

“Transvestites Unplugged”
Does the Malay society in Singapore regard it as a deviance?

The article written by Farid Hamzah in the *Berita Minggu* (Singapore’s Malay newspaper) on 30th August 1998 highlights the problem of Malay transvestites. It has been observed that in the recent years, the number of Malay transvestites has been increasing although there has been no formal study to confirm this. Among the issues discussed in the article are the tendency of these transvestites (born male but inclined towards the female gender) to prostitute and service “gay” men to earn cash, how society view them as deviant and their awareness of the religious implications with regard to their transvestitism. In fact, the plight of Mr. Z, a 27 year-old transvestite or “Mak Nyah” or “Bapok” (transvestite in the Malay language) indicates the seriousness of this problem in the Malay society.¹

I have decided to focus my research on the Malay transvestites as being Malay, any phenomenon affecting the Malay society has direct bearing as it is a small (about 15% of Singapore’s population) and close-knitted community. This trend is also disturbing as the Malay transvestites are in their twenties and are considered as “youth” who would be the leaders of the next millennium.

This research paper is based on a survey done within the Malay community. The respondents for the survey were from the various age groups signifying inter-generation viewpoints as to whether they regard transvestites to be deviant. I have also interviewed some Malay transvestites to gather personal insights regarding this issue as well as consulted religious authorities on Islam’s stand on transvestitism.

¹ “*Pulang ke pangkal jalan*”, *Berita Minggu*, 30th August 1998, p. 5 (Please refer to Annexes A and B)

Transvestitism or transvestic fetishism is a gender identity disorder. Transvestites obtained intense sexual arousal through cross-dressing or wearing clothes appropriate to the opposite gender. Transvestites are different from transsexuals. A transsexual is someone who experiences strong and persistent cross-gender identification and persistent discomfort with his or her anatomical sex, creating significant impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning.² Most transsexuals often undergo sex surgery while the majority of transvestites are exclusively heterosexual, are married and have fathered or borne children (Benjamin, 1967)³.

The term “*deviance*” as defined by the Concise Dictionary of Sociology is “a formal property of social situations and social systems” which has the properties of norm violation and stigma construct.⁴ What can be characterised as deviance depends upon the firm understanding of the norms and the labelling process in particular social context.⁵

The Malay community emphasizes the man as the head of the household and hence shoulders the responsibility of maintaining the family by working and bringing home the bread. Man is seen as the strong-willed person. A Malay woman on the other hand is expected to care for the family by staying at home; although Malay women today are having careers to help support the family financially. However it is society’s expectation for the man to appear more “masculine” and hence if the man is seen to be effeminate, he will be labelled as “dayus” or weak. What more if the man is seen to cross-dress and be a transvestite. Thus, what is the Malay society’s viewpoint on this issue ?

² Sue Sue Sue; *Understanding Abnormal Behaviour*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 5th Edition, 1997, pp. 302-303

³ Ibid. p. 307

⁴ Marshall Gordon, *The Concise Dictionary of Sociology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 120

⁵ Ibid. p.120

A survey of about 40 Malay males and 48 Malay females were conducted. They were asked to fill up questionnaires whereby they were asked issues relating to transvestitism. We will discuss each of the 8 questions asked and perhaps try to offer explanations and relate the answers to some sociological theories.

[Please refer to the tabulations of the survey results for further graphic explanation]

Qn.1 : Do you think that transvestites are deviant (violation from the norm) ?

It is interesting to note that 90% of the Malays consider that transvestites are deviant. Although about 6 of the 9 who think otherwise are below the age of 22, we can conclude that even with education and exposure to modern living, the third generation Malays in Singapore have the same views as their parents and grandparents.

Qn.2 : Is your opinion based on – religion, unbiased personal viewpoint, because everyone thinks so, or other reasons ?

About 73% of the Malays based their opinion on religious grounds. 23% based it on unbiased personal viewpoints while 4 people cited personal encounters and personal choice of the transvestites as other reasons. Again, inter-generation viewpoints are similar on their basis of opinion. Hence we can conclude that religion plays an important part in shaping the thoughts and principles of the Malays. Even with secular education, the second and third generations Malays still base their opinions on religion. **Haji Abu Bakar Hashim**, President of the Singapore Syariah Court stated that it is a great sin to change one's sex as it goes to show one's ingratitude towards God's gift.⁶

⁶ "Pulang ke pangkal jalan", *Berita Minggu*, 30th August 1998, p. 5 (Please refer to Annex C)

Qn.3 : Do you have friends who are transvestites ?

84% of them do not have friends who are transvestites. Perhaps this explains why the majority thinks that transvestites are deviant. However the remaining 14 people who know transvestites personally still regard them as deviant.

One of the transvestites interviewed; **Gaya** (born Abdul Yahya), aged 26 stated that she did not have any transvestite friends before. “She” merely grew up playing with dolls and “cooking” and shunned the games boys her age like to play. She felt that it is an inherent quality. Hence the *Differential Association Theory* could not hold true here as the Malay transvestites often stated that they were more inclined towards feminine activities since young. Outside influences and social interactions with friends having the same “tendency” (pro-deviant)⁷ did not rub on them and influence them to be transvestites. However, the *Differential Association Theory* can be proven to be correct as close association with transvestite friends in the later stages of Gaya’s life have influenced Gaya to be bolder and declared her “transvestite” nature openly in her workplace. She said that she applied for her current job as a man but now cross-dresses to work.

Qn. 4 : If you found out that one of your family members/children is a transvestite, what would your reaction be ?

About 46% expressed anger, 33% expressed shame, and 1 person will deny the confession while 20% of the Malays will accept the fact. Hence, we can conclude that majority of the Malays will show unhappiness at the initial confession. This is acceptable as being Asian; the Malays are quite conservative and unreceptive towards unconventional behaviour as compared to their western counterparts who are more liberal.

⁷ Thio, Alex, *Sociology*, Harper Collins Publishers Inc., New York, 4th Edition, 1996, p. 183

Qn. 5 : With regard to question 4, what will your next move be ?

78% of the Malays would send their transvestite child for counselling compared to the 9% who would accept the fact that their child is such. The remaining few will use persuasion or they will counsel the child themselves, though 1 father said that he would disown his child.

Nurul (born Mashamid), a 27 year-old senior surveyor who has undergone a sex change said that, initially her parents could not accept her condition but they gradually accepted her. She knows of transvestite friends who were beaten up or thrown out of the house by their families. However based on the survey, we can conclude that the Malay community would try to “cure” their child from this abnormality by sending them for counselling first before taking other measures.

Qn. 6 : Who do you blame for his “transvestitism” ? - Lack of religious education, poor family upbringing, peers/friends influence or other factors.

More than 51% will put the blame on the lack of religious education. 14% will blame the family for not educating the child properly while 20% will blame it on the peers/friends influence. The remaining 15% stated the following factors : nature of fate, the child’s innate curiosity to experiment, past trauma and assimilation of character of the person he identifies with; and the parents fault by treating the son as a daughter especially when they really yearn for a daughter.

Here, perhaps we can explain the *Control Theory* that portrays deviance as a product of society itself.⁸ The *Control Theory* as proposed by Travis Hirshi (1969) asserts that the absence of social bonds such as attachment and commitment to family, school and friends, lack of involvement in conventional activities and lack of beliefs in moral values and norms of society

cause deviance.⁹ By applying this theory, it is proven significantly that there exists a strong correlation between lack of parental support and emergence of the “transvestites”. Gaya mentioned that she comes from a divorced family having stepsiblings as well as sisters and hence did not receive enough attention as a child. The lack of education also causes Gaya to be “wayward” and she resorted to thefts and gang fights. She was even imprisoned for minor thefts and bashing up other people. Her lack of beliefs in the moral values of society causes her to go into prostitution (although she has a part-time day job) to earn enough cash to support her extravagant lifestyle.

Diana, a 38 year-old transvestite shares this lack of beliefs in moral values. She cohabits with a “husband” who supports her financially but she prostitutes several times a month just for the “kick”. However this is not true as in the case of Nurul who is highly educated, holds a stable job and does not need to resort to prostitution. Her close ties with her family also helps to shape her views on moral issues and although she insists that she does not regret her decision to undergo sex change, she knows that Islam forbids such transformation and that she hopes to repent in the future.

We can also discuss the *Structural Strain Theory* by Robert Merton (1968) to explain how deviance is a result of a “discrepancy between societal expectations and opportunities”¹⁰ and how this limited availability of opportunities cause the transvestite to turn to prostitution and make them deviant in the eyes of society. *Mimi Rochelle*, another Malay transvestite who turns to prostitution said that work place discrimination and society’s emphasis on being able to be financially independent have caused most transvestites to take the easier way out by prostitution.

⁸ Giddens, Anthony, *Sociology*, Polity Press, Great Britain, 3rd Edition, 1997, p. 177

⁹ Thio, Alex, *Sociology*, Harper Collins Publishers Inc., New York, 4th Edition, 1996, p. 179

¹⁰ Calhoun Light Keller, *Sociology*, The McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc., 1997, p. 155

Like many other transvestites, Mimi wants to work in a “legitimate” office environment but no employers will want to hire a “Bapak”.

Qn. 7 : Which other activity do you consider to be deviant ? – Smoking, indiscriminate spitting, body piercing or homosexuals/lesbianism.

94% of the Malays insisted that homosexuals and lesbians are deviant. The remaining 5 people thought that spitting and piercing one’s body are acts of deviance. The survey shows that the Malay society is conservative in their outlook of life. This could be explained as Islam, the main religion of the Malays, has certain guidelines for moral conducts. Homosexuals and lesbians are considered deviant. Transvestitism is also considered “haram” or forbidden in Islam. Hence it is not surprising that almost all the Malays regard transvestites are deviant. According to *Ustaz Pasuni Maulan*, a registrar and religious officer in the Registrar of Muslim Marriages, if transvestitism is accepted in the Malay/Islamic community, it will encourage more people to undergo sex change and later marry non-Muslims in the civil courts (as opposed to the Muslim court). This action will cause rifts within the family; increase the possibility of the contraction of the Acquired Immunity Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and lead to the weakening of the structure of the society.

Qn. 8 : Are you aware that there is a growing number of Malay transvestites in Singapore ?

57% of the Malays are aware whilst 43% are unaware of the growing number of Malay transvestites in Singapore. The second and third generation Malays are more aware of this problem as compared to the Malays in the age group of 50 years and above. Perhaps with more exposure to secular education and the media, the younger generation Malays are less inhibited to acknowledge the problem.

In conclusion, the Malay society regards transvestites as a deviance. They base their opinions mainly on religious grounds. To the Malays, religion and culture go hand-in-hand; hence whatever that is forbidden by the religion will be regarded as unacceptable to the society. Even with the rise in education and secularism, the Malay youths themselves hold religious forbiddance in the highest regard and therefore refuse to accept transvestites. This is evident when Gaya, the Malay transvestite interviewed said “*I will not go for sex-change because Islam forbids me to do so*”. Although she felt that she is born in a ‘female’ body, she will not violate this sanctity of God’s gift and will go through life as a female but having male sexual organs. For Gaya who considers herself a “deviant of the worst kind” having dealt with drugs and crimes, she insists that Islam is a compassionate religion and that God will forgive her should she wants to repent. Most of the Malay transvestites interviewed could not care less of whether or not society regards them to be deviant. What they do care about is that they are responsible for their own decision and that they will be answerable to their Creator.

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