

LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY OF MALAY TEENAGE MAK NYAH (TRANSVESTITES) IN KUCHING

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Abstract

Kuching is the capital of the state of Sarawak and is located on the island of Borneo. It is also the largest state in Malaysia with a population of 2.2 million people.¹ The Sarawak Malays are the second largest group of people after the Ibans. There has been increasing concerns about the increasing number of transvestites in Kuching. The term **maknyah**, a vernacular used among Malaysians referring to Malay transvestites, is a local term that may have originated from Peninsular Malaysia and is often used in Sarawak nowadays. This is a substitute for the harsher terminology such as **pondan** or **bapok**, which were previously used by Sarawakians when referring to transvestites and transsexuals. In this study, the pondans being investigated are teenage Malay transvestites in urban Kuching. Apart from their distinct identification practices, they actually have a secret language which helps to shape their identity and it is called **Bahasa Seteng**. Personal identity is defined by how others identify us, not how we identify ourselves.² Bahasa Seteng reflects the group's identity among members in their networks. A transvestite is understood and accepted as a member, also depending on his characteristics and use of Bahasa Seteng. Through in-depth face to face interviews, audio taping of real time conversations, and observations, features of Bahasa Seteng as well as characteristics of the teenage transvestites will be discussed. The findings revealed identification and language practices that give them their own unique identities.

Keywords: language, identity, pondan & Kuching

Introduction

This paper examines the identity construction of the *pondan* (transvestites henceforth also referred to as *maknyah*, a more polite form of address) in the city of Kuching, the capital of Sarawak in East Malaysia. The argument of this paper is based on the characteristics of teenage *maknyah* and their secret language to reflect their identity. An understanding of the construction of such identity calls for addressing the reasons for and consequences of such identity and linguistic practices. In the case of the teenage *maknyah*, their identity acts as an apparatus, a scaffolding and a construction that sustain their perceptions, thus creating the basis for their social behaviour. In fact, they are already claiming total ownership of their own transgender model of identity, classifying it as different from male and female.

It has been estimated that there are about 10,000 *maknyah* in Malaysia.³ In the city of Kuching there are 700 *maknyah* where 75% are Malays, the rest are made up of Dayaks and Chinese. In Sarawak, Malay transvestites are often associated with *pondan*, *bapok* or *maknyah*, the latter a vernacular terminology borrowed from Peninsular Malaysia. Generally, the Malay transvestites in Kuching consider, *bapok* or *pondan* as harsher terms compared to *maknyah*. Certain countries have their own local terms for the transsexual community, for example, *hijras* in India, *kathoeys* in Thailand, *warias* in Indonesia and *occult* in Myanmar (Burma).

Definition of *maknyah*

The term *maknyah* does not necessarily fall under classifications of transsexuals and transvestites though it may show a mix of these characteristics. In other words, *maknyah* refers to those who have undergone sex change operations as well as those who have not.⁴ One of the main features of transsexualism is the pursuit of sex reassignment through hormonal and surgical intervention.⁵ Primary transsexuals experienced a gender identity different from their biological features from an early age and secondary transsexuals, are individuals with transvestite moving into transsexuals.⁶

In this study, none of the respondents who are between 15-19 years of age have undergone sex change and thus cannot be confined strictly to the transsexual category. On the other hand, none of the *maknyah* respondents in this study have proved to be heterosexual boys either, who cross-dressed for sexual gratification. Instead, they are teenagers who have feminine characteristics and a secret language which they refer to as *Bahasa Seteng* (*literally means half language*) to reflect their *maknyah* identity. If the term *maknyah* needs to be appropriately categorised, then it should fall under the broad classification of transgender. However, the use of transgender as the term to describe *maknyah* gives a wider definition in the Malaysian society, specifically in Kuching where people perceive them as transsexuals and transvestites.⁷ In this paper, the term transvestite is used to indicate individuals whose gender display deviates from the conventional two-and-only two gender system, such as the *maknyah* community under investigation.

General perceptions of Sarawakian towards *maknyah*

Generally, the Sarawakian society negatively perceives the *maknyah* community and labels them as people with “dua alam” (two worlds). However, in urban villages not all the transvestites were generally tolerated or even accepted by the community. They believe that transvestites bring shame to their families. This situation has changed from bad to worse over the years and today the government authorities regard *maknyah* as immoral people who negatively influence the society.

At present, the consequences of this negative perception towards the *maknyah* are discrimination and marginalization. In schools and public universities in Sarawak, the security officials monitor their activities closely and they are forced to have ‘rough’ activities such jungle trekking and jungle survival skills in order to make them more masculine.

The issue of *maknyah* in Sarawak has always been brought up over the years by politicians and journalists. Generally, they comment on the increasing number

of transvestites in Sarawak. Various appeals have been made to relevant agencies such as Jabatan Agama Islam Sarawak (JAIS) to eradicate this problem.

Forbidden in Islam

Islam is the official religion in Malaysia. Islam only permits *khunsa* or hermaphrodites to undergo a sex change operation (Teh, 2002). Islam forbids males from behaving like females such as cross-dressing, wearing make-up, injecting hormones to enlarge their breasts, and undergoing sex change operations. Sex organs are objects of hatred and disgust for the transsexuals which drive them to seek sex conversion surgery. Research shows that two thirds of *maknyahs* could accept their male sex organ but 78 percent of them would prefer to have a sex change operation if their religion permits them to do so.⁸

In 1983, the Conference of Rulers in Malaysia decided that a *fatwa* prohibiting sex change operations should be imposed to all Muslims with the exceptions of hermaphrodites. Thus, *maknyah* are considered to have violated the tenets of Islam, and consequently are non-entities in Malaysian Muslim society. They can be charged in the Syariah Court for violating the tenets of Islam. In addition, having sex operation change will pose a problem in terms of Muslim burial rites which states that only female could bathe the body of another female (which does not include the *maknyah*, even though they may have undergone the sex change operation). *Maknyah*, who underwent sex change operation, could not be bathed by a male. Some *maknyah* believe that their souls will float aimlessly when they die because their bodies are not what God had originally given to them. Their beliefs are reinforced by the religious edicts of Islam authorities in Malaysia.⁹

Literature Review

Males do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. Only the human mind invents such categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeonholes. It is believed that the world is a continuum in its aspect. The sooner we learn this human behaviour, the sooner we reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex.¹⁰

The common assumption that biological distinction determines one's gender role may not necessarily hold true anymore. While it is relatively straightforward for the society to allocate specific gender roles for a female and male, it proves complicated for the same society to allocate a social role for a person who does not fall under either of these two categories. Quite often, it is difficult for those who are born with male sex organ to define themselves as 'female inside'.¹¹ Likewise, it is difficult for the society that has a rigid gender system to define such individuals.¹²

Transsexualism defined as a person who experiences life long gender dysphoria; major disruption of identity development with personal adjustment problem due to gender incongruity; pursuit of sex reassignment through hormonal and surgical intervention and cross-dressing. Transsexualism is an incurable endocrinological condition and that sex reassignment surgery (SRS) is the best treatment for these people.¹³

The transsexual phenomenon involves both sexual orientation issues as well as gender issues. However, the social construction of gender is a complicated process. Not all individuals in a society follow the rules of a dichotomous gender system. These individuals who do not conform to the gender norm of society are seen with curiosity, fear or even disgust. In other words, if a person is born as male, then the male individual is expected to do 'men things' when he enters his adulthood. Although gender display may reflect the individual's self-identity, it also presents the gender that others attributed to the person. The way the individual displays their bodies and clothes are interpreted as individual expression of gender. If a male successfully displays himself socially as a woman, then society will perceive him physically as female.¹⁴

There is no definitive claim as to what causes transsexualism. The battle lines of nature versus nurture in transsexualism have been drawn and hardened. Stoller (1976) does not support the biological nature of transsexualism. He argues that it is the excessive identification with their mothers and absence of their fathers may have resulted to transsexualism. Money (1991) suggests that before reaching the age of 27 months is an important period of gender identity development. This implies that socialisation rather than birth is the cause of transsexualism.

Transsexuals in Malaysia are generally attracted to members of the same sex, while at the same time considering themselves as having the gender of the opposite sex. The term transsexuals may also refer to male and female transsexuals, who are males who want to be female in every aspect, and female to male transsexuals who are females who want to be male in every aspect.¹⁷

Aims

The *maknyah* identity and speech community is recognised in Kuching. Therefore, the aims of this paper can be formulated into the following research questions:

1. What are the **identification practices** of Malay teenage *maknyah* in Kuching?
2. What are the **language practices** of Malay teenage *maknyah* in Kuching?

Methodology

The opportunity to do a research on the transvestites came about with the cooperation of Fasha, a 16 years old *maknyah* who was studying in a secondary school in the city. The researcher befriended Fasha through Face book and explained that he wanted to do a research on the transvestites in Kuching. Fasha readily agreed and informed his friends and they did not object to a get together for a couple of hours in Fasha's house in Petra Jaya on the fourth day of *Hari Raya* 2009. Fasha came from a wealthy family and his parents understood his predicament. The researcher was invited to attend the gathering.

There were 62 *maknyahs* studying in schools, colleges and universities who took part in the study. All of them were Sarawak Malays born and bred in the city of Kuching. The researcher conducted the audio recordings and later transcribed

with the help of Fasha. Face-to face open ended interviews and observations were also conducted with all the 62 transvestites during the *Raya* visit which lasted three hours. Both Fasha's parents and other siblings were not around that time.

Findings

Identification practices of teenage *maknyah* in Kuching

The main identification practices of *maknyah* are their characteristics which remain today at the core of identity construction of *maknyah* in Kuching. The findings of this research reveal the following characteristics of the *maknyahs*:

1. The *maknyah* are feminine in characteristics. They realised that they were different from other boys in their schools, siblings and cousins at a young age. Their family members and male friends teased them more when they were younger. They started taking female names when they were in schools.
2. At a very young age, they like to play with the girls in school and female relatives. They are quite sensitive in nature and have a liking for dresses and dolls. All of them love cooking and Chef Wan (Malaysia top chef on television, who also has feminine qualities) is their role model. Their mothers do not discourage them from doing household chores.
3. Toys guns and heavy machinery vehicles such as toy trucks, excavators and cranes do not interest them as they find teddy bears, Barbie dolls, teas sets and playing house more interesting. They like to play indoors and indoor games rather than outdoors. Playing basketball and football or exposing themselves to the sun is definitely out as they were self conscious of getting a darker skin.
4. They like to keep furry animals such as cats and rabbits and they all have cats as pets. They amuse themselves by gossiping, reading entertainment magazine, and watching soap operas on television. They find playing video games a waste of time and too violent for their gentle nature. They enjoy looking for friends in Face book and some have good relationships with both females and males.
5. They realised that their body started to change when they were thirteen and fourteen. Pimples and body hair were removed using various creams. Having a breast like girls would give them great satisfaction and they like to pretend having breasts by always readjusting their blouses. They carry mini lipsticks, comb, skin lotion, tissues and other cosmetics in their bags.
6. They smoke light cigarette and considered it modern and feminine but do not consume alcohol.
7. They see themselves in their sexual fantasies as females. They all want to have a steady male companion, someone to accompany them

shopping. Not all of them want to go shopping with girls and they see girls as rivals when selecting the latest female fashions.

8. They like males who are physically clean, handsome and taller than them. They also feel secure with muscular and handsome boys and hate girls who are attracted to the same boys.
9. They often dream of themselves being show girls and singing sensation performing on stage and winning such competitions.
10. They get upset if their male friends talk to other girls and they hate girls who are more aggressive than them.
11. They enjoy fine arts, dances and dramas and participate in such activities regularly.
12. They feel themselves becoming more feminine each day as they are getting a lot of support from the other *maknyah*.
13. They want the society to accept them as human beings with brains, talents and skills and stop teasing them.

Language practices of teenage *maknyah* in Kuching

The *maknyah* can be identified through the language that they speak. The construction of identity of the *maknyah* through language indicates a creative linguistic use of the Sarawak Malay dialect, the lingua franca of interethnic communication in Sarawak. Sarawak Malay is distinct from the mother-tongue of the Malay people of Sarawak and used in informal domains. Sarawak Malay has the most number of speakers compared to any other dialects and languages in Sarawak and is spoken widely without feelings of embarrassment in informal domains.¹⁸

The main reason for the creation of *Bahasa Seteng* or *Bahasa Setengah* (half language) is to give the *maknyah* a linguistic identity of their own. Using such language helped the *maknyahs* to keep their secrets. They feel that no one can understand them when they gossip, talk about personal matters, sex, boys, etc. *Bahasa Seteng* is spoken by taking the first syllables in a word to form an utterance. The influence of *Bahasa Seteng* as a secret language has attracted the girls particularly when talking to *maknyahs* in the presence of boys.

They do not want *Bahasa Seteng* to be understood by everyone. Whenever they feel that *Bahasa Seteng* is being threatened largely because it has been understood by people around them, the *maknyah* would coin new words and expressions.

The following tables show some common aspects of *Bahasa Seteng*

Pronouns

Sarawak Malay	Bahasa Seteng	English
kamek, kitak	Kam, kit	me, we
sidak	sid	They
Nya	nya	

Some sentences in *Bahasa Seteng* from the transcriptions are given in the examples below:

<i>Sarawak Malay</i>	<i>Bahasa Seteng</i>	<i>English</i>
Suka kamek nangar rambut nya. (<i>Transcription 5</i>)	Suk kam nang ram nya	I like to see his/her hair.
Kacak muka orang laki ya. (<i>Transcription 1</i>)	Kac muk or lak ya eh	The boy is handsome.
Kamek rasa nak makan nasik. (<i>Transcription 7</i>)	Kam ras nak mak nas	I feel like eating rice.
Bencik aku diat perempuan ya! (<i>Transcription 3</i>)	Benc ak di perem ya!	I hate to see that woman.
Jom, mencuci mata dekat pasar! (<i>Transcription 2</i>)	Jom, mencuc mat dek pas!	Come, lets go to town.
Nak pergi siney kitak orang ya? sik embak kamek kah? (<i>Transcription 9</i>)	Nak per sin kit or ya? sik emb kam kah?	Where are you guys going? Not bringing us along?
Sik ada kerja lain kah? Nak ngaco orang jak! (<i>Transcription 8</i>)	Sik ad kej lai kah? Nak mengac or jak!	Don't you have anything else to do? You just like to disturb!
Apa diat-diat? Ada utangkah? (<i>Transcription 13</i>)	Ap di-di? ad ut kah?	What are you looking at? Do I owe you anything?
Berbau sekali jak mulut orang laki ya eh! (<i>Transcription 15</i>)	Bebau sekal jak mul or lak ya eh!	That man has a smelly mouth!
Kau ku tanpa kelak! Kurang ajar! (<i>Transcription 11</i>)	Ko ku tam ku lak! Kur aj!	I'll slap you for being rude!

Some of the new words created and used in *Bahasa Seteng* are:
New words in *Bahasa Seteng*

- | |
|---|
| <p>i. Redu - girl
Sentence: Redu ia geh (<i>The girl is showing off</i>)..... (Transcription 5)</p> <p>ii. Manai - boy
Sentence: Manai ia lawa (<i>The boy is proud.</i>) (Transcription 14)</p> <p>iii. Laupet - faint
Sentence: Ras nak Laupet eh! (<i>I feel fainting</i>) (Transcription 10)</p> <p>iv. Chawyek - kiss
Sentence: Kac nya or lak ya ras nak chawyek jak eh! (<i>That boy is so handsome, I feel that I want to kiss him</i>) (Transcription 12)</p> |
|---|

Below are excerpts from conversations to show some of the instances when *Bahasa Seteng* was used.

To create rapport

In Fasha's house and Fasha saw some new faces and said (see Extract 1)

<p>A: Jang kit sik tah kelak Bah kit pun. Eb sam or la ta. Kel sik ad rah ag. Kit sam sam spe tok ken jag di masg-mas. Geng sama sam ki aj bah. Di jua sam sam da hos. Mun sik sus ki ur ke.</p>

<p>(Jangan kitak sik tahu kelakar Bahasa kita pun. Eboh sampai orang lain tahu. Kelak sik ada rahsia agik. Kita sama sama speci tok kenak jaga diri masing-masing. Geng sama sama kita ajak bah. Diam jua sama sama dalam hostel. Mun sik susah kitak urang kelak.)</p>
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<p>(<i>You must know how to speak our language. You must make sure others don't learn this language. It's our secret language. We belong to the same species and we need to take care of one another. It's better for us to stay in the same hostel.</i>)</p>

Key: Times New Roman Bold – Bahasa Seteng; Times New Roman – Sarawak Malay; Times New Roman Italic-English

To gossip

Two transvestites were busy cleaning the dishes at the kitchen of Fasha's house said (see Extract 2).

B: Ben kam nang Nis ia ju, tang nge gil ngan muk nya nok ked muk pan ia. Ab lak nak di god nya. Muk ibl ia.. B kam pun ma nya ju.

(Benci kamek nanga Nisah ia juak, tang ngegeh gilak ngan muka nya nok kedak muka pano ia. Abis laki nak di godanya. Muka iblis ia.. Boy kamek pun maoknya juak)

(I hate to see Nisah, she is showing off and her face is very ugly. She wants to attract all the boys. She has an evil face. Even my boyfriend is one of her targets)

C: Em jal ked ia. Mak nya sunl ju bah, apa ag nya. Sik lama ag bas nya kel.

(Empuan jalang kedak ia. Mak nya sundal juak bah, apa agiknya. Sik lama agik basik nya kelak).

(For a slut like her, it is common. Her mother is a slut, too and she'll be worse. Soon she'll be stale.)

Key: Times New Roman Bold – Bahasa Seteng; Times New Roman –Sarawak Malay; Times New Roman Italic-English

To argue

There was an incident when two transvestites started arguing over personal matters. Eventually Fasha had to break them up (see Extract 3).

D: Make barang kamek sik beri balit. Muka jerawat sik ada laki maok ko

(You used my things without returning. With your kind of pimples on your face, boys won't get attracted to you.)

E: Muka pucat ceridak ko ia, make lipstick pun sik pande nak nganok urang.

(You're scolding me but you don't realise that you have a garbage face and still unable to wear a lipstick.)

Key: Times New Roman Bold – Bahasa Seteng; Times New Roman –Sarawak Malay; Times New Roman Italic-English

To compliment

Tina, Fasha's friend was watching a Spanish soap opera on television with a few others and got excited with the actors (see Extract 4).

F: Nang lok nang lok kit sia. Syk ak nang nya. Lic nar muk nya. Ked pelak cer Sepan. Mat kac nang ju. Un dap ja gi nya. Ak ma aj.

(Nanga lok nanga lok kita sia. Syuk aku nanga nya. Licin nar muka nya. Kedak pelakon cerita Sepanyol. Matanya kacak nang juak. Untung dapat jadi gairnya. Aku maok ajak.)

(Look over there. I like to see him. He has such a smooth face. He looks like a Spanish actor. He has beautiful eyes. How lucky to be his girlfriend. I really want to.)

Key: Times New Roman Bold – Bahasa Seteng; Times New Roman – Sarawak Malay; Times New Roman Italic-English

Discussion

The religious non-acceptance and stigmatisation of the *maknyah* have increased discrimination against them. The *fatwa* that was decreed by the Conference of Rulers in 1983 changed the society's perceptions towards the *maknyah* from bad to worse. Muslim *maknyah*, except for *khuensas*, are banned from having sex change operations. Muslim *maknyah* who violate these laws are considered violators of the Islamic teaching, and regarded as immoral.

About fourteen percent of *maknyah* in Malaysia have tried committing suicide. This alarming figure can easily be due to the fact that the *maknyah* find it difficult to get employment and cannot afford to earn a good income. The *maknyah* in this study are expected to face similar situation.¹⁹

The *maknyahs* are very sensitive and attached to their families. Getting higher education has somehow made the *maknyah* more acceptable by family members. In families, where the other siblings are less educated, the *maknyah's* parents have looked upon them to support them in their old age. Quite often, such parents who have realised the academic potential of their *maknyah* offspring would accept them and have stopped the other siblings from making fun of them. In fact, some of the respondents are excellent in their studies. Respondent 22 said this:

When I was small, my father and brothers kicked and hit me a lot. They were embarrassed of me because I was not like them. I did not play football with the other boys. My brothers were only loud, but were not good in their studies. My father was a laborer, a bully and is not working now. He depends on my sister to support the family. Both my brothers have no proper jobs and are married. They are very useless. Now, my parents see me as an asset to them. They always tell me to study hard and get a job. They don't want me to leave them. But of course, I will take care of them in their old age. No bitter feelings. Instead, I thank God for giving me good brains.

The *maknyah* in this study believe that society should respect them for what they are. *Maknyah* in Kuching mostly follow traditionally female professions such as

chefs, make-up artists and dress makers. They are well known as talented *mak andam* who do make-up and arrange wedding dais for wedding ceremonies. They have good jobs, earn good money, drive expensive cars and live in huge houses.

Maknyahs are not going to hide away from the rest of society. They are a group of happy individuals who cannot understand why other people have problems in accepting them. They are aware that they have contributed to the society by sharing their skills and natural talents. Their lives have not been easy are due to harassment by members of the public. They have not created any social ills in the society. Respondent 34 said:

People always see us as sex maniacs. Well, perhaps some are but not me, and not many of my fiends. Some girls feel disgusted when I buy blouses in the ladies department. Something is terribly wrong with the silly girls. It's my money. Others feel amused that I should have a female name. So what, I have the right to be who I want to be. I'm not disturbing anybody. I'm still using the name which my parents gave me for official matters. Otherwise, just call me Liz...

The *maknyahs* in this study are all talented individuals. They are warm, loving human and respectful towards others. They are determined to show the community that they can succeed and have so much to contribute to mankind. Respondent 11 said: 'We are not *manusia dua alam* (people with two worlds) but blessed by having the best of both worlds.' They believed that society should allow them to form a *Maknyah Association* so that they can contribute more and handle their own problems by supporting one another without any feeling of prejudice. Respondent 26 said:

Forming our own association does not mean that we will organise immoral activities. Society has to change. We can contribute tremendously in politics, social and business, if we could have a strong association of our own. It's time to realise that we are different from males and females. We are not a curse that should be abused and rejected by society. We have human rights too. If you allow us to vote, that means we are equal citizens and should be treated as such. Organising beauty pageants, becoming make-up artists are things which people associated with maknyah. Nowadays, educated maknyah own beauty parlours, cosmetic companies and restaurants. I will be a CEO of a new cosmetic company one day."

Maknyah are well known as performers. All the respondents have their own talent groups and scout new talents among the juniors. There are four talent groups identified among the respondents:- Vocals, Dancers, Emcees, Make-up artists. The researcher followed all these four groups and was invited to several 'function'. Respondents 12 and 14 are great dancers in the University dance troupe. Sasha would like to be a professional dancer even after he graduated and perhaps combines his knowledge in business studies with his talent and opens a dancing school. Fasha is a dancer at heart and his family supports him because he earns

money by dancing part-time with the Sarawak Cultural Village. He has also participated in many dancing competitions ever since schooldays. However, he performs as a male dancer in public because his greatest fear is being arrested by the religious authorities. Under the law, if a man dresses in woman's clothes or acts like a woman in public, it is considered unlawful and is punishable with a fine up to RM1,000 and/or jail up to six months and compulsory counseling.. Respondent 14 said:

Real boys don't want to join because they say it's haram (not allowed in Islam) and is very sissy. Well, if males don't dance, how do you expect us to win so many competitions. The sick public should be proud of us, not harassing us, when they do not need us."

The make-up artists surely know all the latest beauty and cosmetic products in the market. They often volunteer to help out in beauty salons for minimal wage during holidays, just to gain more experience. Most of them also give some money to help their parents. According to respondent 54:

I'm independent now, unlike my other siblings who always asked money from my parents. My father thinks no one will employ me because I'm not normal. I never asked money from him since I stated working part-time. The salon, where I'm working during weekends and semester holidays belongs to my cousin. He is a maknyah too and he understands my financial difficulties. It seems many customers like my working style and have asked for me. I will continue working with my cousin there until I set up my own business.

The loudest *maknyah* in the group can be very dramatic at times. Three of them, respondent 16, 17 and 18 have participated in singing competitions in the city of Kuching. They have won prizes and money for their tireless efforts. All of them hope to join Malaysian reality shows namely *Malaysian Idol* and *Akademi Fantasia*.. Respondent 17 said:

My father is still not happy with me singing in public. My brothers are ashamed of me. They don't talk to me unless if they want something. My mother is leaving my fate to God. I'm God's greatest gift to her, she once said. To my brothers, I'm the greatest failure. My sisters are different. They think I'm great and help me to buy cosmetics. I love my sisters. They think I should join major singing competitions. Both of them are divorced.

None of the *maknyah* has ever been caught by the police for cross-dressing. They are very cautious about this because once caught they will be charged with indecent behaviour under section 21 of the Minor Offences Act 1955.

Conclusion

This study limits only in identifying the identity and the language used by the *maknyahs* in Kuching and does not pinpoint any specific social or cultural factor or factors that cause them to become *maknyahs*. Perhaps, it is a complex phenomenon that needs to incorporate biological and environmental explanations. It should be noted that not all individuals in a society follow the rules of a dichotomous gender system.²⁰ Therefore these individuals who do not conform to the gender norm of society should not be seen with curiosity, fear or even disgust. Society expects that if a person is born a male, then the male individual is expected to do 'men's things' when he enters his adulthood. This display of gender construction inevitably puts the *maknyah* in a difficult position. *Maknyah* do not fit into the dichotomous gender system because of their inappropriate gender display. Their identification and language practices are part of their identity and society to learn to accept them.

Endnotes

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¹⁰ Le Vay, *Queer Science*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 47.

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¹⁴ B. Lucal, "What it means to be gendered me: Life on the boundaries of a dichotomous gender system," in *Gender and Society*, no. 13, (1999), p. 781.

¹⁵ Sandra Veloso, Tiet Ho, Gabriel Chong & Kelvin Egay, "Mak Nyah Community in Kuching," p. 515.

¹⁶ J. Money, *Gays, straight, and in-between*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 73.

¹⁷ Teh Yik Koon, "Male to Female Transsexuals (Mak Nyah) in Malaysia," p. 107.

¹⁸ Mazehi Johari, *Fonologi Dialek Melayu Kuching*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1989), p. 45.

¹⁹ Teh Yik Koon, *The Mak Nyahs: Male to Female Transsexuals in Malaysia*, p. 149.

²⁰ B. Lucal, "What it means to be gendered me," p. 788.