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2017

https://doi.org/10.25595/494

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pitkänen, Veera Helena: *“You’re Not Left Thinking That You’re The Only Gay in the Village” : The Role of the Facebook Group: Seksualiti Merdeka in the Malaysian LGBT Community*, in: Köhn, Steffen; Fox, Samantha; Terry, Mike; Frömming, Urte Undine (Hrsg.): Digital Environments. Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017), 227-238. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/494.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839434970-016

GenderOpen – Repositorium für die Geschlechterforschung: www.genderopen.de

FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN

HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN

"You're Not Left Thinking That You're The Only Gay in the Village"

The Role of the *Facebook* Group: *Seksualiti Merdeka* in the Malaysian LGBT Community

Veera Helena Pitkänen

Introduction—LGBT in Malaysia

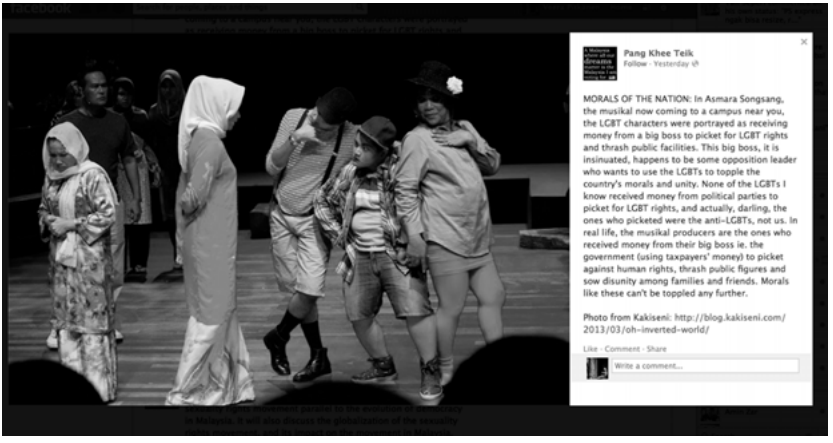
This essay focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities in Malaysia, a Southeast Asian country where sexual minority issues have been very contentious, as the Islamic Malay government openly condemns homosexuality (Offord 2011: 142). In Malaysian society, as described by Offord, sexuality is under attack, and great emphasis is put on guarding and policing Islamic morality (ibid: 142–143). Sodomy is considered a crime under Malaysian law—a remnant from the British colonial era—with punishments as much as 20 years in prison and corporal punishment, although the law is not often prosecuted (Alagappar & Kaur 2009: 25).

However, in 1998 and again in 2010, the opposition leader in the Malaysian parliament and the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, made international headlines for being sentenced to prison for engaging in sodomy with men (Offord 2011: 140). Although Ibrahim was acquitted in 2012, the situation has worsened for sexual minorities in the last decade (Williams 2009: 7). They are experiencing an increasing amount of intolerance, discrimination and harassment in the country (Alagappar & Kaur 2009: 25).

In recent years, other issues concerning the LGBT community in Malaysia have also received international media attention. An incident that raised eyebrows in Europe was the publication of "guidelines" by the Malaysian Education Ministry to help parents to identify gay and lesbian "symptoms" in

their children so they can take early measurements in correcting them.[1] In April 2013, the *Guardian*, among other foreign newspapers, made a report about *Asmara Songsang*, a musical backed by the Malaysian government.[2] My translation of the title is: "Abnormal love/desire," and the project aims to warn young people about the dangers of being lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) in the country. The musical has sparked controversy over its "state-sponsored bigotry" and potential to incite hatred. Asmara Songsang (Abnormal Desire) follows the lives of three LGBT friends who throw loud parties, take drugs and have casual sex, thereby incurring the wrath of their religious neighbours, who attempt to reintroduce them to the teachings of Islam. Those who repent are spared, while those who don't are killed in a lightning storm (Hodal 2013).

Image 1



Performance photo of the *Morals of the Nation* musical from the *Facebook* profile of Pang Khee Teik. https://www.facebook.com/pangkheeteik] March 2013.

1 | "Guidelines to Identify Gay and Lesbian Symptoms Published." Free Malaysiakini. September 13, 2012. Accessed: April 8, 2013. http://www.freemalaysiakini2.com/?p=46392

2 | Hodal, Kate. "Anti-gay musical tours Malaysian schools and universities." The Guardian March 28, 2013. Accessed: April 8, 2013. http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/28/anti-gay-lgbt-musical-malaysia

Resisting Discrimination—*Seksualiti Merdeka*

Despite the extremely conservative attitudes towards sexual minorities in the country, there are still several groups that actively promote tolerance and acceptance. One of them is *Seksualiti Merdeka*. Meaning "sexual independence" in the Malay language, it is a movement with a clear message: no one should be discriminated against or harassed, regardless of their sexual identity or orientation. Initiated by arts facilitator Pang Khee Teik and singer-songwriter Jerome Kugan, the first *Seksualiti Merdeka* festival was held in Kuala Lumpur in August 2008. It consisted of talks, forums, workshops and cultural events, and gathered together an estimated 400–500 people.

The organizers wanted the festival to coincide with the Merdeka (Malaysian Independence day) celebrations, because they wished to "address the fact that 51 years after independence, not all Malaysians are free to be who they are" (*Seksualiti Merdeka* 2013). The festival was organized annually until 2011—when the event was raided by the police and the activities banned by the Malaysian government.[3] In 2012, the organizers decided to take a break from organizing the festival. At the time that this article was being written, the plans for 2013 were still being discussed.

Research Question: From a *Facebook* Group to a Community?

This essay aims to scrutinize the role of social media, and particularly *Facebook*, in the lives of Malaysian LGBTs. More specifically, it focuses on a *Facebook* group called *Seksualiti Merdeka*, a meeting point and a peer-support group for the Malaysian LGBT community, and examines the significance of this type of online platform in the country. Malaysia has the 24th highest number of internet users per capita in the world,[4] and social media is very widely used across the country.

Doing research on the LGBTs in Malaysia felt natural because of my personal relationship with the topic. From 2009 until 2012, I resided in Kuala Lumpur, and got acquainted with members of the LGBT community as well as representatives of related NGOs. One of the organizations was the *PT*

3 | „Seksualiti Merdeka movement festival banned." The Star. Published November 3, 2011. Accessed: April 8, 2013. http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/11/3/nation/20111103172539&sec=nation

4 | „Media>Internet>Users>Per capita: Countries Compared." Nationmaster. Last updated 2011. Accessed: April 8, 2013.http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/int_use_percap-internet-users-per-capita

Foundation—the former *Pink Triangle*—that provides information, education and care services relating to HIV/AIDS and sexual minority groups in Malaysia. I had joined the *Seksualiti Merdeka Facebook* group in 2011 when I was living in the country, as it seemed to be a great source of information about the current issues concerning sexual minorities in Malaysia.

Seksualiti Merdeka is a closed group on *Facebook*—an application for membership has to be approved by an administrator. At the time of the writing (April 8, 2013) the number of members stood at 2933, consisting of both Malaysians and non-Malaysians (who mostly live or have previously lived in Malaysia). I wanted to find out what purpose this group served to the Malaysian LGBTs, and whether it was used as a platform to deal with topics they would not otherwise be able to discuss. I also wanted to research whether the *Seksualiti Merdeka* group would be a safe space for its users to express their thoughts and to discuss even controversial political issues, and whether this group could be used to organize and plan events related to *Seksualiti Merdeka*. Key main references were: Offord's (2011) article "Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia: arrested development!" and Alagappar/Kaur's (2009): "The Representation of Homosexuality—A Content Analysis in a Malaysian Newspaper"—a study of homosexuality in Malaysian media. My research could be considered to be cyberanthropology, which is:

> an approach that submits anthropological and philosophical questions (as well as sociological, political and linguistic questions including questions of constitutional law arising from them) to different fields associated with the internet", targeting "the questions of how the human being understands itself and others, how it structures its lifeworld when embedded in virtual environments, in face of the challenges posed by the internet as the dominating medium.[5]

Research Methods and Ethical Reflections

The main research methods used in this paper are participant observation in both active participant as well as participant-as-observer roles, accompanied with single and group interviews. I was following the discussions in the group on a daily basis between 17 March 2013 and 8 April 2013. I watched a variety of videos and read articles or blog posts that the group members posted, to get an idea of what kind of issues people in the Malaysian LGBT community talk about and are interested in. I interacted with the group members by asking them questions, and analyzed their responses. I also interviewed Pang Khee Teik,

5 | "What do we mean by Cyberanthropology?" CyberAnthropology. Accessed: April 8, 2013. http://www.cyberanthropology.de/CA/What_is_CA.html

a cultural and political activist and the co-founder of the *Seksualiti Merdeka*, and Raymond Tai from *PT Foundation*, who is also an active member of the *Seksualiti Merdeka* group.

Although there seemed to be an equal amount of different genders in the *Facebook* group, I mainly got responses to my questions from gay men.[6] They seemed to be more active in commenting and posting in the group. Only one of the respondents was female, and one transgender (male to female). It would have been fruitful to have more female representation in the research.

Field Research—What Is Discussed in the *Seksualiti Merdeka* Group?

The *Seksualiti Merdeka* group on *Facebook* is quite active, with roughly more than ten new posts and a variety of comments per day. The main language of the posts is English (the second official language in the country), but sometimes also Malay and Mandarin Chinese. The topics of the posts vary from political issues concerning the LGBTs in Malaysia to promoting LGBT-related events in the country: There are also inspirational coming-out stories and videos dealing with different LGBT issues; legal advice is also given—for example, how to act when arrested by the police.

Rather bold statements were posted on the page as well, such as a commentary by the group admin Pang Khee Teik to the aforementioned *Asmara Songsang* musical: "ASMARA SAYA tak songsang, beb. Politik negara ni yang songsang. Jom luruskan kerajaan. Sekian terima kasih." It translates to: "My love is not abnormal. The politics of this country is abnormal. Let's straighten the government. Many thanks."[7]

6 | However, this was just my assumption based on the respondents' profile pictures.

7 | Pang Khee Teik. Forum post on the *Seksualiti Merdeka* group on *Facebook*. March 29, 2013. My translation.

Image 2

Photo gallery from *Facebook* account for Seksualiti Merdeka. https://www.facebook.com/groups/SMFestival/ March 2013.

The majority of the group members seem to be LGBT themselves, although it is impossible to acquire any accurate statistical data on this. Most non-gay members, such as myself, are most likely somehow involved in the LGBT community: working or volunteering in NGOs or participating in alternative cultural or political events in Malaysia.

According to my observations in the group, a vast amount of the members of the *Seksualiti Merdeka* are Malaysian Chinese (predominantly non-Muslim) men. They are, based on my experiences in the country, usually the ones in Malaysian society who tend to be more open about being gay, mainly because the Chinese culture is often more liberal and tolerant of differences than the country's two other main cultures: Malay and Indian. This is, however, not to say that homosexuality would be widely accepted in the Malaysian Chinese community either.

Also a large number of Malays have found their way into the group. All ethnic Malays are Muslims by the Malaysian constitution, and are under no circumstances allowed to leave the religion (Yusof 2010: 184). As many

observant Muslims in the country reject homosexuality, LGBT ethnic Malays are often under enormous pressure not to express their sexual identities.

All in all, the *Facebook* group is very diverse, and the country's main ethnic groups and different genders are relatively well represented. There are also quite a few foreign-sounding (European, Australian, American) names, which could be explained by the large expatriate community in Malaysia.

Single Interviews

To collect data from the group interviews, I first posted a questionnaire on the *Facebook* Wall belonging to the group. The possibility to answer anonymously by e-mail was offered, but I did not get a sufficient amount of replies. Subsequently I tried posting only one question on which the members of the group could comment directly; this turned out to be the most effective method in getting the group members to reply. I received a total of 13 answers. Out of all the people that answered, I chose two people who seemed to have more to say, and asked them further questions by e-mail.

Based on the single interviews with Pang Khee Teik (conducted on April 2, 2013) and Raymond Tai (conducted on April 1, 2013), I put together some of the most prevalent issues related to the research. According to both of the interviewees, there are various *Facebook* groups in Malaysia for the LGBT community. Tai said social media and other internet sites in Malaysia can be used mainly for socializing purposes. Dating and sex sites are thriving because they are almost impossible to control—even when a site is closed down, a mirror site will appear the next day. However, for those who are not out yet, using *Facebook* always poses a risk that their sexual orientation will be revealed.

Teik explained that many Malaysian LGBT people have two *Facebook* profiles for this purpose: one that reflects their identity as a gay individual, and one that appears as "straight" in order to avoid persecution. "To me, [that] sounds a bit unnecessary and makes it difficult to be who you are. I hope, one day, they will be able to merge the two together. I tell them that, on your gay profile, even if the privacy settings are very high, there is no guarantee that one of these gay people that you befriend is not going to expose you."[8]

Tai emphasized that although excellent for socializing, social media in Malaysia is not a safe platform from which to plan political activities, such as setting up organizations to help those who are in the closet, or organizing empowerment programs for sexual minorities. "For a while that is what *Seksualiti Merdeka* was doing, but it was quickly exposed in the main media. The government would use every effort they can to try to use public pressure

8 | Pang Khee Teik in interview with author.

to close it down."[9] According to him, the state controlled media has often been distorting the information they found in social media—for example, *Seksualiti Merdeka* ("Sexual Independence") would be twisted into *Sex Bebas* ("Free Sex") in the newspapers. Tai said *Facebook* users should always be aware that anything they post may end up in the wrong hands.

> I use a lot of restraint in what I put on the internet because of my work at PT Foundation; I cannot jeopardize the work that we are doing at the Pink Triangle. Especially Facebook is so public that the rule of thumb is that if you are unable to say [something] on printed media, you wouldn't say that on Facebook. It is similar in the sense that you have no control over it. When you put information on Facebook, it is public property, so one has to be careful, I suppose. (Interview with Raymond Tai)

Pang Khee Teik, who posts about LGBT issues to the site several times a day, told me that most of the time a team of two or three people, including himself, are responsible for making sure that new group members have the appropriate agenda. At the time of this writing, in April 2013, they had over 200 people in line awaiting approval. Teik said they usually end up adding people who already have more than five friends in the group. "Sometimes I also look at their *Facebook* profile—if it is someone from the circle of friends who I can trust, then I will add them in. Or, sometimes, if I am not quite sure, I will actually send them a message and ask why they want to join."

According to Tai, social media is in general the best place to communicate. He also mentioned alternatives such as *Google Groups*, which are more confined and limited to the core group of people. They can be used to discuss some of the things that need more organizing. "*Facebook* is more for things that we think we can publish—it is still the most versatile [social media platform] and commonly available for most people."

Group Interviews

In the group, I asked the participants why they found the *Seksualiti Merdeka Facebook* group useful. Between 3-7 April 2013, I received twelve replies in total: ten of the respondents were male, one of them female and one transgender (from male to female). Eight of them were ethnic Malaysian Chinese and four of them Malay. All of the respondents were Malaysians and LGBT; six stated in their profile that they lived in Malaysia and three lived abroad. In three profiles the current location information was not stated. In their *Facebook* profiles neither of them stated openly that they are gay, however, some of them had

9 | Raymond Tai in interview with author.

included suggestive quotes or photographs promoting liberal values such as sexual equality. To protect the respondents' privacy, I used pseudonyms instead of the names given in their *Facebook* profiles.

The answers revealed that the most important reason for using the *Facebook* group was primarily receiving information or news concerning the LGBT community in Malaysia, as well as being informed about LGBT related activities and events in the country. Seven respondents mentioned this point. "Unlike many platforms out there, the members here talk about useful LGBT information and equality. No, we don't talk about where is the latest toilet to cruise or where to get porn DVDs. We talk about what's going on around us, how it is going to affect us and how we can all come together and deal with it wisely," said Nick. Five respondents mentioned camaraderie or making new friends as an important factor: "I've made a few friends from the group as well. I have a small social circle and SM has introduced a few LGBT friends to me for which I'm grateful," said Sam.

Five considered peer-to-peer support an important factor. "It's nice to know you're not abnormal or damned like the public majority would think. To be able to safely admit who you are and finally be yourself. You're not left thinking that you're the only gay in the village which is depressing and leaves you hopeless for the future," told Nita. Another respondent, Joseph, also highlighted this issue: "You are so alone, a freak, an outcast, an abomination. But when you have found people like you, you don't feel so alone anymore. Having a supportive community, self pitying and self hatred just gradually disappear." Four respondents also referred to the value of being able to have a free discussion and network with other members of the LGBT community.

Being inspired by others and gaining self confidence were mentioned by two: "Seeing so many LGBTs who are proud of who they are and willing to fight for their rights inspires me to love myself more and be more comfortable with myself," said Sam. Knowing, understanding and learning to defend one's rights together with gaining the ability to be themselves and express oneself freely were also mentioned twice. Two also stated that they would like to support others who are going through similar issues to ones they had experienced: "you want to be a pillar of strength for someone out there who is still lost, scared and alone," Joseph continued. Respondents also mentioned feeling able to "complain about the government," being empowered, not being judged by others, reaching out to the whole community, getting resources, seeing things in perspective and making the world a better place.

Out of these 12 respondents, I chose two members, Khalil and Sam to whom I sent additional questions by e-mail. They both emphasized the importance of using protected *Facebook* groups and aliases when dealing with delicate issues such as sexual identity or orientation: "It is important for me to use not only closed but a secret group where my family members will not be able to see that

I'm in that group via *Facebook*. This is mainly because I'm not out to them yet, considering the possible financial repercussions," said Sam, whose studies are funded by his parents.

He is still afraid of publicly commenting on things related to LGBT on social media "since people associate you with being LGBT the minute you say anything about it. And I don't want to have to lie and say I'm not if asked the question. So I choose to avoid it altogether."[10] Khalil had a similar view on the issue: "It is still widely unacceptable being gay in this country, and in order to prevent further discrimination, only closed groups can protect the LGBT community." He thought it is possible that government officials were watching activities, but he had not encountered any problems himself.[11]

Conclusion—A Safe Space For Like-Minded Individuals

Over the course of my research, I found a variety of other LGBT related groups and pages on *Facebook*, such as the "PFLAG Malaysia" support group,[12] and a page called "Gay Malaysia Confessions."[13] However, *Seksualiti Merdeka* is one of the most popular groups that Malaysian LGBTs turn to for information.

For the regular user, *Seksualiti Merdeka* is a closed community and a safe space where the members can discuss their experiences as LGBT. Members support and encourage each other, sharing information and events of interest without being judged. For them, it is also an important means of networking and connecting with like-minded people in order to realize they are not alone; that being LGBT is not something to be ashamed of. The members feel they can "be themselves," at least in this virtual environment, instead of playing a role as they often have to do in their everyday lives.

For the group members who are involved in politics and organizing events related to the *Seksualiti Merdeka* movement, however, social media is not a safe arena. They must be constantly be mindful of what they write in order for their comments not to leak out into the Malaysian mainstream media. The research shows that, at the moment, it is not advisable to use *Facebook* or other means of social media for organizing any large public events for sexual minorities in the country. For the LGBTs in Malaysia, there is still a long way to go before

10 | Sam, in a private e-mail message to author. April 3, 2013.

11 | Khalil, in a private e-mail message to author. April 7, 2013.

12 | „PFLAG Malaysia." *Facebook*. Accessed: April 8, 2013. https://www.facebook.com/groups/pflagmalaysia/?ref=ts&fref=ts

13 | „Gay Malaysia Confessions." *Facebook*. Accessed: April 8, 2013. https://www.facebook.com/GayMYConfessions?fref=ts

people can freely express themselves in social media without fear. Groups like *Seksualiti Merdeka* are, however, a good start and act as a beacon of hope for a brighter future.

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