

## 9 Facing the music

### Music subcultures and “morality” in Malaysia

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#### **Introduction**

My involvement as a musician in the Malaysian independent music scene began by chance and rather “late” (I was 20 years old) as I slowly came to realize my musical works, methods and collaborations were at odds with the general ideological expectations presented by the mainstream. I found it more pleasurable and progressive to grow, learn and discover the varied realms that existed in the underground music subculture. It also helped that my friends with whom I shared a love of particular strains of music – the lo-fi collegiate rock of the 1990s and noise rock experimentations – also began networking in underground punk subculture that to a certain extent we had more in common philosophically speaking.

Growing up in the 1990s, it was common to read in the Malaysian dailies about the “vicious influence of Western culture” or *budaya kuning* (yellow culture) and how certain forms of music such as hip-hop and punk were threatening the very fabric that held Malaysian society together. Malaysian youths in general, and Malay youths in particular, were depicted as clueless and out of control, although my own lived experiences of that era begged to differ and raised an awareness in me that all is not what it seemed.

In that light, the black metal crackdowns of 2001 and 2005 were media grabbing and unfortunate incidents. Nevertheless, they make for interesting case studies on how urban Malay youth subcultures negotiate with the disciplinary power of morality in the changing Malaysian political landscape. From my perspective as a musician and a music lover of all genres, some of the accusations hurled at them were just plain absurd. In general, music “gigs” are organic gatherings of musicians and fans of a particular genre or subgenre. They are ideal social networking opportunities for musicians outside of the mainstream cultural industry who share not only the same musical inclinations but also similar value orientations. The crackdowns involved a series of raids on independent and privately owned music performance spaces which led to the arrests of mostly Malay youths who were subsequently freed without any charges made, save for a few who had broken council laws regarding permits. The significance of the events can be appreciated by considering the extensive coverage devoted to them by the local Malay language

media which not only reported the events with great enthusiasm but also with little journalistic regard for accessing credible sources. What clearly emerges from these episodes of mediated moral panics is a commentary of how modern Malay youth subjectivities is closely intertwined with popular cultural consumption, and how ethnic stereotypes are also easily manufactured as a result of these consumptive choices.

In this chapter, I argue that the construction of Malay cultural identities as embodied in the body politics of urbanized Malay youths is central in the portrayal of the phenomena. In bringing to the foreground the disciplining of the “deviancy” of these groups, what is also implicitly questioned is the efficacy of hegemonic nation-state ideals and trajectories. In other words, one can read these events as undermining the importance of addressing “more serious” issues of politics and culture as imagined by the ruling government.

### **The black metal crackdowns**

On New Year’s Eve, 2005, a police raid was conducted on “Paul’s Place”, a small music venue for the independent music community along *Jalan Kelang Lama* (Old Klang Road) in Kuala Lumpur. Police officers revealed to those present that it was a raid on the black metal gig. Close to 400 people, mostly men, were rounded up and detained for a few hours. The detainees consisted of not only those who were inside “Paul’s Place”, but also members of the public who were outside the venue and patrons of hawker food stalls within a 100 meter radius of the venue, including a stall owner and some Singaporean tourists who happened to be passing by the area at that time.

Ironically, the gig itself was not organized by the black metal fans at all but by the “hardcore” subculture which is a subgenre of “punk”. Adherents of hardcore punk subculture emphasize clean and healthy living, and practice what is termed “straight edge” – no use of drugs or alcohol. The bands performing that night not only consisted of local hard core bands but also independent bands from various genres. They included a Singaporean band whose sound can be described as a cross between *pop yeh yeh* and rock and a guest Japanese band. A band member later recounted that the rationale for the raid was that the police had come across the event’s flyer that appeared to have an image of “the devil” as well as blood motifs. They concluded that it was a black metal gathering.

All the detainees were subjected to urine tests for drug use. Only seven out of the 365 detained tested positive. Despite the presence of other ethnic groups, the Malay media, notably the daily tabloid, *Harian Metro*, reported the raid in an ethnically biased manner.

Four individuals were remanded for two days while the rest were released within a few hours after their detention. The four were released only following a press conference at “Paul’s Place” organized by the independent music community on January 2, 2006. By this time, the reasons given by the authorities for the raid had fluctuated between “black metal” to “unlawful gathering” to “public indecency” and back to “black metal” again.

Quickly following on the heels of the black metal raid, the Malay media reported of another crackdown on the “Langkawi Fest”. The “Langkawi Fest” was intended to be a “rave” (a large-scale techno party) happening on New Year’s Eve but was cancelled at the eleventh hour by the organizers. In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, “techno” had been closely associated with a particular social setting along with use of the drug ecstasy, and had generated considerable controversy in the early to mid-1990s (Shuker 2001: 153). The simplistic link made in the news reporting between the diverse subcultures of techno and black metal showed a lack of journalistic professionalism. What seemed to preoccupy both sensationalist stories was the spectre of drug use without a deeper concern for balanced reporting.

Indeed, an important precursor to the New Year’s Eve raid was a series of biased and highly editorialized features on the Malaysian black metal subculture by *Mastika*, a popular monthly Malay tabloid magazine, in its October, November and December issues of 2005. The articles carried, amongst others, accounts by “reformed” black metal subculture members and carried theatrical images, including one of a singer in stage make-up with strawberry sauce poured over his head to resemble blood from black metal events held at “Paul’s Place” taken earlier in the year. The November issue’s cover headline in Malay read “*Kami sembah syaitan – bakar Al-Quran di Port Dickson*” (“We worship the devil – burning the Al-Quran in Port Dickson”) while the December issue read “*Makan Babi, barulah true black metal!*” (“If you eat pork, then you are a true black metal follower”), followed by a smaller header at the bottom of the page “*Anak kita makin jauh terpesong*” (“Our children are further deviating”). The images on the front page montage that accompany the November headline include an illustration of a ghoulish creature (presumably the devil) and a photograph from a black metal live performance. The December issue carried an illustration of a half-woman, half-skeletal ghost next to a photo of two long-haired youths with face make-up – similar to that of the American rock band Kiss – one of whom has his tongue out (their eyes are digitally blurred) and three superimposed images of youths loitering by sidewalks next to parked cars and a shop lot signage that read, “*Pub dan Disko*” (“Pub and Disco”).

On 4 December, 2005, *The Star*, an English language daily, reported about a raid at an alleged black metal concert (headlined, “Malaysian Police Bust Black Metal Concert”) in Seremban town by the police, the day before (on Saturday) in which 105 youths were detained. The issue brought up in the lead was that the organizers had applied for its permit under the name “*Persatuan Cekak Silat*” (“Cekak Martial Arts Club”). However, the District OCPD Assistant Commissioner was quoted as saying that initial investigations did not indicate activities that broke the law or went against religion but they were detained for urine tests. According to the report, “the police had information that the organizers were carrying out activities that were against Islam and had planned to end their performance with a satanic worship session and sex”. The report concluded that, “30 youths had tested positive for drugs and three persons were handed over to the state religious department on suspicions they had committed acts contrary to Islam”.

The raid made the front page of *Harian Metro*'s December 5 edition and carried the headline, "*Pesta Black Metal – penganjur guna nama persatuan silat cekak*" ("Black Metal Festival – organisers use cekak martial arts club name"), and continued in the second page with the subheading "*Hasrat pijak Al-Quran*" ("Wish to step on the Al-Quran"). *Harian Metro*'s take on the event was far more in-depth and recounted an earlier black metal raid in 2001, and the paper's extensive coverage of that saga. The story concluded with an un-sourced mention of followers burning, stepping, and even fornication in front of the Al-Quran. It also noted the government's cancellation of a concert by black metal band, Mayhem, from Norway that was scheduled for 4 February at the Backroom Disco in Kuala Lumpur.

The following day (6 December, 2005), *Harian Metro* carried yet another front page story with the headline, "*Amuk Black Metal – 40 kumpulan rancang gegar Jalan Kelang Lama*" ("Black Metal Amok – 40 groups plan to rattle Old Klang Road") which continued on inside with a lengthy subheading of an eyewitness account, "*Kata-kata Menakutkan Laman Web Black Metal – Saya lihat banyak grafik seram selain lambang kumpulan muzik dipenuhi darah, kepala kambing hitam*" ("Scary Sayings on Black Metal Web Page – I saw a lot of scary graphics other than the band's insignia full of blood, black goat's head").

Four years earlier, in 2001, similar media-grabbing raids were conducted by the police and religious authorities in the northern Malaysian state of Kedah. It was believed that a black metal occult movement had thrived among Malay youths in that state. Youths were randomly subjected to strip searches for black clothing. Those who wore black T-shirts were apprehended for questioning and counseling as they were believed to be "black metal followers". As in the 2005 case, the raids were racialized as they implied the involvement of Malay youths via suggestive headlines in the 2 January, 2006 edition of *Harian Metro* such as "*Tin arak bertaburan*" ("Alcohol tins found scattered"). In the same edition, *Harian Metro* gave a specific count of 380 people consisting of 310 male and 70 female teenagers, while *The Star* (on 5 January, 2006) merely reported "some 380" people were detained and brought to the Brickfields police station for urine tests. None were reportedly charged.

Both raids were the latest series of similar actions taken against other music subcultures like "punk rock", "hip-hop" and "heavy metal" over the past three decades. Through their demonization, those in power are fortifying a dominant ideology which in itself is also deeply entrenched in neo-religious and mythical rhetoric. Moreover, the "problem" of youths has often been a subject of perennial concern of the government. As observed by Maila Stevens:

The relative social powerlessness of children and young people leaves them very vulnerable to authoritative depictions. The small attention paid to youth in scholarly work on Malaysia is all the more interesting, given the place occupied by the behaviours and needs of young people in government polemic and more generally in public discourse since independence in 1957. The perceived dangers of drugs and, latterly, of the effects of the new

affluence, have been prominent planks of government pronouncements and other national cultural production, featuring regularly in ministerial speeches, rallies and television propaganda ... That young people are now making themselves heard in a way that worry their elders is clear from recent accounts of the rapid growth of rock concerts as key events in many young Malaysians' lives.

(Stivens 2002: 190–1)

### **Malay media and the Malay consensus**

The discursive categories usually used by the Malay media to portray the ethnic and religious make-up of the “deviants” picked up in the raids are significant. They are portrayed to be situated within the shifting landscapes of modern urban Malaysia as well as contrasted against a nostalgic traditional rural Malaysia. This juxtaposition is central to understanding the cultural politics involved in the raids because of the social climate of a country undergoing rapid economic development and the subsequent shifts in cultural identities that are perceived to be set in motion. The growing importance of a resurgent Islam has also increased the instability of what constitutes Malaysian modernity. The idea of modernity is located within a series of tensions surrounding the role of religion in the modern Malay world and its relationship to tradition, family and critiques of modernization and Westernization (Stivens 2002: 191). Under these circumstances, the mainstream media (journalism in this case) and popular culture exist in a state of ongoing struggle between party politics versus everyday politics, and which often results in a stalemate.

Hartley explains the linkages between journalism and modernity in the following terms:

Journalism is *the* sense-making practice of modernity (the condition) and popularizer of modernism (the ideology); it is a product and promoter of modern life, and is unknown in traditional societies ... Journalism and modernity are marked by co-development of capitalization and consumerism, market expansion ... and is caught up in all the institutions, struggles and practices of modernity; contemporary politics is unthinkable without it, as is contemporary consumer society, to such an extent that in the end it is difficult to decide whether journalism is a product of modernity, or modernity is a product of journalism.

(Hartley 1996: 33–4)

With this in mind, any evaluation of Malaysia's cultural make-up will usually lead back to the modern/traditional binary opposition. It is within this relationship where the ownership of Malaysia's cultural history is contested as the negotiations and complexities that arise out of this dynamic drives dominant cultural forms to add or exclude elements without considering the said dynamism. It is at here where selected cultural elements are tagged “ideals” and which are then associated

with “morality”. The discourse of “Malaysian culture” in local journalism is often caught within this binary, and is a direct consequence of the state’s ownership and control of the mass media, whether directly or by proxy ownership. This phenomena is particularly acute in the Malay media.

Urban Malay youth culture is embedded within wider Malaysian social and political structures and cultural complexities. The official management of culture in contemporary Malaysian society is often done with reference to the official religion of the country, Islam. This necessarily refers to the ethnic Malay majority as all Malays are constitutionally defined as Muslims. Historically, Islam has played a significant role in formulating Malay cultural identities for at least five centuries. The synonymous and naturalized relationship between Malays and Islam continues to be the platform on which generalized notions of cultural norms and morality are constructed. Malaysian Islam has also imbibed strains of “conservatism”, notably from returning Malay students educated in the Middle East over the years that make up the new Malay middle class. As elsewhere, since the mid-1970s, global Islamic resurgence has impinged upon the public sphere of post-colonial, multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysia. The project of a new corporate Islam is oddly reminiscent of the “muscular Christianity” ethos noted by historians for nineteenth-century Britain, with distinct overtones of the militarily competent and hyper-masculine Christian gentleman, the heir to the Protestant Ethic, in the central image of the new order (Stivens 2002: 192). Indeed, the Malaysian government has more recently leaned towards the conservative end in matters of religious interpretation and practice in order to avoid a wider political schism that might weaken Malay political control. Arguably, this shift has unsettled Malay modernists and partially contributed to the breakup of the old ruling Malay political party, United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO), in 1987 (Provencher 1995: 180).

The Malaysian media is also tightly controlled by the Ministry of Information through various legislative instruments like *The Printing and Presses Act*, *The Sedition Act*, *The Official Secrets Act*, and *The Internal Security Act*. Additionally, media practitioners are often steered into directions that are dictated by their proxy owners which are closely linked to political parties of the ruling coalition, and hence limiting any alternative or dissenting voices from the public (e.g., Zaharom Nain and Wang Lay Kim 2004; Mustafa 2003). The Malay media, in particular, have the largest audience share, and the ideological weight they play in creating political and moral consensus cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it is not surprising that most of the contents portrayed in the Malay media tend to be centered around concerns of “social and moral degradation” among the Malay populace, particularly among gendered youths.

There is also a high degree of “dumbed-down” and sensationalist contents in the Malay media offering little intellectual alternatives or reportage of social and political realities other than trivia and gossip within the entertainment industry. For instance, the two best-selling Malay medium publications are *Harian Metro* and *Mastika*. The former has a daily circulation of 241,800 according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation (16 July, 2006). These two publications frequently touch

upon topics and sensitivities pertaining to Malay cultural beliefs which hark back to pre-Islamic times (e.g., animism) and transpose them onto urban settings. These two publications also make no qualms about being tabloids, and are focused in selling stories and features which take gossip and word-of-mouth information as credible sources. For the ruling elite, the challenge is to balance the high commercial consumption of popular culture as found in media – also frowned upon by Islamic revivalists – with competing political agendas.

Another angle that these publications usually adopt is that of Malays originally coming from a predominantly agrarian society still coping with the radical changes of modernization in a post-colonial urban environment. A residual legacy of the British “divide and rule” policy, this ideological slant is ironically prominent in portrayals of urban Malays as the sole “victims” of “wayward” or “Westernized” lifestyles. In these publications, very few Chinese or Indians, let alone the numerous ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak, are represented. When they appear, their cultural identities are mired in the colonial stereotypes of the Chinese as industrious and entrepreneurial traders and the Indians as penniless labourers.

### **Music subcultures and Malay youth discontent**

As I have noted earlier, the key mobilizing metaphor for Malay morality is Islam. However, politically inspired interpretations of the faith often bear little resemblances to Islamic teachings as practiced by ordinary adherents. The appropriation of Islam for the spectre of “moral panics” is central to my argument. Together with the deployment of the Malay media as a “moral entrepreneur”, both elements come together to play a powerful policing and rationalizing role in re-presenting to the general reading public the various punitive police raids on black metal music events and crackdowns on their fans. However, these actions must also be seen alongside the context of working-class Malay youths where music subcultures have long played a central role in the management of their new urban identities despite being pitted as a force which undermines traditional Malay cultural values. Both trajectories are symptomatic of Malay society grappling with its own growing diversity and meeting the demands of urbanization and industrialization where youth alienation from traditional values and disgruntlement over job prospects are common since the rapid development of Malaysia from the 1970s (Lockard 1998: 233).

In comparison, the presence of the Chinese music underground scene, as opposed to the mainstream Canto-rock, was spearheaded in the late 1990s and early 2000s by bands such as Chong Yang and Moxuan through the Huang Ho record label. Currently, the Soundscape record label and more politically aware bands like Nao and Deng Deng, and more musically inclined bands like Citizens of Ice Cream are the embodiment of the breadth and variety in the Malaysian music subcultures that go beyond the discourse of “morality”. These bands tend to sing in Mandarin and are musically influenced by punk, rock and metal but inhabiting neither one genre at any specific moment. The local Chinese media are also more professional and supportive in representing these musical acts, highlighting their

music and ideas more rather than focusing on the contextual meanings behind the subculture itself. The Malaysian experimental music scene is also a result of the explorations that had its beginnings from the Chinese music underground. One of its proponents, sound artist Goh Lee Kwang, even had a column in one of the Chinese dailies before relocating to Europe and touring the region. The availability of large corporate sponsors such as Tiger Beer (a non-starter for the Malay subculture) certainly helped with developing their music events financially. Nevertheless, the market for the Chinese underground is currently too small to sustain and most bands tend not to stick just within the scene but also explore outside their comfort zones. I resist using the “subculture” in my description because the Chinese underground scene is very eclectic and has no ideological qualms about corporate sponsors as opposed to the more “purist” punk subcultures.

As with any subcultures, be it musical or otherwise, the driving force of identity formation lies in the ways which the subordinate group resists the incorporation of the parent and dominant cultural forms. In the recent past, two music subcultures in which urban Malay youths have popularly identified with, have been punk and heavy metal. Lockard notes that by the 1980s:

Some marginalized, aimless, urban young people adopted selective features of Western popular culture, from punk hairstyles to “heavy metal” music. Increasing numbers of teenagers and young adults (especially Malays) enjoy “hanging out”; their elders call it *lepak* (“loitering”) and view it as idleness. They *lepak* at McDonald’s outlets, shopping malls, public squares, or the beach, in order to relax, listen to music, and relieve tension after work or school. Authorities worry about drugs, smoking, and vandalism.

(Lockard 1998: 233)

Given the pace of capitalist development in the country, the seeds were sown early in the media to cultivate a preferred reading for a strong moral policing force to keep Malaysia productive and untainted by “foreign” values despite the irony that these cosmopolitan lifestyle choices usually accompany open economic systems. Intensified advertising campaigns – aimed mostly at younger and female consumers – to buy products associated with Western popular culture like tobacco, alcohol and fast food also became an area of some concern (Lent 1995: 7). While the foregoing might seem unrelated to subcultural activities – which more often than not reject the consumption of such products – nevertheless it is the imagined links between these disparate elements that have become a favorite tool for inciting the need for moral policing and winning moral consensus.

The demonization and scapegoating of rock music and targeting of youth subcultures (notably punk) is not a new phenomenon elsewhere in the world. In the 1980s, the emergence of the “New Right” in America brought about a complex network of political, secular and religious organizations exerting considerable pressure and influence through letter writing and petition campaigns, television and radio programmes, and the publications of think-tanks. Religion figured



prominently as an ideological tool of attack. For instance, Denslow makes mention of a claim by Pastor Fletcher Brothers, a “rock deprogrammer”, that rock music is:

the single most powerful tool with which Satan communicates his evil message. MURDER MUSIC has led millions of young people into alcoholism, abortion, crime, drug addiction, incest, prostitution, sadomasochism, satanic worshipping, sexual promiscuity, suicide and much more. MURDER MUSIC has to be STOPPED NOW! The moral fiber of our country and young lives are at stake!

(cited in Shuker 2001: 224)

In 1985, rock music and free speech was the target of the Parents’ Music Resource Centre (PMRC), headed by a group of “Washington wives” most of whom were married to Senators or Congressmen and were “born again” Christians.

The PMRC dedicated themselves to ‘cleaning up’ rock, which they saw as potentially harmful to young people, terming it ‘secondary child abuse’. One of the founding members, Tipper Gore, became involved because she had bought her 8-year-old daughter a copy of Prince’s album *Purple Rain* and found that one of its songs, ‘Darling Nicki’, referred to masturbation (‘I met her in the hotel lobby, masturbating with a magazine’) . . . The PMRC published a *Rock Music Report*, condemning what they claimed to be five major themes in the music: rebellion, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and perversion, violence-nihilism, and the occult.

(cited in Shuker 2001: 224–5)

The result of this encouragement of self-censorship was the generic “Parents Advisory Explicit Lyrics” label that appears on albums evaluated to be culpable.

Various musical subcultural movements that have emerged both in the West and the East, notably rap and hip-hop, have also been subsequently incorporated into mainstream music and lost their initial resistant anti-establishment qualities. Others, such as the hardcore punk scene in America and Japanese skinhead punk, have maintained and resisted co-optation. The arrival of rap music in Malaysia in the 1990s was greeted with similar tones of disapproval but remained popular despite a government ban on broadcasting these performances on radio and television stations. They were perceived by local critics as “too westernized” and “un-Islamic” (Lockard 1998: 259). Punk music subculture by comparison has managed to remain largely outside the radar of the Malay media’s roving eyes (except for a brief period in the 1990s) and the local music industry’s incorporation. It resembles more of a counterculture as punk music enthusiasts usually move on to hold professional jobs but many continue to espouse its guiding principles of political and humanitarian activism outside of their work sphere. On the whole, punk subculture (and its various permutations such as hardcore,

straight edge, anarcho, skinhead, post-punk, etc.) has the attraction of offering ready-made solutions to Malaysian society's ambivalences and a platform for self-empowerment amongst Malay youths. Pioneering Malaysian punk bands like Carbuerttor Dung and The Pilgrims paved the way for not just punk as a music genre but also ideas and values which are alternatives to dominant culture. Although the musical aspect is a symbolic vehicle of this, punk itself is not merely a genre but also a philosophical approach to life and art promoting empowerment through self-sustenance and socio-cultural and political awareness through a D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) ethos. The definition of punk by local punk guru Joe Kidd of Carbuerttor Dung can be summarized as follows:

Anybody or any group of people who sincerely push boundaries, create challenging bodies of work with integrity and thought, is considered to be as punk, especially when the expression positively reaffirms individual freedom and allows for the betterment of the world we live in. That's my conclusion. That's punk.

(cited in Muhammad Azwan, undated)

Punk rock and its various subgenres also have their own sets of fashion which distinguishes one subgenre from another. But its permutations are not always "antireligious". In fact, most re-incorporated trends are readily available in youth fashion stores. Some can be mistaken as black metal to an untrained eye or lazily appropriated into the 'black metal' discourse. As Muhammad Azwan observed:

As punk culture consists of many themes where they are associated with somehow different type of punk music, they also wear quite different style of dressings. The anarcho punk wear black cargo pants, t-shirt with slogans or logos of bands, patches, khaki backpacks, dreadlocks or spiky hair. While the hardcore kids are spotted with cargo pants, loose denims and t-shirts, wallet chains and baseball caps among other things. As for the skinheads, they are synonymous with bald or shaven heads, tight jeans rolled up above the ankle, suspenders, berets, denims and suede jacket, Fred Perry shirts and Doc Martens (boots). The skinheads are more fashionable, smart-dressed and sometimes don't really show harmful looks.

(Ibid.)

By comparison, the heavy metal genre that emerged did not offer a solution but more as a form of escapism amongst the urban Malay youths as most of its membership tend to come from the working class, although not exclusively so. Heavy metal remains popular amongst all social classes and ages, notably because of the musical techniques, particular skills at guitar playing, drumming techniques, vocalizations and so forth that come with performing the genre. Although all forms of music can be consumed as a form of escapism, certain permutations and subgenres of punk are often more politicized compared to the other forms of heavy metal. The spirit of the countercultures and anarcho punks of the late

1980s and 1990s can still be found in the anti-globalization protests of the early twentieth century and are examples of non-musically centered (and sometimes musically linked) highly politicized groupings that would have once been termed “subcultures” but are difficult to conceive of as such today (Huq 2006: 21).

Falling under the generic term of “rock”, heavy metal is associated with Malay youth rebellion. But unlike the punk subculture, their members lack connections to broader constituencies that might support progressive causes (Lockard 1998: 261). Heavy metal is also frequently criticized as incorporating the worst excesses of popular music, notably its perceived narcissism and sexism, and it is also often musically dismissed (Shuker 2001: 152). The term “rock” in Malaysia often wrongly refers to heavy metal – a symptom of musical genre ignorance pervades in the Malaysian cultural landscape – and the continuing popularity of 1980s heavy metal bands such as Metallica and Iron Maiden, to name a few, with its supposed “macho” imagery, posturings and music often found in posters, band photos or album covers are often misread as the “violent” and “aggressive” nature of the genre. These negative associations are echoed in the local setting where the Malay media label colloquially heavy metal fans as *kutus* (hair lice) because of their trademark long unkempt hair. Margaret Scott (cited in Lockard 1998: 25) describes its attractive powers in the following terms:

With the strictures of Islamic fundamentalism pressing in on one side and, on the other side, the drudgery of working or looking for work in a place where the unemployment rate is more than 35 percent among 15–24 year olds, rock music offers relief ... *Dakwahs* [missionary Muslims] inhabit the universities and *kutus* inhabit the shopping malls. When being young and Malay means choosing sides between the club of the *dakwahs* at one extreme and the club of *kutus* at the other, popular culture becomes a partisan pastime. *Kutu* culture, a provocative, challenging alternative, is a convenient target for what is at the root a debate over national identity ... but why heavy metal? Because it's loud and it's got minor chords and it's offensive and it's a badge of distinction and it's got clothes to go along with it and it's only for young Malays and because *dakwahs* don't like it.

*Kutus* or heavy metal bands and fans consciously adopt a signature fashion and style to personify their resistance to dominant culture. Although often times expressing real anger at the system, *kutus* are less able to play an activist political role since their music is defined by particular lifestyle concerns rather than political commitments (Lockard 1998: 261). Heavy metal subculture also has many subgenres like “black metal”, “death metal”, “speed metal” and so forth. Their fans often try to outdo one another by self-consciously reveling in their marginal and outsider status. It is this nebulous aspect of their subculture which the Malay media usually focuses on when they perform their collective work of demonization.

While the particular appeal of black heavy metal amongst urban Malay youths merits further study, it suffices for now to note how this subgenre differentiates

itself from other heavy metal subgenres. The most recent of the heavy metal influenced subgenre to rise into the commercial and capitalist market is “nu metal”, which incorporates influences from rap and hip-hop via the use of rapping techniques in singing and the presence of a DJ (disc jockey) who uses sampled music or sounds within the song structures and performances. Like “grunge” in the mid-1990s through Seattle-based and Washington-based bands such as Nirvana, Mudhoney, Soundgarden and Pearl Jam, stylized and marketed rebellion via fashion and music was the order of the day. This is a key factor in locating the features of a specific music subculture or subgenre which may or may not appeal not only to youth culture trends but also the degree of “moral ambiguity” because of the lack of religious symbolism. More often than not, while heavy metal or punk influenced subgenres often appear aggressive and loud on the surface, its lyrical subject matter still draws from traditional modes of popular songs while varying its signature themes of anomie. As Huq (2006: 147) notes:

... lyrically many of the same emergent themes of grunge have resurfaced in nu metal, whose proponents include Korn, Offspring, Limp Bizkit and Slipknot. Papa Roach’s 2002 ‘She Loves Me Not’ for example revolves around the lyric ‘Life’s not fair’, revisiting the age-old theme in vernacular popular song of romantic love and articulating the sense of injustice voiced in numerous examples of punk, grunge and other ‘alternative’ music. There are also various examples of youth culture shock tactics in nu metal, as seen in punk posturing and the extreme edges of heavy metal, such as Ozzy Osbourne’s stage shows.

Indeed, the style and fashion of black metal subculture through its signature use of insignias, dressing and gestures also play a significant role in fueling negative media portrayals of them. The fact that adherents of black metal music subculture seldom localize its symbols and iconography further facilitated the spectre of negative foreign cultural forms “invading” local “pure” and “untainted” cultures. What distinguishes black metal subculture from other genres, however, is its often anti-religious or atheistic motifs expressed both lyrically and symbolically. For local Malay-Muslims, these themes rub against deeply ingrained religious beliefs with respect to the seductive powers of the “devil” and the severe penalty of “disbelief in god”. The specific insignias, dressing, gestures and musicality of black metal have a culturally specific history and can be traced back to its heavy metal origins. In the industrialized West, Shuker (2001: 152f) notes that:

Many heavy metal fans are working class, white, young and male, identifying with the phallic imagery of guitars and the general muscularity and oppositional orientation of the form ... The symbols associated with heavy metal, which include the Nazi insignias and Egyptian and biblical symbols, provide a signature identification with the genre, being widely adopted by metal’s youth cult following ... The genre has maintained its high market profile into the 1990s, despite critical derision and a negative public image.

The precise reasons for the international popularity of heavy metal among working class male youths have been a subject of research and debate. Foremost has been the suggestion that it is essentially a subversive and oppositional cultural form against the status quo. In the case of Malaysia, rapid urbanization combined with aspects of religious subordination and the mundane routines of working class employment for Malay youths are strong plausible factors. This is suggested in culturally specific local idioms and imageries evident in heavy metal lyrics but more exaggerated in black metal. For instance, biblical symbols such as the crucifix often take on more ominous tones which, in its extreme, alludes to fantasy and paganism but to what extent black metal listeners in general practice them is open to question, since it is a form of escapism. It would be akin to likening gangsta-rap fans to indulging in guns, murder and crime. The late famed rock critic, Lester Bangs, who favoured the emergence of heavy metal has this take on the subgenre:

As its detractors have always claimed, heavy metal rock is nothing more than a bunch of noise; it is not music, it's distortion – and that is precisely why its adherents find it appealing. Of all contemporary rock, it is the genre most closely identified with violence and aggression, rapine and carnage. Heavy metal orchestrates technological nihilism.

(cited in Shuker 2001: 152)

As in other kinds of music, the heavy metal genre has also been absorbed into a capitalist mode of consumption. Marketing plays a significant role as the genre's performers present an achievable image of flounced hair and torn jeans, a rock lifestyle whose surface aspects are affordable to its followers. The impact of Western heavy metal on MTV has been significant and is mirrored in the heavy music video rotations throughout the 1980s to the 1990s in Malaysian television. In this context, black metal subculture could be viewed as a knee-jerk reaction to the commerciality of heavy metal. Its intensified form and reinterpretation of heavy metal structure and imagery doubles or triples any form of negative public image and propels it further into underground music and, in the process, engenders less visibility in the eyes of the dominant culture. This mysterious and cultish nature, central to its identity, is also detrimental to its listeners who do not partake in its subculture. Opportunities for scapegoating and demonization can be easily built around it, as was the case in the Malay media which played up on local beliefs and cultural anxieties together with its notoriety in the West to mediate a simulated moral panic.

### **Simulated moral panics and policing: An analysis of the 2001 black metal crackdown**

As I have discussed earlier, the intended preferred reading of the raids prefixes the notion of a strong moral policing force to keep Malaysia, and Malay youths in particular, productive and untainted by “foreign” values and practices. A textual analysis of media reports reveals some telling insights into how a preferred reading

is inferred by the choices of words mediated by an Islamic paradigm to portray the black metal music genre. The tenuous association made between the black metal followers and drug use and viewing pornography can basically be seen as an iconic attempt to scapegoat black metal as fundamentally associated with social ills and evils like the burning of the Quran, animal sacrifices, blood drinking, and so forth. Moreover, the commentaries of *muftis* (a professional jurist who interprets Muslim law), the Kedah State Executive Committee for Religious Affairs, and the Kedah Islamic Affairs Council certainly helped to project a grave religious concern. The frequent mention of “threat to religious beliefs”, “faith”, and “Malay youths” in the same breath as “evil” practices consisting of “occult worship” and “devil worship”, and which would lead to the “destruction of Muslims”, if unchecked, buttressed an Islamic inflection of a moral panic. In the journalistic news reports on the black metal crackdowns of 2001, a combination of religious commentaries and strong imageries to characterize black metal rituals and iconography provided metaphorical weight through language and semantics rather than factual accounts.

To make sense of the episode, I adopt the sequential scheme as famously worked out by Stanley Cohen to describe the phases of a typical disaster and to explain the mode of reporting deployed.

*Warning*: during which arises, mistaken or not, some apprehension based on conditions out of which danger may arise. The warning must be coded to be understood and impressive enough to overcome resistance to the belief that the current tranquility can be upset.

*Threat*: during which people are exposed to communication from others, or to signs from the approaching disaster itself indicating specific eminent danger.

*Impact*: during which the disaster strikes and the immediate unorganized response to the death, injury or destruction takes place.

*Inventory*: during which those exposed to the disaster begin to form a preliminary picture of what has happened and of their own condition.

*Rescue*: during which the activities are geared to immediate help for survivors. As well as people in the impact are helping each other, the suprasystem begins to send aid.

*Remedy*: during which more deliberate and formal activities are undertaken towards relieving the affected. The suprasystem takes over the functions the emergency system cannot perform.

*Recovery*: during which, for an extended period, the community either recovers its former equilibrium or achieves a stable adaptation to the changes which the disaster may have brought about.

(Cohen 2002: 22–3)

The hypothesis that the crackdown is a simulated moral panic can be based on the third sequence, the *impact*, in which there had been no actual proof of

damage done by the black metal groups other than the damage to Islamic belief and morals. The initial sequences of *warning* and *threat* had not been substantially supported by an actual *impact* and the only evidences reported mostly consisted of black metal paraphernalia and “reformed” ex-black metal members’ confessions. In fact, there had been many false alarms concerning certain youth gatherings that turned out actually to be “innocent” gatherings or totally unrelated to black metal groups. The lack of any coherent voice and opinions from academic or independent professionals from non-governmental organizations in the reports also showed considerable bias in the sourcing of information.

The first four initial reports – on July 16, 17, and 21 – by the Malaysian National News Agency, relied on quotes by authority figures such as the National Unity and Social Development Minister (describing it as a “street gang”), the Education Director General (describing it as a “group”), the Deputy Prime Minister (describing it as a “menace” and “a social problem”), and a Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department (describing it as a “dangerous virus” and a “cancer ... which will lead to the destruction of Muslims in the country”).

The expressions used in these initial reports at first suggested a *warning* that warranted further investigation and the words used to describe black metal followers (“street gang” and “group”) did not imply grave social concerns as these descriptions merely imply deviant social groupings and nothing *too* serious. However, by quoting an authority figure with the stature of the Deputy Prime Minister, the spectre of an escalating *threat* through the words, “menace” and “social problem”, was raised. This was further supported by a quote in a report four days later from a Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department who brandished phrases such as “dangerous virus” and “cancer” as formidable *threats* to Muslims in the country. Within the span of five days, the image of these black metal “members” comprising mostly high school students and youths, had escalated from mere isolated “deviant” social groups to a huge threat to Muslim society.

It is a common tactic for those in positions of leadership given the responsibility of managing situations such as moral panics to adopt the public demeanour of calm father figures managing the irrational outburst of an adolescent. Once the emotion subsides, it is assumed that the panic will go away (Horsfield 1997: 5). This is exactly what had happened. A binary opposition was first set up between the adult paternal figure of the authorities and the adolescent members of the black metal groups. Later, the binary shifted between the “good”, righteous religious Muslim leaders (a position also adopted by politicians) and the “evil”, ignorant youths of the black metal “groups”. If the moral panic was indeed simulation, this claim is supported by the fact that media reportings eventually disappeared within a month.

What is evident in the events reported is this apparently clear-cut binary oppositions – “adult rationalism” versus “adolescent irrationality”, and “good” versus “evil” – and the rapid succession from initial *warning* to the *remedy* and *rescue*. The entire fiasco lasted just over a month. Revealingly, the police were reluctant to intervene. The Inspector General of Police was quoted (on July 21) as saying that “it is not a national security problem ... [but] more social

than criminal". A few days later, on July 24, the North-East District Police Chief stated that, "it would be futile merely to investigate what could be just another modern day fashion". This suggests a strong political basis in pointing fingers rather too quickly. The rapid progress from a religious concern (July 21) to a political concern ("aimed at bringing down the government ... it was used by the opposition to show the failure of the government to curb social ills among the youth" on August 4) also seems rather contrived considering that the *remedy* and *recovery* sequence by the authority offered up a rather quick, clean and simple, and effective solution – by treating black metal followers with medicine to complement counseling and motivational programs (August 12), using local music personalities to combat social ills (August 17), and by the "integrated action" between the Education Ministry, the police, the Home Ministry, the National Unity and Social Development Ministry, the National Security Division, and the Malaysian Islamic Advancement Department (JAKIM).

Another important aspect of black metal subculture is the symbolism and icons that are, like most subcultures, anti-hegemonic in its representations. Style is a significant part of subcultures challenging the principle of unity and cohesion, and which contradicts the myth of consensus (Hebdige 1979: 18). It is these aspects of subcultures that become easy targets for local media as they transpose apparent differences to an exaggerated degree. Thus, while punk subculture is closely associated with profanity and highly stylized fashion of working class youths, black metal subculture is often aligned with paganism. This aspect of the black metal subculture makes it useful as a moral target especially in societies like Malaysia where religion is closely linked with cultural values and public consensus. In this particular case, there was much political capital to be gained as most of the alleged members came from religious schools. By brandishing black metal as a "demonizing" agent, the subculture became an inherently evil entity which threatens the very social fabric of the Muslim community, especially for "fragile", "confused" and "irrational" Muslim Malay youths.

While little had changed in terms of tone and strategies used by both the Malay media and the authorities in both incidents, the former have become more complicit in the phenomena. In the 2005 crackdown at Paul's Place, for instance, according to eyewitnesses and patrons, members of the Malay press were present. This suggests that the Malay media are playing an active role as an instigator in pressuring the authorities into taking action by playing the religious and moral card.

While it is difficult to quantitatively measure whether black metal bands and its fan base has increased or decreased substantially, black metal events or events with black metal bands participating still persist and these bands continue to record. The raid itself was not detrimental to black metal subculture as most black metal bands and their fans are more inclined to its musicality rather than the ideas associated with the subculture. As a subculture, most black metal band members, fans and subculture members often have day jobs and families, and lead ordinary and possibly equally mundane and routinized lives. The raids constitute more a breach into an individual's freedom of choice rather than state ideological repression as musical tastes do not necessarily dictate an individual's ideology or worldview.



To be sure, low-profile raids are more commonplace, and in comparison to the media grabbing 2005 New Year's Eve raid, there were less publicized raids in places like Seremban town earlier where no formal charges were made. The episodic nature of these raids thus implies a certain felt need by enforcement and religious authorities to exert their powers at a marginalized group in order to give some semblance of corrective "action" in the face of perceived social ills while bringing about little real change at the same time.

The community most affected by these raids have been the local independent musicians. Consisting primarily of working to middle class Malaysians with jobs and families, these musicians find pleasure in performing, recording and organizing small-scale and self-funded events. They conform to legal requirements regarding the application for permits from local councils and authorities to organize such events and put to question the kinds of moral issues sensationalized by the Malay media.

## **Conclusion**

In the 1990s, similar kinds of mediated moral panics were evident in the Malay media. They included the naturalized association of "lepak" ("loafing") at shopping centres by Malay teens with moral degradation, and the "bohsia/bohjan" ("biker boys" and "biker girls") with drugs and free sex (Stivens 2002). The raids discussed in this chapter also have resonances with more recent crackdowns on up-market places like the Zouk nightclub in central Kuala Lumpur, and on "Mat Rempits" – Malay males who perform daring motorcycle races on the numerous highways that ring cities like Kuala Lumpur. Once again, Malay youths were specifically targeted for corrective action. In the infamous Zouk raid, for instance, Malay patrons were separated from non-Malays and humiliated before they were brought to the police station for questioning and detention. Mat Rempits comprise largely working class Malays and have also been subject to periodic police retributions. However, these actions have been supplemented by calls from within UMNO to "recruit" Mat Rempits into the party for a greater cause and to re-label these new party members as "Mat Cemerlang" ("achievers").

Notwithstanding their intended outcomes, what these punitive raids and assimilative actions succeed in making are moral statements about the plight of urban Malay-Muslims and the putative loss of cultural and religious values that come with modernization and urbanization. At the core of these events are issues of the dueling features of a growing religious conservatism that are at odds with the demands and democratizing choices brought about by modernity. In this scheme of things, how musicians and fans of the independent music scene are positioned in the changing moral landscapes of Malaysia, particularly in sub-genres like black metal, presents new areas for academic inquiry. A further mapping of the cultural consumption of urban Malay youths, including the new Malay middle class – children of parents who have benefited from the New Economic Policy – may help provide indications to the extent these mediated punitive actions have affected them and whether the concerns and grievances discussed

in this chapter are more universally shared. The availability of alternatives to the mainstream media through the appropriation of the Internet (for blogging and social networking) has created a virtual cultural space to navigate, communicate and present their contestations. At the very least, this promises a healthy questioning of the truth claims and relevance of the mainstream mass media in contemporary Malaysian society and the hegemonic values that their owners seek to transmit.

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