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# **Conjuring the tropical spectres: heavy metal, cultural politics in Singapore and Malaysia**

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*KEYWORDS: Malaysia, Singapore, youth subculture, moral panic, heavy metal, Islamisation*

## **ABSTRACT**

*The evolution of moral panics is dependent on the particular social context and the ability of certain issues to trigger concern within society. In this paper, the authors have employed a cross-comparative study of the heavy metal music subcultures in Singapore and Malaysia to understand the differences in the issues that generate such panics based on the socio-political context of each country and its current concerns. Although the youth involved in both cases are marginalised male Malays, the framing of their alleged deviance and criminality permits, in the case of Singapore, only a limited possibility for moral panic creation given the conservative socio-political governance that limits allegations such as 'Satanism'. In the case of Malaysia, where a 'large-scale' moral panic involving black metal emerged in 2001, the recent trend towards Islamisation gave fodder for the condemnation of black metal based on the allegations of the anti-Islamic behaviour of Muslim youth involved in the black metal scene. In both cases, such groups were exploited by parties claiming to defend the social fabric of the moral majority, but in the latter case it took on grave implications due to the extent of the state and public response. This paper thus argues that the framing of these moral panics is an important component determining the*

*relative 'success' of the panic or its ability to capture public and state imaginings.*

[In Malaysia]

Police have detained two leaders of the black metal occult group and identified 25 members, mostly students in the Kuala Muda district of Kedah. ... Last Sunday, National Unity and Development Minister Datuk Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman exposed the existence of the group which spread anti-God philosophy among teenagers. It allegedly conducted satanic worship, practiced deviant teachings and subscribed to occult rituals.... A non-follower who chanced upon an underground gig was aghast when he saw youngsters, in a dimly lit room where it was being held, 'spitting at each other' as a way of saying 'hello'. (*The Star*, 19 July 2001)

[In Singapore]

My two girls are crazy about pop. We give them room as long as they don't turn the music too loud. We enjoyed rock n' roll and the twist in our youth. But certain groups are out of bounds ... a few groups are self-confessed satan worshippers we have been told. Their stage acts are obscene and crude. It is said that some tapes played backwards express the satanic influence. (*The Straits Times*, 14 September 1985)

## **Introduction**

Singaporean and Malaysian youths wishing for wider public platforms for expressing their passion for the genre of Heavy Metal music have been faced with a gauntlet of responses. The menacing images and messages on the (usually) black T-shirts of Heavy Metal music bands and the barrages of growls from their music records and gigs, and, most prominently, the scruffy long hair of male fans, have automatically invited public and official disapproval. However, rather than exemplifying a passing adolescent fad, the fans have managed to establish a vibrant

subculture revolving around the music. Since their first appearance in the 1960s, several generations of metallers (fans of Heavy Metal music), have endured the routine social disdain to more fervent official clampdowns arising from periodic outbursts of moral panics. It is through such responses that the latent tensions and insecurities within the dominant structures are being vented out against what is constructed as deviant behaviour.

Through investigating a series of both undercurrent tensions and major moral panics, this article seeks to explore both the volatility of youth-based Heavy Metal music subcultures in Singapore and Malaysia. Beginning with a general survey of the cultural genesis and social compositions of the genre as a phenomenon of predominately working class ethnic Malay youths, the authors will posit that their alleged deviance and criminality have often been framed and exploited by parties claiming to defend the social fabric of the moral majority. This will be evident in the attempts of players, from politicians to the media, to conjure the metallers as subverting the conservative socio-political and religious ethos in both Malaysia and Singapore.

In addition, the article will assess the extent to which measures undertaken to suppress the local subculture have both reinforced the marginality and criminality of Singaporean and Malaysian youths. It is also opportune here to determine whether these measures have either sharpened or blurred the ideological underpinnings of the cultural politics of the two states. It is hoped that this article will not only update the literature on popular culture in the two countries concerned. More importantly, it wishes to establish a more relevant template in Asia on the subject of the complex interactions between the localisation of global youth subcultures and their interactions in the cultural politics of the societies involved.

## **Symptom and scapegoat**

In his pioneering study of moral panics, Stanley Cohen describes a moral panic as a situation where:

A condition, episode person, or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to the societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotyped fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounced their diagnosis to solutions; ways of coping are evolved or resorted to. The condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes the subject of the panic is quite novel as at other times, it is something which has been in existence long enough but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklores and collective memories; at other times, it has more serious and long lasting repercussions and might produce such changes in legal and social policy, or even in the way society conceives itself. (Hunt 1997: 630)

The examination of moral panics on subcultures reveals a deeper social anxiety towards the fear of erosion of landmarks and icons of traditional societies. According to Raymond Calluori, even as subcultures are mostly regarded by their participants as ‘magical’ refuges instead of ‘real’ solutions to social problems, they are viewed as being politically dangerous. Firstly, these groups are feared to usurp, embarrass and outmanoeuvre the hegemonic structures and symbols on a more routine level. Secondly, they serve to expose the contradictions and weakness of the system and, more importantly, contain seeds for more radical dissidence and disruptive action. Hence, the mainstream would be quick to characterize them as ‘frivolous, pathologically deranged or hooliganistic’ (Calluori, 1985: 50–51). These anxieties have usually been vented on socially marginalised groups that have been used as scapegoats blamed for

the source of all existing maladies. In this process, the youth have, since the 1960s, played the role of *symptom* and *scapegoat* (Hall and Jefferson 1976: 73). Since Cohen's works, the scholarly discourses on moral panics have been significantly refined to encompass various models oscillating between elite and working-class-based orchestrated moral panics. The underlying fears of these groups have usually been made public and further sensationalised by media networks posing as moral guardians for their viewers.

Even as the discourses on moral panics and cultural politics are still relevant, they have nonetheless been limited to the Euro-Atlantic context, with mainly references, from the Salem Witch hunts, mods and teddy boys, to paedophiles and Aids victims. Aside from scattered academic sightings of contemporary youth subcultures, scant attention has been accorded to moral panics and cultural politics in contemporary Asian societies. This is crucial for postcolonial societies struggling to reconcile with the destabilising effects of rapid modernisation and industrialisation. With the disruptive demographic displacements caused by migrations and urbanisation, new social and cultural networks and references have emerged. These include predominantly urban youth subcultures, several based on cultural references derived from the increasingly global appeal and transmissions of Western-based popular media.

Like their counterparts in the West, youth subcultures in this region exist on a fine thread between deviancy and criminality. Any trends or incidences that suggest a dangerous threat or corrupting influence not just to public order, but also to the sanctity of the home would have been unacceptable. These would be readily picked up by the media, the extrapolations of which render passive public consent and active demands from moral entrepreneurs for the deployment of the repressive

apparatus of the state. These calls would be more prevalent in especially authoritarian states and conservative political leaderships that have consciously claimed to be protectors of national traditions and social structures against the invasion of 'Western decadent values.'

Unlike adult based or supported organisations, youth subcultures are not seen to be bearers of social and cultural capital, and therefore have little access to the structures of authority in their societies concerned. This has in turn rendered them vulnerable to inaccurate or exaggerated negative labelling and repression by both society and state. Involvement with parent cultures becomes apparent when they become photographic props with national leaders, youth zones and parts allocated by municipalities, and new advertisements from corporate brands.

In effect, the youth subcultures established on the premise of alternative lifestyles and aesthetics in Asian societies like Singapore and Malaysia have been negotiating in both a legally and culturally ambiguous space. As such, the persistence of these youth Heavy Metal communities and the significantly repressive cultural politics stacked against them in the two states deserves more scholarly attention.

### **Pop Yeh-yeh, Mat Rock: shared legacies in Singapore and Malaysia**

Rock-n-roll first found its way into Malaysia and Singapore in the 1950s via airplay over radios, the most common and accessible means of listening to such music. By the 1960s groups such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones became hugely popular in both countries, and many local musicians sought to perform and record cover versions of these songs. It was during this time that a hybrid form of Malay rock and roll known as Pop-Yeh Yeh<sup>1</sup> emerged. The popularity of this medium, particularly amongst the Malay communities of both countries, would gradually pave the way towards the acceptance of other associated musical mediums,

including that of *Heavy Metal*. This process would in turn account for the widespread influence of bands such as *Black Sabbath* and *Deep Purple* in the 1970s and early 1980s, on local groups in Malaysia and Singapore.

Interactions between metal bands and consumers from Singapore and Malaysia demonstrated the appeal of Malay language rock in these two countries and the possibilities for commercial success. The group *Sweet Charity*, who combined hard rock with Malay lyrics, was very popular in both countries (*BigO*, November 1991). They were succeeded by bands such as *Search* (Malaysian) whose *Fenomena* album sold half a million copies. This became the first triple-platinum album ever sold by a Malaysian band (*New Straits Times*, 23 May 1989). Other heavy metal groups also continued the tradition of combining Western rock with Malay music. These included groups such as *Purnama* and *Lefthanded*, who mixed heavy metal with Malay folk instruments (Lockard 1995: 24).

Despite the vibrancy in musical composition in both countries, the Malay rock scene, particularly in Singapore, was increasingly facing competition from imported American movies and music, whose popularity was buttressed by language policies that favoured English as the 'major language of administration, commerce and education and consequently social status in the seventies' (Gopinathan 1994: 67). This was not the case for Malaysia where the promotion of Bahasa Malaysia increased the dominance of Malay language in public life. The Singapore Malay rock scene was also dealt a further blow when the *Cintan Buatan Malaysia* (Love Malaysian Products) campaign was launched in 1984. The Malaysian's Radio-Television's ruling during 1989 to 1991 permitting only the broadcast of Malaysian-composed music effectively barred Singapore-based rock groups from obtaining any airplay. The loss of a large Malaysian market was devastating to Singaporean Malay rock musicians, some of whom choose to move to Malaysia or become



Malaysian citizens to further their musical pursuits. (*BigO*, November 1991: 28; *The Straits Times*, 3 July 1991; Yusof 1996: 96)

Few metal musicians in Malaysia and Singapore today expect to gain the recognition of groups such as *Sweet Charity* and *Search*, a situation that reflects the overall decline in the local film and music industries in these countries and the lack of commercial opportunities. Even bands such as *Impiety* and *Rudra*, who have gained some level of commercial success, have nevertheless found it difficult to turn this into a full-time occupation. Where the metal scene exists, it is mainly maintained by 'volunteers' who see to the independent development of fanzines and websites, organization of gigs as well as production of CDs.

Nonetheless, the heavy metal subcultures in these two countries were not merely sustained by commercial interests alone. In the genre, marginalised working class ethnic Malay youths, in particular, found their sense of community through sharing common interests in what they would see as 'extreme guitar' music. Records and CDs and other heavy-metal related literature have often been shared among these youths, who have also committed themselves to organising gigs and writing fanzines. At times, the scene has turned into family affairs with fathers passing on their products to their children, and entire families attending what would be deemed by the mainstream as an unorthodox event. However, such has not often been recognised by the societies and governments they lived under.

### **Irrational identities: barbarous music and long hair in Singapore**

Singapore's postcolonial government's perception of modernity is one where, to quote Peter Osborne, 'in its perpetual anxiety to transcend the present, modernity is everywhere haunted by the idea of decline' (Osborne 1992: 76). The notion of progress being part and parcel of being

a 'free' and 'developed' society has been accepted by the PAP government as necessary. However, the possibility of its attainment in a society with competing identities and ideologies remained problematic. As Wee W.L. has noted, the realisation of an Asian form of modernity by the Singapore government would involve the 'authorized blocking of irrational ideologies and identities ... [which were] unsuitable for building a nation' (Wee 2001: 228). Regulatory policies taken towards metal music have thus reflected these concerns as well as a constantly evolving approach towards censorship that has arisen from changing social standards and political norms.

### **Moral panics in the 1970s**

The first moral panics involving metal music in the 1970s and 1980s were linked to larger fears about political subversion from counter-cultural movements taking place in Western societies. In the eyes of Singapore's officialdom, this movement was personified in the promiscuous, drug reliant and anti-establishment world of longhaired male hippies conjured to be an antithesis to values of diligence, industry and order, and an affront to the state's attempts to mould its population into a tightly controlled, efficient and achievement-oriented society (Lian and Hill 1995: 189). In the 1970s, the government banned all forms of 'hippie' culture and made illegal the wearing of long hair for men. Despite some amount of public outcry, it maintained that this was a necessary measure to maintain social cohesion in Singapore society. As the then Foreign Minister, S. Rajaratnam said in defence of these actions:

If our citizens are asked to sacrifice a few inches of dead cells (long hair) to keep Singapore safe from the scrounge of hippism, I would not believe for a moment that democracy is dead in Singapore. It is not founded on hair. (Rajaratnam 1972)

Such views triggered the first moral panic on metal music concerning 'Mat Rockers', the Malay term for Malay youths interested in rock and metal music. Their subcultural style of long hair and tight jeans looked 'suspiciously' similar to that sported by 'hippies'. In addition, their emphasis on music, which included singing and loitering around public housing estates served to further reinforce pre-existing racial notions of Malay youth as 'lazy' and incapable of academic excellence and discipline. Drug-related moral panics in the 1970s and 1980s also tended to stereotype male Malay youths as having a propensity to consume drugs, which was commonly believed to be related to their interest in metal music and the hedonism of a rock and roll lifestyle.

### **Concerns about metal music in the 1980s**

Concerns about metal music in Singapore in the 1980s faintly mirrored contentions in America and Britain about the impact of music lyrics on the listener as well as the links between metal music and its connection to child abduction and ritual abuse that was said to be the work of 'devil worshippers'. This included fears of the subliminal effects of metal music, which a 1985 lawsuit taken against Ozzy Osbourne (whose song *Suicide Solution* was said to have encouraged 19-year old John McCullom to shoot himself) encouraged. Although the case was subsequently dismissed, this was used as fodder for the high profile Senate hearings involving the Parents' Musical Resource Centre (PMRC) who called for the imposition of legislation on rap and heavy metal.

Such stories about the subliminal effects of music as well as ritual abuse were also reported in the local media. This began to influence audiences in Singapore to the extent that similar 'urban legends' began to circulate. As the story entitled 'House of Satan' described:

There is a house in the city areas that is famous among some

Singaporeans ... some people believe that an organized cult operates out of the House of Satan. The group is believed to hold prayers there on certain weekend nights ... one visitor reports that she saw a hooded figure in the main hall surrounded by candles. This is supposed to be the High Priest. (Lee 1989: 69)

Rumours about 'back-masking' where 'satanic' messages could be heard when the recordings of certain forms of music were played backwards were also all the rage, particularly amongst the youth at that time. As one story goes:

According to my friend, her brother was very interested in metal music. ...[One day, her brother apparently started acting strangely] she guessed he was under satanic influence. [She took his music to a priest], who confirmed that it was a satanic object. When he played the tape backwards ... there was a voice, which said, 'Six, Six, Six and I love the Anti-Christ'. (Lee 1992: 150–154)

Despite these urban legends, the government did not conduct any significant public campaigns beyond the routine censorship of a random variety of records. It was further suspicious of the wide-ranging claims made by Christian groups of the evils of Heavy Metal. An example of this was the exchange between a Christian Member of Parliament, who called for a ban on rock music, and the Minister of Culture in 1983. With regards to the Parliamentarian's claim of back-masking, where one could allegedly hear Devil worship on such tapes, which could create mental problems for those listening to them, the minister answered: 'My turntable is not capable of running backwards' (Singapore Parliamentary Debates 1983, 1267–1271) and that the government did not wish to impose its taste on others, excepting material such as literature glorifying drug use. Consequently, while selected groups expressed concern over such issues, there was a lack of generalised concern amongst the public about this

music.

### **Moral panics and metal music in the 1990s**

Subsequent panics in the 1990s involving metal music primarily involved the effects of the music on youth violence and aggression. Following a report in a local tabloid about slam-dancing, entitled, 'This is happening in Singapore, would you allow your kid to do this?' (*The New Paper*, 1 October 1992), all forms of moshing, slam-dancing and body surfing during gigs were prohibited. To deter such actions, gig organisers were made to place a SGD\$2,000 (US\$1,400) deposit, which they would stand to lose if these activities took place. Potential gig organisers, who were mainly young working adults or students, found that they could not afford to raise or lose such a substantial amount if gigs were to turn messy. Similar concerns about violent behaviour took place a year later in April 1993 when the metal band *Metallica* came to Singapore to perform. The concert was held amidst a heavy police presence as it was feared that riots would break out as they had in Jakarta, where the band performed before Singapore. During that night, 150 policemen, armoured vehicles and attack dogs were stationed outside of the performance venue in what was probably the most well-policed pop concert in the history of Singapore (*The Straits Times*, 15 April 1993).

The growing popularity of heavy metal bands in the 1990s also made censors in Singapore more stringent. In 1991, metal band *Guns n' Roses'* album *Use Your Illusion* was taken off the shelves for sexual references in the track *Get in the Ring*. In 1992, the Censorship Review Committee also recommended that audio material with 'excessive vulgar language, obscene sexual connotation, Satanic themes; or lyrics encouraging drug taking' be banned, a recommendation that was founded upon the need to 'protect the young,' and, to safeguard

national interests from ‘materials that would erode the core moral values of society ... causing misunderstanding and conflict in our multi-racial and multi-religious society, or the denigration of any religion or race’ (Censorship Review Committee Report, 1992).

### **Where have moral panics gone: metal music today**

By the late 1990s, restrictions placed on Rock/Heavy Metal began to lapse, consciously and unconsciously. In 1997, the government introduced the Registered Importers Scheme (RIS) to facilitate faster clearance of audio materials for the estimated one million publications and 300,000 audio materials imported each year. Under the RIS, the Ministry of Information and the Arts stated: ‘importers are allowed to exercise self-censorship. We train them on the guidelines on vetting publications. They will only refer controversial ones to us for consultation and advice’ (Media Development Authority, 2003: 97). In addition, licenses for rock and metal gigs were now obtainable from the Media Development Authority instead of the police, reflecting that such licenses were procedural.

Although gig organisers continue to face difficulties in obtaining venues for metal music performances, they have been able to find support in the most unusual of places, including state-run Community Centres, which are considered to be places for family friendly activities. Moshing and slam-dancing have also returned to metal gigs. Recent attempts by a local tabloid to exploit the ‘satanic’ images and lyrics of a highly publicised performance by Swedish Black Metal band *Dark Funeral* also failed to illicit a response from the population at large. A parent interviewed for the article commented that she found the music ‘very noisy’ and felt that her son should avoid listening to it, but she also said with a laugh that that was only if he were willing to listen to her in the first place (*The New Paper*, 29 October 2002).

These changes in attitudes amongst the public coincided with the

state's attempts to foster the development of Singapore as a cultural hub.<sup>2</sup> In accordance with Michel Foucault's argument about modern state's dispersed 'capillary' of disciplinary networks where the focus is on choosing private and institutional 'disciplinary' mechanisms rather than public dramas of transgression and retribution, the Singapore state has become increasingly reluctant to determine explicitly, and to enforce, otherwise contentious standards of public morality or aesthetics (Thompson 1998: 24). Hence, metal music albums are now more openly and publicly available than ever before. This takes us to the case of Malaysia, where a reverse process has occurred.

### **'Searching for the black metal cult' metal music in Malaysia**

Whereas state policy in Singapore has become more open over the years, the converse can be said of the Malaysia, where Islamic resurgence has, since the 1970s, created conditions for greater orthodoxy and conservatism. In the 1960s, the lifestyles of entertainers in the Malay music and film industries were rarely frowned upon by the state or the public as 'permissive'. Female entertainers in the *pop yeh-yeh* genre wore short skirts and mini-dresses that were in keeping with the style of those times and mixed freely with their male counterparts in performance. Even the prominent filmmaker, P. Ramlee's second wife, Saloma, was photographed in swimsuits and was a well-known sex-symbol of that time.

By the 1970s, the worldwide Islamic resurgence made way for greater orthodoxy and conservatism in cultural policy. As religion became the cultural ballast for poor Malays disenfranchised by state economic policies, it also favoured cultural policies that attempted to re-write Malay art forms, such as *zapin* and *bangsawan*, to portray 'Islamic' themes (Van Der Heid 2002: 96). In the 1980s, cultural policies became

even more conservative following the rise in militant religious groups and religious-based political parties such as PAS (Parti Islam SeMalaysia). Debates on the applicability of Islamic legal and moral codes to a plural society have sensitised the population to the impact of development and Western style modernity on the social fabric of Malaysian society. The social values of women in particular were the source of such concerns. This led in the 1990s to calls for women to be barred from participating in the entertainment scene for reasons of modesty. *Mak yong* a form of traditional Malay dance for example was banned in Kelantan (a stronghold of PAS) because of the close proximity in which males and females performed (*Asiaweek*, 25 August 1994). In the same manner, the performances by female singer Shelia Majid were disrupted by protestors condemning her as being ‘morally degrading’ (*Asiaweek*, 25 August 1994). Even female Koranic singers were not spared such condemnations by religious activists.

Aside from women, the cultural consumption of youth has also recently been in the forefront as rural–urban migration and the ease of access to global pop culture products has created competition with traditional discourses. In an attempt to limit such competition, religious officials have called for bans on foreign or Western music and labelled them as *haram* (forbidden). It was within such a climate that a large-scale moral panic involving black metal music arose in 2001.

### **Conjuring the black metal cults in Malaysia**

There were little known instances of public concern about metal music consumption in Malaysia other than write-ups about *kutu* (a Malay term for head lice) or alienated blue-collar and unemployed youths who consumed metal music (Lockard 1995: 24). Metal music concerts also had few problems securing large commercial sponsors for their activities in



the past. It was therefore surprisingly when the National Unity and Social Development Minister Dr Siti Zaharah Sulaiman announced that she had discovered a 'Black Metal cult' that was involved in occult activities and which demonstrated a propensity for antiestablishment behaviour.

Initially, such news did not trigger a public furore, as accounts from a newspaper report in July indicated:

When the first 'confessor' came out in a tabloid newspaper about two weeks ago, saying that he had to drink goat's blood to be initiated into the black metal fold, the reaction was pretty 'mild'. Many thought that it was just either a 'sensational way to sell newspapers', or an isolated issue that was being blown out of proportion. (*New Straits Times*, 25 July 2001)

However, reports of religious desecration where members of the cult allegedly burned the Koran and prayer mats and published anti-religious literature containing 'blasphemous statements on the holy book' triggered massive public condemnation. The cult was described as the work of 'certain Muslims willing to be used by Satan or the devil to the point that they deliberately commit heinous and cruel crimes' (*New Straits Times*, 21 July 2001; 24 July 2001). It was further identified as a serious problem when government officials labelled this group as 'an alarming social menace' and expressed the need to monitor these 'deviant' activities (*Daily Express*, 18 July 2001).

Shortly after the reports, youths began to find themselves as the target of social surveillance both by the state law enforcement agencies as well as religious authorities. In the months that ensued, police raids were conducted on shopping centres and schools, with an estimated 700 youths detained and questioned for alleged criminal activity relating to religious desecration, devil worship, drug use and promiscuous behaviour. 4000 magazines, 180 videocassettes and 68 CDs were confiscated from shops in a five-day operation (*Time Magazine*, 2001). In schools, students were

strip-searched for Black Metal tattoos and forced to surrender 'metal'-music related articles. Under the instruction of Fadzil Hanafi, some 150 students from 15 schools in the Kuala Muda district of Kedah were selected to undergo a drug treatment programme that was sponsored by a pharmaceutical company (*Daily Express*, 13 August 2001). This he said 'would complement the counselling and motivational programmes that were being used to rehabilitate the Black Metal followers' (*Daily Express*, 13 August 2001). Although campaigns by religious and political activists to cancel a concert by the German metal/rock group *Scorpions* failed, many organisers became wary of bringing in metal-related bands following the issuing of a *fatwa* (decree) to ban Black Metal music by religious authorities in Seremban, and the calls by State Muftis in Penang to consider decreeing Black Metal music *haram* (not permitted in Islam – *New Straits Times*, 2 August 2001; 4 August 2001).

As the panic evolved, it became clear that most of these were 'adolescent legend trips' forced out of youths who were likely under pressure to conjure an account of their alleged involvement in cult activities. This included practising devil worship at 'dilapidated buildings, abandoned housing projects, caves and secluded spots' (*The Star*, 19 July 2001). Other dubious accounts included those of 12 year old cult 'leaders', the sacrifice of black goats as well as spitting as a form of greeting (*The Star*, 19 July 2001; 20 July 2001). In one case, the student involved even confessed that he had only seen such acts being practised on a VCD, but claimed that he had knowledge of these acts being carried out in Malaysia (*The Star*, 19 July 2001). Tan Sri Norian Mai, the Inspector General of Police also said when questioned by the then Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Sri Abdullah Badawi that this was a social problem and not a criminal case and that 'it was too low profile to be classified as a threat to national security' (*New Straits Times*, 21 July 2001). Attempts to link

Black Metal consumption with pornography and illegal VCD selling also failed.

## **Moral panics and metal music: a comparison of cultural politics in Malaysia and Singapore**

### *Singapore*

Panics that were related to the anti-religious symbolisms and lyrics in Metal music (or more specifically Black Metal music) have been surprisingly muted in Singapore. Claims that certain music contains 'satanic' messages were mainly confined to several urban legends in the 1980s that few took seriously. One of the main reasons that explain this situation is the religious composition of Singaporeans, where Christians only make up 15% of the total population. Interviews conducted with metal-music consumers in Singapore revealed that it is mainly parents from Christian backgrounds who find the iconography of metal music particularly offensive. Most other parents do not appear to equate the consumption of metal music with the violation of social norms, and when complaints arise, they are mainly directed at other general aspects of the music such as the volume of the music or the amount of money spent on CDs. With regards to the Malay Muslim community, which makes up about 15% of the population and much of the Heavy Metal scene, less fear and disapproval have also been expressed even as the government-backed Muslim affairs councils and several Malay ministers have made negative comments about Western popular music consumption, from going to discos to Hip Hop music. This could be a reflection of a combination of the anachronism of the moral statements imposed from above to most Malay families who have also been exposed to the various music genres since the 1960s.

Metallers themselves are aware that the symbolism of this music is

derived from a Judeo-Christian American/European context and, consequently, while they may consume this music as a form of youth rebellion, they tend to dissociate their consumption from the belief systems of such iconography. While it may seem incongruous, it is thus quite likely for a metal music consumer to continue to practise his or her religion without any sense of contradiction, as the discourse of 'Satanism' or even the anti-religious element is deemed to be Eurocentric and lacks relevance to the listener's own religious context. Hence, there are few concerns from parents or figures of authority because it is accepted here that this music is a form of entertainment rather than an attempt to engage in anti-religious activities. This also explains the tongue-in-cheek commentaries in local metal music magazines, which frequently discuss the latest 'evil' albums alongside notes of a more celebratory nature regarding the impending marriages of local band members or new additions (i.e. births) to their families (*Dark Legions* Issue 3: 10)

Another reason that has prevented the development of significant 'religious-based' campaigns against metal has been the mantra of 'secularism' that guides governmental policy. Despite the 1992 Censorship Review Committee's recommendations that audio materials with 'Satanic' themes be banned, the government has generally been wary to cross the line between a secular arbitrator of laws and the protector of religious interest groups. Hence, while metal music has been subject to censorship, it is unlikely that the Singapore courts would be allowed to make judgements on whether something is or is not 'Satanic', as this is considered to be a dangerous boundary to cross, in the light of competing claims from various well-established religions in Singapore.

The lack of public attention in the republic on Heavy Metal is not only the result of macro socio-political factors, but also the efforts of metallers deliberately to retain a lower public profile. Gig organisers are

now more inclined to hold their events in enclosed venues rather than public spaces that would draw unwarranted attention, and are also more keen to maintain higher levels of crowd discipline.<sup>3</sup> The only visible signs that the public sees are the unusual crowds, largely of ethnic Malays, milling around the venues of gigs wearing black Heavy Metal T-shirts.

### *Malaysia: Islamic resurgence and public appeal*

The emergence of the Black Metal panic in Malaysia can be explained by the development of a more assertive Islam that is widely supported by Malay Muslims from different social backgrounds and fuelled by contestations between political parties. Islamic resurgence in Malaysia first began in the 1970s, when Malay Muslim youth sought Islam as a means of self-identification whilst pursuing their tertiary education overseas. On return, they established Islamic youth groups that brought to the forefront debates about Islam and the role of religion in public life. In the 1980s, these groups aligned themselves with the leading Islamic political party PAS, adding momentum to the resurgence. Since the 1990s, political contestations between PAS and UMNO (United Malays National Organization) have also fuelled the resurgence across different sectors of the Malay Muslim population.

PAS has attempted to promote itself as a counter-hegemonic and anti-systematic project that epitomises the ‘new social, moral and political order embodied by the Islamic state’ (Noor 2002: 3). Its focus on the welfare of ‘ordinary’ folk such as the displaced Malay peasantry, the frugal ways of PAS politicians such as Nik Aziz and the promotion of hudud (religious law) are all implicit criticisms of the corruption and emphasis on big business in the leading political party UMNO (Salleh, 1992). This party consequently appeals to those disenfranchised by social change or concerned with issues of corruption.

As an example, there was a five-fold increase in circulation of the PAS's publication, *Harakah* (Movement), during the arrest of ex-deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim in 2001, alleged to be a cover-up for corruption within the government (Hiley 2001: 209).

The ruling party UMNO has also been influential in the shaping and manipulation of Islamic discourse, but has tended to court the middle classes through the establishment of formal Islamic institutions, such as the establishment of the Islamic Research Centre, the Islamic University, as well as Islamic financial institutions such as the Islamic Bank and the Islamic Economic Foundation (Muhammad 2001; Khoo 1995: 163). The UMNO-led New Economic Policy that was based on the developmentalist ideas of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed also 'stimulated a greater tendency towards Islam as a source of communal status' (Khoo 1995: 57). Consequently, it was not surprising that 'some of the strongest supporters of the revivalist Islam come from the hard-working, thrifty and devout middle classes', beneficiaries of the UMNO led New Economic Policy (Stivens 2000: 30).

### **Religious-based moral panics, Black Metal and Islamisation**

The labelling of Black Metal as 'anti-Islamic' generated a reaction that was reflective of the enhanced sensitisation amongst Malay Muslims to issues concerning public morality and religion. Malia Stivens proposes in her study of youth-based panics in Malaysia that concerns about youth, family and the impact of Western style modernity on the social fabric have become central in Malaysia 'with unprecedented growth rates and energetic debates about a corporate Islam as the way forward for Malays' (Stivens 2002: 188). It was no surprise that concerns over the 'Black Metal cult' escalated into a full-scale panic when the media began reporting stories of religious desecration.

Furthermore, the support given to Islamic figures of authority in religious and political organisations has provided fertile grounds for moral crusades against ‘anti-Islamic’ mediums in recent years. The panic has profited groups and individuals interested in encouraging religiosity amongst the youth or in imposing stricter religious laws. State Religious Affair Committee (Sungai Petani) chairman Fadzil Hanafi, who was simultaneously in charge of the Kedah Committee on Social Problems, gained much public limelight as a result of the media attention given to the panic. Although parents as well as groups concerned with civil liberties were disturbed by some of the measures he took – such as forcing students to take psychiatric drugs or subjecting them to questioning – it did not stop him from becoming a representative of public morality and a commentator on youth deviance and consumption. This was despite the fact that he seemed to possess scant knowledge about the nuances of popular music cultures, having thought that *skinhead* and other music related terms such as *punk* and *hardcore* were names of cults (*Daily Express*, 13 August 2001).

Moral entrepreneurship was also not confined to Muslim organisations alone. The climate of sensitisation enabled other organisations such as the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism to call for the introduction of religious education from non-Muslim groups into the school curriculum, a measure that they claimed would prevent youths from being lured into cults. A Young Buddhist Association adviser also encouraged the practice of Buddhism, which he said would prevent youths from going to extremes (*The Star*, 17 July 2001). Even the Civil Defence Department, a secular organisation attempted to offer a ‘spiritual values programme’ during the school holidays in response to the panic (*The Star*, 23 July 2001). PAS and UMNO have also politicised the panic by

using this as an opportunity to criticise the promotion of Islam by each group. Mahathir Mohamad who was head of ruling party, UMNO, at that time, blamed the emergence of the cult on the failure of PAS to provide 'progressive' religious education. In his speech 'Malays Forget Easily', delivered to the 55th UMNO General Assembly, he said:

Some (parents) are influenced by PAS that Malay Muslim children only should pursue Islamic studies. Other forms of knowledge are secular and not important. What is even sadder is that what is taught during these lectures is not the true teachings of Islam that can inspire the students to study and pursue knowledge more vigorously.

Similarly, PAS authorities also blamed UMNO for their monopoly over state religious education, which in their opinion led to a lack of purpose amongst youths. The PAS state information chief said:

When PAS introduced *Qiyammulail* (overnight religious classes) for youths and students, the authorities stopped them. As a result, the youth could not address their restlessness and ended up doing something else. (*The Star*, 20 July 2001)

The flurry from the Malaysian media and politicians in the 2001 clampdown did not, however, crush the local scene, which has made a less conspicuous comeback after the public attention had waned. Like their Singaporean counterparts, the interest of Malaysian metallers in the music was not discouraged but was probably kept more underground from the gaze of both the secular and religious police as well as the various media networks.

### **Dionysian threats to Apollonian ethos**

The music youth subculture of Heavy Metal rests simply upon teenagers and young adults trying to establish broader communities and identities around their interests in alternative popular music genres. Albeit coming



from mostly working class backgrounds, the majority of these fans are evidently law-abiding citizens. Their deviance borders on difference in terms of consumption and style rather than delving into the anti-social. But editors, officialdom, clerics and parents have chosen the labels of satanic cults, drug addicts and decadent long-haired rioters to describe them. These sentiments have not only been articulated in the domains of the homes, but at churches and mosques as well as through public policies. In Singapore, the 'Mat rockers' as these metallers are commonly known, are demonised to be not just Dionysian threats against public order, but are also thought to be opposed to the Apollonian ethos of progress and development for the past few decades. In Malaysia, the peace enjoyed by metallers was briefly but rudely disrupted by the moral panic after news that Black Metal cults were burning the Koran, inviting a major backlash from both the government and religious groups.

As this article has shown, the grounds of the public reactions are more of a projection of local fears and ideologies rather than dominated by the imagery of Satanism in the West. The Metallers in both countries have also been used as platforms of contestations for government institutions, political parties, media and religious groups all eager to claim and usurp claims of moral guardianship of their societies against the corrupting influences of youth. In the process, even as attention has waned, cultural policies and politics have been complicated by hasty legislation, police actions and other disciplinary mechanisms. This has not only left such subcultures in a more ambiguous position, between tolerance and benign neglect to active repression and censorship on the part of the dominant cultures. More importantly, the opaque cultural politics in the policing of youth subcultures have also revealed if not engendered contradictions within the ideological foundations of secular but authoritarian Singapore, and a Malaysia balancing Islamisation with modernity. In all, an insight

into the Heavy Metal genres in the two cultures not only reveals the persistence of subcultures in the repressive political climates, but also the instabilities and impulses of the dominant cultures these 'mat rockers' reside in.

## **Notes**

1. Pop Yeh Yeh was so titled after the Beatles hit 'She loves you, Yeh Yeh Yeh' (Lockard, 1995).
2. The rhetoric of more openness from the Singapore state has not been consistently applied. For instance, the Singapore Police Force has denied permits to gay groups organising 'Pink Parties', under the pretext of aversion to lewd behaviour and complaints by members of the public. In this respect, the police force did not see itself contradicting the continued insistence by national leaders on giving larger priority to the sensitivities of the moral majority.
3. It is highly suspected here that local gigs are a low priority for the Singapore Police Force which has probably not received substantial complains from the public of incidences of disorder.

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