Distortion-Drenched Dystopias: Metal and Modernity in Southeast Asia

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Abstract
Dedicated fans of heavy metal music can now be found in every corner of the industrialized world. This fandom, rarely mentioned in most studies of 'cultural globalization', is usually associated with the existence of local 'scenes' – semiautonomous social networks supporting the production, dissemination, and consumption of recordings, fanzines, and other artifacts that operate to an extent outside the global/national mainstream commercial music industry. This paper investigates the remarkable development of indigenous metal music scenes in three adjoining Southeast Asian nations—Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore—over the last twenty years. While hard data on this phenomenon are still limited, the little that exist raise tantalizing questions about the relationship between these music-based subcultures and local politics, local constructions of masculinity, pre-existing sources of social difference, and patterns of global dissemination of cultural forms.

Key Words: Ethnonationalism, globalization**,** Indonesia, Malaysia, masculinity, music scenes, politics, Singapore, Southeast Asia.

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1. Introduction: The Globalization of Metal in Southeast Asia

In addition to maintaining an enthusiastic fan base in its countries of origin, heavy metal is a global phenomenon with legions of enthusiasts in every corner of the world.[1] In this paper I offer some preliminary remarks about an explosion of Malay- and English-language heavy metal in the three adjoining Southeast Asian nations of Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia based on my ethnographic research in the region in 1997-2000 and subsequent forays into the world of recordings and Internet sites created by the communities that support the music.

When I began my research, many non-metalheads, including fellow ethnomusicologists, had a tough time believing that metal could catch on in Malaysia, Singapore, or Indonesia, even though the popularity of this music previously had been noted by several not-always-sympathetic scholars of Southeast Asian musics.[2] What had not widely been reported was the enormous scale and vitality of the linked underground extreme metal scenes I encountered in those countries, a testament to the power and scale of metal music's globalization over the last two and a half decades. While hard data

on this phenomenon are still limited, the little that exist raise tantalizing questions about the relationship between these music-based subcultures and local politics, local constructions of masculinity, pre-existing sources of social difference, and patterns of global dissemination of cultural forms.

Metal fandom, a phenomenon still rarely mentioned in studies of 'cultural globalization,' depends on the existence of local 'scenes' – semiautonomous social networks supporting the production, dissemination, and consumption of recordings, fanzines, and other artifacts that operate to a great extent outside the formal commercial music industry. This 'outsider' status, combined with the extremity of the music itself, often puts metalheads in a vulnerable position. In the words of metal historian Ian Christe, the music's fans the world over 'live on a volatile cusp, prone to harassment by powers that view them as symbolic of a breakdown in traditional values.'[3] The Southeast Asian metalheads described in this essay are no exception, yet their scenes have only gotten stronger in the last twenty years despite concerted government and religious efforts to squelch them.

2. A Brief History of the Scene

The metal movement in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia began in the 1980s with groups of teenaged boys covering songs in English by their favourite Western bands. As these teenagers reached their twenties and thirties, more groups began writing original material, first in English, the same language as that employed by their idols, then increasingly in Malay. By the time a new generation of metal musicians came of age in the late 1990s, 'Malay metal' was a well-established if marginal and disreputable music genre, and shared space with the mainstream pop, Indian film music, and ethnic musics popular in the region.

Many outsiders who learn that the Malaysian and Indonesian national variants of Malay are almost the same language are surprised to discover that the everyday spoken variants of Indonesian and Malay are not mutually intelligible. In fact, participants in the metal scene frequently have to resort to using English as a medium of face-to-face communication. The written languages are more similar, however, and the language used in song lyrics (including metal songs) is nearly identical, which facilitates transnational appreciation of local metal groups, and a number of compilation albums have been produced over the last fifteen years featuring songs by bands from all three countries. In Singapore, metal music is popular among the Malay-speaking minority and has carved out a stable niche in the island nation's music scene with all-day concerts in community centers and ties to the metal scenes in Malaysia and Indonesia.[4] Both Singaporean and Malaysian bands frequently tour in Indonesia, where the performance environment is far less regulated and their music can draw massive crowds.

Indonesian bands tour neighbouring countries less often due to financial considerations and the difficulty of obtaining permission to play.

While the majority of the heavy metal bands from the region do not incorporate elements of traditional 'ethnic' music to their sound, bands who have experimented with the creation of ethnic metal 'alloys' include the Indonesian groups Gong 2000 and Kremush, the Malaysian groups Purnama and Lefthanded and the Singaporean group UrbanKarma (who also incorporate the sounds of the Australian *didjeridu* and the Brazilian *berimbau* in their music). Javanese gamelan, the region's best-known musical export, is known worldwide for its (decidedly un-metal) dignified solemnity and refined, stately beauty. In Bali, by contrast, where gamelan is a village- rather than a court-based tradition, a fast, aggressive, and virtuosic variety of gamelan called *gamelan gong kebyar* has existed since the early twentieth century; this style was influential in forging the death metal/ethnic hybrid sound of Denpasar's Eternal Madness.[5] These ethnic hybrids constitute one answer to the question of how one can be simultaneously 'Malay,' modern, and metal.

3. Metal and 'Malayness'

By the early 21st century, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore were home to some of the largest metal movements in Asia and the world. This diverse region, comprising the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian archipelago, is divided by a sociopolitical distinction between 'Malays', the indigenous inhabitants of the region who are predominantly Muslim, and the descendants of immigrants from China and southern India who mostly settled in the region during the colonial era. These latter groups are considered 'non-native' and are usually non-Muslim (the Indians are mostly Sikhs and Hindus, the Chinese a combination of Christians, Buddhists, Confucians, and followers of Chinese folk religion). There are also isolated groups of non-Muslim indigenes in rainforest and highland regions called in Malaysia *Orang Asli* (Original People). Indonesia is home to numerous Catholic, Protestant, Hindu, and Buddhist minority groups, as well as isolated peoples who still follow traditional native religions. 96 percent of Indonesia's population is considered indigenous, 55 percent of Malaysia's, and about 15 percent of ethnic-Chinese-dominated Singapore.

In *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia,* Craig Lockard writes of Malaysia:

> By the late 1980s and early 1990s, heavy metal groups had become the chief focus for expressing youth alienation from mainstream lifestyles and values, although the groups faced sporadic restrictions on their public performances…Whatever the nuances, heavy metal music

> appealed chiefly to frustrated urban blue-collar workers and unemployed youth, among them the alienated Malay youngsters known locally and pejoratively as *kutu* ('head lice'), who congregate around malls and affect a punk lifestyle. In some ways this evolving rock subculture provides a distinct challenge to the dominant culture and socioeconomic norms promoted by the state and Islamic purists.[6]

As this passage suggests, urban working-class Malay young men tend to be the most ardent fans of metal. In Malaysia and Singapore metal appears to be *the* music of choice for this group. In Indonesia, *dangdut* (a popular syncretic style whose appeal appears to transcend age and gender) is still the preferred genre for young working-class men but hard rock/heavy metal is a close second. Legendary Western bands, particularly Deep Purple, Metallica, Sepultura, and Cannibal Corpse, are extremely popular among the region's metalheads, but so are Malaysia's XPDC, Suffercation, Infectious Maggots, Sil-Khannaz, FTG, and Indonesia's Betrayer, Grausig, Puppen, Purgatory, Suckerhead, Siksa Kubur, Slowdeath, Tengkorak, and Trauma. Major Singaporean bands include Doxohedron, Impiety, UrbanKarma, and the 'Vedic metal' masters Rudra, a group whose ethnic Indian heritage is a notable exception to the Malay predominance in Island Southeast Asian metal.[7]

Strident Malay ethnonationalism occasionally can be found in the work of Malaysian bands like FTG (which either stands for 'Freedom That's Gone' or, according to some fans, 'Fuck the Government'). In their Malay-language song 'Anak Melayu' (Malay Sons) they assert:

> Don't forget your own country/Let the earth be a witness/Ask in your heart/Do not forget your origins/We are Malay sons/Why have you forgotten/Why have you been carried away?/How I long to tell of/From where we came.

While metal in Malaysia and Singapore is commonly associated with working-class Malay ethnonationalism, in Indonesia the national metal movement forges ties across boundaries of religion, ethnicity, and class, a consequence of a markedly different, more inclusive understanding of 'Malayness' that extends back to the colonial era.[8] In all three countries, however, the intimate association between metal music and 'native' working-class young men, despite the music's indisputably foreign origins, is rarely questioned and appears to be quite 'naturalised'.

4. Politics, Censorship, and the Triumph of Metal

The Malaysian metal scene is larger than Indonesia's, despite the country's smaller population, but it has also been much more subject to government censorship and harassment. In 1985 the Ministry of Culture prohibited a Malaysian tour by the group Scorpions[9] and Malaysian authorities have maintained an attitude of suspicious hostility to metal ever since (though in 2001 they allowed Scorpions to play while banning Megadeth[10]). In 2006 the Malaysian government disappointed thousands of fans when it prohibited the Norwegian black metal band Mayhem from playing in the country.[11] In Malaysia, as in Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, and Lebanon, rather than the state viewing crackdowns on metalheads to be the defusing of a genuine threat to the social order, they are generally a tactic to win the allegiance of religious fundamentalists, many of whom regard all music as forbidden by Islam.

Music censorship has been less onerous in Indonesia. In most of the Muslim world western culture is seen as threatening (though, of course, also alluring). In Indonesia, after decades of technocratic, developmentalist leadership, the West is seen less as a hostile territory filled with imperialistic infidels than a valued source of technology, cultural products, and modern ideas. Secular nationalism (with its exhortations of national 'development') is generally more persuasive than the rhetoric of transnational religious fundamentalist movements to the majority of Indonesians. Therefore, Western music, including metal, is often viewed as a neutral or positive force in society.[12] Furthermore, as Krishna Sen and David Hill have pointed out, even during the Soeharto dictatorship (1966-1998) musicians were relatively free from government harassment and censorship (though of course there was some, usually involving popular music superstars like Rhoma Irama and Iwan Fals).[13] Indonesia has also been less conflicted than most Muslim societies about music itself, a result of the relatively moderate variety of Islam that prevails among the majority of Muslims in the country. Therefore, attempts to censor musical expression do not enjoy the same popular support as they do in Malaysia.

In Indonesia, metal bands have made bold political statements as that country transitioned from dictatorship to a cacophonous democracy in 1998, rejecting the authoritarian paternalism that still holds sway for its neighbours. The following is a translation of the lyrics to Puppen's *Hijau* (Green). While the lyrics are relatively indirect and poetic, it remains one of the most politically 'sharp' (*tajam*) underground songs in existence, as the 'green' of the title refers to the Indonesian military police, who frequently commit violent acts against student protestors.

> Green oppresses, pressuring repressively/Snatching away rights that have been trashed, fear is already enough/Green

> represses, victims fall/Not aware [they] have grown the seeds of resistance/Seizing, tearing, green is supposed to feel cool/Green silences, silences questions why/Spreading fear, developing colonization/Green oppresses, all is drowned/Snatching rights that have been trashed, we've been oppressed long enough/Seizing, tearing, green is supposed to feel cool/Reject your presence, too great is my pain/Wounds and suffering: green is supposed to feel cool/We have been oppressed long enough![14]

5. Conclusion

According to ethnomusicologist John Blacking,

> Music is not a language that describes the way society seems to be, but a metaphorical expression of feelings associated with the way society really is. It is a reflection of and response to social forces, and particularly to the consequences of the division of labour in society.[15]

This perhaps provides a clue to why heavy metal has become so popular in Southeast Asia. As a region, the way society 'really is', characterized by wrenching social changes, uneven development, official hypocrisy, and widening inequality is not reflected in the authoritative discourses of government and religious authorities. But this reality *is* expressed in the anger, aggression, and power of metal music.

At the time of this writing, many serious metal enthusiasts in the West are already aware of at least some bands from the region, such as Singapore's Impiety and Rudra, Malaysia's Suffercation and Sil-Khannaz, and Indonesia's Kekal and Armageddon Holocaust. More work needs to be done on the subject of the Singapore-Malaysia-Indonesia metal scene. How did the connection between metal music and working-class Malay masculinity first emerge and develop over time? Will the metal scene's increasing visibility in the mainstream give rise to the currency of ever more extreme forms? How do metal artists from the region negotiate the racism and neocolonialism of the global metal scene? Finally, and most importantly, as metal increases in popularity in spite of all attempts to limit it in the Middle East, China, South Asia, and mainland Southeast Asia, will new transnational links be forged that can challenge the hegemony of the Anglo-American metal mainstream? If this happens, arguably metal will have finally arrived as a truly global genre.

Notes

[1] See, for example, I Avelar, 'Defeated Rallies, Mournful Anthems, and the Origins of Brazilian Heavy Metal', in *Brazilian Popular Music and Globalization*, C. Dunn and C. Perrone (eds.), University of Florida Press, Gainesville, 2001; E Baulch, *Making Scenes: Reggae, Punk, and Death Metal in 1990s Bali*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2007; K Kahn-Harris, *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge,* Berg, New York, 2007; M LeVine, *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam,* Three Rivers Press, New York, 2008; and the essays in J Wallach, H Berger, and P Greene eds., *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, forthcoming.

[2] Including C Lockard, *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia,* University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, Hawaii, 1998; R A Sutton,'Interpreting Electronic Sound Technology in the Contemporary Javanese Soundscape.' *Ethnomusicology*, vol. 40, no. 2, 1996; Tan Sooi Beng, 'The Performing Arts in Malaysia: State and Society.' *Asian Music*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1989/1990.

[3] I Christe, *Sound of the Beast: The Complete Headbanging History of Heavy Metal*, Harper Collins, New York, 2003, p. 364.

[4] Fu Yu Sin, K. and Liew Kai Khiun, 'From Folk Devils to Folk Music: Tracing the Malay Heavy Metal Scene in Singapore', in *Sonic Synergies Music, Technology and Community, Identity*, G. Bloustien, M. Peters, and S. Luckman (eds), Ashgate, Aldershot, Hampshire, 2008.

[5] J Wallach, 'Engineering Techno-Hybrid Grooves in Two Indonesian Sound Studios', in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies in Sonic Cultures,* P. Greene and T. Porcello (eds.), Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 2005, pp. 148-151.

[6] Lockard, pp. 256-257.

[7] Vedic metal is a metal subgenre that combines extreme metal with Indian classical music and Hindu sacred chant. While it was pioneered by Rudra from Singapore, Vedic metal began truly to flourish in the small but rapidly expanding Indian metal scene.

[8] Lian Kwen Fee, 'The Construction of Malay Identity Across Nations: Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde* vol 157, no. 4, 2001.

[9] C Lockard, 'Reflections of Change: Sociopolitical Commentary and Criticism in Malaysian Popular Music since 1950', *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies,* vol. 6, no. 1, 1991, p.38, note 90.

[10] Christe, p. 364.

[11] Kahn-Harris, p. 117.

[12] For a further exploration of this thesis, see J Wallach, *Modern Noise, Fluid Genres: Popular Music in Indonesia, 1997-2001,* University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 2008.

[13] K Sen and D Hill, *Media, Culture, and Politics in Indonesia*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2000, p. 184.

[14] For more about Puppen and the song 'Hijau', see J '"Goodbye My Blind Majesty": Music, Language, and Politics in the Indonesian Underground', in *Global Pop, Local Language*, H. Berger and M. Carroll (eds.), University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, Mississippi, 2003, pp. 75-76.

[15] J Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 1973, p. 104.

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