HEAVY METAL NOTHINGNESS: ALLURING FOREIGNNESS AND AUTHENTICITY CONSTRUCTION IN EARLY 2010s MALAYSIAN METAL

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic observations and interviews with twenty Malaysian metalheads, this paper demonstrates how early 2010s Malaysian heavy metal subculture constructs subcultural authenticity based on "authenticating" global forms of heavy metal. "Authentic" Malaysian heavy metal identities, however, appear subordinated to the possession of imported western subcultural capitals, which are "authenticated" by their foreign/western origin. This paper analyses how in a fast-developing Southeast Asian nation such as Malaysia, the foreignness of Anglocentric global metal still exerts a powerful influence on the construction of Malaysian metalheads' perception of "metal authenticity", thus eschewing the localized development of hybrid forms of "Malaysian metal".

Introduction

Metal music in Southeast Asia is considered one of the imported western popular culture's codes that local youths look to for authentic identification in the rapidly-changing, industrializing and globalizing societies they live in (Wallach, 2008, p. 103). This is indeed the impression one gets from previous studies on global metal (Wallach, Berger, & Greene, 2011): the genre is a fixed code, an artistic expression bound by a set of globally recognized stylistic rules that authenticate its performance. In other words, metal has a structure and a sound that makes it immediately recognizable and thus reproducible around the world as outlined, for example, by a recent study of metal in Kenya (Knopke, 2015). Based on Arjun Appadurai's (1990) concept of *mediascapes,* metropolitan ideas become globalized because of the easy flows of their printed and screened media images worldwide. Accordingly, metal fans and musicians around the world have been influenced by the metal cultural production that spread to their countries from the western epicenters – a phenomena that Deena Weinstein has called "the globalization of metal" (Weinstein, 2011). However, such an interpretation could suggest the subordination of the developing world's metal scenes to a form of Western-influenced "metal colonialism", thus claiming their inability to create authentic metal music, and also highlighting their adherence to the features of a foreign music genre.

Such a conclusion, however, is simplistic. The concept of music "authenticity", is not in fact inherent in objects, but it is negotiated and mutually agreed upon by the social groups who observe such objects (Peterson, 1997). In other words, Malaysian metalheads define metal "authenticity" based on the example of western metal's parent culture. Thus, metal in Malaysia is perceived as a static form, and becomes authenticated when it is performed as close as possi-

ble to those foreign forms of metal that are recognized as classic examples. This hypothesis is confirmed by the study of other Southeast Asian countries where there are instances of western music subcultures. Jeremy Wallach concluded that the punks of Jakarta "loathe to embrace musical innovations, instead maintaining their stylistic allegiance to what they perceive as a classic punk sound" (Wallach, 2008, p. 103). Heather Machlachlan observed that Burmese pop music seeks to reproduce a foreign art form that is perceived as authentic only when it sounds as close as possible to western originals (Maclachlan, 2011, p. 71). Similarly, Ward Keeler saw very few differences distinguishing the performance of the rap scene in Burma from rap scenes anywhere else in the world (Keeler, 2009, p. 13). In the case of metal, Emma Baulch (2003) observed how Balinese death metal enthusiasts did not consider local death metal music as serious or authentic if it was sung in languages other than English, or if they incorporated local folk elements that are alien to the American and British heavy metal traditions. This choice is in line with the features of global heavy metal, which does not reflect a sense of territoriality. Even when it does, it fits the requirements of the Anglocentric global metal marketplace by using English vocals, such as in the case of Brazilian death metal band Sepultura (Harris, 2000), and Israeli band Orphaned Land (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 113).

These considerations might lead some to argue that global metal, exactly as any other form of globalised popular music, represents an instance of what George Ritzer and Michael Ryan defined as the "globalization of nothing", intended as "empty forms that are centrally conceived and controlled and relatively devoid of distinctive content" (Ritzer and Ryan, 2002, p. 51). "Nothing", contrary to indigenously-created forms rich in distinctive content that constitute "something", is easier to export because its lack of content is less likely to offend the sensibilities of foreign cultures. The shopping mall is one such example of empty structure that can be easily replicated around the world, and filled with objects uncharacteristic of any particular culture (Ritzer and Ryan, 2002, p. 52). Metal music, akin to the shopping mall, could then be interpreted as an empty structure, a globalised music genre that remains faithful to a set of "authenticating" features.

Metal experts and metal studies scholars could object to this argument that metal is just an instance of globalized "nothing". Indeed metal music, besides presenting non-political, anti-reflexive attitudes (Phillipov, 2012), retains strong anti-hegemonic messages. Furthermore, its unorthodox themes and rebellious imagery have certainly unleashed the reprimanding action of censors and concerned parents in several offended societies, even in such non-western cases as Turkey (Hecker, 2012), Egypt, Iran, and Morocco (LeVine, 2008), and Malaysia itself (Azmyl, 2009). This evidence would seem to contradict my argument that metal could be easily exported as inoffensive "nothing" that can adapt to any culture. However, I suggest that the structure of metal, with its defiant characteristics, occult themes and music style, has materialized in exact ways in both the "developed" and the "developing" worlds, wherever a metal scene has come into existence. The examples provided by the globalized metal scenes of Turkey (Hecker, 2012), Israel (Kahn-Harris, 2002), Egypt, Pakistan, Morocco, Iran, Lebanon, Palestine (LeVine, 2008), and Nepal (Greene, 2011) support my argument. In other words, metal never changes; it just reproduces itself regardless of the new cultural contexts in which it embeds. Keith Khan-Harris had observed how "[metal] musicians accrue mundane subcultural capital by developing existing styles. The majority of musicians and bands in the scene are not innovators, but refiners" (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 126). Suitably, the Malaysian metalheads with whome I interacted and in-

terviewed seemed bent on reproducing an "authenticating" foreign style, more than re-interpreting and refining the metal genre for their local social and cultural contexts. Their sense of "metal authenticity" appeared to be validated by close reproduction of the foreign bands they observed in the global metal marketplace. In the following sections, I support this argument presenting several case studies.

Foreign influences in Malaysian Metal

The British colonial occupation of Malaysia helped facilitate the spread of English-language popular music and foster a sense of musical authenticity based on foreign Anglo-American popular music models (Kong, 1996). This situation helped foster a popular music market dominated by imported British and American recordings and music magazines in which Malaysians could read in English about the current popular music trends of the West. Kuala Lumpur became the major centre of record distribution (Lockard, 1996), and the English language kept being promoted as the sole authenticating feature of all British-American-inspired popular music genres.

These linguistic and cultural influences carried on into the late 1980s with the birth of early Malaysian thrash and death metal bands such as Brain Dead, Silent Death, Suffercation, Vociferation Eternity and Infectious Maggots. Their album titles (From the Ecstasy, *Eternal Damnation*, and *Before the Sunrise* to cite a few) underlined their choice to adhere to both the language and the horrific lyrical and visual themes that characterized most other contemporary European and American thrash metal bands of the time, such as Venom, Slayer, Megadeth, Destruction, Sodom and Kreator. During live shows, the early Malaysian metal bands used to situate their music styles within the particular milieu of western influences by covering songs of the aforementioned western thrash metal bands. Until today, Malaysian extreme metal bands have rarely employed any of the locally-spoken languages (like Malay, Mandarin or Tamil) in their compositions. Furthermore, Malaysian extreme bands also seem to acknowledge their subordinated position to the global extreme metal scene. For example, it is common for them to use the song titles of other influential Western metal bands as their monikers. Brain Dead and Tools of the Trade are two examples. The former took its name from a song by Exodus (Californian 1980s thrash metal band), and the latter from Carcass (seminal British grindcore band, one of the creators of the genre). The choice of reproducing foreign bands' song names could also be interpreted as an authenticating feature to fit into a particular musical genre. Tools of the Trade's guitarist and singer Tiong explained that he chose to call his band after a Carcass song because he "was young and new to the scene, adored Carcass, and wanted my band's name to give immediately the idea of grindcore" (Personal communication, 12 March 2014).

To Malaysian metalheads, adherence to institutionalized global examples of metal appears natural as they desire to be part of the global Anglocentric scene. For instance, black metal musician John told me that

Heavy metal comes from the West, and we are an ex-British colony. The British brought western music here. Whatever genre you can think of, blues, jazz... it all comes from the West, and people here just follow whatever the original form is. We just play it as it is. (Interview conducted in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, on 21 July 2013)

John comes from the Eastern Malaysia state of Sabah, and has been part of the metal scene since the early 1990s. When I met him, he clearly showed how he followed the western black metal style: he wore a leather jacket adorned with embroidered patches, most notably the Satanic Goat emblazoned inside a pentagram, which is also the logo of British band Venom, originators of black metal music and among the first bands to use Satanic themes in their lyrics, artworks and visual style (Moynihan & Søderlind, 1998). The guitar that lay at John's feet, a Jackson BC Rich – an expensive piece of equipment for Malaysian standards – was protected by a hard case covered with several stickers representing the logos of other western extreme metal bands, such as Mayhem and Burzum. Regardless of the tropical heat, John also wore the ankle-high military boots used by the majority of extreme metal musicians around the world. Even before he claimed that Malaysians followed Western heavy metal forms, I immediately recognized his preferred metal style by looking at his clothes.

Figure 1: Metal subcultural capitals for sale at Dead Beat shop in George Town, Penang (picture by the author, 18 June 2013)

John's description, with obvious differences related to the diverse sub-genres of metal and their peculiar styles, easily extends to all of my research informants. To them, being authentically metal means to present their selves to the outer world by showing their compliance to "authenticated" styles. These are objictified in the form of cultural production, such as music recordings, and clothing style, such as T-shirts, patches, boots, and long hair. In other words, Malaysian metalheads' sense of authenticity is strongly related to cultural and material consumption in ways similar to what Sarah Thornton (1995) observed among the British dance club subculture. This phenomenon is especially evident in the most important space where metalheads come together and "perform metal" in Malaysia: the live show dimension, which I describe in the next section.

Live shows and authentication of metal style

On the afternoon of Sunday 4 May 2013, I stood outside the doors of the Black Box, a live music club in the trendy shopping mall Publika in Mont Kiara, an upper class northern suburb of Kuala Lumpur. I was in attendance to the annual KL Metal Camp, surrounded by about one hundred metalheads who came from all over West and East Malaysia for the event. The anticipation was palpable in the air as the main guest band was 1980s German thrash metal stalwarts Destruction, supported by largely Malaysian death, grindcore and black metal bands – Storming Steels, Nekrad, Tools of the Trade, Hereafter, Stompin Ground, Humiliation and Silkhannaz – including one band from Thailand – Zygoatsis. All around me, dozens of long haired Malaysians clad in black heavy metal t-shirts occupied the sidewalk in front of the club. Some sat cross-legged on the floor, or lay against parked cars to the dismay of the passersby Sunday shoppers. The metalheads t-shirts sported foreign band logos and the skeletal creatures, demons, inverted crosses, living dead and other stereotypical images used globally in heavy metal's imagery. If they did not wear one of such t-shirts, these metal fans were clad in denim jackets covered with embroidered heavy metal patches. The use of such vests reminded the signature clothing style of 1980s thrash metal. In the West, metalheads would decorate their jackets with large numbers of embroidered patches to show affiliation to a number of metal bands of the past. The Malaysian fans I observed at KL Metal Camp complied with such style.

Figure 2: The trademark "thrash metal hessian" look as employed among Malaysian metalheads at KL Metal Camp 2011 edition (picture from http://sceptical-logickers.blogspot.com/2011/05/events-kl-metal-camp-5.html)

Most of the names embroidered on their patches belonged to popular western thrash, death and black metal bands from the 1980s and 1990s, such as Possessed, Megadeth, Darkthrone, Kreator, Destruction, Black Sabbath, Metallica, Morbid Angel, Death, Death Angel, Carcass and Cannibal Corpse. I counted more than 30 patches sewn on some of these jackets. By showing a bigger number of obscure and underground bands' logos on the jacket, a Malaysian metalhead aims to become instantly recognizable as an authentic member of

the subculture. He aims to show his subcultural distinction and affiliation by publicly "wearing" his musical influences.

The importance of this practice among Malaysian metal fans became clearer a few months later when I found the following Facebook post.

Figure 3: Screenshot, plans for decorating a denim vest are shared on Facebook, 16 February 2014

The poster presents a picture of his unadorned denim vest with a study plan of how he wants to sew 10 patches on it. In the first comment, a friend recognizes that the patches are "nice"; in other words, he establishes the authenticity of the bands selected to adorn this vest. By deciding to ask to the larger group of the music scene's members to validate his choice, the original poster seems to prevent the disappointment of being publicly derided at a show not considered authentic by the rest of the scene. Of the bands perceived as representing the authentic sound of metal, I recognize among the patches Motörhead, a seminal new wave of British heavy metal band that started playing in the late 1970s and constitutes the link between original punk and early metal (Waksman, 2009); Swiss band Hell Hammer, among the early influences of the first wave of death and black metal; Nunslaughter, an extremely prolific American death-black metal band which has been true to its stripped-down, simplistic death metal style since 1987; and Inepsy, a Canadian band who played throughout the 2000s and broke up in 2011, considered one of the most successful modern underground "metal punk" bands, and whose musical style reproduces the authentic spirit and sound of early metal and punk. The choice of such patches suggests that, conforming to current trends in underground metal subcultures, also the Malaysian metal scene looks back at metal from the 1980s and 1990s as the most authentic, purest form of the genre.

The dynamics of such "metal authentication" are confirmed by Patto, guitarist of Kuala Lumpur's thrash metal band Atomic Death. He is a Malay man in his early thirties and has been a part of the extreme music scene for about 15 years. Among my research informants, Patto is among the most travelled Malaysian musicians: besides touring Europe with Atomic Death in 2013, he also toured Indonesia with crustpunk band Appäratus in 2008. I saw Atomic Death

perform live at Soundmaker Studio in Penang on 5 October 2013. In comparison to most other Malaysian metal bands, Atomic Death on stage wore the denim vests adorned by patches, the leather jackets, jeans and sneakers or boots that were used by western thrash metal bands since the late 1980s. Regardless of the heat on stage, Atomic Death never took off the vests on stage. Patto remarked that upon seeing pictures of Malaysian bands wearing open toed shoes or using a non metal-authenticated style, he immediately knows that "this band is not only unprofessional, but also cannot be taken seriously" (all Patto's direct quotes are from an interview conducted in Penang on 5 October 2013). Patto's perspective reinforces my argument that in Malaysian metal, authenticity is measured by adherence and commitment to performing the precise style that foreign bands are using. Furthermore, he emphasized how he learned to perform authentic metal by observing foreign touring bands:

Patto – I have been in the scene for almost 15 years; I saw many touring bands from the USA, Europe, Japan, a lot of good input. The thing is, when you see so many good bands playing for you, why do you keep doing the same shit? If you want to start a band, make it more serious. Most foreign bands that come here have the power to control the stage and the audience. I realize that most Malaysian bands do not see those things... for example, tuning guitars on stage... it is a small thing but it is very unprofessional... no foreign band tunes its instruments on stage. I think that if people pay a ticket to see your band, you need to deliver a powerful performance and make them satisfied of the money they spent.

MF- Do you mean that Malaysian bands are less authentic because less professional?

Patto- No, it is not about being authentic... people are simply not serious. If you are a metal band, you must dress like a metalhead on stage. It is not acceptable otherwise. If you play in a death metal band and you wear slippers, that is not acceptable. People see you, it is not just your music. It is your identity.

MF – Do you believe that Malaysian bands have to follow a style to be authentic?

Patto – Yes, it is very important. It is the band's identity and that is the first thing people see. It is obvious: if you play in a thrash metal band and you dress up like a rapper, thrashers will not be interested in you.

MF – I see, but the thrash style comes from the West. Do you think that in order to be an authentic band, you need to follow foreign examples, or Malaysian bands should use Malaysian influences?

Patto – I do not think it is a good idea. Because all the music comes from the West... it would be like having a car with four wheels, and deciding to drive it only with two... it cannot be. You want to be a thrash band; then you must look and act like one.

Specific genres of metal require musicians and fans to adhere to precise styles that authenticate their commitment to the scene and to the genre of music they decide to refine. To Patto and the majority of my informants, the foreign forms of metal are closed structures that can only be reproduced as they have

learnt them. There is no desire for innovation or localization. Instead, there is a great need to replicate consistently the rules of a genre to be endowed with distinction and therefore appear authenticated as a metal band. In Patto's words, the thrash metal style becomes mere reproduction of an idea of a globalized form of metal, which is similar to what Ritzer and Ryan identified as globalization of "nothing" (2002). Nevertheless, I am not suggesting a mere degrading, commercialised connotation of metal. My reading is that Malaysians tend to accept western metal's form and structure. In fact, by duly referencing the foreign, Malaysian gain scenic knowledge and show others their high commitment to the scene.

However, such authentication is subordinated to the possession of subcultural capitals. In fact, subcultural capitals, the validating symbols of metal authenticity, come at a price. Consequently, economic status of the scene members and their capacity to bear the costs of looking – and therefore being – "authentic" become of paramount importance.

The costs of metal authenticity

Expanding from Pierre Bourdieu's argument that individuals increase distinction in a social field by accumulating capitals (Bourdieu, 2006), Sarah Thornton (1995) coined the concept of "subcultural capital". It represents the way in which music scene participants accumulate scenic knowledge, increasing their distinction and advancing their positions in the music scene's field. Subcultural capitals can be objectified "in the form of fashionable haircuts and well assembled record collections" (Thornton, 1995, p. 11). In the case of extreme metal, Keith Kahn-Harris observed how collecting objectified subcultural capitals is "the mundane, solipsistic practice par excellence" (2007, p. 63). Akin to the punk subculture (Force, 2009), possession of original materials, especially rare vinyl editions, sanctions higher authenticity status within a music subculture. However, what seems to have been overlooked is how in developing nations local metal is not considered as equally "authentic" as foreign metal. Thus, authenticity is subjected to local accessibility of foreign subcultural capitals, and to the different economies that regulate the distribution of such imported, authenticated materials. This is the case of Malaysia, where foreign metal cultural production has limited distribution and higher costs. Thus, "authenticity" and distinction is subjected to the economic status of scene members.

To produce an authentic denim jacket as seen at KL Metal Camp, Malaysian metalheads must spend from RM250 to RM750. When comparing this price with the country's minimum wage of RM900 in Peninsular Malaysia and RM800 in Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan respectively.[66]

Buying metal recordings is also expensive. Vinyl is regarded as the most authentic format, regardless of the fact that imported records can cost up to RM100 and higher. In western countries, regular vinyl editions of metal albums cost between €12 and €15 (RM50 and RM65 respectively). The considerable price difference is because of Malaysian import tax on foreign goods. If vinyl records were produced locally, prices would be cheaper, but there are no vinyl pressing plants in the country. Imported vinyl records nevertheless remain the favourite among Malaysian metalheads. The higher costs seem to

[66] (data from the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources, accessed on 10 July 2014 at http://minimumwages.mohr.gov.my/employees/what-employees-need-to-know/), it is clear that "being metal" is costly.

authenticate and confer greater subcultural distinction to Malaysian metal vinyl record owners.

Import costs are also prohibitive for the local shops, which as a consequence do not buy imported materials in bulk but only on customer request. For this purpose, the Facebook social network was used to publicize sales and recruit interested fans that pay for the desired objects before the shop orders them from overseas. Such business relationships are based on scenic trust. Consequentially, reliable organizations gain authenticity within the scene as "reliability and honesty are crucial in avoiding intra-scenic conflict" (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 126).

As a consequence, "authentic" Malaysian metal shops largely use the Facebook social network to connect with their circle of potentially interested music scene "friends". Screenshot 2 shows a typical online sale for the patches that adorn metalheads' vests.

Figure 4: Screenshot, imported embroidered heavy metal and hardcore patches sold on pre-order via Facebook, 6 March 2014.
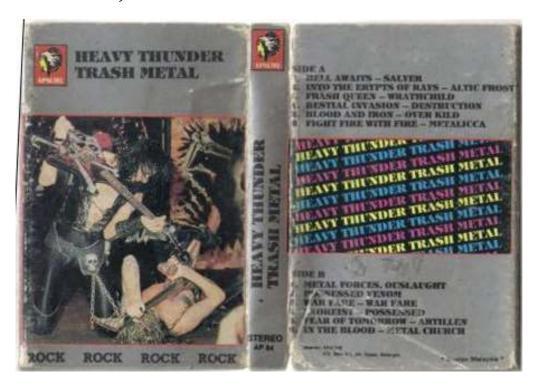

Figure 4 illustrates that 47 people "liked" the post. Significantly, the shop grouped the patches' pictures under a folder titled "IMPORTED PATCHES" [caps sic]. By highlighting that particular feature, the seller is doing two things. First, he shows the authenticating value of the products by publicizing their foreignness. Second, the shop clarifies its level of subcultural distinction and trust by appearing as an "authentic dealer" of subcultural capitals. The authentication of imported materials is a crucial dynamic that explains how Malaysian metalheads construct their idea of metal authenticity.

Local as inauthentic

Despite the higher prices, Malaysian metal fans visit the few available local shops and buy imported items because they know that their foreign "authenticity" is worth the cost. The reason why Malaysians believe that foreign items are more authentic than local items can be traced back to the proliferation of counterfeit pirated recordings in the second half of the 1980s. Pian, an old-timer metalhead and fanzine writer, remembers one particular pirated cassette

tape, "Heavy Thunder Trash Metal", as very influential to "introduce Malaysian rockers to another, unknown dimension of extreme metal music" (personal e-mail communication, 31 May 2013). This tape collected hits from 1980s American and British thrash, death and black metal bands, and symbolises the low quality of Malaysian products. For example, the tape ludicrously used the word "trash", instead of the genre's name "thrash". Second, most of the band names and song titles were misprinted in the tracklist: Metallica became "METALICCA", Slayer maimed to "SALYER", and Celtic Frost renamed to "ALTIC FROST".

Figure 5: The pirated tape "Heavy Thunder Trash Metal" (Courtesy of Pian of Ekstrim fanzine).

It is not surprising then that locally-produced subcultural merchandise is considered "inauthentic". This feeling was confirmed by Anba Razen, an Indian metal fan and collector from Batu Gajah - a small town close to Ipoh, state capital of Perak in West Malaysia. He agreed with the observation that Malaysian metal fans are more attracted to original foreign imports as they feel the latter have better quality than local products. Anba felt that Malaysian fans are willing to pay much more to buy original merchandise from abroad. He recalled how back in the 1990s, Malaysian tape labels, such as VSP, printed local versions of heavy metal's most important foreign bands at cheaper cost, but of inferior quality than foreign versions. With their badly printed inlays and covers, copious typos and printing mistakes, lowest plastic quality for the cassette, it was not surprising that most Malaysian fans avoided locally produced metal items, considering them "inauthentic". Anba stated that he "would prefer to spend more and get the original European, American or Australian edition of the same album" (interview, 1 June 2013). For the same purpose, he travels regularly to Singapore to see international touring metal bands as he believes that the venues, public address system and organization in the adjacent island state are better than in Malaysia. Anba knows well that such trips

are much more expensive, but he is willing to spend more to buy a more "authentic" metal experience abroad.

Conclusion

This paper describes the ways in which metal authenticity is performed in the Malaysian music scene of the early 2010s, and the reasons why it adheres to certain features of foreign metal. Insofar as Malaysian metal emerged as conforming to various specific features of the global metal style, my interpretation tends to depict Malaysian metalheads as a group that constructs their own subcultural authenticity based on a foreign "authenticating" culture. Nevertheless, I am not implying that extreme music in Malaysia has no refining effect or relevant impact on the global metal scene. In fact, the case studies I presented outlined how global metal in Malaysia is indeed used as a template to construct "metal authenticity" based on global forms idealized as classic. As Patto's reflections highlighted, Malaysian metal as a musical form still needs to be fully understood to master the mechanisms of the global metal marketplace, thus helping Malaysian metalheads refine, and maybe innovate, their local metal context.

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