Panic in the Peninsula: A Case Study on the Religious Model Reporting Style and Mediated Moral Panics in Malaysia

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Abstract
The issues concerning moral panics and music subcultures have often been overblown in the press coverage in Malaysia. Various models have been adopted by the authorities via the press to put a face on these so-called moral panics by appropriating the fashion and styles of music subcultures. Western popular culture has often had a volatile relationship notably with conservative, religious societies (even more so in non-Western countries) and the controversy surrounding the introduction of each popular medium frequently represented a form of moral panic (Shuker, 2001, p. 16).

From the mid to the late 1990s, music genres such as rap, hip-hop, heavy metal and punk have taken the center stage of personifying the rhetoric concerning 'social problems regarding the nation's youth'. In light of the country's current increasing conservatism, shaky political hegemony, and religious and racial rhetoric in the mainstream media, the 2001 moral panic which resulted in the so-called 'Black Metal crackdown' serves as an instrumental case study on how the religious model reporting style and mediated moral panics is exercised in Malaysia.

Keywords: Malaysia, music subcultures, media studies, mediated moral panics, religion, politics, news

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The issues concerning moral panics and music subcultures have often been overblown in the press coverage in Malaysia. Various models have been adopted by the authorities via the press to put a face on these so-called moral panics by appropriating the fashion and styles of music subcultures. Western popular culture has often had a volatile relationship notably with conservative, religious societies (even more so in non-Western countries) and the controversy surrounding the introduction of each popular medium frequently represented a form of moral panic (Shuker, 2001, p. 16). From the mid to the late 1990s, music genres such as rap, hip-hop, heavy metal and punk have taken the center stage of personifying the rhetoric concerning 'social problems regarding the nation's youth'. The 2001 moral panic resulted in what has been dubbed the 'Black Metal crackdown'.

A period of moral panic, as described by Stanley Cohen in his seminal book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972), consisted of:

> …A period, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions…the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (p. 9)

Heavy metal has gained notoriety in the past, notably in the United States, in regard to moral panic including court actions against heavy metal bands by parents and politicians blaming and holding them accountable for youth suicides, Satanism and other social ills (Bennett, 2001, pp. 53-55). Black metal has in particular raised concern in Norway where black metal bands have appropriated the genre to anti-Christian and racist sentiments that had apparently resulted in the burning of churches and racial murders and incarceration of the offenders. However, these tend to be isolated cases and do not represent the general black metal listeners and followers, who have been identified as being mostly passive despite their critical ideology concerning society (Bennett, 2001, pp. 55-56).

Black metal therefore has had an even more notorious history especially concerning religion and occults. Rap, hip-hop and punk subcultures tend to be more socially and culturally based and centers primarily around the music and the ideology it represents as an alternative lifestyle that revels in their identity and marginalised position. These subcultures also seldom incite religious hatred or racially discriminate (unless Nazi-skinheads are accounted for).

Research questions

This paper involves an analysis of the reporting style of the 2001 'Black Metal Crackdown'. The research questions are as follows:
Was the 2001 'Black Metal crackdown' in Malaysia primarily a simulated moral panic? If so, what models were used and why? If not, what evidence is there of a real moral panic?

The reporting style can be identified as that of a religious model. Whether this was used for political means may be implied later in the analysis of the progress the reports take during the crackdown.

The appropriation of black metal as a moral panic is more volatile considering Malaysian ethnic and religious structure is brought into attention: the ethnic majority consists of the Malays and Malays are often born into Islam. In fact, all Malays, by definition, are Muslims (Milne & Mauzy, 1999, p. 12). While moral panics in Malaysia often involve the rhetoric concerning the social ills among youth, the concerns can be identified as religious as most of those identified as being involved the so-called black metal occults and Malay youths.

The panic and fear could very well stem from the appropriation of heavy metal iconography which has over the course of the genre's existence evolved towards fantasy and satanic imagery – most visible in album cover artworks and band t-shirts. These fantasy and satanic imagery conjures images of the devil which is in opposition to any religious belief and a threat to a religious faith. The combination of the Islamic background of the Malays in general and the conservative values Malay culture adopt and adhere to, Black Metal can be seen as the most successful for moral panic in Malaysia.

Methodology

The analysis of the reporting style will be done by doing a textual analysis of the press reports that covered the incident. The textual analysis will look at the press reports by the Malaysian National News Agency (the official news agency – all news agencies are owned or at least partially owned by the government) from the beginning of the 'witch hunts' that began on July 16th 2001 to the last available press coverage on August 18th 2001. The press reports are taken from the ProQuest electronic database and the reports have no authors or journalists accredited to. The analysis is therefore limited to this scope. A comparison to the initial actual newspaper reports (the national daily *New Straits Times*) will be used to identify any similarities in reporting style. The analysis examines how the iconography associated with heavy and black metal was reported and the recurring times it appears in opposition with the religious, Islamic model used. Cohen's writing and theory on moral panics and reporting style is the basis of the analysis and will be used to identify how the Malaysian reports mirror the theories.

The 'witch hunts' began in the Northern state of Kedah and like other northern Malaysian states, such as the Islamic ruled states of Kelantan and Terengganu, is also known as very Islamic and conservative. The 'witch hunt' included stripping students (boys and girls) in schools to find any tattoos or the concealment of black shirts that would suggest an occult leaning. Even youths with long hair and who generally wear black were detained or questioned or threatened with haircuts. Among the behaviour and practices of the so-called black metal occults reported included animal sacrifices and blood drinking, digging graves, free sex, drug use/abuse, stepping on the Quran and viewing pornographic material.

What the textual analysis and research question hopes to achieve is the identification and dissection of the evil icon in opposition with the dominant Islamic model and the dialectic between good and evil in the reporting. Since the actual reasons behind the 'witch hunt' campaign cannot be easily identified, the political assumption behind the campaign will be speculated based on other available news reports covering the same time-line.

Analysis

The sequential model as described by Cohen (1972) used to describe the phases of a typical disaster seems to parallel that in the 'Black Metal crackdown' reporting:

> 1. *Warning:* during which arises, mistaken or not, some apprehension based on conditions out of which danger may arise. The warning must be coded to be understood and impressive enough to overcome resistance to the belief that the current tranquility can be upset.
>
> 2. *Threat:* during which people are exposed to communication from others, or to signs from the approaching disaster itself indicating specific eminent danger.
>
> 3. *Impact:* during which the disaster strikes and the immediate unorganized response to the death, injury or destruction takes place.
>
> 4. *Inventory:* during which those exposed to the disaster begin to form a preliminary picture of what has happened and of their own condition.
>
> 5. *Rescue:* during which the activities are geared to immediate help for survivors. As well as people in the impact are helping each other, the suprasystem begins to send aid.
>
> 6. *Remedy:* during which more deliberate and formal activities are undertaken towards relieving the affected. The suprasystem takes over the functions the emergency system cannot perform.
>
> 7. *Recovery:* during which, for an extended period, the community either recovers its former equilibrium or achieves a stable adaptation to the changes which the disaster may have brought about. (pp. 22-23)

The hypothesis that the crackdown is a simulated moral panic can be based on the third sequence, the *impact*, in which there had been no actual proof of damage done by the Black Metal groups other than the damage to Islamic 'belief' and 'morals'. The initial sequences of *warning* and *threat* had not been substantially supported by an actual *impact* and the only evidences reported mostly consisted of Black Metal paraphernalia and 'reformed' ex-Black Metal member(s) confessions. In fact, there had been many false alarms concerning certain youth gatherings and such that had turned out to be 'innocent' gatherings or totally unrelated to Black Metal groups. The lack of any strong voice and opinions (if any) from academic or independent professionals from non-governmental organisations being interviewed in the reports also show considerable loopholes in the sourcing.

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

The expressions used in these initial reports at first suggests a *warning* that warrants further investigation and the words used to describe Black Metal followers ("street gang" and "group") did not imply grave social concerns as these descriptions merely imply deviant social groupings, nothing *too* serious. However, by quoting an authority figure of the stature such as the Deputy Prime Minister leads on to imply an escalating *threat* and the word used ("menace" and "social problem"). This is further supported by a quote in a report four days later from a Minister in the Prime Minister's Department who uses the strong words such as "dangerous virus" and "cancer" and implies the *threat* it poses to Muslims in the country. Within the span of five days the image of these Black Metal 'members' (mostly high school students and youths) had escalated from mere isolated 'deviant' social groups to a huge threat to society, Muslims particularly, and that warrants a crackdown.

It is a common tactic for those in positions of leadership in social institutions who are given the responsibility of managing situations such as moral panics to adopt the public demeanor of calm father figures managing the irrational outburst of an adolescent – once the emotion subsides, it is assumed, the panic will go away (Horsfield, 1997, p. 5). This is exactly what had happened – the binary opposition of the paternal, adult father figure of the authorities versus the adolescent members of the Black Metal groups and later the binary opposition between the 'good', righteous religious Muslim leaders (a position also adopted by the politicians) versus the 'evil', ignorant youths of the Black Metal groups. If the panic was indeed pure simulation, it may explain the fact that it eventually disappeared within a month, at least in the reportings.

What is evident in the events reported is this seemingly clear cut binary oppositions ('adult rationalism' versus 'adolescent irrationality' and 'good' versus 'evil') and the

rapid succession from the initial *warning* to the *remedy* and *rescue.* The entire fiasco lasted just over a month. The reluctance of the police to intervene (the Inspector General of Police is quoted also on July 21st as saying that "it is not a national security problem …more social than criminal" and later by the North-East District Police Chief who stated that "it would be futile merely to investigate what could be just another modern day fashion" on July 24th) might allude a political bias in pointing the finger too quickly. The rapid progress from a religious concern (July 21st) to a political concern ("…aimed at bringing down the government…it was used by the opposition to show the failure of the government to curb social ills among the youth" on August 4th) also seems a bit rushed considering the fact that the *remedy* and *recovery* sequence by the authority offered up a rather quick, clean and simple, and effective solution: by treating Black Metal followers with medicine to complement counseling and motivational programmes (August 12th), using local music personalities to combat social ills (August 17th) and by the 'integrated action' between the Education Ministry, the police, the Home Ministry, the National Unity and Social Development Ministry, the National Security Division and the Malaysian Islamic Advancement Department (JAKIM).

The Religious Model and Exaggeration

The association made between the Black Metal followers and drug use and viewing pornography also can be seen as an attempt to scapegoat Black Metal as an icon symbolically associated with social ills and evils (the burning of the Quran, animal sacrifice, blood drinking etc.). The involvement of Muftis (a professional jurist who interprets Muslim law), the Kedah State Exco for Religious Affairs, JAKIM and the Kedah Islamic Affairs Council certain helped propagate a religious concern thus a religious model. The frequent mention of "threat to religious beliefs", "faith" and "Malay youths" in the same discourse of an imminent 'evil' consisting of "occult worship", "Devil worship" which could lead to the "destruction of Muslims" favors the authorities who take a religious model to propagate a panic and launching a crackdown campaign.

With an already established religious model, such generalizing and phrases based on the associated Black Metal iconography is further exaggerated in the mode and style of 'over-reporting' which distorts the alleged damaging effects which is still yet to be proven by concrete evidences or events. The sensational headlines, the melodramatic vocabulary and the deliberately heightening of those elements are also characteristic of most crime reporting (Cohen, 1972, p. 31). Religion, while very personal, can work to great lengths in this case since most of the alleged members were from religious schools. By brandishing Black Metal as a 'demonising' property, like a criminal on the run, it became mythical immoral and inherently evil entity, a 'virus' as described earlier, which threatens the very fabric and structure of the Muslim community, specifically the 'fragile', 'confused' and 'irrational' Muslim Malay youths.

The demonising of its associated genre, heavy metal, had not occurred prior to this. In fact, more than 10 years earlier (December 5, 1988), the *New Straits Times* ran an article which rather trivialized heavy metal and associated it with Malay youth rebellion (Lockard, 1998, p. 258) and most of the heavy metal followers are described as 'kutus'

(head lice) and seen merely as loafers who laze around shopping malls. The suggestion by one State Minister (July 30th) that three youth groups identified as having "high risk tendency of being influenced by the Black Metal occult group" can be found "usually loafing around shopping complexes on weekends or public holidays and at concerts" does not warrant a 'demonising' tag. It inherently points to the religious model in providing solutions and contrast rather than tackle the social (or even economic) issues associated with the behaviour.

Political Aims?

What can be implied, by considering other events before and during the crackdowns began, is that the Black Metal groups were used as a scapegoat to symbolize the social problems (such as increasing reports of rape cases, drug abuse and the authority's attempt to curb pornography) that were going reported on *and* also as a political tool to divert the public's attention from more serious political issues concerning the ruling government (such as the use of the Internal Security Act to subdue student activists and the opposition) . This section will examine the other news stories and events reported in the national daily *New Straits Times*. The month of July 2001 was full of events that were both socially and politically alarming. Among the reports by the *New Straits Times* coverage in July 2001 included:

- July 5th - a cover story of a 16 year-old student being raped and murdered in the southern state of Malacca;
- July 6th – a cover story on the arrest of a student activist under the Internal Security Act (ISA);
- July 8th – a cover story on the arrest of a second student activist under the ISA; and an 'amok' incident in which a man (believed to be a drug addict) kills his father and stabs his mother and sister;
- July 9th – a headline about a 'New ruling to enter university – helping students to focus on studies and stay away from unproductive activities' in which concern was raised in regard to student, particularly Malays, who consider the university as a center to rally against the government;
- July 16th – a page 13 report (no reporter credited) about the arrest of 31 people, including seven women, who involved in an illegal gathering in front of a detention camp protesting about the ISA and asking for the release of detainees (the police said they were supporters of the Opposition).

The July 5th report about the rape and murder case and the July 8th 'amok' case are one of many crimes that were reported during this period (a suggestion that something is going wrong in Malaysian society). The first report about Black Metal groups was on the July 17th edition, in page 7 ('Ministry to check on group called Black Metal'). During this period, there were also concerns, in most of the news coverage, about the activities of university students on campus that included anti-establishment, anti-government and pro-opposition activities.

The rising number of people being detained by the ISA (including the arrest of nine opposition leaders in April 2001 and the two student activists – subsequently released later – in July) for allegedly spreading anti-establishment and anti-Government sentiments and support could be one of the main political reasons in instigating a moral panic to distract the public, notably the rural and non-metropolitan population. At the same time, there was a hotly contested by-election in Likas (East Malaysia) where the Government coalition had accused the Opposition of deploying 'phantom voters'. It is worth noting that the entire crackdown eased and remedies were procured after the by-election had ended, although to what extent this was influenced by the by-election remains to be explored.

One action involving the 'witch hunts' which raised eyebrows was the raiding of shops selling black metal paraphernalia or CD and VCD sales: even illegal VCD stalls were raided for this purpose. *Time* magazine (September 10, 2001) quoted a then-deputy of the opposition party who suggested that the entire black metal fiasco was merely an attempt to cur the opposition because such VCD stalls also held the VCDs of opposition parties. There is indeed a rising trend among opposition political parties to distribute their views and manifestos via VCDs which can be produced at a low-cost since there is virtually no room for the opposition in the predominantly state-owned and controlled media. This could explain the insistence on raiding VCD stalls for purposes of eliminating the sale of pornographic VCDs that is repeated throughout the reports (and linking it together with free sex as a staple Black Metal activity). There was also massive crackdowns on VCD pirates and sales of pornographic VCDs (July 17th) with authorities raiding illegal VCD factories and stalls during this period to the point that top officers were allegedly getting death threats (July 20th) from the pirating syndicates (which a majority of were run and owned by gangs). Two other cover stories on July 20th included findings about the number of crimes committed by secondary students from 1999 to May 2001 (12 cases causing deaths, 123 rapes, 51 robberies and break-ins) and a teenager charged with murder, again implying via reporting an escalating problem among youths warranting action by the authorities. The July 20th issues also included the most comprehensive initial reports linking Black Metal with Satanism and occult activities (also in outlining the progress of the crackdowns) in pages 10 and 16 and the headline on July 21 reported on the Prime Minister's concern over the moral degradation and crime among youths. The coincidence of the breakdowns of 'morality' in the number of the news reports during the span of these couple of days suggests, again, a parallel between the instigation and construction of a variety of moral panics and the Black Metal crackdown, which was already under way, as an affirmative action in prevention by the authorities in simulating a 'solution'.

Another issue that can be explored further is the relationship between popular music and politics in South East Asian countries and the possibility that the campaign was used as a subtle warning to any member of the music community to avoid anti-government sentiment. To a certain extent, the ignorance of a popular culture discourse by the Islamic elite in relating to Malaysian Muslim youths (and the rise of a consumerist culture as an

alternative model) in building a cultural and political identity can also be explored (Noor, 1996, p. 1) as a precursor to such panics or concerns.

Conclusion

In the end, it may be hard to exactly pinpoint the reasons behind such moral panics and the subsequent crackdowns but by comparing it against parallel social and political events, various assumptions, notably political diversion (or to display successes in governing and maintaining order), as the analysis has shown can be made. It is discouraging to note that figures of authority continually blame the absorption of Western popular culture among Malaysian youth groups as the source of all social ills and the style of reporting leaves little room for any other possibilities or arguments. Although there may actually have been an actual Black Metal occult which had carried out the alleged activities, the unwarranted mass stereotyping and scapegoating of youth groups accompanied by the method of reporting using an Islamic simulation model (which eventually led to the crackdown) is disheartening since other cultural considerations and discourses (even the availability of real substantial evidences other than t-shirts, CDs, VCDs etc.) relating to the causes were virtually ignored and never really explored thoroughly in the news reports.

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