

Malay Metalheads: Situating Metal Music Culture in Brunei

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Abstract

As a global phenomenon metal music has created a worldwide community that constructs its own unique subculture. In Brunei, popular culture takes its own particularistic form of articulation due to the existence of contestations for hegemony between the youth and the Malay Islamic state. The dominant state ideology of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) or Malay Islamic Monarchy plays a pivotal role in influencing and reshaping the local sense of a metal community. In the Brunei context, an important feature of the Malay metalhead community is the fact that it does not duplicate the metal cultural blueprint of its western origins. Contrary to international metal communities, there is an inadequacy of public space to perform the role of a metalhead (i.e. live performances), and it is difficult to undertake music-related activities in Brunei. As the public domain is constantly regulated by MIB, the Malay metalhead community is totally grounded in the realm of the private sphere. This article explores three important issues: first, the creation of the Malay metalhead culture; second, the convergence of the MIB identity and the metalhead identity; and third, the hybridization of global and local metal cultures.

Keywords: metal music, Bruneian popular music, *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB), Malay metalheads, music subculture, metal community, glocalization, hybridization, popular culture

Introduction: The General Background of Popular Music in Brunei

Popular culture and music have always exerted a powerful allure among young people in Brunei Darussalam, and there are various hybridized subcultures within the small Malay Islamic nation. Even under the rule of a modern nation-state bounded by the ideology of *Melayu Islam Beraja* (MIB) or Malay Islamic Monarchy, the Bruneian youth is able to harbor a local metal community.¹ The existence of popular subcultures suggests that global influences, such as metal music, are not effectively controlled by the MIB-anchored state, depicting a complex relationship between the global and the local. In the case of Brunei, the Malay metalheads (metal fans) are able to experience the translocal cultural values of metal music while adhering to the national ideology, albeit restricted within the bounds of a contested social space. Although Malay supremacy is advocated by the MIB, Brunei is a multicultural society made up of seven diverse ethnic or indigenous groups. The Brunei Nationality Status Act of 1961 states that there are seven groups with entitlement to Bruneian nationality: Brunei Malay, Belait, Tutong, Kedayan, Dusun, Murut, and Bisaya.² It is also true that in present day Brunei, the identity of a Bruneian Malay has increasingly become more fluid, entailing various cultural values and practices from mixed ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, the idea of cultural hybridity is not foreign to Bruneian society.

For decades, Bruneian popular musical landscape has been heavily dominated by Western mainstream genres (ballad, rock, R&B, pop, and hip hop) as well as Malay music (predominantly Malaysian-influenced popular traditional and modern musical genres, including contemporary *nasyid* or religious music),³ *dangdut* (of the Indonesian variant), and, in the current global era, K-pop (Korean pop music). The Bruneian creative industry, particularly on locally produced music, has not reached a level of reception or mass consumption that can overshadow the above mentioned popular musical genres. Due to a limited and confined circuit of music distribution in Brunei, well-known local musicians or artists are often dependent on exposure provided by the *Radio Televisyen Brunei* or RTB (state-owned broadcasting station) through radio airplays and television appearances. Besides mainstream genres, the other side of

Brunei's musicscape, which can be categorized as traditional, is laden with indigenous elements of story-telling lyrical style or folklore songs and accompanied by sounds of traditional instruments, such as *Rampana* (small drums), *Gulingtangan* (small gongs), *Gandang Sadaman* (resembling a Xylophone), and *Suling* (flute), just to name a few. The pre-existing or traditional musicscape also incorporates loud music and fast rhythms—musical aesthetics commonly found in rock, pop, rap, and heavy metal.

It should be noted that active musicking infused with *lepak* (hangout) culture, loud drums, and dancing are not entirely new elements in the local experience; in Brunei, it is known as the *Gambus* phenomenon. From the local historical point of view, *Gambus* music (not to be confused with the traditional lute instrument of the same name) is a tradition usually performed during cultural events (i.e. weddings and royal ceremonies) that incorporate a band of musicians and the act of *memukun* in which two singers battle each other using poetic verses in songs. However, the modern *Gambus* interpretation by the younger generation depicts a different tainted picture, when it was still quite popular during pre-Sharia (Islamic law) revival days. The transition from traditional music to karaoke parties and rock music has generated a negative reputation among locals and scholars who have redefined the new meaning of *Gambus* as a “mobile club,” which moves from one house to another, providing a social space where youth, both male and female, apart from “partying” to the music, often engage in activities that are defined as forbidden (*haram*) by religious authorities—for example, the consumption of alcohol.⁴ Hence *Gambus* has become an example of a reinvented Bruneian subculture which occupies a position that is often ambivalent or even contrary to the religious and cultural practices advocated by MIB, demonstrating the complex relationship between the state and the popular culture.

Historically, metal music in the Western domain has suffered from a negative image among the general public and struggled to be accepted as a form of popular music. Throughout the years of metal's evolution, it is no stranger to controversies ranging from musical origins, censorship, explicit lyrics, violent imagery, to association with Satanism. In its beginnings, metal music pioneers incorporated the *diabolus in musica* (the

devil's note), which refers to the use of the diminished fifth or augmented fourth tritone,⁵ to obtain the renowned heavy guitar sound made famous by bands such as Black Sabbath and Slayer,⁶ causing some to accuse metal of harboring satanic tendencies. In the 1980s, a majority of top heavy metal bands included in the Filthy Fifteen list were charged based on censorship issues that resulted in the implementation of the infamous "Parental Advisory" stickers on records or CDs.⁷ Furthermore, the most notorious controversy in the history of the genre is the association of metal with Satanic activities. The sub-genre of black metal bands in Norway, for example, are notorious for church burnings as an act of defiance against religion, and other heavy metal bands were accused of allegedly a "backmasking" technique to transmit harmful subliminal messages in songs.⁸ However, metal has undergone tremendous changes since its early days, and the canonical literature on the music has become less Eurocentric, encompassing a more global approach, whereby metal music has come to flourish in the culturally diverse societies of Southeast Asia.

Similar to *Gambus*, the aesthetics of metal music against the backdrop of the local setting offer a different outlet in which Malay metalheads engage in a social space that is outside the confinement of traditional, cultural, or religious expectations. There is, however, a paucity of research done on metal music culture and its growing community in Brunei's musicscape. Indeed, even leading literature of metal studies around the Southeast Asian region has only focused on the metal scenes in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore.⁹ The exploratory essay presented here can be a valuable contribution to the study of global metal and will be able to address the knowledge gap on Brunei as a case study. Here, we explore the Malay metal music subculture based on an ethnographic study conducted during the infancy stage of the Sharia law implementation in Brunei, from 2013 to 2014.

The Emergence of Metal Music in Brunei

At first glance, Brunei may not appear to be a conducive environment for the transgressive appeal of heavy metal and its extreme sub-genres. The

metal scene in Brunei does not have as wide a following as Indonesia's metal scene because since the very beginning its existence has been submerged in the underground sphere. In the ethnographic study, tracing the history of metal's first inception to a specific date is proven to be quite difficult and it is also a messy task to identify bands and musicians who were the first purveyors of metal. Although subcultural production in the early days did include local fanzines, much of their content remains unknown as they were not published for public distribution. Hence, they stayed true to the nature of an underground scene in exemplifying the fact that (sub)cultural objects are often partially exclusive to several members only. Thus, an attempt to outline the history of the development of metal is problematic due to the absence of written or official records on the metal scene. This section will not be a comprehensive outline of the history of metal in Brunei; however, it will offer an overview to address the emergence and development of the culture of metal.

In other parts of the world, the emergence of a metal scene is usually understood as a reaction to major socio-economic dilemmas. In the West, studies of the genre of heavy metal emphasize that early metal genres provided a space to express the frustrations of working-class youths.¹⁰ In Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia, the emergence of local metal music scenes can be understood as a response to the unsettling societal changes brought by industrialization and urbanisation.¹¹ The metal scene in Nepal, however, points to different factors in its emergence, compared to the other countries. In Nepal, the development of metal is synonymous with the act of "rebellion against specifically local phenomena" by Nepalese metal fans and musicians.¹² Correspondingly, Brunei's situation mirrors the fact that the development of metal music is a reaction based on local frustrations, rather than on matters of class struggle or industrialization, specifically in contesting over issues of limited space to participate in popular culture and MIB restrictions on freedom of expression for the youth. Though details are sketchy, the starting point of the metal scene in Brunei is quite similar to other countries in the region (Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia)—metal listeners started listening to rock and mainstream heavy metal before moving on to the more

extreme metal subgenres (i.e. Thrash Metal, Death Metal, Black Metal, Gothic Metal). Wallach traced the Malay metal scenes in Malaysia and Singapore to rock music, which is better known as the “Mat Rock” (Malay rockers) phase in the region. Subsequently, extreme metal thrived due to established scenic infrastructure that was able to “sustain regionwide networks of cultural and musical exchange involving touring musicians and the wide circulation of musical and textual artifacts.”¹³ As rock music was one of the dominant forms of popular music in Brunei and it was a starting music reference for metalheads, it often blurs the distinction between the metalheads and the rockers. Metal music surfaces in the public arena being categorized as “rock.” For example, two Bruneian mainstream radio stations play Metallica’s and Megadeth’s songs in “rock sessions,” understating the fact these are iconic bands of the extreme metal genre of the thrash metal style. Misidentification of heavy metal as rock music is common even in areas of its origins, since early metal sounds from the likes of Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple, borrowed musical styles from the rock genre.¹⁴

Below are excerpts from metal fans who describe the environment of Brunei’s metal history in the 1980s and 1990s:

Informant 1: I remember back in the late 80s and early 90s, they used to call us “rockers” because they [the general public] didn’t know what we were listening to. People heard the loud noisy music and called it rock music. They didn’t know if it was metal. They didn’t know anything. They didn’t need to care. What for? To them it’s just music but of course. It’s obviously different now. It’s not easy for me to explain why but the feeling I get when I talk about the metal scene now is... very hard, everything is... [looks around and waves his hand to point the surrounding area] difficult now here.

Informant 2: If you look back before, religion was like what? It wasn’t even strong before. We could do whatever we wanted here, people used to drink alcohol, go to Gambus events and parties. Metal gigs were much more frequent too but of course in the remote districts such as Tutong and KB (Kuala Belait) because most of us [metal musicians] were living around these areas. And those gigs were really organized. We had to

pay tickets to get in and it was not at some small secluded areas, it was actually in public district halls especially in Tutong. So, I guess you could say that we were “bebas” (free) at that time, yeah, we had more freedom back then.

The above narrations were told from the perspective of what Bruneian metalheads refer to as *orang lama* from the local metal scene. *Orang lama* here is a reference to what the key informants described as the older generation of metalheads who have been listening to metal ever since the late 1980s and they were the more ardent fans of classical metal. Most of the early influences came from heavy metal, thrash metal, black metal, death metal, power metal, and new wave of British heavy metal that came with bands such as Metallica, Megadeth, Scorpion, Iron Maiden, Sepultura, Mayhem, and Death. They are also respected by the younger generation of metalheads who consider the seniors to be more knowledgeable in classic metal genres and, since they were the first group of metal listeners, responsible for establishing metal's early influence or infrastructure establishment in Brunei. The first phase of metal's establishment portrayed by these informants suggests that metal had a liberalized beginning even though MIB had long been rooted in Brunei's political system. The location of metal's early establishment as proclaimed by the informants, which is outside the capital district, Tutong and Kuala Belait (near to the border of the Malaysian state of Sarawak), also implied that there was an absence of religious authorities in these remote areas where metal was supposedly thriving. Based on an ethnography in a remote small town in Indonesia, Wallach articulates that metal is not necessarily an urban phenomenon; isolated areas can foster metal scenes as long as there are connections between fans, “commodity flows,” a “social infrastructure of organized concert events, and other institutions and practices that support local underground scenes and foster opportunities to acquire subcultural capital.”¹⁵ In the early 2000s only few Bruneian bands, such as Senjakala and Karacoma, rose to fame drawing on styles from thrash and gothic metal with clean vocals, and were openly producing music in the public domain, gaining record labels recognition and releasing EP (extended play) records

within Brunei. Wan Long Kok (thrash and hardcore) and Hebiimataru (melodic death metal) were among the few extreme metal bands that were allowed to play on the radio. The time for such airplay only lasted for a short duration due to their aggressive vocals—hardcore screaming and death metal growls.

The Globalization of Metal and the Internet

The advent of new media, especially the Internet, is crucial for the development of metal in previously metal-free areas. Countries outside the sphere of metal's origins are subjected to what Deena Weinstein refers to as the second phase of metal's globalization when metal "increased the international reach of the genre."¹⁶ The Internet plays an important role as a non-hegemonic mediator for metal, in which she explains that: "the globalization of metal received enhanced momentum when the rise of the Internet coincided with the economic boom that increased the standard of living in peripheral areas, especially in the metropolitan centers of Southeast Asia and Latin America."¹⁷ This is especially true in the development of the metal infrastructure and subcultural activities of the local scene in Brunei. When asked about the main source of their metal knowledge, several key informants mentioned the Internet as their answer. Although not unique to Brunei, local metal fans receive subcultural information and constantly study and develop metal aesthetics via new media platforms such as YouTube and MP3 downloading.¹⁸ The following interview excerpts testify to this:

Informant 3: Back then the older generation would have used cassettes, but now we don't have to. Why? Simple. One word: the Internet. It's easy for us to discover metal music nowadays. One click on YouTube and you get to watch the latest metal video. We rely on the Internet as our metal resource because we don't just watch videos we actually want to download the songs. So, we use mp3 downloading sites to get our favorite metal songs. That's why the Internet is useful for metalheads in Brunei, since it's the easiest way we can get our hands on metal music.

Informant 4: *I feel sorry for all the metal bands out there because obviously most of us here [Brunei] would just download songs online and most of the time we don't even have to pay for it. We do look cheap by doing that but we owe it all to the Internet because without it how would I become a metalhead? I would just be a normal Bruneian guy without it. I mean listening to one metal song won't make you a metalhead, so you have to study it, by discovering new bands online while downloading their songs.*

The usage of the Internet or digital technology as part of the globalizing cultural processes has been noted by Arjun Appadurai in his idea of the “technoscape.”¹⁹ In this case, the act of downloading songs and watching music videos by the local metalheads is part of the technoscape of metal’s globalization that can be roughly interpreted here as the way in which subcultural objects (songs) and information (musical knowledge) can be accessed or downloaded via online platforms.

Additionally, the Internet also acts as a source of subcultural consumption where metal fans demonstrate their loyalty to the music through the act of buying merchandise such as band t-shirts. One informant explains his experience of buying band t-shirts:

At first, it was just listening to the music and then suddenly I have the urge to find out more about metalheads in Europe and America. So, I started to use the Internet and found pictures and videos of other metalheads on social media. The more I see, the more I learn so I guess I was influenced by the things that I see. I remembered wanting my favorite band t-shirt so bad because most of the metalheads were wearing it. I have to admit it looked really appealing so I went online and bought it. Well, now I have many band shirts in my closet. I like wearing it because it makes me feel like one of them, feels closer to the band and it's like the fans are united wherever we may be, after all, we are metalheads.

This informant’s experience is one of many that specifies that metal’s globalization engages with global cultural consumption, in this case in the form of metal band t-shirts. Metal like any other form of

popular culture has a marketability factor in the sense of a “cultural supermarket effect,” which refers to when “social life becomes mediated by the global marketing of styles, places, and images, by international travel, and by globally networked media images and communications systems.”²⁰ The effect here is claimed when the informant and other local metalheads are being influenced to feel a sort of (sub)cultural proximity or connection by wearing metal t-shirts just like their European and American counterparts. The consumption of international metal t-shirts is part of the subcultural consumption pattern that exists to support the subcultural capital of the metal community in Brunei.

Identity-making in Brunei’s Metal Scene

As emphasized earlier, the MIB is a dominant ideological state apparatus; Bruneian identity is subjugated to concepts of Malayness, Islam, and the Monarchy. In contrast, metal’s globalization and subcultural formation stretches the Bruneian-MIB identity beyond locality, hinting at the fact that the modernization of identities could be more fluid or “free-floating.”²¹ Pertaining to the development of multiple identities, Kath Woodward believes that “the body has become a project”; individuals of this era are no longer restricted to one single outlook of themselves rather, they are free to carry on with further alterations and transformations of the self.²² This is true in the case of the Bruneian metalheads who accord their role-playing in different places, almost replicating the ever-changing dramaturgical roles in the backstage, onstage, and offstage personas of their favorite performers.²³ The following passages bear out the importance of dramaturgical role-playing among Bruneian metalheads:

Informant 5: When I’m onstage, that’s when I feel most alive. I feel like one of those famous metal musicians and I think I can say the same for my band mates as well. When I work wearing all those work clothes, you probably can’t see me as a metalhead. But onstage I become the metalhead that people are familiar with because I’m the lead guitarist of my band. When we play live shows, we all dress up in our black t-shirts

and that's the time when we enjoy headbanging. But of course, I don't dress up as a metalhead or act like this metal guy all the time. I do that when I'm onstage or jamming with my friends. I know when I want to act very metal-like.

Informant 6: I'm always excited to go home from work when I know I'm going to go jamming with my friends. There's something so spiritual about putting on your favorite metal bands t-shirts and preparing yourself for a whole afternoon session of jamming loud death metal music in the studio. At least, that's what I think. I love jamming because it's a different environment from my work place and, well, I'm not doing work when I'm jamming! [Laughs.] My colleagues are surprised when they see me jamming because it's like seeing another side of me, that's what they said. Also, because they thought I was just some normal guy, they didn't think I could be a musician, let alone being a metal musician.

Woodward's theory of the body as an ongoing project subjected to change resonates well with the experiences of both informants. Both of them emphasize the feeling that there is an attraction of jamming with friends and being a metalhead. They choose to transform their role from working professionals to metal musicians to "feel alive" and to experience the spirituality of appearing as a metalhead such as putting on a metal band's t-shirt. Both play the metalhead role when they are jamming to feel "metal-like" and the significance of wearing a subcultural object such as the metal t-shirt—indicating the shifting identities from the work role (public persona) to the metal musician role (subcultural persona). The metalhead and MIB identities co-exist together; however, as suggested by these informants, the Bruneian metalheads have to partake in a sort of strategic behavior management.

At one level, metal community, both global and local, can be seen in terms of an "imagined community." Weinstein states that "metal is the music of a group of people that transcends other, preexisting cultural and national boundaries."²⁴ In other words, metalheads adhere to their own set of unwritten rules or shared values. In the case of Brunei, the subcultural capital of the local metalheads is governed by metal's global

“code of authenticity” referring to many aspects of the music such as the following: the signature sound of the music with screaming vocals, the visual appearances of the metalheads (wearing band t-shirts), and the verbal aspect which refers to the strong lyrics, band names, and song titles.²⁵ When asked about subcultural rules in the local metal scene, an informant explains:

I do believe we have a sort of unwritten rule shared among metalheads everywhere whether it's in the West or here in Asia. It's this thing where we are so passionate about music that we want the music to stay true or original. I used to like this Viking metal band for years, but when they made a new album, they totally changed direction towards folk metal. They're not staying true to their roots so I don't like them anymore.

The informant's emotional reaction to the changing musical drive of the European metal band indicates the code of authenticity which he believes is shared among metal fans worldwide. The narration shows how metalheads idealize certain musical expectations or attributes that they identify as authentic or “original.” These attributes such as vocals, genre, and themed lyrics are the few elements that attract fans to give allegiance to the metal bands. Metal's subculture centers the appeals of metal bands. However, once these attributes are replaced, altered, and changed, the fans will quickly re-evaluate their loyalty. Changes or unfamiliarity to a specific sound can mean a disruption to the metal identity that is built upon specific musical expectations. Metal fandom operates heavily on allegiance or on staying true to authentic metal sounds, differentiating metal fans than from those of other genres of popular music.

Hegemonic Contestations: Metal, Malayness, and Islam

The Bruneian metalheads are perhaps most conscious among its nation's citizenry with regard to their MIB-based national culture. Most bands and musicians refuse to write controversial lyrics that would offend the state philosophy that serves as the dominant ideology of the day. Unlike

their more “political” metal counterparts in Indonesia, the metal scene in Brunei is by comparison somewhat subdued, with a greater focus on infusing metal with a sense of the local, as one band member explains below:

We know we are Malays and our culture is thicker than blood kind of thing. Because of that, I guess we are influenced by both metal and the local culture which we show in our music. Our genre is thrash metal, but our lyrics and song titles are all in Malay. We write mostly about Malay myths and legends. But other than that, we also write songs about life in Brunei. The materials are good as well, the local legends and myths, I mean. People always like that one song called “Pusaka.” I can’t believe at first that Malay traditional stories like that can actually fit into metal music easily but, then again, we have folk and Viking metal from Europe. So, we’re doing the same thing here; it’s just that we do it Malay style. We feel proud to have done that, singing metal in our mother tongue. We also feel proud of being Malay metalheads.

This is an example of the type of metal music that became the archetype of Bruneian metal. Although not all bands sing in Malay, their main theme revolves around hybridizing metal with Bruneian culture. However, stigmatization of metal music by the larger society remains. In terms of Bruneian public perception, metalheads are often associated with black metal and Satanism, as exemplified by the following narration:

I was out buying food in the “pasar” (market) one night wearing a metal t-shirt. The graphics on my shirt were really visual. But I thought nothing would happen; it’s just a shirt. Then this lady came along and greeted me. She pointed to my shirt and asked: “Is that black metal?” I was shocked to hear that coming from a stranger. I told her it’s not black metal, it’s just some scary graphics. But she argued with me saying that it has a goat’s skull meaning it’s black metal so it’s “haram” [forbidden] to wear it. Then she was lecturing me about Islam and black metal. I thought she was really strange so I said to her, “I don’t want to get into

an argument with you, and I don't know why you think its Satanic because it's just a shirt!"

It is part of the dominant discourse in Brunei to perceive black metal as satanic, due to the allegations of satanic rituals and banning of black metal in Malaysia and Indonesia.²⁶ Although in most cases the restrictions from religious authorities are not publicly announced or officially publicized, often local metalheads are labeled as Satanists. As portrayed above, usually it is based on broadening the application of the religious notion of *haram* or “what is forbidden” in Islamic teachings to particular cultural objects, such as t-shirts, which are deemed as unacceptable to the general public. The statement above indicates that ordinary citizens, who have little knowledge about metal music, also stigmatize the metalheads as they follow the denunciation issued by the authorities. Metal informants do feel a particular sense of frustration and betrayal when their attachment to metal music is misrepresented by those who belong to the same religious faith, as the following statements make evident:

I listen to Black Metal but I pray five times a day. That's not a weird thing. I'm doing my job as a Muslim still, and there's no reason for me to abandon my religion if I listen to black metal. People have the right to be scared of it though since there are a lot of misconceptions about it being in relationship with Satanic practices. Yet that is specifically in the context of Norway. They burn churches for historical and political reasons. We're not going to start worshipping Satan in Brunei. I don't think the authorities should have anything to worry.

There is no connection between religion and metal. Your religion is your religion. Your music is your music. It should not be wrong for us to be metalheads and be Muslims at the same time. I don't see the problem. There is no need for conflict or argument on this. Metal is my music. Islam is my religion.

These are the views expressed by the metalheads who feel that there

should be no conflict between heavy metal and Islam. Other informants also claim that being metalheads does not undermine their *akidah* (Islamic conviction) as Muslims. On the other hand, it seems that through the public sphere of civil society and its “socialized” citizenry, the unintended consequence of the MIB state’s official discourse is to continuously perpetuate a sense of anxiety, an ongoing contestation over meanings within the metal community. It is from this terrain of struggle that many metal fans highlight their limited freedom of expression and, consequently, negotiate and reshape their metal musicking, and ultimately, their metal identity.²⁷ To ensure that the metal scene will continue to flourish, the Bruneian metalheads resort to symbolically creative activity, in which youths in popular culture are “expressing or attempting to express something about their actual or potential cultural significance.”²⁸ Creativity here refers to a notion of “agency” (after Giddens),²⁹ in which metalheads are capable of reacting to restrictions issued by authorities in a pro-active and productive way by creating an alternative musicking space and, in concrete terms, to the privatization of metal. Metal gigs remain a very important subcultural capital source for the local metal scene; however, they are reduced to musicians’ homes, home-based studios, garages, and private properties. In this so-called “private domain,” a social space that is relatively insulated from the direct regulation by MIB, both emotional and material support by family members, kinsmen, friends, and neighbours also become crucial. In the sphere of the public domain, metal shows have become increasingly rare, as an informant explains as follows:

It’s a hassle organizing public gigs; they are usually meant for music schools but metal musicians are allowed to play as well but even that we usually play acoustic versions of metal songs to appear non-aggressive. Plus, in public shows they usually have to check everything, even the drum set can’t have double pedals because playing with double pedals sounds metal or aggressive. What I mean by “they” is the authority on public entertainment, they are always checking on the permit and other things. So, we would rather stick with safer acoustic songs. Even if there’s no one checking us, we still prefer to play safe songs, since we

don't want to get into trouble.

The above narration shows that metalheads feel that they should manage their own performance in the public domain. However, in this public sphere, they are always ultra-aware of the sensitive religious-political context of their surroundings, the controlling state bureaucracy and institutions, the supreme order of the monarchy, and indeed, the authority figure is always prominent in their conscience. To a large extent, this reflects the Foucauldian notion of “surveillance” whereby individuals feel like they are being observed even when there is no monitoring.³⁰ The Bruneian metalheads have the intention of fulfilling socially acceptable codes to avoid the possibility of stigmatization, such as by keeping information among the subcultural members and keeping live shows performed in remote venues or at their own homes as private events. Metalheads keep a low profile when they perform in public shows, by either playing softer music or acoustic versions of metal songs. Hence, the thought of being under surveillance has made Malay Bruneian metalheads reinforce their own sense of self-discipline and engage in self-policing. Foucault’s theory of panopticism is useful in pointing out that the state or authority can still exert their (ideological) power indirectly, through the consciousness of being under surveillance.

Conclusion

This article is not intended to represent a comprehensive review of metal music history in Brunei. In its exploratory form, it aims to uncover the metal identity and subcultural formation, and most importantly, the hegemonic contestations between metal and the state ideology of MIB. It is observed that the emergence of metal’s aggressive appeals and sounds should not come as a shock to the local experience, as *Gambus* was a loud music culture as well. However, the emergence of metal started from rock listeners, in a manner similar to the *Mat Rock* phenomenon in Malaysia and Singapore. Through the second phase of metal’s globalization and the advent of the Internet, a dedicated metal community could be forged and solidified in Brunei. The technoscape

represented by the Internet has further enabled metal netizens to access knowledge about metal music and reinforced the “cultural supermarket effect” of metal’s globalization. The convergence of the metalhead and the MIB identity is mediated through strategic behavior management by Bruneian metalheads. Metal fans organize the identities of the Islamic Malay and of the metalhead separately according to differences in social space. The code of authenticity is important in maintaining metalhead identity and providing subcultural validation. Distinct from its regional counterparts, the Bruneian metal scene is not political. Conflicts with the state (MIB) are ideological, which reduces the subcultural power of metal through the stigmatization and privatization of metal gigs. On further examination, the Brunei MIB model of cultural governance does reveal a form of formalized control that is far from totalizing, even though popular culture performance in the public domain is fully regulated by it. In its present form, the sphere of the private domain seems to be left relatively on its own by MIB, leaving it open to the support and voluntary spirit emerging from civil society, its citizenry, and locality, including families, kinsmen, and neighbors. It is in this private domain that metalheads, rockers, and other alternative musicians negotiate their struggle for social space, though without recourse to directly confronting the state. It appears that this restricted social space is relatively adequate, at least for the time being, in accommodating to Bruneian metalheads’ creativity or identity needs and the practice of their popular culture, without radically compromising or rupturing the state’s dominant ideology and its national culture discourse. The other option, of course, is for Malay metalheads to simply opt out of the Brunei nation-state’s MIB-dominated public space and explore other available metal-friendly social spaces in the rest of Asia or Southeast Asia.

Notes

¹ For further elaboration of the concept of MIB, please see Dominik M. Müller, “Sharia Law and the Politics of ‘Faith Control’ in Brunei Darussalam: Dynamics of Socio-Legal Change in a Southeast Asian Sultanate,” *Internationales Asienforum* 46, no. 3-4 (2015): 316-17.

² Awang Mohd Shahrol Amira bin Abdullah, “Being ‘Malay’ in Modern Brunei,” in *Brunei – History, Islam, Society and Contemporary Issues 2016*, ed. Ooi Keat Gin (London: Routledge, 2016), 81.

³ See Zawawi Ibrahim, “Disciplining Rock and Identity Contestations: Hybridization, Islam, and New Musical Genres in Contemporary Malaysian Popular Music,” *Situations* 9, no. 1 (2016): 21-47.

⁴ Anthony R. Walker, “A Kingdom of Unexpected Treasures: Contributions to a National Ethnography of Brunei by UBD Sociology-Anthropology Students,” *South East Asia: A Multidisciplinary Journal* 10 (2010): 11-38.

⁵ James R. Lewis, *Satanism Today: An Encyclopedia of Religion, Folklore and Popular Culture* (California: ABC-CLIO, 2001), 72.

⁶ For the history of the association of early metal bands and the devil’s note, see *Metal: A Headbanger’s Journey*, directed by Sam Dunn, Scot McFadyen, and Jessica Joy Wise (Ontario: Banger Productions, 2005), DVD.

⁷ Tom Bromley, *Wired for Sound: Now That’s What I Call an Eighties Music Childhood* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2012), 268.

⁸ Chris Mathews, “Apocalypse Cheerleaders: Satanism in Popular and Not-so-popular Culture,” in *Modern Satanism: Anatomy of a Radical Subculture* (London: Praeger Publishers, 2009), 177-92.

⁹ Jeremy Wallach, “Unleashed in the East: Metal Music, Masculinity, and ‘Malayness’ in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore,” in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 86-105. Also see Craig Lockard, *Dance of Life: Popular Music and Politics in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1991); Marco Ferrarese, *Banana Punk Rawk Trails: A Euro-Fools Metal Punk Journeys in Malaysia, Borneo, and Indonesia* (Petaling Jaya: SIRD Malaysia, 2016).

¹⁰ See Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hannover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993).

¹¹ Wallach, “Unleashed in the East,” 86-105.

¹² Paul D. Greene, “Electronic and Affective Overdrive: Tropes of Transgression in Nepal’s Heavy Metal Scene,” in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 109-34.

¹³ Wallach, “Unleashed in the East,” 88. Also see Ibrahim, “Disciplining Rock and Identity,” 21-47.

¹⁴ “Heavy metal” and “metal” are umbrella terms that can be used to refer to all diverse musical styles of the genre, ranging from traditional to extreme metal. Usage

of the terms may result in ambiguity, as metal is a broad musical genre that has many different types of subgenres, such as black metal, thrash metal, death metal, melodic death metal, and Viking metal. The anthropologist Sam Dunn made a comprehensive research on metal's history and genealogy starting from traditional heavy metal to its modern variants by looking into the pre-metal musical influences in the UK and US division. Early metal sounds evolved from rock music that was particularly influenced by American blues and hard rock. For further elaboration on all various subgenres of metal, see *Metal Evolution*, directed by Sam Dunn and Scot McFadyen (Ontario: Banger Productions, 2012), DVD.

¹⁵ Wallach, "Unleashed in the East," 99.

¹⁶ Deena Weinstein, "The Globalization of Metal," in *Metal Rules the Globe: Heavy Metal Music Around the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51-52.

¹⁸ The use of the Internet as the main source of metal knowledge by metal fans is significant in countries where there are restrictions on popular music such as Iran. See *Global Metal*, directed by Sam Dunn and Scot McFadyen (Ontario: Banger Productions, 2009), DVD.

¹⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 34.

²⁰ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 622.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Kath Woodward, "Questions of Identity," in *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Nation*, ed. Kath Woodward (London: Routledge, 2000), 36.

²³ See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959).

²⁴ Weinstein, *The Globalization of Metal*, 46.

²⁵ Deena Weinstein, "Heavy Metal: The Beast that Refused to Die," in *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000), 46.

²⁶ See Andrew Weintraub, "Introduction: The Study of Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia," in *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011).

²⁷ Coined by Christopher Smalls, the term "musicking" refers to all active and passive participation in musical activities or performances. The action of musicking is "to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing." For further details on the concept of musicking, see Christopher Smalls, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 1-18.

²⁸ Paul Willis, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1.

²⁹ According to Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, the agency is related to the power and capability of the individual against the structure (i.e. social systems). The term agency can be defined as concerning "events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently." See Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 5-13.

³⁰ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison 1979* (New York: Vintage Books).