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## Malay singing in Pahang villages: identity and practice

Silahudin, S.

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## CHAPTER 4

# *KUGIRAN* MUSIC AND PUNK ROCK

### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, two modern Malaysian music genres will be discussed: *kugiran* and punk rock; genres which in many ways, are not associated with the songs from the past discussed in Chapter 2, and which have backgrounds with foreign influences. I aim to understand why Malays in Pahang villages are attracted to *kugiran* and *punk rock* and to clarify how their views of certain musical forms are used to express their identity.

I have included these two genres together in this chapter for two reasons. Firstly, both genres have been fuelled by socio-economic development in Pahang, and secondly, the two genres are interrelated. Two semi-professional bands will form the focus of discussion, each representing one of the music genres. *Kugiran* music is represented by the band Kugiran Muzik Asli from Paya Luas village, Temerloh, while the band Hibiscus, also from Temerloh, represents punk rock. In the first section, I explore the background of *kugiran* music and its association with the birth of rock and punk music.

#### 4.1.1 The background to *kugiran* and how it relates to the emergence of rock and punk music

In the mid-1960s a number of Malay youth bands known as *kugiran* began to emerge in Malaysia (and in Singapore). The word *kugiran* came from the abbreviation for the term *kumpulan gitar rancak* (lively guitar band) (Matusky and Tan, 2004). The word was first used on a Singapore radio station in the weekly *Lagu Pujaan Minggu Ini* (Best Songs of the Week) segment hosted by the first Malay radio host, Mohd Ismail Abdullah. It was also rumoured that P. Ramlee (1922-1973), a key and well-respected figure in the Malay entertainment industry in the early 1950s, was the first person to use the word *kugiran* to distinguish these bands from previous Malay bands (Jaafar et al., Unpublished).

Many changes occurred in Malaysian music during the 1960s and 1970s, decades which were dominated by Western pop star imitations. The period between 1965 and 1971 could be termed the era of *pop yeh yeh*,

referring to the lyrics of the hit by British pop group The Beatles, 'She Loves You, Yeah Yeah Yeah'. The *kugiran* bands at that time played *pop yeh yeh*, the latest rock and roll hits, and Latin American Santana-style pop with Malay lyrics. Soon, a flood of Beatles' imitators appeared, singing in Malay and other languages (Lockard, 1996). Lockard states 'the *pop yeh yeh* music was more Western in sound than much of the earlier Malay music, although some singers utilized traditional vocal influences' (Lockard, 1996: 9).

*Kugiran* bands, comprising three guitars and a drum, became all the rage in Malaysian towns and villages in the 1960s (Tan, 2006). These bands had basic stylistic traits: simple lyrics, simple background accompaniment, simple drumbeat, rhythmic patterns and simple bass lines. The lyrics had relatively little creativity. Mohd Osman Mohamed's 1964 hit 'Suzanna' may have been the first Malay song in this genre, but it was soon followed by dozens of others. Most *kugiran* bands used English names, even though the songs were sung in the Malay language. Among the popular *kugiran* bands in the 1960s were The Rhythm Boys, The Mods and The Singlap 5, who frequently received invitations to play at weddings. These bands played The Twist, blues, country and western, a-go-go and bossa nova music (Tan, 1989). *Kugiran* concerts were staged not only in big cities and towns, but also in small towns and villages.

*Kugiran* bands were characterized by their original musical compositions and the dialectal or *asli* (indigenous) features that were applied to the Malay lyrics and complemented by Western musical style and instrumentation (Adil Johan, 2014). Most of the *kugiran* songs had themes revolving around regret and unhappiness. Apart from the song lyrics, *kugiran* was welcomed by the community because the musical rhythm differed considerably to that of the existing music of the time (*kroncong* and *asli* were still popular in the nation). *Kugiran* fans were mainly Malay youths and they followed the trends and imitated the styles, attitudes and fashions introduced by the members of *kugiran* bands.

*Kugiran* stars sold thousands of records, and appeared on television music shows and in band competitions. They also dominated the entertainment magazines. However, the glory days of *kugiran* music were over by 1971 (Jaafar et al., Unpublished). For many middle-aged Malaysians today, *kugiran* is the music of nostalgia. The development of *kugiran* music undoubtedly led to the emergence of more upbeat music including rock and punk (Annuar et al., 2016). Yusof (2010) affirms that rapid urbanization, religious constraints and boredom among working-class Malay youths were important factors in the emergence of rock music. In the mid-1980s, the country saw the growth of

rock music bands. They received support and coverage from the print media, covering concerts and music albums. The album 'Battle of the Bands' sold in excess of one hundred thousand copies and opened the door to the appearance of rock music in Malaysia. Meanwhile, in the same period, only a limited number of *kugiran* bands were still active, including The Zurah and Nirwana.

However, the rise of rock music raised issues of compatibility with the *Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan* (DKK) (National Cultural Policy) which was enacted in 1971. Any element contrary to Islam and the Malay culture, both important features of the DKK, was perceived as a cultural threat (Ibrahim, 2016). The Malaysian Islamic Party (*Parti Islam Se-Malaysia*), an Islamist political party based in Malaysia's rural and conservative north, stated that music from the West was immoral and inappropriate for the country. The party believed rock music could have a negative impact on youths.

In September 1986, after a statement by the Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysian government banned public rock concerts. This action came about after a number of letters of complaint were sent to news agencies after youths threw bottles, chairs and other objects at a rock concert organized in Penang. The government claimed that this music had a terrible influence on teenagers. Later that same year, the government eased its ban on outdoor rock concerts, limiting the ban to heavy-metal music (Malaysiaasia, 2014). In an article published by the Institute of Language and Literature shortly after the disorder at the concert in Penang, Samantha Tay (cited in Annuar et al., 2016) argued that the act of banning rock music concerts was improper, as only a small number of people were involved in the commotion. Moreover, the act failed to affect the growth of rock music which continued to increase in popularity, becoming an important part of the culture. The development of rock music was also the result of a need for escapism due to an economic downturn that had resulted in youth unemployment. Most rock music fans were poor and were unable to access expensive entertainment.

In 1989, several rock bands including Search, Wings and May, gained popularity after they performed in the final round of the music competition, *Muzik-Muzik*, organized by a local private television station. This television phenomenon influenced the growing number of non-professional rock bands. However, this did not necessarily mean that there was sufficient confidence within government to recognize rock music as a culture. Furthermore, politicians assumed that rock music and the pleasure it elicited interfered with their political power. The development of rock music was seen to have the potential to allow the voices of those oppressed by the government to be heard. In 1992, a restriction was brought in prohibiting rock musicians with long hair

from appearing on television. This restriction, however, was lifted in 2002 when the popularity of rock music began to decline. During this time, other music genres, including *nasyid* and ballads, began to dominate the music industry in Malaysia.

The bad reputation and impression of rock music continued due to the emergence of black metal music. Since the 1990s heavy metal, an underground music genre, had tried to rival rock music. The underground scene comprised a variety of music genres such as punk, thrash metal, black metal and alternative. Underground music bands exhibited anti-commercial qualities, and believed that rock musicians conformed to the priorities of international recording companies and their commercial interests (Tan, 2002). Black metal music has been associated with the devil's influence and the slaughter of animals for worship (Utusan Online, 2001). The Malaysian government has taken several actions including prohibiting this music from being played on radios and televisions, performing raids on shops selling souvenirs and vetting foreign groups who wish to perform in Malaysia. The public perceives the punk lifestyle as 'too westernized' and 'un-Islamic' (Lockard, 1998). To maintain their reputation, rock musicians explained to critics that their music has no connection with underground music. Until this day, rock music is still enjoyed by its followers in the undercurrent spaces.

#### **4.1.2 The background to punk rock music**

Both *kugiran* and rock music are inextricably intertwined with the emergence of punk rock. 'Punk combines a variety of creative forms in order to make a movement distinctly different from the dominant mainstream culture, socially, politically and musically' (Donahue, 2001: 89). Punk rock is the style commonly related to the punk scene. There are two views of how punk rock became known in Malaysia: one takes an international perspective and the other considers domestic influences. At an international level punk was known about and brought to the local population via three different routes. Firstly, Malaysian students who were studying in the United Kingdom brought back punk music to the country. Secondly, punk culture circulated in elite schools. Thirdly, punk rock was introduced through the use of shortwave radios and through magazines from overseas (Annuar et al., 2016).

For domestic influences I referred to Zulkifli Zakaria, known as Joe Kidd. He is a Malay guitarist with Carburator Dung, one of Malaysia's earliest punk bands. Joe Kidd is also known as the father of punk music in Malaysia.

According to him, the punk scene in Malaysia has been identifiable since 1979 through the input of individuals who were fans of punk music in Terengganu, Pahang's neighbouring state. At that time, most of these fans were at secondary school. Joe Kidd, himself, was inspired through British magazines such as *NME*, and started one of the first punk fanzines in Malaysia, *Aedes* in the mid-1980s. Later, he helped arrange for a record company to finance the punk label, Sonic Asylum Records.

Historically, the punk scene in Malaysia developed earlier than in neighbouring countries, including Indonesia (Fiscella, 2012). During the early phase of punk in Malaysia, the followers were teenagers from working-class backgrounds. At that time, jamming studios did not exist. The punk scene was still in its early phase of development with followers involved in activities such as exchanging fanzines and punk cassettes from overseas. The phenomenon of music studios in which groups could jam only existed from the mid-1980s, and then only in big cities.

The first punk music band in Malaysia was called Malaria and came from Terengganu. A typical punk music band had four members playing lead guitar, bass guitar, rhythm guitar and drum. One of them would be the singer. Keyboard and synthesizers were also used and preferred wherever possible. The players were regularly self-taught and normally rehearsed at least once a week. The establishment and spread of small local studios made it possible for bands to make recordings for their own use or for informal demonstration tapes, in a more permanent and technically sophisticated form than they could otherwise achieve. The music was usually of their own compositions.

Due to its nature, punk rock music can be inappropriate to be performed in open public spaces, including in concert. Ferrarese (2016) points out that punk music is not for everybody. The youth culture of punk tends to be associated with anger and self-destructive behaviour. Punk rock bands are frequently forced to accept whatever venue they can get because nobody in the local music scene wants to deal with them. However, spaces to perform punk rock music are central to the punk music scene and punk rock musicians can access and play at all typical punk venues, including *Rumah Api* (Lighthouse) and Beatnik, both venues located in Kuala Lumpur, because of the musicians' reputation for moral integrity.

Punk is not merely a genre, but also a philosophical approach to life and art, promoting empowerment through self-sustenance, and socio-cultural and political awareness through a 'Do It Yourself' (DIY) ethos (Guan, 2010). The term 'Do It Yourself' first emerged in a 1912 article about home

decoration written by Garrett Winslow in the American magazine *Suburban Life* (Gelber, 1997). The DIY ethos is associated with the attitude behind the production of low-budget and self-distributed fanzines in the United States and Europe (Spencer, 2005). The DIY ethos, Spencer adds, is ‘the urge to create a new cultural form and transmit it to others on your own terms’ (Spencer, 2005: 12). In addition, rock critic Marcus identifies the ethos behind punk rock as the notion ‘to live not as an object, but as a subject for history’ (Marcus, 1989: 6).

For Luvaas (2012), the term ‘DIY ethos’ is too fluid a concept to be defined, or limited in such a way. While conducting his research on DIY cultural production in Yogyakarta and Bandung in Indonesia, Luvaas identified that DIYers (who come from many ethnic backgrounds including Javanese, Melayu, Sundanese, Batak, Dayak, Balinese and Makassarese) are actively ‘getting together and making stuff, then selling and distributing it through their own peer network, without direct investment or mediation from larger corporate, state, or financial interests’ (Luvaas, Section DIY in DIY (Daerah Istimewa Yogyakarta: Everyday Production in the Indonesian Indie Scene. In *‘DIY Style: Fashion, Music and Global Digital Culture’*). Even though I have not conducted in-depth research into DIY cultural production in Pahang during the course of this study, but, I nonetheless believe that the experiences of DIYers in the punk scene in Pahang are not that different to those of DIYers in Yogyakarta and Bandung in Indonesia in terms of, for instance, producing cheap, demo music albums and punk fashion.

In the sense of DIY in music, noted Luvaas, ‘it was punk rock arising from the post-industrial metropolises of the United States and the United Kingdom in the mid-1970s that would most stridently hoist the banner of DIY, popularizing the term for a new generation, and forging a conceptual template of DIY that is still very much in use today’ (Luvaas, Section Introduction: The DIY Ethos. In *‘DIY Style: Fashion, Music and Global Digital Culture’*). Like punk bands in Indonesia, punk bands in Pahang developed and replicated the sounds of the well-known punk bands that they heard through demo cassettes. As their skills improved, the bands began playing their own songs which were mostly energetic and simple. They also began to produce demo tapes and fanzines, and perform gigs (small-scale concerts).

A very well-known punk band in Pahang was Hijrah (later The Pilgrims). This band produced an album named ‘Perfume Garden’ under the independent label of Sonic Asylum Records which was reported to have sold as many as twenty thousand copies. This album received an encouraging response from the fans. Many punk followers in Malaysia are Malay youths and they adhere to the Islamic religion. However, this is not an aspect of their



lives that comes under scrutiny from the punk community as it is considered personal and private. Punks believe in the freedom to choose to be religious or not (Noor, 1999). This is not to say that these punk followers completely separate themselves from the practices of the Malay community. Certain things are accepted, especially the practice of returning home and celebrating Eid, a Muslim festival that celebrates the end of the holy fasting month. In this instance it is simply important to honour, celebrate and enjoy time with their family or friends, even though they may have different beliefs.

In the early years, followers were very much attracted to the punk lifestyle because punk was considered new music and it had a unique fashion to go with it. Youths chose a punk lifestyle due to the style of music, lyrics, symbols and images on display. Punk provided opportunity and hope to youths who considered themselves marginalized. Punk was seen as the light of freedom and a means through which young people could express their anger at what was happening in the country. The news in 2015, for instance, reported that more than a hundred punk followers were arrested at a punk music event in Kuala Lumpur. The arrests took place as the gathering was seen as bringing harm to the country as well as being an illegal assembly that could have threatened the country's political security (Malaysiakini, 30 August 2015). Ibrahim (1993) indicated that Malaysia experiences conflicts of tradition and moral values at the prospect of the growth of new cultures which are considered to be of 'poor quality'. This term seems to describe public anxiety surrounding the conflict of values among locals. Most members of the community in Malaysia still rely on and practise traditional values. This has led to the emergence of disagreements between the two parties.

## **4.2 *Kugiran* music**

Today, after more than three decades of popularity, the number of *kugiran* bands has decreased. In a *pop yeh yeh* talk organized by the Music Department of the Malaysia National Museum on 25 January 2018, Rahman Hassan, singer and guitarist of the *kugiran* band Nirwana observed that there are less than ten surviving *kugiran* bands in Malaysia. I would argue that this figure only represents *kugiran* bands in big cities, and excludes *kugiran* bands in villages. This study indicates a more profound change in the presentation of *kugiran* music and its community. *Kugiran* music has travelled from the big cities to village settings. During my field research in April 2016, I had the opportunity to learn about *kugiran* music and its function at wedding receptions.

Currently, a Malay wedding in Pahang and other places in Malaysia comprises two events: a solemnization ceremony and a reception. The solemnization is an emotional moment which typically takes place in a mosque prior to the main wedding reception and is witnessed only by close family members and officials. This religious ceremony accomplishes the declarative act of marrying the bride and groom (Schrauwers, 2000). Meanwhile, the reception is a party or celebration that will often have food and where everyone has a good time. The wedding reception entails the delivery of the groom to the bride's family. It is about the presentation of the bride and groom as a married couple to the wider community.

In the village of Paya Luas near Temerloh, Pahang, I observed a *kugiran* band best known to the village community as Kugiran Muzik Asli. Even though I did not have a chance to see them perform live at a wedding reception, I had the opportunity to attend two of the group's rehearsal sessions as a way to experience their music playing and to learn about the band's repertoire. To deepen my understanding of the position of the *kugiran* band within the community (in the context of wedding receptions), I was able to refer to photos of performances at several wedding receptions, as well as conduct interview sessions with some *kugiran* band members and members of the village community.

#### **4.2.1 Kugiran Muzik Asli of Paya Luas village**

*Kugiran* music is one of the most popular forms of village entertainment in Pahang. Generally, *kugiran* means a group that plays upbeat music. The Malay word *asli* is perhaps the most common term used to refer to traditional music. It literally means 'original' and is derived from the word *asal*, which means 'origin' (Coope, 1976: 13). The term *asli*, Chopyak suggests, 'has a wide variety of musical meanings and uses that depend on the context in which the term is being used' (Chopyak, 1986:114). *Asli* also refers to an ornamental style of singing, is closely identified with *bangsawan* and often incorporates popular Western dance beats (Lockard, 1996). In the Malaysian scholarly context, *asli* is a type of music that suggests a specific melody, demanding vocal techniques, *pantun* verses as the song lyrics and *asli* bands (Silahudin, 2011; Nasuruddin, 2003; Matusky & Tan, 1997). *Asli* is also considered a form of Malay folk singing and dance music in modernized form (Seneviratne, 2012). A few examples of *asli* songs are 'Patah Hati', 'Seri Mersing', 'Seri Serawak', 'Jalak Lenteng' and 'Damak' (Silahudin, 2010). Most *asli* songs are derived from and gained popularity during the eras of

*bangsawan* theatre and Malay classical films in the second quarter of the twentieth century (from the 1930s until the early 1950s).

The popularity of *asli* music decreased in the second half of the century due to socio-cultural and political changes. People were more attracted to, as Lockard (1996) proposed, ‘Western social dance’ (such as Twist), and at the same time ‘the introduction of television killed off the great amusement parks’ (Lockard, 1996: 3). In the last three decades of the twentieth century, the government widely reintroduced *asli* music to the mainstream community, especially young people, by holding several annual *asli* singing competitions at district, state and national levels.

The use of *asli* in the band’s name at first suggested to me that they were playing a type of music from the era of *bangsawan* theatre and Malay classical films. However, I was wrong. Kugiran Muzik Asli, in fact, plays a series of songs originating from the 1950s to the early 1980s, a time of growing influence of the West on Malay socio-cultural life. This is one of the distinctive and conspicuous characteristics of the band. The evidence suggests that the use of *asli* in the band’s title is not connected to *asli* music as mentioned above, but rather, refers to the traditional musical instruments that they have included as part of their musical assemblage in addition to modern music instruments.

The band Kugiran Muzik Asli was formed in 2006. Members of the band come from various villages in the vicinity of Temerloh, Pahang. The band consists of fourteen male musicians, aged between eighteen and seventy years old. The members playing modern musical instruments are: Manaan on first guitar and accordion, Kutak on second guitar, Wan on bass guitar, Sulaiman on conga drum, Deli on timbale, Aziz on keyboard and Epaak on flute. On request, the band can also call on a saxophone player to vary the sound of their music. The members playing traditional musical instruments are: Long Mat on gong, Paklah, Meda, Nazri and Sukur on frame drums, and Nasa on tambourine/maracas. Lastly, Gee is the vocalist of the band. They are all self-taught musicians. It is interesting to note that all of the band members are related to others, for instance, a frame drum player is the nephew of the conga player, and the bassist is the second guitarist’s son.

The band rehearses at a *bangsal* (a shed for martial arts training) located in Paya Luas (Figure 4.1). The *bangsal* is also the training place for a martial arts dance group from the same village. Nazri, the frame drum player in the *kugiran* band is a coach at the martial arts group and the keyholder for the *bangsal*. The musical instruments and appliances are stored in a room at the back of the *bangsal*. Rehearsals take place twice a week to polish the skills of

the instrumentalists. Further rehearsals also occur in the weeks prior to a wedding.



Figure 4.1: Kugiran Muzik Asli at rehearsal in the *bangsal*

When asked about what inspired them to play music and set up their band, Mana'an made it clear that there is a considerable demand from village communities for 'new-fashioned' wedding reception music. Mana'an stated that several years ago it was difficult to find *kugiran* music players to perform specifically for wedding receptions in the vicinity of Temerloh. Mana'an could remember a time when his neighbours held wedding receptions and insisted on having *kugiran* music to entertain their wedding guests. As a result, and with encouragement from the village community, Mana'an and several friends built up their previous unplanned, *kugiran* band. The band began to collect or buy musical instruments.

They also learnt many beautiful songs dating from the late 1950s to the 1980s which work well at wedding receptions. Even though there is demand for the *kugiran* band to play at weddings, it does not mean that they have sacrificed their main jobs. The majority of the band members have other employment besides playing in the band. Playing music at wedding receptions is a supplementary job. Each of them earns between RM100-RM150 (GBP20-GBP30) for each performance.

In the following section, I will discuss their repertoire of songs as well as how *kugiran* music is performed at the reception.

#### 4.2.1.1 Repertoire and musical performance

In general, no instruction or guidelines are given to the band as to what type of music they should play at a reception. The combination of their traditional and modern musical instruments (Figure 4.2), amplification and musical skill mean that Kugiran Muzik Asli plays a variety of music styles.



Figure 4.2: Kugiran Muzik Asli at a wedding reception (courtesy: Mana'an)

The types of song the band play at wedding receptions include *pop yeh yeh* and classic Malay songs (dance rhythms such as *masri*, *joget* and *inang* with western folk and pop elements) as well as a number of Indonesian classics from the 1960s to early 1980s. I noticed that the band also plays Malaysian *dangdut* songs. *Dangdut* is 'a form of Malay folk music which has graduated from the village setting into the modern entertainment scene' (Seneviratne, 2012: 12). There are two forms of *dangdut*: *dangdut pop* and traditional *dangdut*. Based on informal conversations with several acquaintances who are also Malaysian singers, the *dangdut* music played in Malaysia is *dangdut pop*. It is this category of *dangdut* that is mostly played by Kugiran Muzik Asli.

When I asked why the band chooses to play these music styles, Mana'an responded, 'Those are the songs that our community likes the most. We hardly listen to these songs nowadays. The modern ones, especially Malay film tunes, are of little worth.' Mana'an added that most of the songs they play had been introduced to the public mainly through records played on turntables at the time when there was no 'big radio with moving pictures' (television). In the eyes of the *kugiran* band's members, playing songs that date from the 1960s until the early 1980s corresponds to the decline of such songs (especially

*pop yeh yeh*). In addition, wedding hosts and their guests enjoy these songs because they remind them of their youth. The performance of the *kugiran* band may bring back feelings and emotions attached to their memories of *pop yeh yeh*, acting as a nostalgic recollection of times past. Here, I refer to the idea by Lockard (1996) that, for many middle-aged Malaysians today, songs from those decades are nostalgic.

Compared to *pop yeh yeh*, which was popular in the 1960s, *dangdut* only became popular in Malaysia in the 1990s. Several people talked to me about the choice of Malaysian *dangdut* that is played at wedding receptions. They acknowledged that, even though *dangdut* derives from Hindustani film music, it is somehow a Malay music and popular among local people. In his investigation of *dangdut* in Malaysia, Seneviratne noted that *dangdut* ‘is very much the dance of Southeast Asia because it draws so much from traditional rhythms, which have derived from traditional popular dance music and has been updated with the use of technology’ (Seneviratne, 2012: xi-xii). Seneviratne (2012: xi-xii) suggested that *dangdut* may have an image problem nationally in Malaysia, however this view is clearly not representative of all communities, as my research shows.

The wedding reception is a unifying social party that aims to include everyone from the local community. The songs played at reception parties can bring back good memories from the past among the village community, especially the elders. *Pop yeh yeh* was omnipresent in public spaces, such as villages, shops, buses, taxis and homes, at the height of its popularity in the 1960s. This kind of popular music became a component of the background to daily life, and images of popstars were displayed in many places. Music from this era is considered dynamic and creative, with highly innovative song lyrics that encourage musicians to play such music at social events, including wedding receptions.

At most wedding receptions, Kugiran Muzik Asli play music throughout the day, usually from eleven in the morning until four in the afternoon. There are three distinct sets to the performance: a beginning set, a middle set and an end one. At the beginning upbeat and ‘feel good’ songs are the favoured choice. At this stage of the musical performance the band is encouraging the growing audience’s enthusiasm. Furthermore, playing cheerful, lively music in the first set acts as an introduction to the band and brings the wedding reception to life.

The first set lasts for around one hour until the announcement of the arrival of the bride and groom at the reception. Instrumental music will then be

played as the couple moves to the bridal dais. In contrast to the upbeat songs of the first set, tunes in the second set are of a slower tempo. Continuous music is played after the host has attended to the ceremony of the *bersanding* (enthronement) of the bride and groom, which usually takes place inside the bride's parents' house. One of the musicians, usually the band's leader, will announce to the guests that the bride and groom are having the *makan pengantin* (bride's meal). A special dining table for the couple will have been set up in the marquee (or at some receptions, dining takes place in an open garage) facing the guests. The special wedding song 'Selamat Pengantin Baru' (Happy New Bride) is often played as the accompaniment to *jamuan makan pengantin* (the bride's meal ceremony).

During the second set, music is played without any interruption for at least an hour or longer. At this time the number of guests in attendance will have reached its peak. The slower tempo is a way to make the wedding reception calmer and more laid-back. Furthermore, the music played in the second set will be easy to talk over.

In the third and final set, Kugiran Muzik Asli will add to their musical performance by encouraging guests to participate. The band's leader will ask if anyone at the reception (regardless of age or role in the wedding) would like to come forward and share their musical talents, especially in their vocal talent. At this point, it is a good thing to have a special family member or friend lined up to sing – it provides a touching and memorable moment. Conversation takes place between the individual and the musicians to come to an agreement on song selection. The final set of music aims to enrich the guests' enjoyment and ensure that they have a good experience at the wedding.

To conclude, Kugiran Muzik Asli of Paya Luas plays music for wedding receptions. The inspiration to form their *kugiran* band in 2006 arose when there was demand for music from the 1960s to the early 1980s to celebrate weddings. Besides creating a celebratory atmosphere, the band's inclusion of songs from this era is due to their ability to invoke feelings of pleasure and joy, especially among middle-aged people.

#### **4.2.2 Community formation around *kugiran* music**

Music is one of the most important elements at wedding celebrations in Pahang. Through music, guests can relax and enjoy themselves at the party and, invariably, music at the reception brings people together. The discussion about how this happens and what it means is based on a summary of my

findings from interviews with wedding hosts, *kugiran* musicians, wedding DJs and wedding guests in Temerloh, Pahang.

Two sub-themes are considered in the next section: the wedding host's considerations when deciding on a live music band or a DJ (with music in MP3<sup>5</sup> format); and the segment containing song requests.

#### **4.2.2.1 The wedding host's options: a live music band or a DJ with music in MP3 format**

Wedding hosts play an important role in a wedding reception. In their view, choosing the appropriate music is fundamental. Some choose a band, others prefer a DJ for wedding entertainment. The latter may think that a DJ can more easily play music from a wide variety of genres, and that bands tend to have a more limited repertoire because the musicians have to learn the songs beforehand. Furthermore, hiring a band (more than three musicians) for a reception party is likely to be costlier than hiring a DJ because there are more people to be paid.

For wedding hosts, the ideal combination for a wedding reception would be to have a band and a DJ at the same time. People may choose a band to play their own style of music and then contrast it with a DJ playing MP3 music (Figure 4.3). However, it could be costly to have both for a wedding party. Whichever choice they make, the wedding host has to employ a sound person who will manage the sound system for the wedding.

It is understandable that wedding hosts try to keep the costs incurred for the wedding low. A DJ is a very good choice since he/she will provide a variety of background music in a particular order. Or, as a back-up, a background track on CD is a reliable option as long as the CD player and sound system work. It is easy to find background tracks as some music stores stock these. Nevertheless, the easiest way for a DJ to get background tracks is to search online and download the tracks (subject to copyright) from websites. If the MP3 option is chosen then it is important to have an experienced DJ who understands the importance of the correct order of songs and how the little

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<sup>5</sup> MP3 stands for Motion Picture Experts Group One, Audio Layer Three – a reference to its origins as an inter-standard compression program when it was invented in 1991 by a German research firm, initially for broadcast use. Of more interest to the world's music fans, MP3s operate in an open file format, allowing users to convert the masses of data that make up audio files into much smaller, near-CD-quality MP3 files (Mewton, 2001).



things matter, for example, how a small gap between songs can seem an eternity.



Figure 4.3: A wedding DJ with a sound person at a reception party in Temerloh, Pahang

The age range of wedding guests is broad. If a wedding host hires a band to perform music at a wedding party, the band will be asked to play music for all age groups. Different groups of people have different tastes in music, and guests tend to prefer to listen to music they know and love. Whenever a band or a DJ, the entertainment has to make a good impression on the wedding hosts, as well as the wedding guests, through playing songs they enjoy.

This section has shown that wedding hosts are important people in determining the success of wedding receptions. Choosing the appropriate music for the wedding reception is essential and all the options available need to be evaluated: both DJs and bands have advantages and disadvantages. Within this process, wedding hosts can be seen as key figures who take responsibility for the musical style, content and even changes between music types at wedding receptions.

#### **4.2.2.2 Song requests**

Whether or not a band will take songs requests is likely to affect whether it is hired by a wedding host. If musicians do not take requests, they may not be hired. When attending weddings people may well have certain songs they want to hear. As guest participation is an important aspect of the

wedding celebration, the songs request section of the musical performance is important and the way in which a *kugiran* band helps guests to enjoy the party. The *kugiran* band will guide guests through their favourite songs. During a performance, Kugiran Muzik Asli may take song requests from the wedding hosts as well as the wedding guests. The wedding host's knowledge of the guests will help guide the *kugiran* band by anticipating what songs will be appreciated by the guests and making a note of these. This creates the best possible celebration for everyone at the reception party. Important songs will be at the top of the list. Guests tend to respond well to familiar songs, while obscure ones are less well received.

Wedding guests may request songs by jotting down the song titles on a piece of paper. The *kugiran* band collects all the requested songs together during a short break after performing a few songs. By gathering all the requests, some important information about the musical tastes of the wedding guests is provided. The *kugiran* band has a certain degree of flexibility. The opportunity to have song requests played by the band can make the reception even livelier and more spontaneous. It promotes a good time at the party and ensures that guests feel part of the celebration. While it may work well, it depends on the songs requested by the guests. If an individual picks unknown songs, it makes it difficult for others to join in; yet the *kugiran* band will not want to upset the guests by not playing their requested songs. The *kugiran* band would, however, impose some control over the songs if they felt that the guests were trying to influence the music at wedding reception.

There is another benefit to having a *kugiran* band at a wedding reception. It is as part of the song request section that family members and wedding guests can sing their favourite songs accompanied by the band. As indicated earlier, personal performances by special family members and friends at a wedding can make it more special and memorable. However, the *kugiran* band will only play songs which they have rehearsed and can play well. The danger of requesting songs that the *kugiran* musicians do not know is that they may not be performed very well. Therefore, it is a safe and wise decision to go with songs that the *kugiran* musicians play and know well. As well as song requests, the guests also provide written messages wishing the bride and groom a good life that are to be announced by the *kugiran* band. The messages usually come from those nearest to the couple. In this way, the guests can convey their hope of everlasting marriage between the bride and the groom. This approach establishes bonds between the three parties: the *kugiran* band as the mediator, wedding guests and the wedding hosts.

To summarize, the *kugiran* band offers live music at wedding receptions that provides a way for guests to be part of the wedding through the song request section. While guests may list their song requests, the *kugiran* band will only choose to play songs that they have already rehearsed. While family and guests attending the reception will generally enjoy the music, it is through song requests that the *kugiran* band helps to bond everyone and create a good feeling among them.

### 4.3 Punk rock music

According to Fiscella (2012), ‘punk’ is a term that was loosely thrown around by musicians including Frank Zappa (in his 1968 song ‘Flower Punk’), Suicide (self-described as a ‘punk music’ band in 1970-1971) and Lenny Kaye (who used the phrase ‘punk rock’ in 1972). The Asian punk scene is among the biggest in the world. In 2016, Ferrarese, an Italian musician, wrote about punk music in his ethnographic book *‘Banana Punk Rawk Trains: A Euro-Fool’s Metal Punk Journeys in Malaysia, Borneo, and Indonesia’*. He presented an honest literary treatment of Malaysian underground music. In Malaysia, punk music still seems to have a sense of social rebellion, which is built on the country’s a long and inglorious punk history. Ferrarese feels that the punk scene in Malaysia is both exotic (that is, it has its own identity) and yet has not been fully surveyed.

I use the term ‘scene’ rather than ‘subculture’ to refer to a ‘cultural space in which a range of musical practices co-exist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization’ (Straw, 1991: 373). My ethnographic research on the Malay punk scene in Pahang provides a different story to that of Ferrarese as his research is based in Penang and Kuala Lumpur. On 21 April 2016 I, accompanied by my youngest brother Ahmad Kamil, acting as a research assistant, attended a private punk gig held at the Orchid Studio, located less than ten kilometres from Temerloh town. As neither of us was familiar with the punk community in Pahang at that time, we were accompanied by Naem, the eldest son of a musician from a *kugiran* band in Paya Luas.

The organizer of the gig was the Pahang Punk Association but there was no corporate sponsorship. I do not know, however, whether the gig had received permission from the local authorities to go ahead. Two prominent Malay punk bands from Pahang were involved in this gig: Hibiscus and

Keledexx. In addition, three punk rock groups from neighbouring Indonesia also performed: Forgotten Generation, Moonstomp and Brawlers86. Interestingly, this event featured the exceptional appearance of a punk band from Europe, Bakudan of Germany. The gig formed part of Bakudan's musical showcase in conjunction with its Asia Tour in 2016. The state of Pahang had been selected as one of Bakudan's tour stops. For the local punk bands, the opportunity to play alongside international bands – bands with good reputations from Germany and Indonesia – was personally rewarding. In this sense, the punk scene in Pahang has shown a high degree of cooperation in hosting bands from Europe and other parts of South-East Asia.

The gig started at 9 pm. Each spectator was asked to pay RM15 (GBP2.80) at the entrance to the hall. Having paid, we entered and I took the opportunity to have a look around. Unlike the usual music events I attend, there was no stage. The musical instruments, a drum set, an electric guitar and the sound monitors, rested on the carpeted floor. The gig lacked a professional sound system. There were two stalls: the first was located near the stairway into the hall; the second was right in the corner of the music hall. Both were selling music merchandises, for instance, CDs, group stickers, posters and tour t-shirts.

The night opened with music from the Malay punk rock group, Keledexx. The band performed two songs. During the opening music, the crowd started to grow. From my position in the middle of the hall I could see some of fans start to dance and move wildly to the song. Keledexx's performance was aggressive, full of anger and outlandish. After Keledexx's set, BrawlerS86 continued the gig with a few songs. In my opinion, BrawlerS86's music was similar to Keledexx: chaotic, fractious and a little frustrating to understand. To outsiders, punk rock playing is 'quite a noise', but insiders understand what is happening and what lies behind a particular performance. Common song structures in punk rock music follow a standard pop structure: intro-verse-chorus, played at a high tempo with distorted electric guitar. Punk rock music uses only three or four chords and the drums are played fast and furiously.

The identifiable punks in the audience totalled about eighty and were almost all male. Some displayed punk regalia: locally made t-shirts depicting foreign and domestic band logos. From my observation, the punk rock audience members at the gig somewhat resembled a rebellious assembly. Several male fans in their early twenties reported that they had never attended a punk gig before, and had only experienced the music through reviews or through listening to punk rock albums owned by older people. I could also see

a small number of women in a corner of the Orchid Studio who were enjoying the show. Having introduced myself to one of the female fans, I asked her why she was there. The young lady replied to me that she had accompanied her husband, who was a big fan of punk rock music. She had been to several gigs and had enjoyed each and every performance. This newly married couple had been punk rock music fans since they were in secondary school.

While the gig was taking place in the Orchid Studio, other fans outside the hall (in the parking area) were blasting out punk rock music on car stereos. They were listening to the just-released album they had bought from the vendor standing outside the venue. I could see their response to the music – for instance, they would be repeatedly nodding their heads to indicate acceptance while simultaneously attempting to sing. The punk gig is where fans can meet and bond with familiar faces and with newcomers to the punk scene. I only watched the first half of the show and left an hour early, before it finished at about 1 am. I was informed that Bakudan from Germany were leaving immediately for Singapore to continue with their music tour. It is inspiring to see the punk rock community in this region appears to be considered equal by their counterparts outside of Malaysia. Overtly or covertly, the Malay punk rock community in Pahang is part of the international punk network regardless of political or theological differences.

My field research indicated that there are several earlier-established Malay punk bands in Pahang including Paradive, Anguish, Soul Savior and Torch, and I was told that the punk scene in Pahang emerged as early as the 1970s. However, no further information about the punk community in Pahang during that time is available. Through conversation with several punk followers, I learnt that fanzines emerged in the late 1990s and were popular until the early 2000s. Fanzines were mainly produced by amateurs for fans of a particular performer, group or form of entertainment. Local fanzines during this era included ‘Switch Stance’, ‘Kaum Muda’ (Youth), ‘Rodong’ (Friends), ‘Grind Your Ass’, ‘Militia’, ‘Scum Attach’ and ‘Love Grass’.

In the following section I describe the musical identity of Hibiscus, one of the Malay punk rock bands from Temerloh, Pahang. This will provide a better understanding of the social context of the punk music scene in Pahang.

### 4.3.1 Hibiscus

The Malay punk rock band Hibiscus was established in 2001 and originally consisted of four male members: Ajan on vocals, Pokcix Sham on guitar, Fadil on bass, and Wea on drums (Figure 4.4). All of them have a university- or college-educated middle-class background, and were in their early thirties during my first meeting with them in May 2016. None of them rely on the band as their main source of income. Ajan and Fadil work for government agencies, Pokcix Sham is employed as an office worker in the private sector, and Wea has his own printing business. Their formal jobs do not stop them taking an enthusiastic part in punk rock music. When I asked why they were involved in punk rock, Pokcix Sham replied that this kind of music took him and other members out of the boredom and routine of their lives and articulated the things that they were feeling. It was a source of escape rather than a profitable enterprise.



Figure 4.4: Hibiscus (courtesy: Pokcix Sham)

The band was named Hibiscus after the Malaysian national flower, *Bunga Raya*. Before the band's formation the members had already played for other underground bands. At the end of 2003, the band members took a break. However, eight years later, the band became active again and worked on a recording project. Local and international music groups have influenced this band's artistic work and performance. Internationally such bands include The Business, Oxymoron, The Oppressed, Discharger, Rancid and The Casualties. At a local level, Hibiscus's music has been influenced by several Malaysian

underground bands including Acab, Roots and Boots, Subculture, The Bollock, Caburetor Dung and The Official.

Hibiscus is a hardworking band and is credited with attempting to revive interest in punk rock among sections of the community in Pahang. The band emerged at a time when punk rock was not widely known, but slow rock was popular. Punk followers have positioned this band as influential in Pahang. For the band's followers, Hibiscus's fast, aggressive, chaotic music and live performances combined with DIY ethic has put them in the hard-core category, alongside *otai* (established) bands in Malaysia such as Acab and The Officials. For those who are new to the punk scene, the style of Hibiscus's music could be perceived as rock and roll.

The identity of the band Hibiscus is illustrated in a logo as seen in Figure 4.5. The descriptively designed words 'Swallow City Skinhead', at the top of the logo give a direct indication that Hibiscus has adopted what Knight (2011) briefly identifies as unpleasant and ugly aspect of youth: skinheads (or 'Skins', as some call them). At the bottom of the logo the phrase 'Punk Rock 'N' Oi!' clearly identifies that this skinhead-oriented band is associated with the music genre of punk rock and its sub-genre, 'oi!'



Figure 4.5: Hibiscus's logo

A skull is a symbol favoured in punk clothing and jewellery. It also conveys the message of darkness and rebellion that is reflected in punk music. Superimposed on the skull is an illustration of the hibiscus flower. In a national context the hibiscus, Malaysia's national flower, has inspired logos for the Kuala Lumpur 1998 Commonwealth Games and for Tourism Malaysia. The illustration of rice grains (paddy) reflects the background of the members of

Hibiscus, who originated from Pahang, as paddy is a symbol of the main crop in Pahang and is a staple food for the local community (Zulfadli et al., 2016). The two swallows both depict freedom of expression in music and signify the place of Temerloh, where the members live. The black and white used in the logo represent the colours of the Pahang flag, while the yellow denotes the spirit of solidarity and respect.

Hibiscus is popular and has earned the nickname the Mentakab Skinhead Crew. Mentakab is a business area in the district of Temerloh. The nickname suggests that this punk rock band is motivated by an expression of alternative values incorporating contemporary skin-related trends. Their hair is usually closely trimmed or they are suede-headed, they have no facial hair and do not usually wear hats. Above all, according to Pokcix Sham, the leader of the band, members of the band have never been had any major issues such as drug or alcohol abuse, unlike the members of several other punk groups.

#### **4.3.1.1 Repertoire of songs**

The punk rock music genre is not one that is readily accepted by major entertainment organization, radio or television. Record companies refuse to sign bands that adopt a punk sound. Hibiscus independently produced a music album released in early 2016 (Figure 4.6) which was recorded at the Elephant Army Studio, an independent recording studio. The album production process therefore differs from that of an album produced commercially – instead, it is a product of DIY cultural production. For punk bands, a recording event is one among several engagements in their cycle of performances, and the importance of a recording session is comparable to a live performance because of the special challenges it poses. Recording at an independent local studio like this marks a significant addition to what is a familiar round of local live performances of punk rock music.

Hibiscus sold five hundred copies of its album within two months of release. The image on the album cover shows it is called ‘Hibiscus, Music for bootbois’. ‘Bootbois’ refers to boot boys, reflecting the skinhead culture of wearing boots and the identity of the band members. Also on the album cover is an illustration of an underground railway as a reference to the covert and dissident nature of the underground music scene. The CD booklet contains photos of the band at gig performances, song lyrics and credits.



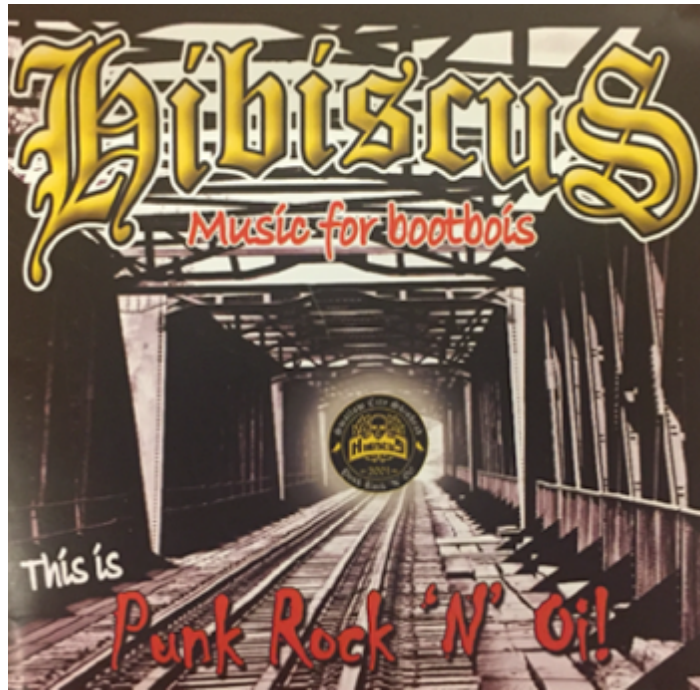


Figure 4.6: Front cover of Hibiscus's album

The album consists of seven tracks, three of them are sung in English and the rest in Malay. The songs mainly consist of three chords and a lyrical structure of verse-chorus-verse. Punk music can be seen as really powerful and exciting, and as such, it is a great 'weapon' to ensure others listen. The music offers an opportunity to address social and political issues through punk messages. The band leader explained to me that all their songs basically feature positive messages concerning unity, brotherhood, democracy and equality with their music followers. Most of the songs are not related to riots or uprisings.

The first track on the album is an English song entitled 'Here We Are' written by The Blades. This song addresses the spirit of brotherhood and an awareness that punk will rise above society's control and its attempt to stop the punk rock movement.

We stand strong in the scene,  
Together fight for our right,  
Kick down all the bastard person,  
Life in our lifestyle,

Together we searching for the new thing,  
Spread our knowledge to everyone new,  
Communicates with the old timers,  
Fight everyone we hates us,

Making friends for our scene going bigger,  
Jamming everywhere spread our message,  
Tell the truth in what we are saying,  
And try to make something nice,

Here we are.

The lyrics of the second track, 'Kawan' (Friends) written by Ajan (vocalist) is on the theme of true friendship and the idea that being a good friend includes loyalty, love, warmth and being non-judgemental. Among others, this song stresses that friendship is one of the most important parts of life. The song can be found on the band's 2016 album.

*Ada lagi kita di sini, / We are here again,  
Bukan fantasi dan mimpi, / Not in the fantasy and dream,*

*Tetap dekat tetap sama, / Stay close and remain the same,  
Haluannya tiada bezanya, ooohhh / The direction is no  
different, ooohhh*

*Kawan kau selamanya, / Forever friends,  
Kawan yang ku hargai, / A friend I appreciate the most,*

*Kawan kau selamanya, / Forever friends,  
Kawan kau yang ku percayai, / A friend I believe the most,*

*Semangatmu seperti dahulu, / Your spirits are just like  
before,  
Menerima cara hidup ini, / Receive this way of life,*

*Tak pernah beralih arah, / Never switch directions,  
Kekal sehingga kini, ooohhh / That remains till today,  
ooohhh*

Interestingly, there is an indication that the lyrics of the fourth track, 'Topeng Hitam' (Black Mask) are similar to *syair* lyrics, in that it is written in stanzas. Each stanza consists of four or five words on each line, employing an a-a-a-a rhyming scheme. This exemplifies the transmission of Malayness through a non-Malay musical format and the idea that a sense of Malayness can be conveyed through non-traditional forms.

*Telah lama kami sengsara,  
semangat makin membara,  
biarkan kau pula berputih mata,  
kau yang mulakan sengketa.*

*Pedih hati tidak tertahan,  
melihat segala penipuan,  
berapa lama bisa menahan,  
lambat laun kau ku tawan.*

Translation:

For a long time we have suffered,  
our spirit is burning up,  
let your eyes turn to blindness,  
you started the dispute.

Heartache is unbearable,  
when looking at all the fraud,  
how long can it last,  
slowly, I will capture you.

The band also introduces a religious touch to their music and imagery and raises the theme of the humanitarian disaster in Gaza in the final track on their album, 'Tangisan Gaza' (The Cries of Gaza). This song is about the crying children and the wailing of elderly people in Gaza who are suffering in the Israeli-Palestinian war. As well as calling for people's awareness of this unstoppable war that is detrimental to the Gazans, Hibiscus also urges people to pray to Allah and to help rebuild the destruction wrought by the Israelis. Despite their music being neglected by the majority of people, the band demonstrates their concerns about a war occurring in the Islamic country of Palestine, located more than 9,500 miles away.

The religious touch in Hibiscus's song reminds me of the phenomenon of Taqwacore, a collection of young immigrant Muslim populations who formed a subculture in the USA and other places who identified with the punk ethos in its heyday in South-East Asia in the early 2000s to the 2010s (Dougherty, 2017). I agree with Dougherty that 'Muslim punks do not rebel, but feel frustration in the face of rules and social forces and have political opinions or want to explore alternate definitions of social norms. They had to borrow models from the West in the form of punk applied to Islam in order to express what could be seen as predictable rites of passage' (Dougherty, 2017: 207). Taqwacore bands, or what I would loosely term Muslim punk bands, on the one hand express their religion in music without explicitly challenging Islam, while on the other, involve the reimagination of Islam through punk eyes and the challenging of religious authority (Fiscella, 2012).

To summarize this section, the punk band Hibiscus has addressed social and political topics through its songs. The lyrics in punk rock provide an opportunity for the band members to share their concerns and to send a direct message to their followers.

#### **4.3.1.2 Orchid Studio as a music space**

Orchid Studio is the main performance space for Hibiscus and other punk rock bands in Temerloh and neighbouring areas. The space has a cosmopolitan feel and provides a common meeting ground where news about bands, events, and the social and artistic experiences of the local and international scenes is communicated and exchanged. According to Pokcix Sham, Orchid Studio is a rented space owned by an anonymous individual. Orchid Studio is known as an environment where friendships are made and where positive human interaction thrives. It is somewhere to find a network of like-minded people to hang out and jam with. Orchid Studio can be equipped with a sound system, which is usually supplied by some close friends of Hibiscus, who are also musicians.

I would characterize the music space at Orchid Studio as poor quality with many disadvantages. It only provides a small space for punk local fans to fit into. The studio's ventilation is poor, and yet there is no restriction on music fans smoking inside. It has two ceiling fans, but only one works. There is only one access door. Orchid Studio is located on the first floor of the building, in front of a tailoring shop, and near to industrial and residential areas.

Punk rock bands in Pahang can be categorized in a number of ways. A significant method is by looking at the names of the band. Most bands utilize English names; only a small number are in Malay. Several bands have unusual, striking names, for instance, Rejected Youth and Dead Cities. Some use venomous and mysterious names of animals, for instance, *Kala Jingga* (Dark Yellow Scorpion) and *Ayam Hitam* (Black Chicken). The use of strange names for the bands has been a fashion since the 1970s.

These unusual names are favoured among punk rock bands in Pahang as it helps them to stand out from the crowd; the names also act as a label to indicate their opposition to authority, building on the common 'protest' image (Xavier, personal communication, 30 March, 2019). Some bands also use strangely concocted names that sound as if they have an English origin, such as Brontox, Tracenta and Pulling-T, which local people find difficult to articulate. The use of unusual English naming patterns is linked to improving life

conditions. Punk rock bands in Pahang tend to prefer uniqueness to conformity. Another characteristic of punk rock bands in Pahang is that, in most cases, they use English as the preferred language for promoting their music events.

To conclude, although it is still marginal in terms of attracting public attention, the punk rock scene in Pahang has developed its own infrastructure consisting of bands, independent labels, fanzines and gigs. Hibiscus, as a band, engages in the independent punk rock music scene connected to DIY (Do It Yourself) values. The band is often involved in performing at music events organized by close friends and acquaintances. The Orchid Studio is an important music venue for Hibiscus both as a performance space and as somewhere to congregate with like-minded punk musicians and followers. Giving live performances at Orchid Studio provides a sense of place and unity for punk rockers, who often feel as if they are outsiders in society.

In the following section, I shall discuss the formation of community around this music genre.

#### **4.3.1.3 Islam in the lives of Malay punk rockers in Pahang**

In the late 1970s, British punk bands toured in areas with large Muslim populations, leading to the formation of Muslim punk bands (Fiscella, 2012). In Malaysia, the earliest Muslim (Malay) punk bands were cropping up by the late 1980s. Through his work, Pickles (2001) identified that those involved with punk activities in Muslim countries in South-East Asia form ‘decentralized, participatory collectives, which are egalitarian, self-managed and non-hierarchical’ (Pickles, 2001: 61).

A well-known example of a Muslim punk band is Marjinal Akustika which has toured and stayed in many places in South-East Asia. During their stay in Pahang, Marjinal Akustika gained many followers. The band started a trend called street punk by coaching children to busk for money with ukuleles (small four-stringed guitars). For Marjinal Akustika and many other punk rock bands, ‘punk is addressing the things that are rotten in society. It tells us that we have the ability to be independent and take care of each other’ (Fiscella, 2012: 265). Marjinal Akustika’s street songs claim to stand for independence, social change and mutual aid.

In many ways, Malaysian (Malay) punk rockers are comfortable with moderate Islam and being a punk is not seen as a contradiction to this (Fiscella, 2012). One way in which punk followers avoid offending people, especially

parents, is by attending the mosque every Friday to perform Friday prayers. Similarly, they ensure that ‘thank you Allah’ is included in the notes that accompany their albums.

Hibiscus has been involved in gigs with Islamic-related themes. For example, the band was among several Malay punk rock bands to perform at a 2016 gig with the theme *Suara Di Hari Raya* (Voices in Eid), held in conjunction with the celebration of Eid-Ul Fitr (Figure 4.7).



Figure 4.7: Poster advertising Eid gig

Eid is an Arabic word meaning ‘festivity’, while Fitr means ‘to break the fast’. This Muslim festival marks the end of the fasting period of Ramadan. Pokcix Sham explained that playing music to celebrate Eid-Ul Fitr every year has become a ritual for his band as well as other Malay punk rock bands in Pahang. At this particular gig, they cover popular Eid songs (but with a punk rock sound) in addition to performing some opening songs (Pokcix Sham, personal communication, 3 May 2020). Open to visitors of all ages, the Eid gig is mainly held during the first week of Eid when most of the band’s members are on holiday. In this way the punk rock music community is able to join in with and follow the tradition of gathering during Eid that is practised by other Malays in Pahang and elsewhere in Malaysia. Furthermore, posters promoting

the gig are written in both English and Malay, giving both a sense of locality and of the engagement of the punk scene with the Islamic/Malay celebration.

Being a punk rocker does not prevent Pokcix Sham from following his religious path. In my recent conversation with him, Pokcix Sham shared the happy occasion of his wedding reception (Figure 4.8). Islam honours marriage as an important and sacred union between two persons that fulfils half of one's religious obligations. Marriage is viewed as an act of worship of Allah (Amin, 2014). Pokcix Sham married a local young woman in 2017, a year after our first meeting at a gig at Orchid Studio in Temerloh, Pahang.



Figure 4.8: Pokcix Sham and his wife at their wedding reception (courtesy: Pokcix Sham)

Before the wedding, they had gone through several common pre-wedding customs, such as the marriage preparation course, which is a two-day course administered by Islamic institutions. Islamic teachers from the District Islamic Department mediate the class. The couple will be briefed on the essentials of life as a husband and wife based on Islam. During the solemnization ceremony (before the wedding reception), the bride will be asked by the *kadi* (marriage official) to recite several lines from the Qur'an before he delivers a short sermon on marriage in Islam.

The wedding of a Malay punk rocker is no different to any other Malay wedding. This indicates that the Malay punk community maintains an appreciation for its cultural heritage. A religious officer officiates at the solemnization ceremony, which is held at the bride's home. The solemnization

is ‘the only Islamic component in a Malay wedding, though Islam encourages a small, modest wedding feast to celebrate the marriage’ (Amin, 2014: 97).

During the solemnization ceremony, Pokcix Sham included the presence of a DJ specifically to play Islamic-themed songs to create an atmosphere of religiousness (Muslimness) to emphasize the values of Islamic religious belief and morals. During his wedding reception, Pokcix Sham had his band members perform a selection of songs, excluding punk rock. He noted that at this special event, attended by people from all backgrounds, punk rock music would, without a doubt, not have been appropriate. Instead, his band members collaborated with non-punk musicians to perform a variety of Malay songs from different eras. This reminds me of the *kugiran* music that is generally performed at wedding receptions.

Malay punk rockers have also shown their awareness in relation to the Islamic community in Pahang. Through a social media post on their Facebook page on 14 September 2017, Hibiscus asked for the community to recite *al-Fatihah* (the first chapter/Surā in the holy book of the Qur’an), which has seven verses containing a prayer for the guidance and mercy of Allah (Appendix V), for pupils from a private Islamic school. The students had been killed in a blaze at the Darul Koran Ittifaqiyah School. A witness to the tragedy explained that the pupils had been locked in, could not escape and were killed in the fire (Amanda Erickson, *The Washington Post*, 14 September 2017). The story became headline news across the media, attracting the country’s attention. Hibiscus’s post on Facebook received reactions from many who lamented what had happened to the pupils; they shared their prayers and uplifting words with the victims’ families.

To summarize, all Malay punk rockers are raised as Muslims. Being Malay punk rockers, however, does not prevent them from being involved with Islamic affairs. They share a love of punk rock and want to practise Islam in the usual ways. This is in line with what Hsu (2011) described: ‘the Southeast Asian punk [...] seems to be very religious. They pray five times a day and maintain observance of Ramadan’ (Hsu, 2011: 168). Indeed, Pokcix Sham believes that Muslim punks experience punk rock in a myriad of Islamic ways (Pokcix Sham, personal communication, 3 May 2020).

#### **4.3.2 Community formation around punk rock**

Punk rock in Pahang is one of the many examples of the performance of Western music styles in non-Western contexts. The Malay punk rock scene



has evolved, developing many of its practices and social forms, and demonstrating that there are many ways that punk rock music brings together a community. In this section, I will further discuss two particular aspects: skinhead culture, and the punk forum.

#### **4.3.2.1 Skinhead culture**

Punk rockers in Pahang are connected with a skinhead identity. Skinheads from all regions in the world share a similar main ideology, one of pride, being working class, and being part of the brotherhood. The skinhead's style is that of being smart and clean. It is an apposite uniform that proclaims identity. Their clothes – bomber jackets, army greens, jeans (Levi and Wranglers brands), narrow punk braces and red socks – identify them in a crowd. Their shirts are mainly of Fred Perry brand and they wear Doctor Marten boots. The hairstyle, too, is naturally an important feature for skinheads.

Skinheads mostly have short, cropped hair. Moustaches and beards are rarely seen on skinheads. Knight (2011) notes that skinheads in the UK copied the cropped hairstyle from West Indians who wore their hair in that way. The style was then followed by skinheads from other regions, including Malaysia. Through this specific 'uniform', skinheads appear visually very different to other people. When they hang out together other local, non-skinhead gangs will try to find them, looking for trouble with them. However, while skinheads do not consider themselves to be troublemakers, local gangs will still try to pick a fight with them.

The introduction of skinhead culture first started in Malaysia as a result of the socio-political situation of the country. Every state in Malaysia has skinheads and these can be of different races: Malays, Chinese, Indians, and ethnic groups from Sabah and Sarawak (the last two are from East Malaysia). They share several main interests – from music to lifestyle. However, there are a few things in skinhead culture that are not suited to all members.

Based on my conversation with Pokcix Sham, Muslim skinheads have a somewhat different perspective. As Muslim skinheads, they choose to follow Islamic values. For instance, they perform Friday prayers and fast for the holy month of Ramadan, and ignore aspects of skinhead culture that contradict the teachings of Islam. For example, they shun bad influences such as carving tattoos on the body, and consuming alcohol and drugs.

Pahang skinheads are neither political nor racist. Pokcix Sham underscores that they are not involved in pro-government activities, nor are they against them. For them, it is about music, skateboarding and brotherhood. The difference between skinheads in Malaysia and other countries, according to Pokcix Sham, is that skinheads in Malaysia tend to compromise more towards their culture, and will never be racist. Living as a skinhead means that someone will work hard and will not give in easily. He will sacrifice his own good for that of his family, wife and band.

Pokcix Sham admits that skinhead culture may be difficult to understand, but claims that despite the skinheads' uniform being 'brutal', their souls are not. 'There is a big difference between those who work hard, but are not skinheads, and those who work hard and are skinheads. Skinheads tend to show more strength of spirit' (Pokcix Sham, personal communication, 3 May 2020). One way in which they display their strengths is through their yearly celebration gig which is arranged by the Pahang United Skinhead Organization, the well-known skinhead organization in Pahang. The daylong gig features around fifteen punk and old-school hard-core bands, each playing two to three songs.

It seems that the physical image of skinhead is not applicable at all times (Figure 4.9). According to Pokcix Sham, he would wear appropriate attire in common with others on specific or public occasions, for instance, to a Malay wedding. Wearing skinhead attire to such events would be unacceptable and subject to disapproval from the public. In this sense, punk rock followers recognize and will conform to standard behaviour which is acceptable to non-skinheads, when necessary. They are not bound by their skinhead identity.

With regard to the parents of punk rockers, it is likely that they may have some misgivings about their offspring becoming a skinhead. Initially they may not like it or may be afraid of it. It might appear to be something that their child is copying from foreigners: for example, the way they behave, or how they style their hair and what they wear. They may also have fears that following a punk rock lifestyle could result in their child neglecting their prayers. However, after a while, the parents usually come to realize that punks and skinheads can vary from those who are very extreme to those who are not. As a result it is seen as acceptable to be a skinhead, as long as their child is not extremist, anti-social or endorsing violence. Parents might allow their child to be a skinhead, but the child also needs to follow the teachings of Islam and be a good Muslim.



Figure 4.9: Skinhead fashions

This section has demonstrated that Malay skinheads in Pahang have rejected several elements of the archetypal skinhead culture. Pahang skinheads have clearly adopted two components from their namesakes's culture: musical style (punk rock and oi!) and clothing. However, they have discarded many of the elements that were originally part of skinhead culture, especially its ideological dimension. This includes an aggressive form of behaviour which contradicts Islamic values. Some of the framework of the original years has disappeared. Skinheads in Pahang have moulded new behaviours and attitudes that do not follow those of their original skinhead counterparts. Pokcix Sham regrets the reality, however, that the punk scene is not accepted locally and that no effort is made by the general public to understand its values and form of expression. This corresponds with the views of Manaan, who is not a follower of punk rock music, that most people perceive the appearance of punk rock followers and their ritualistic behaviour as symbols of aggression and disturbance (Manaan, personal communication, 16 April 2016).

#### 4.3.2.2 Punk rockers' forum

On 24 April 2016, again accompanied by Ahmad Kamil and Naem, I attended a punk gathering held at the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall in Kuala Lumpur. The punk forum drew attention to the subject matter of *Kebebasan Bersuara Dari Sudut Pandang Punk Rockers* (Freedom of speech from the perspective of punk rockers). The poster advertising the forum can be seen in Figure 4.10. The forum was organized by a non-governmental

organization, the *The Gerakan Hapus Akta Hasutan* (The Movement to Remove the Sedition Act), as part of its campaign to end the ever-present threat of the Sedition Act. About two hundred punk fans, ranging in the age from their twenties to their forties, attended the forum. As well as fans from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, fans came from as far as Penang in the north, Pahang in the east, and Melaka and Johor in the south. All were united in this prestigious historical building that was erected in 1923. Several information stands were set up around the edge of the hall providing merchandise, fanzines, posters, novels, CDs and band stickers.



Figure 4.10: Poster advertising a punk rockers' forum in Kuala Lumpur

I observed the forum from the beginning. Rozaimin, an anti-fascist skinhead and guitarist with the band Gang Buster delivered an introductory speech. Five panellists were invited from a variety of backgrounds: a punk rocker, a punk writer, a punk designer and a skinhead anti-fascist, all of whom had been part of the punk scene for more that ten years. The panel discussion focused on the freedom of speech enjoyed by punk rockers. Seated at the back of the assembly hall, I enjoyed the warm atmosphere where camaraderie and friendly humour reigned throughout the two-hour forum.

One panellist, Fahmi Reza, shared his experience as a punk activist and political cartoonist. In 2016, Fahmi Reza was convicted of disobeying multimedia laws with his renowned caricature of Najib Razak, the previous prime minister of Malaysia, who governed the country from 2009 to 2018, depicting him as an evil-looking clown. The image became a viral phenomenon, spurring a wider protest-through-image movement (*The Straits Times*, 28 March 2016). Fahmi Reza, who referred to his artwork as his weapon, pointed out that Islamic-majority Malaysia is being governed by fools and crooks. Because he portrayed Najib in powder-white clown make-up with evilly arched eyebrows and a garish blood-red mouth, Fahmi Reza, who was educated in the United States as an electrical engineer, was jailed for a few days and forced to stop posting the clown image of Razak. In his talk, he also referred to the fact that punk rock music provides a soundtrack while he is working.

The punk scene in Malaysia is negatively perceived, and viewed as being a form of moral deviation. However another panellist, Sharifah, representing the women's voice in the forum, linked punk to positive socio-political campaigns, not to morally subversive activities. Sharifah provided the example of *Rumah Api* (Lighthouse), which is the main base for the punk community. *Rumah Api*, explained Sharifah, is believed to be an expression of opposition to authority and a symbol of counterculture, as punk is influenced by the principle of DIY and freedom. One of the forum attendees, a punk musician, raised the issue of dishonesty in politics and corruption in the ruling Malaysian government during the question and answer session after the panel discussion. He shared his perspective on the position of punk music relative to the community. He assured the audience that punk music allows or encourages people to be critical of society and the media, and urged punk musicians to be more aware in order to keep alive a strong music tradition that supports constructive social values.

In summary, the punk forum revealed the extent to which the voice of the punk community makes a moral contribution both within their community and outside of it. Despite being accused of being useless and without purpose, the punk community highlights and acknowledges the conflicted values, uprisings and movements of resistance that are ignored by standard, regular procedures. The forum provided an opportunity for discussion about the punk scene throughout Malaysia, from the serious side of the punk community's involvement in politics to the more light-hearted side, punk music. Without a doubt this punk forum provided the opportunity for a fascinating exploration of cultural resistance in Malaysia.

## 4.4 Concluding thoughts

This chapter has explored two global music forms – *kugiran* and punk rock – putting them into context socially and indicating their role in the formation of a community. They are examples of the manifestation of global sounds within Malay communities in Pahang villages. These music genres have come to be naturalized, to quote from Mora (2019), as ‘ethno-national forms’ through the incorporation of local musical and lyrical elements in their production (Mora, 2019: 304).

The appearance of *kugiran* bands in villages is attributed to popular music culture, *pop yeh yeh* in the 1960s and other music styles from the 1970s and 1980s. *Kugiran* music is seen as musical entertainment for middle-aged people, and is performed primarily at weddings. For this age group, *kugiran* music may well evoke good memories of the 1970s when they were still young. In terms of the emergence of punk rock in Pahang, this is very much the result of youths who feel marginalized being exposed extensively to punk. The best known single characteristic of punk rock players in Pahang villages is their interest in being able to express their own views and personality through music-making. Punk rock has much in common with the sentiments of the punk movement and its responses to socio-political campaigns. The punk scene has also been seen as the light of freedom for its community. There seems to be a common perception in villages, by people outside of the punk rock scene, that punk rock is the protest music of the oppressed, and one which is essentially detached from the mass media.

In different ways and through the performances and social events attended by each scene, members of both *kugiran* and punk rock music scenes could be regarded as sections of society. However, the punk rock community has differentiated itself from other communities through distinct behaviours, including adopting skinhead characteristics and the DIY ethos.

Overall, there has been an expansion and diversification of musical cultures among the Malay population in Pahang villages and the surrounding areas. The four music genres I have analysed – traditional, regional pop, *kugiran* and punk rock – are all associated with professional and semi-professional musicians. In the following chapter, I will reflect on non-professional musicians and their involvement with two specific vocal song types, *nazam berendoi* and *dikir rebana*, which are regarded as song types performed by amateurs.