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Punk culture rattles sensibilities of adults

Joceline Tan

FREDDY Fernandez, a name synonymous with Malaysia's music industry, was one of several judges at the Pepsi Young Talent contest which drew about 600 entries from aspiring teenagers.

It took a few months to hear each participant out and, says Fernandez, "we didn't see a single punk teenager throughout".

He also made a rather surprising confession: he has never personally set eyes on a punker in spite of his long experience in the entertainment industry. He has only read of or seen them in the news.

In Fernandez's opinion, the punks are "a very small group".

He is probably right because of about a dozen people spoken to, only two had ever come across the budak-budak punk and, they are really not easy to miss.

One of the two chanced upon a group of them outside a Kuala Lumpur discotheque.

They were in full punk regalia, namely, lots of leather and chains and their hair gelled into spikes and, of course, in wild colours. One had a mean-looking earring pierced through his eyebrow.

The other observer came across them at a popular lepak spot for young Malays, the Pertama Complex. He recalls one of the punks having a hairstyle that looked like "psychedelic toilet brush".

Even Royal Prof Ungku Aziz, the former Universiti Malaya Chancellor, has not had real encounters with local punks.

He confides that the day before appearing on a TV talkshow on the same topic, he went around town looking for a CD by the Sex Pistols, arguably the most famous of punk rock groups in the West.

He had heard of the group but, not their music, for which he ought to be thankful.

Incidentally, the Sex Pistols had been so long out of circulation that Ungku Aziz could only find a cassette version.

But this tiny and rather cliquish sub-group of Malaysian society has made recent headlines and earned the disapproval of Malay leaders including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Some think the alarm bells went off in high places because, although there are non-Malay punks, the majority are thought to comprise Malay youths.

As an Umno Cabinet member had joked: "We seem to be trying for 30 per cent equity in everything!"

Although not as widespread or prone to the outrageous behaviour and violence as in the case of their Western counterparts, they make a screaming impact on account of their appearances.

And the fact that Malaysian youths should emulate a trend so alien and bizarre has definitely rattled the sensibilities of many adult Malaysians.

Punk culture itself was a rebellion to the pop and rock scene of the 1970s and the make-love-not-war hippie culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

It was, basically, working class in origins and the appearance and action of its practitioners were designed to shock, defy and differentiate from almost everything that has to do with the middle class.

The skinheads - a copycat version is also available here - were a little more frightening. They were notorious for their violence and have often been labelled as fascist.

British sociologists claimed the punks were also making a political

statement against the established order although most people simply could not see how the act of urinating on an audience - a signature gesture of the Sex Pistols - could be anything more than what it was, namely, gross.

Definitely, Malaysian youths are no different in wanting to rebel against conventions and to express their individualism. Their outlandish dressing may simply be a way of declaring: "I exist!"

The general opinion is that the culture of punks and, even the skinheads, in Malaysia is not grounded in class conflicts although there are conflicting views about whether they come from affluent or more humble backgrounds.

"I think it's more a fashion for them than anything else," says Fernandez.

They doll up, jump on their bikes - which, incidentally, are nowhere near the extravagance of the other sub-culture, the Big Bikers - and head off to a meeting place or discotheque to listen to punk groups with charming names like Infectious Maggots.

In other words, their emulation of this Western import is basically quite superficial. Many may not be aware of the origins and purpose of their tiru (copy) culture.

"We like to follow, to copy without understanding," says Dr Muhammad Nur Manuty, president of Abim, the Islamic youth movement which had struck a chord in the hearts and minds of so many young Malays in the 1970s and 1980s.

Citing a survey by the National Union of Muslim Students, he says Malaysian youths have been subverted by Western culture from music to the way they look and think.

"It's not only in the urban areas but in rural areas as well," says Muhammad Nur, who grew up in a kampung near Taiping and happily remained a square throughout the hippie era.

For a while too, Abim had zealously campaigned against the Salem concerts on the grounds that it encouraged smoking, too much mixing among the sexes, alcohol and even dadah.

But even the Abim president is at a loss to explain why indigenous culture has failed to capture the imagination of Malaysia's young in the way that Western rock culture has.

"Yes, it's a shame," says National literary laurette Prof Muhammad Salleh of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

"What is sad is that when they need to find an outlet for their expression, they seek out the negative side of the West," he says.

The reasons behind the way young people and, in particular, Malay youths have embraced Western fads are definitely complicated.

Muhammad Nur, in typical Abim fashion, blames the state of things on the "onslaught of materialism, conspicuous consumption and hedonism".

But Rahman Embong, a UKM sociologist, suggests that the most important of these reasons lies in the rapid transformation of Malaysian society over the last 30 years, from a rural-agricultural to an urban-industrial economy.

Values and cultural practices have also changed in the process and the Malays are the ones most affected.

"The urban setting is still very new to Malays," adds Dr Azizan Bahari of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

And the irony is that Malay youths have been highly susceptible to such fads despite the intense emphasis on religion and tradition within the community.

Malaysia, says Rahman, is a late moderniser and, thus, in a hurry to catch up, to accomplish in a few decades what the west took one or two centuries to do.

A consequence of the rush is insufficient attention being paid to nation-building and the cultural dimension of modernisation.

"When we say Malaysia boleh, we tend to think more of being boleh materially, not so much being boleh culturally, intellectually, scientifically," Rahman adds.

The young, in the absence of a solid, cultural foundation back home, tend to look elsewhere for models.

And, unfortunately, they end up mimicking the more crass and decadent cultural forms of late capitalism, blindly purveyed by popular local tabloids, magazines and TV stations.

"We haven't developed our own cultural tradition; we copy and, we copy the wrong things," says Rahman.

Of course, everybody blames the media which has grown into a formidable conduit of information and images.

"Good stuff comes through the media but so does a whole lot of cultural garbage," says Muhammad.

Most of those spoken to also think that punk and even their counterpart, the skinheads, is a fad and like all fads, will eventually fizzle out perhaps to resurface again in another generation or two.

But the Malay intelligentsia's worry is that the uncritical copying will continue in this and other forms in the future unless there are moves to strengthen our cultural foundation and national resilience.

"Cultural modernisation and nation-building has to go in tandem with rapid economic and technological transformation," Rahman insists.

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