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**Andrzej Juszczyk**

Jagiellonian University

ORCID 0000-0002-8872-4737

## The Global and Local Dimension of Metal Music

Broadly speaking, metal music is perceived as a phenomenon that belongs to Western culture including primarily North America and Western Europe. In this article, I aim to expound in a nutshell – the activity of African and Asian metal scenes, with particular emphasis on their connection with the metal mainstream and their relationship to local culture. I also reflect on the mechanisms influencing the development of metal scenes on the so-called “periphery” of the West.

As fans commonly perceive them, the most important bands, most influential labels, most significant festivals, and concert tours, and most important music media come from the western world. Commercial success of an artist is the result of the sale of records or tickets to concerts in America or Western Europe. Although metal has been long established in other parts of the world, the global metal scene is considerably oriented toward the Western world. In metal fans' opinions non-Western bands are regarded as curiosities or discussed in terms of their ability to break into the metal mainstream. The presence of Western stars in non-Western markets is perceived as a manifestation of effective expansion, winning markets, and audiences so far resistant to metal.

A good example of the current nature of the audience (and academic) awareness of metal music is, for example, *The Virgin Encyclopedia of Heavy Rock* edited by Colin Larkin (1999), also published in Poland under the title *Encyklopedia Muzyki Popularnej. Heavy Rock (Encyklopedia Muzyki Popularnej 2000)*. Both the introductory essay describing the historical development of metal music (or perhaps even more broadly, heavy rock) and the selection of entries about specific artists demonstrate how “heavy rock” is essentially British-American, with a little input from mainland Europe. The Polish edition adds a dozen or so entries about local artists, which does not change the fact that the book is full of information about bands, sometimes rather insignificant, but included precisely because they operated in the US or Great Britain.

Quite contrary to the picture mentioned above, metal music has been developing outside North America and Western Europe for a long time. Local scenes are often surprisingly self-sufficient, essentially isolated from mainstream metal forums

(festivals, tours, press, etc.), yet still very active and dynamic. Recognizing the vitality of metal culture in regions previously considered marginal leads to a better understanding of the local conditions governing popular music. Moreover, it also raises important questions regarding the aims of research on metal music in general. Should the locality of a scene be the basic filter imposed on the perception of music created outside the Western “center”? And if so, should the notion of “locality” affect only the perception of “marginal” phenomena and not be taken into account in characterizations of metal music created in North America or Western Europe? Is this local, “exotic” aspect really the most characteristic feature of metal music in Africa and Asia, or is it just the opposite: the development of these scenes shows the global potential of metal that can be launched anywhere and anytime, regardless of local conditions?

It is significant that in recent years, research on metal music has featured a rather strong trend toward describing and analyzing non-Western music scenes, in the process, taking into account local cultural, aesthetic, political, and moral concerns and their importance for shaping music in Asia and Africa. Examples of this growing interest in the decentralized nature of metal music include the documentary film *Global Metal* (2007), by filmmaker Scot McFadyen and Canadian anthropologist and musician Sam Dunn; the book *Heavy Metal Islam: Rock, Resistance, and the Struggle for the Soul of Islam* (2008) by Mark Levine, a musician and professor of Middle East and African History at the University of California; the volume *Living Metal: Metal Scenes Around the World* edited by Bryan Bardine and Jerome Stueart (2022) including studies of local scenes from different regions of the world; and books by Edward Banchs of Florida Atlantic University including *Heavy Metal Africa: Life, Passion and Heavy Metal in the Forgotten Continent* (2016) and *Scream for Me Africa: Heavy Metal Identities in Post-Colonial Africa* (2022). The growing frequency of publications on global metal scenes reflects the intensive development of metal outside Europe and North America in recent decades. It also reflects a growing realization among metal music researchers that the West-centric view of metal is no longer relevant.

According to Adam Mayer and Jeffrey M. Timberlake, at the time of metal music's initial period of popularity in the 1980s, there were about 3,200 metal bands in North America and Western Europe, including both big names with global reach and bands that never achieved any sort of international status (Mayer, Timberlake 2014: 28). At that time, even though metal music appeared outside the Western mainstream, it was on a very limited scale. On the other hand, in 2008 the number of metal music performers around the world was estimated at around 75,000 bands in nearly 130 countries (Mayer, Timberlake 2014: 28). Mayer and Timberlake attribute this increase in metal performers and audiences to the ever-expanding worldwide digital accessibility to music, which not only allowed listeners from Africa and Asia to access the metal mainstream (so far limited by small imports of music on physical media), but also allowed a large number of artists to freely distribute their work (2014: 29). The result of this process was not so much the global expansion of the traditional metal market (though to some extent this was the case), but a kind of decentralization of metal music. Now, all over the world, regional metal scenes have a local (concerts, festivals, fans) and potentially global (presence on streaming

channels) reach. Interestingly, these scenes, which are physically separate from Western markets, are largely self-sufficient, and their participants generally do not have any ambition to achieve international stardom. Of course, there are spectacular careers of local artists such as The HU from Mongolia, but the general tendency is rather different.

### Exotic Metal?

One might guess that the local character of metal music might be associated with some kind of fusion of ethnic and Western elements. However, even a cursory glance at these scenes tells a very different story. Indeed, the music of most metal artists from Asia and Africa is devoid of any trace of folkly exoticism (which is so welcomed by Western listeners). Rather, bands tend toward the reproduction of and innovation within the universal character of metal, often with a great predilection for its more extreme varieties.

This is quite an interesting phenomenon, because this “exotic otherness” may be attractive to metal fans looking for new sounds and inspirations.<sup>1</sup> Non-Western metal bands could potentially capitalize on elements of cultural fusion, however they eschew such a strategy, instead latching on to specific “pure” types of metal (death metal, black metal, grindcore, etc.).

Non-Western metal scenes are very diverse, and their development has depended on multiple local conditions. It is therefore difficult to compare, for example, metal from Japan, where listeners and creators have had virtually unlimited access to mainstream metal music as well as instruments, equipment, and recording studios; with metal from Botswana or Mozambique, places where musicians and audiences have had comparatively limited access to metal recordings and musical instruments as well as more fundamental issues, such as problems with access to electricity (Banchs 2016a: 313).

In Africa, metal music varies depending on the country and its internal situation. The first African bands inspired by Western rock—for example, Jimi Hendrix, Black Sabbath, and Deep Purple—appeared in the 1970s in Zambia. This strong Zambian rock scene (so-called Zamrock) coalesced around bands such as WITCH, Musi O-Tunya and Amanaz. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, rock and then metal music was often suppressed by local authorities who associated it with the hostile civilization of the white West (Barone 2016: 26). In South Africa, however, metal developed without any significant obstacles, though only within white South African communities. The first black metal band composed exclusively of non-white musicians (Demogoroth Satanum from Soweto) was established there only in 2009 (Irizarry 2017).

There was an influx of metal music to Africa in the 1980s and 1990s via imports of European and American vinyl, cassettes and CDs. Regardless of the prevailing religion or the model of state power, in most African countries metal was subject

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<sup>1</sup> Here it is worth mentioning the use of oriental ornamentations that appear quite often in Western metal and hard rock, for example, in the works of Deep Purple (“Perfect Strangers”), Metallica (“Wherever I May Roam”), Rammstein (“Giftig”), etc.

to restrictions, and local performers and fans faced repression and social ostracism (as was the case in Egypt, Morocco, Angola, Cameroon, and Mozambique) (Knopke 2015: 112).

For example, in 1997 about 90 metal fans in Egypt were violently taken from their homes and imprisoned on charges of “contempt for heavenly religion”, obscenity, and promoting political extremism. The local media jumped on the topic and wrote about satanic rituals, orgies, animal sacrifice, etc. (Matsue 2003: 14). In 2002, members of two Moroccan metal bands (Nikos and Reborn) were accused of Satanism, arrested, and held for two months (Robertson 2015: 75). In turn, in 1980s South Africa, under the influence of the “satanic panic” in the USA, the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church) and government-imposed sanctions on the import of metal albums on charges of spreading Satanism and demoralization. This coupled with a serious lack of access to instruments, sound equipment, and electricity meant that metal music was largely forced underground where the scene was inevitably limited.

### **Extreme Code**

It is difficult to generalize about “African” metal and “Asian” metal since each comprises a host of often divergent national scenes. It is also not easy to determine which performers are particularly important or popular because the most accessible data centers on the number of plays of individual songs on streaming services, and this is not always the best source of information. Therefore, for this study, I also include data from scientific publications and information from websites, blogs, and fan forums.

A key feature of the development of local metal scenes, regardless of their location, is their independence and self-sufficiency revolving around a specific globality and stylistic orthodoxy with a relatively small number of “ethnic” elements in the music itself. Many metal artists from around the world seriously consider whether to make music “their way” (and thus creatively use local music traditions) or according to conventional rules of the ostensibly global metal code. Several scholars have described this in a range of local metal scenes. For example, Ekkehard Knopke has written about the development of the local scene in Kenya. He recalls numerous statements of Kenyan metalheads who, on the one hand, feel that they should somehow refer to their own traditions and shared experiences with local audiences (indeed, a few such experiments took place there). On the other hand, they fear that their music will become an exotic curiosity and not be taken seriously (Knopke 2015: 109).

What is also important here is a completely different approach to the local musical tradition from the Western one: for a Western listener, the sounds of African folklore or the local language are simply exotic; while for Kenyans, the musical tradition is always associated with a specific place tribe, and/or ethnic group. Just as people may be divided along the lines of language use, the evocation of specific musical traditions may also have similar (and serious) consequences. As Edward

Banchs notes in his study also devoted to the metal scene in Kenya, tribalism is a living and difficult issue, yet metal music becomes a way of overcoming ethnic tensions and conflicts that may be difficult for outsiders to understand (Banchs 2016: 320).

Following Benedict Anderson, Knopke notes that metal music offers artists and audiences the opportunity to participate in a specific, imagined community, based at once on a common global metal code (Weinstein 2000: 6) and local socio-moral and ideological conditions (Knopke 2015: 106). So, even if the music sounds similar in different parts of the world, the motivation to perform it may be fundamentally different. Even though metal itself is rebellious music that allows one to express disagreement with various forms of oppression (Brown 1995: 451), the experience of this oppression varies from place to place, and in turn, the reasons for performing or listening to metal music also vary accordingly.

For example, following Mark Levine, Jennifer Milioto Matsue notes that heavy metal in the Middle East might be used to forge a positive cross-regional identity among young people opposed to institutional, religiously motivated violence (Matsue 2003: 14). Stefan Barone, in his research on Tunisian metal, states that metal has given young Tunisians the opportunity to escape from a national ethos founded on religious hypocrisy, conformism, ignorance, and violence and that the local metal scene formed its identity in rebellion against “standard Tunisian mentality” (Barone 2016: 31). Similarly, young Kenyans’ choice of metal music is a reflects a break from rural, traditionalist culture in favor of aspirations to a modern, metropolitan lifestyle (Banchs 2016: 314).

Many non-Western metal scenes are notable for their cultivation of specific genres of metal. Even a cursory glance at some African and Asian scenes demonstrates that they are dominated by extreme types of metal: black metal, death metal, grindcore<sup>2</sup>, doom, sludge, etc., while interspecies fusions are rare (most often in the circle of Arab and Mongolian metal). The information collected on the *Encyclopaedia Metallum* website proves useful for analyzing the data on genre preferences in individual local metal scenes. Although it is a fan initiative, this resource nonetheless provides important material for analysis (*Encyclopaedia Metallum*).<sup>3</sup>

It is impossible to present statistics for all local, non-Western metal scenes, so I have selected only a few scenes from Africa and Asia, taking into account the total number of metal bands assigned to a given country and the number of bands performing extreme metal genres such as black metal, death metal, doom, grindcore, goregrind, sludge, and their variants (terms used by the creators of *The Metal Archive*). I include both active and inactive groups.

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<sup>2</sup> This observation is based on the analysis of the content of metal music websites in Africa and Asia and the genre assignments contained in the *Encyclopaedia Metallum* website where artists and fans are able to collectively edit information.

<sup>3</sup> Over 1.5 million users are registered on the site. *The Metal Archives* section contains information on over 157,000 groups from all over the world. The archive is updated by users and verified on an ongoing basis by the moderators of the website.

Country	Total number of metal bands	Extreme metal performers	Percent
<b>Africa</b>			
Algeria	31	24	77
Botswana	9	4	44
Egypt	47	29	61
Kenya	8	5	62
Lebanon	61	36	59
Mozambique	2	2	100
South Africa	277	192	69
Tunisia	34	20	58
<b>Asia</b>			
China	387	257	66
India	297	197	66
Indonesia	2228	1871	83
Korea	279	120	43
Pakistan	57	37	64
Malaysia	696	295	44
Poland	3936	2748	69

Tab. 1. Participation of bands performing extreme types of metal within local scenes (own study).

In most cases, the percentage share of bands playing extreme types of metal in the entire local metal scene is about 60–70%. Although sometimes, as in the case of Korea, Botswana, or Malaysia, this number is 43–44%, and sometimes, as in the case of Indonesia, it even reaches 83%. Of course, this raw data does not tell the whole story about the nature of metal culture in individual countries. But it is indeed significant, as it indicates what kind of metal musicians and their fans prefer. The data does not capture how successful, influential, or popular a given artist's work is. However, the data provides insight into genre preference and therefore illuminates a portrait of general trends in this regard. This data also provides an important point of comparison for genre preferences in long-standing and well-grounded metal scenes, such as in Poland. The relatively small share of performers who indicate genre preferences with primarily local orientations (e.g., ethno-metal, folk metal) is also noteworthy. In the end, the data confirms that participants of the metal scene in certain non-Western regions prefer to adhere to the requirements set by the conventional metal code and be compared to artists performing similar music around the world.

The choice of extreme genres may also have another motivation; perhaps the brutality associated with the music is directly proportional to the external limitations affecting it. Metal's transgressive and rebellious potential is still rather potent,

although today metal does not arouse hysterical reactions from local authorities as in times past.

## **Metal Dreams**

Many researchers of non-Western metal scenes emphasize the sociopolitical aspects of the music. Just like representatives of other musical genres of “foreign” provenance, many metal artists, by their very existence, somehow undermine the political and moral status quo. Many have also been directly involved in social and political movements, especially by using their music to comment on current events and criticize those in charge. In this regard, metal artists have been considered iconoclastic and dangerous simply because of the nature of the music they perform. This only confirms the subversive potential of metal, a potential aptly sensed by the authorities.

However, it also seems that these specific uses of radical metal’s transgressive potential result rather from its specific fluidity and susceptibility to narratives that are external to it. Metal almost always becomes a tool for creating a new, imaginary community in opposition to established traditional forms. As have others (Barone 2016: 31; Brown 1995: 446), Edward Banchs suggests that heavy metal is attractive to local musicians outside the West because it allows them to “escape into something new and unfamiliar”. This then becomes the basis for the emergence of subcultural projects in some sense aimed to revolutionize orientations to national belonging. In this context, listeners and performers are comfortable expressing themselves through a seemingly exogenous Western approach to music (Banchs 2016: 322).

The question is if the popularity of extreme forms of metal in the non-Western world is a significant or marginal phenomenon? In the grand scheme of the global music industry, artists who are isolated from the mainstream on local stages and who have no aspirations for international recognition also have no significant influence on the shape of the global music market. However, this very phenomenon is so widespread that it testifies to ways of participating in the global metal code in creatively meaningful ways that promise few if any monetary returns.

Markus Verne’s article “Music, Transcendence, and the Need for (Existential) Anthropologies of the Individual” (2015) analyzes the ultimately failed careers of two Malagasy metal musicians, Rija and Klara. Verne describes Rija and Klara as artists trying at all costs to overcome technical and financial adversities to make music on par with what they consider the world’s best metal. However, from a pragmatic point of view, such an effort is never fully appreciated by local audiences nor by the Western music market. Nevertheless, Verne concludes, their struggle is important regardless of the end result. It is the effort itself, not necessarily its specific outcome, that impacts a person’s identity, worldview, and desires. What is important here is the need for artists, in their own imaginations, to belong within the global metal scene despite slim chances it will ever happen. The artists subordinate their lives to this need, and it gives them a purposeful identity (Verne 2015: 79). Even if the self-perception of a musician as a metal artist is imaginary, the struggle is authentic, and we can hear its traces in the music.

Perhaps similar efforts, exerted by aspiring metal bands on the periphery and around the world, are what will drive the development of metal music in the future – outside the big market. And when one looks at other genre scenes in the world, for example, at the extremely developed, though also self-sufficient, and outside the mainstream contemporary new wave scene, it can be assumed that such a model of popular music functioning as a generator of imaginary global-local communities. Perhaps this is the direction in which metal is headed as well.

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**Abstract**

This article deals with the development of local metal scenes in Africa and Asia in relation to the metal mainstream. The article addresses the problem of Western centrism in the current perception of metal music and introduces researchers to the current interests of non-Western music scenes. The article also proposes a psychosocial perspective on local metal scenes and, at the same time, the imaginary global metal community.

**Globalny i lokalny wymiar muzyki metalowej****Streszczenie**

Artykuł dotyczy rozwoju lokalnych scen metalowych w Afryce i w Azji w odniesieniu do metalowego mainstreamu. Autor porusza problem zachodnio-centryzmu w dotychczasowym postrzeganiu muzyki metalowej oraz przybliża aktualne zainteresowania badaczy nie-zachodnimi scenami muzycznymi. Proponuje też psychologiczno-społeczne spojrzenie na funkcjonowanie lokalnych scen metalowych i zarazem globalnej wyobrażonej wspólnoty metalowej.

**Keywords:** Global metal, extreme genres of metal music, local music scenes, African metal, Asian metal

**Słowa kluczowe:** metal globalny, metalowe gatunki ekstremalne, lokalne sceny muzyczne, metal afrykański, metal azjatycki

**Andrzej Juszczyk** – dr hab., is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, the director of the JU Joseph Conrad Research Centre. He is particularly interested in the popular culture, utopianism and the concept of post-Apocalypse in contemporary culture. His publications include *Retoryka a poznanie. O pisarstwie Teodora Parnickiego (Rhetoric and cognizance. The work of Teodor Parnicki, 2004)*, *Stary wspaniały świat. O utopiach pozytywnych i negatywnych (Brave old world. Positive and negative utopias, 2014)*, editor of the series of monographs *Music – University – Technology – Emotions. Studies in popular music (2017–2019)*.