The Republic of the Union of Myanmar, more commonly known as Burma, is a small Southeast Asian nation lying between the borders of Bangladesh and Thailand off the Bay of Bengal. Torn by the remnants of British colonialism and military juntas, Burma has long been considered a pariah state, seemingly isolated from the rest of the world. While its doors to the outside have only recently been opened, to many Westerner’s surprise, deep beneath the underbelly of a land lost in time lurks a growing community of punk rockers.

With about 200 punks in Yangon, Myanmar’s capital city, and another hundred in nearby Mandalay, Burmese punk rockers are slowly garnering foreign attention through their intense opposition to mainstream politics and social attitudes. In Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson’s book, *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual*, which contains several essays that examine all aspects of scenes, they define music scenes as “clusters of musicians, producers, and fans that share common musical tastes and distinct lifestyle choices”, (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). With their multi-colored spiked hair, leather studded jackets, and anti-authority attitudes, the Burmese punks inspired by the movements in the UK and the United States, have created a tightly-woven network of youth opposition.

According to Bennett and Peterson, both professors of sociology well versed in popular socio-musicology, the term “scene” has been used in “journalist discourse, functioning as a cultural resource for fans to forge collective expressions of ‘underground’ or ‘alternative’ identities”, (Bennett & Peterson, 2004). Scenes are culturally distinct from the mainstream societies in which they are found, and they come to fruition in three different forms. Translocal scenes are scattered geographic scenes based around a specific genre and lifestyle, local scenes are geographically contingent, and virtual scenes are communities connected through the internet or fanzines. In many ways, Myanmar’s punk rockers evoke characteristics of all three types of scenes.

In its most obvious aspects, Myanmar “punk” is the very definition of a translocal scene. Punk rock’s roots, which can be traced back to the late 1970’s, established itself as a counter position to the glam rock, disco, and pop that had been feeding the hands of the music industries both in the US and UK. The ideology of the scene promoted an ethos of self-reliance and D.I.Y., and the music touted sociopolitical lyrics that commented on artistic integrity and personal responsibility. Punk in Myanmar was cultivated through the appropriation of style and philosophy, discovered via leftover magazines and memorabilia, depicting the Sex Pistols, Ramones, Buzzcocks, and The Clash, brought over by the few sailors allowed into the isolated nation, (Whitehead, 2013).

However, Burma’s punk scene is much more than a mere photocopy of its Western counterpart. It has its own “symbolic economy of authenticity”, where true punkers live in squalor, scoff at the indulgent lifestyles of ruling elites, and play at the seediest venues out of political protest, (Grazian in Bennett & Anderson, 2004). Yangon youths have taken the US/UK style punk-rock ethos and made it wholly their own, creating a collective identity aimed at going against one of the world’s harshest authoritarian regimes. According to Mickey Vallee, whose review of *Music Scenes* analyzed its
three core arguments, the punk scene stands as a refuge for these disgruntled Burmese youth, and consequently “alternative lifestyle choices have become tolerated and celebrated”, (Vallee, 2006).

Today, Myanmar’s punk scene is gathering loads of press attention, with photographs of rebellious youths clad in Misfits shirts, safety-pin studded jackets, and combat boots flooding the internet. This is largely attributed to the recent influx of journalists and documentarians into Myanmar, following its slight reform after 50 years of strict military rule. This bubbling of internet activity is helping to keep the Yangon punkers connected and the scene evolving.

In a land where speaking out against the government can often lead to imprisonment, punk rock is a true form of rebellion. While the scene is an adaptation of Western music movements, it has been made uniquely Myanmarese by an underground community of youths, and virtual activity is allowing the scene to further evolve in unpredictable ways. Bennett and Peterson, whose Music Scenes might be best recommended for students of sociology and music journalism, argue that scenes can be made anywhere, anytime via a network of fans, musicians, and producers, and the search for authenticity is the common thread that links them all. “Real” punk in Myanmar for many is simply a community of like-minded individuals brought together through discordant, angry music, and of those willing to speak out against oppression in the hopes of changing the ideas of those around them.

-Lauren Levine

**Bibliography, APA style**


