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Never Mind the Generals. Burmese Punk Rock Scene as a Vehicle for Manifesting Changing Notions of Burmese Identity

Abstract

This paper is based on data collected during field surveys conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Burma. The study was conducted in Yangon, the most cosmopolitan city in Burma, which is not only financially but also the musical center of the country where youth culture thrives. The main research method was participant observation, supplemented with interviews and text analysis. In this paper I would like to explain how punk rock expresses and interprets Burmese identity situated within the broader context of a continuum of Burmese identities. I would also like to raise the question of an inter relationship between music, politics and identity, using the example of Yangon punk rock scene. I will also try to explain how expressive forms of art, in this case punk rock, are used to construct national cultures, bring political change and engage their fans to become politically active.

Keywords: punk rock, Burma/Myanmar, youth culture, anthropology of politics.

This paper, based on data collected during field surveys conducted between 2014 and 2016 in Burma's financial and cultural hub, Yangon, where in which youth culture thrives. The main research methods were participant observations, supplemented with interviews and text analysis. My field research primarily consisted of interviews with the elite members of Rangoon's punk scene and their roles varied from active musicians, event organizers and community leaders. The majority of the participants were men over the age of twenty, while as the veterans were in their mid-thirties. In addition to being similar in age, the men also shared similar backgrounds in that most were once students; however, due to Burma's uncertain economic and political situation, they were forced to abandon their study's. As

one of my respondents commented on the reason for his departure from the university, under the Junta, he was disappointed in Burma's education system.

In this presentation I would like to explain how punk rock expresses and interprets Burmese identity situated within the broader context of a continuum of Burmese identities. I would also like to raise the question of an inter relationship between music, politics and identity, using the example of the Yangon punk rock scene. I will also touch on how expressive forms of art, in this case punk rock, are used to construct national cultures, bring political change and engage their fans to become politically active. As it is known: "The examples of political movements that debuted as musical ones and extended their stake to the altering of the socio-political reality are not few" (Cihodariu 2011: 213–214). The most recent examples of this link between music and politics are the hippie movement, the reggae music in the Caribbean, the Swahili music movement in Tanzania (Askew 2002), the Indonesian Punk rock scene (Baulch 2007). The last of these works has provided an interpretative framework for the analysis of youth culture in South-east Asia. It is paying close attention to the relationship between the underground scene and the political changes in Indonesia, directly linked to the political transformation from authoritarianism to democracy. That is why, in case of Myanmar we cannot ignore the role of youth culture in political change, by shifting it to the margin of analysis of local politics. As Ernest Gellner stated: "There is notoriously an international, trans-ideological youth culture" (Gellner 1983: 117). Since Myanmar's colonial period, Myanmar has experienced a long history of its youth being involved in the country's political transformation. Recently, at the beginning of February 2017, thousands of people marched through the streets of Rangoon as well as other cities around the country calling for the end of the civil war. It was one of the largest anti-war demonstrations organized by young people. It is necessary to emphasize that youth in Burma are not homogeneous. Therefore, in the following paper, attention has been focused on one of its segments – the punk scene, which is actively involved in the local political debate and is ready to confront its ideas and beliefs with the existing political reality. My main argument is that in the case of the Burmese punk rock scene, the consumption of media text is also a part of current identity politics.

Over the last decade, scholars in humanities have become preoccupied with the question of how expressive forms of art can be used to construct national cultures. Between those various forms of expressive art, music has proven to be both mutable and transcultural. Music has been seen as part of material as well as oral culture. It has the power to reflect inherent cultural symbolism through collective gesture, emotional experience, group empathy, and sound. It can also be understood as a form of social consciousness and is one of the most ancient ways by which people create and share their identities. Music is powerful because different people invest in it with complex meanings at different times, and through its non-arbitrary, sensible features, music can amplify those meanings (Wallach

2008: 113). That is why music encourages political movements, can help those who are dealing with post-traumatic stress and can be used to help construct national cultures.

In the Twenty-First century, punk rock music continues to both expand internationally and evolve into several diverse forms. Punk rock is not a monolithic culture, therefore, each form is strongly contextualized within its social and historical continuum in which it exists. For this reason, engagement with punk rock music, or music in general, in a scholarly fashion, is often pushing the limits of contemporary academic disciplines. In this paper, I tried to examine the cultural and political significance of Burmese punk rock scene by using different approaches drawn from sociology, ethnomusicology, and anthropology. In anthropology, music has been claimed as a crucial part of “communicational practice” organised around certain rules. Work of Alan P. Meriam *Anthropology of Music* (1964) provided excellent theoretical framework for the study of music as a human behavior, which has followed throughout this paper. In case of sociology its engagement with the study of punk rock starts with pivotal work of Dick Hebdgie titled *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979). In this book, Hebdgie bridged semiotics, sociology and ethnography to show a broader picture of British punk rock scene in the 70’s. His main point is that subcultures expressed: “a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second class lives” (Hebdgie 1979: 132). This statement became a crucial departure point in this paper. In Myanmar, punk rock has retained its power to both shock and organize on a political level. Nowadays this combination of aggressive punk music and anarchist militant politics has given a voice to a new assertive identity, stimulating the Burmese youth’s political activism. Punk rock is also a way to deal with the trauma of decades of brutal military rule of the junta. For Skum, lead singer of the Burmese Crust Punk band “Kulture (sic!) shock”, politics and music have always been intertwined. The local punk rock scene in Yangon gives a contrasting view of Burmese youth culture. In the past, punk collectives stood against the former military regime’s cultural policy, which recognized liberal ideologies and “globalization” as the main threats to Burmese identity. Moreover, Myanmar’s military junta strongly condemned “un-Burmese sounds, un-Burmese expressions and un-Burmese stage manners” (Craig & King 2002: 4). Prior to 2010, the military government attempted to forcefully eradicate many foreign influences, forcing the Burmese punk rock movement to solely exist in the underground culture. Musicians who inspired Western music were referred to as “destroyers of tradition” (Fink 2001: 202), and it was during this tumultuous period in which the Burmese punk rock scene came to be. Aggressive and oppositional punk rock movement developed in Rangoon in 2007–2008 as an attempt to question the legitimacy of the military’s control of politics and expand democratic space in the country’s political discourse. Almost from the beginning, punks performed songs openly attacking the brutality of the military regime, even when it was dangerous to do so. As Baulch

pointed out, recently: "(...) case studies of the consumption of Western cultural products by non-Western audiences have acknowledged that foreign repertoires can be practiced as oppositional discourses and help liberate people from repressive local regimes" (Baulch 2007: 110). Punks in Burma have created a strong independent music scene, driven by the ethos of DIY (Do it Yourself), which is also, at least declaratively, radically anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian, autonomous and independent. Nowadays, the Burmese punk rock scene works to revise discourse on Burmese youth identity by opposing racism, ethnic hatred and xenophobic nationalism which is growing stronger throughout the country. Burmese punk rockers firmly stand against Buddhist monks from the 969 movement and their persecution of Muslims. Even if they can be attacked by Burmese nationalists, religious bigots or accused of being friends of Muslims. All of those can put their lives in danger. Burmese punks emphasized that they don't care about any ethnic distinctions and they are all equals, as Kyaw Kyaw, leader of the band Rebel Riot, said: "I don't care what kind of people, what kind of ethnicity or what kind of religion. We're all the same. I just don't want people killing one another. That's all that matters."¹ However, almost all members of punk rock scene in Yangon belong to the dominant Burmese race *Bamar*.

In case of the Yangon punk scene, music became both a political tool as well as a coping mechanism to help Burmese youth deal with traumatic experiences from the country's past. That is why the punk rock music can be understood as a social consciousness. My references to "music" implicate not just sound but also, visual and spatial dimensions. Punks in Yangon defy religious and cultural norms not only by their music but also by their dress code. By the start of the twenty-first century, mohawked, heavily tattooed, black-leather-clad punk rock kids in Yangon became widely recognized figures in the city urban cultural landscape. In case of Yangon youth, commitment to the punk lifestyle entails participating in a set of subcultural practices that include hanging out in public places with other punks, attending punk concert events, drinking alcohol, and wearing punk clothing and hairstyles. In modern Burma, social and political changes are most prominent in urban centers such as Yangon and Mandalay. Some prominent social changes include, the increase of mobile phone users and the increase of foreign tourists. Another important factor is the growing availability of the Internet as a means of obtaining information about the surrounding world. In the case of Rangoon and the local punk rock scene, these transformations have a powerful impact on its dynamic development. Through the internet, the punk scene in Burma can interact and get in touch with the members of other punk rock scenes from the region as well as the whole world.

In a country without a social welfare system, several young Burmese live on the streets, either by their own choice for necessity; therefore, through punk rock

¹ <http://m.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/music/1223100/anarchy-in-the-sea> (access: 29.04.2017).

music and the culture attached to it, punk acts as a tool that gives Burma's youth a sense of belonging and a means to survive. Distinct from other more segregated social structures, the underground scene is open for all to join and participate in. The underground music scene has become an important element in the identity practices of many urban youth. For dedicated punk rockers, the underground is more than just a personal expression of style; it is a way of life, and often a way to make a living. In the center of Rangoon, Burmese punks run their own informal vendors, where in which they sell DIY punk merchandise. These kinds of punk cooperatives are known globally by the term *distro*, which was also adopted by the Burmese underground scene. Throughout the world, these punk manufactures provide a source of modest income for punk rockers.

An Interesting aspect of the Burmese punk rock scene is its attitude toward the major religion, Buddhism Therevada. One commonly used slogan "No Gods, No Masters and No Slaves" is straightforwardly expressing punk's attitude towards religion, showing that the punk rock movement in Burma is trying to distance itself from an organized religion. At the same time, it is also reminiscent of *Do Bamar Asiayone*, a movement slogan from the 1930s. In some interviews, Punk rockers from the older generation declared that there is no relation between the rebellious punk attitude and organized religions like Buddhism²; however, some young members of the punk rock band Rebel Riot, share diverse opinion on this matter. The singer of the band, Rebel Riot Kyaw Kayw questioned about how he and his band reconcile the two seemingly opposing ideologies – Buddhism and punk – through their protest music. In one interview he responded:

You are right that punk and Buddhism can be 'conflicting' (...) On one hand, Buddhism can be an organization, a system. But on the other hand, Buddhism is all about living, how you live in this life and how you build relationships with others. It's about how you treat others with kindness, love and compassion. (...) If you're part of a Buddhist group then you're under the system. Buddhism is not about organization. Buddhism is about finding yourself, not following an institution. To us, it's not a system; it's a way of thinking. It's very individualistic. That is what we believe in. In our opinion, Buddhism and punk are similar in a way that they are both about humanity and equality. All human beings are created equal. In our eyes, there is no racism or sexism in Buddhism, but Buddhist organizations create those, you know what I mean.³

As he declared: "Punk and Buddhism are our ways of thinking... our ways of life. We are rebellious for humanity"; and also: "Buddhism is very DIY, like punk. You gotta find your own path by yourself."⁴ These statements were met with sharp criticism from Skum, who later commented regarding the Rebel Riots: "I would never agree with their meddlings in religious bullshit... I'd say all organized religions are evil and hypocritical and think punk has nothing to do with any of these religions... obviously it was Rebel Riot's choice and I don't want to judge

² Interview, 23.02.2016.

³ <http://m.bangkokpost.com/lifestyle/music/1223100/anarchy-in-the-sea> (access: 29.04.2017).

⁴ Ibidem.

them for their actions but you need to think of all the consequences before you do anything.”⁵ In one of Rebel Riot’s Facebook posts, there is a photo of musicians who are dressed as Jesus, Buddha and Shiva, in which the band said:

They always want to teach peace and goodness, refrain from killing each other... but People are ready to fight and kill each other in the name of religion. This is because religious organizations make people blindly believe them. All religious organizations are full of bullshit... Do not follow this and do not listen to what religious organizations have to say. It is better to listen only to your inner voice.⁶

This post was condemned by Buddhist nationalists from the 969, who threaten to undertake legal action against the band. Myanmar National Network leader Ko Win Ko Ko Latt, a regular fixture at nationalist protests in recent years and known for his anti-Muslim activism, saw the photos in the following days and lodged a complaint with the Yangon Region office of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Culture.⁷ Offending a religion is a criminal act under Section 295 of Myanmar’s Penal Code, with a maximum custodial sentence of two years. As an outcome, Kyaw Kyaw signed a document confessing to have offended religious sentiment and made a verbal promise not to repeat the transgression, in addition to this, there was also an apology ceremony at Insein Ywar Ma Monastery, which has long been associated with the Buddhist nationalist movement. As Kyaw Kyaw later stated in one of his comments on his private Facebook profile: “We did not accept we had sinned and had attended the ceremony in order to apologize upsetting religious sentiment.”⁸ However, in the eyes of Burmese punk rock veteran Skum, the action of Rebel Riot is disgraceful. As he commented afterwards: “(...) when the band publicly paid homage to those bigoted monks groveling on their knees begging for forgiveness, it turned punk rock in Myanmar into the biggest joke.”⁹ In his opinion “You’ll need to stand your ground and not give up before the fight’s even started yet...”¹⁰

What is important about this situation, is that it proved that in Burma, punk rock still has the ability to both shock and organize at the political level and the means to provoke social discussions. It seems that during the heightened persecutions of the Muslim Rohingya ethnic minority, every voice against the growing

⁵ <https://uniteasia.org/myanmar-punk-veteran-skum-kultureshock-discusses-rebel-riot-debacle/> (access: 29.04.2017).

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/therebelriot/photos/a.205869796096907.59349.158831214134099/1626362787380927/?type=3&theater>, access (access: 7.03.2017).

⁷ <http://frontiermyanmar.net/en/punk-band-apologises-to-ma-ba-tha-after-photo-backlash> (access: 31.03.2017).

⁸ Kyaw Thu Win, April 2 at 1:02 am, <https://www.facebook.com/rebelriot?fref=ufi&pnref=story> (access: 2.04.2017).

⁹ <https://uniteasia.org/myanmar-punk-veteran-skum-kultureshock-discusses-rebel-riot-debacle/> (access: 29.04.2017).

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/scumfilth.CultureShock> (access: 5.04.2017).

Islamophobia in the country is important, especially when a committee appointed by the Burmese government to review the United Nations report describing the numerous cases of ethnic violence against Rohingya said that it had found no sufficient evidence to take legal action.¹¹

This conflict also showed that, although the Burmese punk rock scene is small it is also internally divided. For the older generation of Burmese punk rockers represented by Skum and his band Kultur Shock, “kids” from The Rebel Riot “(...) have no real interest in punk music and its ideologies (this is obvious if you’ve actually listened to their songs). They only dress in punk fashion to draw attention to themselves.”¹² In his interview for UniteAsia, Asia’s punk, hardcore, metal news website, Skum as a veteran of Burmese punk rock scene, reminded that in 90’s: “(...) it was common for punks to get arrested on the streets without breaking any laws... I have seen friends forcibly get their heads shaved and thrown into jail for no reason.”¹³ He also recalled the time in which he was put in jail for: “(...) minor drug offenses and assaults, and have also been beat up several times by various groups of conservative assholes!”¹⁴ In response to this, members of The Rebel Riot posted on their Facebook profile, their own statement:

Most of the punks in Burma declare themselves as punks but all they do is using drugs or drunk or shouting themselves as punks. They are the junkies and posers. Nothing more! They don’t have solidarity and sharing spirit. They do nothing for the local punk scenes. They will never know the meaning of community coz they are the selfish bastards and still obeying the bullshit social norms. They also don’t have any punk activities except organizing gigs. Having a punk band doesn’t make u a punk! how many punk band names u know, doesn’t make u a punk! How u live, your way of life and doing something useful decide what kind of punk u are, what kind of person u are. Educate each other, agitate each other, and do the actions against the society, against the system instead of blaming each other.¹⁵

By demonstrating their political views, participants in the Burmese punk scene refer to symbols and values that are different from traditional Burmese. Punks in Burma use anarchistic symbols such as the red and black flags that flutter during their concerts. As it can be observed in Myanmar, punk rock music still holds its power to organize younger generations. At the same time, the very existence of this underground scene is well illustrated by the contrasting faces of modern Burmese youth culture.

One such leader of the Burmese youth culture is Skum, who despite the name, is eloquently spoken and fronts the Crust punk band Kulture Shock. Skum stated

¹¹ <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-investigation-commission-says-it-cannot-verify-un-report-on-rakhine-violence-02142017144854.html> (access: 14.02.2017).

¹² <https://uniteasia.org/myanmar-punk-veteran-skum-kultureshock-discusses-rebel-riot-debacle/> (5.04.2017).

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/oakar.aung.94> (access: 5.04.2017).

that he personally perceives punk as: “the way to my personal liberation as well as the weapon to oppose the system that we’ve grown to hate and despise so much at the same time.”¹⁶ Our conversation took place in his own apartment, where in which the walls were covered with graffiti that had been sprayed on by the band members. The graffiti included several straightforward messages including: “Police F*ck off!”. In 2003 he was arrested and jailed for minor possession of marijuana. At that time he was a student of Yangon University of Foreign Languages and a leader of the first Yangon hardcore/punk band. Skum spent three years in the infamous Insein prison and then another three years in a forced labor camp. His imprisonment was directly connected with his engagement in the punk rock scene. During his time behind bars, he had witnessed several political prisoners rely on religious activities and meditations to cope with the harsh realities of prison life. However, as a punk rocker and an atheist, he never took part in religious activities and meditations. Having experienced the harsh realities of being a prisoner in Burma, Skum has little to no faith in Burmese politicians, therefore strengthening his belief that punk rockers need to stand up for themselves to protect their human rights. In addition to this, he also brought up his stance on the 2015 transition. According to him he found it difficult to note on the matter in that the transition is not complete, however as of now he is not impressed. He emphasized that he doesn’t expect much from what he has already seen until now. In this way, he expressed the traditional Burmese distrust for the government, political power and also his own political pessimism. As Lucien W. Pye stated: “(...) [Burmese] tend to be hypercritical of all those who have power, and they generally expect very little of significance to come out of the efforts of their own leaders” (Pye 1963: 131).

The very complex sociocultural nuances of the punk rock scene this presentation describes owe much to an uncertain political climate in Myanmar. Several members of the punk rock scene witnessed and/or were affected by events such as the 8888 Uprising, the Saffron Revolution, Cyclone Nargis, and also more recent political changes which resulted in the 2015 elections. As one of my interviewees recalled: “In 1988, I was only eight years old so I hadn’t been actively involved in any of the protests, though I’d heard enough gunshots at night and news about the brutal massacres of peaceful protestors by the military from older family members and neighbors.”¹⁷ Burmese punks in both their performances as well as their personal accounts, try to revise dominant identity discourses pertaining to Burmese youth. My interviewee argued that:

there’s totally no such thing as a “Burmese identity”. Despite being the majority and dominant race among the native population, the Burmese people never once had a culture of their own, every aspect of this so-called Burmese culture, even the religious beliefs were directly imported

¹⁶ Interview, 18.02.2017.

¹⁷ Interview, 26.05.2016.

from Indian and Mon-Khmer culture. Thus, the whole idea behind the government trying to protect “Burmese identity” from the decadent outside influences, seems absurd to us because the Burmese traditional culture itself was merely just an outcome of those outside influences of foreign cultures. Nowadays, a lot of Burmese citizens, including those from ethnic minority groups, are actually aware of the fact that the dominant Burmese culture heavily borrowed from Indian and Mon-Khmer cultures and clearly sees through the false pride and lies of deep-rooted Burmese chauvinism, still widely practiced among the whole nation.¹⁸

That is why my main argument is that youth cultures can contribute to the revisions of local identity discourses. Members of the Burmese punk rock scene often refer to national and local politics in the interviews. In their own words there are “crucial differences between the political and ideological viewpoints of punks and the majority of Burmese society, at least to some degree.”¹⁹ According to Skum: “Deliberately or not, we’ve been trying to revise not only the dominant identity discourses, but we also opposed to religious orthodoxy and Burmese chauvinist ideologies, governmental education, traditional customs, mass media and government propaganda.”²⁰ Ongoing liberalization of Myanmar gave broader access to the western music scene and a western style of dress. In these circumstances, engagement in alternative music scenes became “an invitation of disorderliness” (Baulch 2007: 30), a defiant rejection of the former regime’s obsession with order. Punk rockers in Burma fetishized their marginality. When asked where they would position punk rock in the scheme of three broader cultural structures in Myanmar: “parents” culture, the dominant culture and mass culture. Their answer was that they don’t consider punk rock as the part or the subsection of those broader, mainstream cultures. In the words of Skum: “In the first place, we have obviously chosen to stay underground, mainly to act as the very antithesis of those broader and commonly accepted mainstream cultures.”²¹ As well as in Indonesia’s case, during the fall of president Ahmed Suharto’s New Order, also in contemporary Myanmar “the politics of youth culture is a politics of the metaphor: it deals in the currency of signs and is, thus, always ambiguous. (...) Subculture forms up in the space between surveillance and the evasion of surveillance, it translates the fact of being under scrutiny into the pleasure of being watched. It is hiding in the light” (Baulch 2007: 65–66). Recently Yangon punk rock scene attracted huge media attention and coverage. One of the episodes of an MTV series titled “Rebel Music” concerns Myanmar Underground Music scene. It contains a long segment about the Yangon punk rock scene. In 2015, director Andreas Hartmann released his documentary “My Buddha is Punk” which is the story of Kyaw Kyaw the singer and the leader of Yangon based punk rock band Rebel Riot.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Interview, 26.05.2016.

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Interview, 26.05.2016.

For many ethnographic researchers, the existence of punk in Burma illustrates the tragic “mimesis” of Western culture by a formerly colonized people (see Manuel 1988: 22). From their perspective, metropolitan centers in the Third World are seen as being responsible for facilitating Western cultural domination of their peripheral and powerless citizens. Among such theorists, the use of the term *globalization* implies fragmentation, hybridization, and diversification, however “globalization is not the story of homogenization” (Appadurai 1996). During my conversations with the members of Yangon punk rock scene they expressed their disdain for the whole concept of globalization. In their view globalization and the benefits that seem to come along with it are somewhat based on what they consider: “the hypocrisy and false promises of capitalism.”²² It is also: “concealing the neo-imperialist agendas behind the whole thing.”²³ Sociologist Hillary Pilkington describes the punk scene in Moscow during the late 1980s/early 1990s: “In some ways Soviet punk is one of the clearest examples of ‘imitation’ of Western subcultural forms. There can after all be no social base for a movement subverting consumerist lifestyles in a society where a safety pin or a dustbin bag is an article of deficit not abundance” (Pilkington 1994: 228). Such a view suggests that punk symbols can only be meaningful in particular societal contexts, outside of them the appropriation of those symbols can only be construed as “imitation” without a “social base” (Wallach 2008). However, the development of Burmese music traditions was a long historical process, wherein which Burma was influenced by China, Thailand and India. Burmese punk emerged with minimal interference or direct influence from Westerners. It has been incorporated by Burmese youth with little conscious awareness of or concern for the source. Thus, punk in twenty-first century Rangoon is not a radical signifying practice that treats style as the manipulation of ahistorical, disembodied symbols, but rather a form of self-expression and political protest rooted in the powerful and iconic meanings of particular sounds and images, distorted guitar chords, shouted vocals, tattoos and specific dress code etc. The punk scene in Rangoon has adopted a position of subterranean cosmopolitanism that goes beyond purely mimetic attitudes towards its western counterparts. Studies of underground music scenes in Asia have often emphasized the adaptation of Western styles for the production of alternative spaces within which cultural identities can be creatively and playfully reworked (Baulch 2007; Ma 2002). Burmese punk rockers oppose both attempts to either indigenize the punk rock genre through incorporating traditional sounds and/or embrace musical innovations; and instead, maintain their stylistic allegiance to what they perceive as a classic punk sound. Bands like the Sex Pistols, Black Flag, Dead Kennedy’s, Crass all continuously emerged in the conversations with the members of the punk rock movement in Yangon. However, punk music became for them a tool for self-definition against well-established cultural and

²² Interview, 26.05.2016.

²³ Ibidem.

societal norms. As they said, punk rock for them is not a lifestyle, it is an act of rebellion. In their songs lyrics, Burmese Punks focus on trying to make political statements. Song titles like “F*ck Religious Rules”, „Demonstrations everywhere” or “Military Slave Education” speaking for themselves. Their lyrics deal with human rights violations, religious fundamentalism and are also challenging the status quo of a conservative, traditional and a deeply Buddhist Southeast Asian nation. After Burmese punks publicly denounced nationalistic and xenophobic Buddhist monks from the 969 movement, they had gained international attention and widespread press coverage. By criticizing nationalist Burmese monks Yangon punks are directly participating in national political debate in their country. Inquired about their opinion pertaining to the 969 monks, the punk rockers that I had interviewed referred to them as a group of “Buddhist Nazi Skinheads”. That kind of statements in a mostly Buddhist country had a shocking effect on people. However, as a leader of the band Rebel Riot declared, that is the main goal of their actions: “To shake up the people”.²⁴ He believes that only revolution can change the political system in Myanmar, and for him, only punk rock can help him to spread this revolutionary message. According to Skum:

While islamophobia and racist tendencies were deeply rooted in Burmese society, culture and traditions, the 969 movement itself never really had the widespread acceptance and support of the majority of the poor oppressed Burmese citizens. It’s plainly nothing but a conspiracy between the xenophobic fake monks who lust for fame and power, former members of the notorious military intelligence who’re fired and kicked into prison during the power struggle between the juntas and Burmese-chauvinist political scums who’re waiting for opportunities to drive the country back into totalitarianism.²⁵

Yangon punks also recognize that spreading the message is not enough and that action is also necessary, and as a result, they are actively involved in performing charity work to aid the poor. Every Monday they meet beneath the overpass bridge that crosses Sule Pagoda Road in downtown Yangon and they distribute food to the homeless people living on the streets of the city. Meals are financed by donations and cooked by punks themselves. Often they are also distributing clothing. It is a part of the “Food not bombs” movement which was established in the United States in the 1980s. It has a strong antipoverty and nonviolence ethos and it is directly connected to the Western punk rock scene. By taking direct action, punk rockers in Yangon are trying to help alleviate the growing problem of homelessness in the city; a problem in which the government has done little to help. After the country opened up to direct foreign investment, living conditions in the downtown area became even harsher. In 2014 rent prices in the downtown area of Yangon rose about fifty percent, many residents were being forcefully evicted. As Kyaw Kyaw commented: “People here do not have a place

²⁴ Interview, 23.02.2016.

²⁵ Interview, 26.05.2016.

to live, nor a place to die. It's a daily struggle for them just to get by."²⁶ Recently Burmese punks started a new action called "Books not Bombs", their main aim is to distribute, as they say: "worth reading", books to kids and people to educate them on political issues and broaden their intellectual horizons. The reason for which they started this action is, as they emphasized, "the catastrophic state of the educational system in Myanmar."²⁷ However, it also brings back the bleak memory of the Nagani Book Club in British Burma, which distributed revolutionary and leftist literature.

On February 2016 I was invited by Kyaw Kyaw to a punk rock gig located in downtown Rangoon. At the beginning of the event, the atmosphere of the show was tense due to the concerts organizers not having obtained permission for the show. In the entrance of the venue, punk rockers were selling DIY t-shirts and albums for the local punk rock bands. The performance area consisted of four small portable guitar amplifiers placed on the ground on either side of a rudimentary drum kit. Facing the stage was a narrow wooden bench, which served both as a barrier separating performers from slam dancing audience members, and a place for tired fans to sit and rest. The daylong event featured a bunch of hardcore/punk bands playing two or three songs each, using the drums and amplifiers provided by the organizers. Most of the band had English names like Rebel Riot, System Error, Never Reverse or OAF (Our Anarchist Focus).

The groups played in front of a small but enthusiastic audience, and their music, with its convulsive rhythms, angry vocals, and three distorted guitar chords; differed little from that of the early Western hardcore punk groups aside from the lyrics of the songs which were mostly in Burmese. The punks in the audience totaled around sixty, both females and males, the latter being in the majority. They arrived in full punk regalia: mohawks, spikes, locally made T-shirts depicting both foreign and domestic band logos. Despite the intense heat; many wore leather jackets. My presence was warmly welcomed, musicians and fans allowed me to take photographs. I also received an invite to the after party that was organized by the local squat in the center of downtown Yangon. The other audience members paid very little attention to me. I was just another participant in an event that, regardless of its subcultural affiliations, was fully inclusive. The show was a deeply emotional experience, during which Kyaw Kyaw shouted to the microphone his revolutionary message, encouraging his fans to join him in "Saida!" (resistance).

²⁶ Interview, 23.02.2016.

²⁷ Ibidem.

Conclusion

In the twenty first century the Burmese youth are required to deal with their own distinct experiences of political violence, economical marginalization, starvation, suffering and disempowerment. Burmese punks themselves could be considered sign vehicles that index the social inequality, corruption, and as-yet, an unfinished project of national self-definition that continues to characterize life in their country despite it having transitioned to a multiparty democratic form of government. The real question is not how Burmese punk is distinctively Burmese, but rather, how punk music and style operate within a Burmese national youth culture in a complicated, globalized, post-authoritarian reality. Punk music provides a social gathering place for an alienated youth, and it constitutes a viable alternative to the limited choices young men face between a traditional lifestyle, becoming a monk, on the one hand, and gang membership and criminality on the other. More research certainly needs to be done in this area, particularly as the Burmese scene will pretty soon enter its second decade of existence. Although punk scene members are a minority in Burma and they emphasize their distance from the “mainstream” of popular culture, their activity has a significant impact on the lives, attitudes towards politics of the Burmese youth. Underground music provides young Burmese with a set of alternative identities and lifestyles, providing an escape route, or at least the possibility of negotiating dominant discourses about national identity or ethnic origin. At the same time, accentuating the radical attitude of individual autonomy over the dominating power of the state, the symbols he promotes, and the national culture imposed by the state. In specific Myanmar’s context punk rock can be seen as counterculture offering a rehearsal space for more concrete political action.

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