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(Mis)Representation of Burmese Metal Music in the Western Media

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Abstract

Heavy metal music is performed in Burma (also known as Myanmar) by two distinct groups of musicians: generalists, who are part of the mainstream music industry, and underground bands, who differentiate themselves from the mainstream industry in a number of ways. Importantly, the underground performers insist on presenting nothing but their own original songs.

Western-educated journalists have recently published a number of articles about these underground bands, equating their original creations with resistance against the military junta that controlled Burma for the past half-century. The author argues that the metanarrative revealed in such media reports does not accord with the nuanced reality on the ground in Burma. Resistance is not the sole province of underground musicians, and underground bands have a number of different priorities.

Keywords

metal

music

Burma

Myanmar

underground

punk

media

resistance

Friday 17 May 2013: I am attending a metal and hardcore festival at the NASA nightclub in Yangon, the largest city in Burma (a country also known as Myanmar). Ten local bands are scheduled to perform. All the songs I hear evince a consistent aesthetic: a thrash metal sound featuring high levels of feedback on electric guitars, quick tempos and screamed vocals (Weinstein 1991: 48). The organizers had to settle for this venue, which was made available for rent during the afternoon hours, rather than in the evening as the musicians and fans would have preferred. Douglas Long, a reporter for *The Myanmar Times* who has a particular interest in covering the local music scene, tells me that ‘the lack of venues [in Yangon] is really challenging’ for metal and punk groups who attract comparatively small audiences and who want to perform in locations that seat no more than a couple of hundred people (18 May 2013, personal communication).

The audience members are mostly young men who look to be in their teens and 20s; I estimate that maybe 5 to 10 per cent of the fans here are women. Both genders sport long and often artificially coloured hair with black jeans and t-shirts; many of them repeatedly engage in headbanging and showing the sign of the horns. All of the T-shirts I see are emblazoned in

English with names of heavy metal bands from the United States. Many fans hold cigarettes and iPhones, marking them as rather privileged citizens of this tremendously poor country. While the musicians sing mostly in Burmese, virtually every other aspect of the festival would be familiar to metalheads around the world. Notably, the flyer advertising the festival (see [Figure 1](#)) is written entirely in English. This would make the flyer unreadable for the majority of Burmese people; however a prominent punk musician who is an insider, and very knowledgeable about this aspect of the music scene, assures me that this festival's fans can read the flyer because 'they are very into Western culture' (Darko 2013a).

This music festival provided an excellent example of underground music in Burma. In this article, I will explain the varying cultural significance of heavy metal performances in Burma, many of which are not presented by underground bands, but rather by mainstream popular music stars. I will then argue that underground heavy metal bands have been of great interest to English-language journalists in recent years for a number of extra-musical reasons, the most important of which is that the underground bands seemingly confirm the journalists' preferred meta-narrative, that is, the story they want to tell.

Scholarly context

The growing literature on metal music in Asia includes works on China (De Kloet 2010: 54–60; Wong 2011; Campbell 2011: 99–106), Japan (Kawano and Hosokawa 2011), Nepal (Greene 2001, 2011), Vietnam (Gibbs 2008), Bali (Baulch 2007) and the Malay diaspora, including Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia (Wallach 2011). These books and articles are linked by a common methodological thread: each are ethnographic studies. The brief

ethnographic account of the Burmese music festival, above, adds to this body of literature and offers evidence for two preliminary conclusions.

First, the Burmese underground metal scene has many continuities with other metal scenes around the world. Burmese underground metal focuses on the thrash metal sound (Wallach et al. 2011: 11) and the large majority of the participants in the scene are young males (Weinstein 1991: 117) who execute the body movements and wear the clothing associated with metal. Underground metal in Burma therefore confirms Jeroen de Kloet's hypothesis that metal is a 'hard cultural form' that changes relatively little after leaving its culture of origin (see De Kloet 2010: 30; also Weinstein 2011: 56).

Second, my description of the Burmese underground metal scene reveals that it is, at this point, the province of rather privileged young people in that country. Burmese metal therefore contests the so-called Weinstein Hypothesis (Wallach et al. 2011: 16), that is, Deena Weinstein's foundational argument that metal 'addresses youth throughout the world who feel thwarted by technological society and frustrated by its demands' (Weinstein 1991: 120). The participants in the Burmese underground metal scene resemble those in Vietnam (Gibbs 2008: 21) and in Nepal (Greene 2001: 175). As in Nepal, in Burma it is true that 'the heavy metal sound functions as a prestige marker, like many elements of western cultures, especially those involving technology. It is a lifestyle component that marks one as sophisticated and cosmopolitan, much like using English words or wearing Western fashions' (Greene 2001: 174).

The recent spate of journalistic accounts of underground music in Burma does not acknowledge these nuances, which will come as no surprise to scholars of metal. The scholarly

consensus is that English-language media reports about western metal musics are ‘a conglomerate of numerous clichés’ (Roccor 2000: 90) and seemingly wilful misunderstandings of both the music and the motivations of metal musicians and fans (Weinstein 1991: 240; Binder 1993). In this article I argue that media representations of Burmese metal also contain numerous inaccuracies. These inaccuracies are significant because they are deployed to serve a metanarrative that insists that the metal scene in Burma is the locus of progressive politics. The authors of these media reports are committed to representing Burmese metal musicians as heroic resisters of oppression and agents of emancipation, telling a story that is at odds with the nihilistic metanarrative often contained in media reports about Anglo-American metal.

National context

Burma is a country of some 50 million people located in mainland South East Asia. It was colonized by Britain during the nineteenth century and gained its independence after World War II. Following a brief period of parliamentary democracy, a military junta took the reins of government in 1962. The junta, in various guises, maintained control of the central government until 2010. During this period Burma became one of the poorest countries in the world. Moreover, because the military junta promoted an ideology known as the Burmese Way to Socialism, most foreign citizens were forced to leave, and tourist visas were limited to a stay of one week. Burma was therefore rather isolated from the increasing transnational flows of money, people and ideas that marked the latter half of the twentieth century.

It was in this context that Burma’s ‘stereo’ popular music scene developed, beginning in the late 1960s. At this time, foreign – meaning, evocative of British colonialism – cultural

products were forbidden, and therefore deeply interesting to many people. Anglo-American popular music recordings were smuggled into the country by those who had access to the outside world (especially sailors and employees at embassies). Burmese musicians approached these recordings in two ways: they relied on the recordings to teach themselves various popular music genres, which they then performed and contributed to with new, original songs. They also created *copy thachin*, which are recordings featuring Anglo-American melodies, harmonies and timbres, paired with new Burmese lyrics. (*Copy thachin* are sometimes erroneously referred to as 'covers' in English-language media reports.) This situation persists today. Both *own tune* and *copy thachin* compositions are deeply valued by the majority of Burmese music fans, and most pop music musicians perform and create both, although some specialize in one or the other.

Heavy metal in Burma

Like rock, country, reggae and a host of other popular music genres, heavy metal made its way to Burma through unofficial channels and was immediately imitated. Currently, the Burmese popular music scene hosts two distinct instances of heavy metal music. First, heavy metal is presented as one of many styles performed by commercially successful generalists. In this case, musicians who describe themselves as rock music performers record and perform music from a variety of popular genres, including some heavy metal songs. These heavy metal songs may be *own tunes* (original creations) or, more commonly, *copy thachin* of anthemic hits from western countries. Generalists favour the classic heavy metal sound (Weinstein 1991: 44) and their songs generally feature relatively slow tempos and clearly sung melodies. The preeminent example of a group of generalist musicians that performs both middle-of-the-road

rock and heavy metal is Burma's best-known and most commercially successful band, Iron Cross (usually known as IC). Indeed, IC is so committed to heavy metal that they are sometimes called a 'heavy metal band' (Carrier 2006b). One example of an original heavy metal song composed and performed by IC's lead singer, Lay Phyu, is 'Shauk Shauk'. IC also performs a number of heavy metal *copy thachin*, including 'Deyae Dehlae', which is based on the Scorpions' hit 'Tease Me, Please Me'.

Second, Burmese heavy metal exists as a genre presented by underground bands that are committed to exclusively performing heavy metal. At this point, 'underground' music in Burma is virtually synonymous with punk and thrash metal musics, and English-language journalists tend to use these words interchangeably (see Long 2013 and Gingold 2013). Self-identified underground bands usually perform one or the other of these two genres. As one prominent punk musician acknowledged, critics also point out that underground also means, not commercially successful (Ye Ngwe Soe 2013). Their audiences include a relatively high proportion of Anglo Europeans; at a punk concert held at the Eucalypt Restaurant in Yangon on 18 May 2013, I estimated that approximately 30 of the 75 people in the audience were of European descent. Indeed, the lead singer of Side Effect, one of Burma's best-known punk bands, told an American journalist rather proudly that the group has far more American and German fans than Burmese fans (Roberts 2014).

Another important marker of Burmese underground musicians is their determination to differentiate themselves from the larger Burmese pop and rock music industry. One of the most important ways in which underground musicians distinguish themselves from their peers is by performing nothing but their *own tunes*. That said, underground musicians are happy to

participate in the broad Burmese tradition of musical imitation. As I observed at the NASA nightclub show, Burmese underground metal fans and musicians alike identify themselves with the Anglo metal tradition both visually and sonically, and with 'western culture' more generally. However, they despise the Burmese *copy thachin* phenomenon, in which English-language hits are imitated more or less exactly. Ye Ngwe Soe, for example, told me that the reason he refuses to join the Myanmar Musicians Association (an umbrella group representing people working in the industry) is that the MMA is 'full of copy singers' (2013). Underground musicians' expatriate fans and allies support the musicians in part because they are in agreement with this position. Phil Blackwood, for example, is a citizen of New Zealand and the former manager of the 50th Street Café Restaurant and Bar, one of the very few small venues available in Yangon. At the time of our interview in 2013, the bar hosted live music performances by local musicians once or twice per week. When I asked Blackwood if he had ever, or would ever, book a *copy thachin* singer to perform at the bar, he said gently, 'I don't think so' (2013).

Underground Burmese musics in English language media accounts

Since 2010, when Burma's democratic transition took place and the country became much more welcoming to foreigners, English-language journalists have published a number of stories about popular music in Burma, almost all of them focusing on newly established bands. Underground musics – punk and thrash metal – have been of particular interest to these journalists. There are a number of logical reasons to explain why. For example, the underground music scene is small; Kate Whitehead (2013) claims there are only 100 punks in

Myanmar today. Therefore it does not require much time to develop a comprehensive understanding of the scene. Also, the scene is easily legible to English-language foreigners. Some of the leading Burmese punk and thrash metal musicians speak excellent English, and others have strong allies in the expatriate community who are willing to speak to journalists on their behalf. Underground band names (and a small percentage of their lyrics) are always in English. As we have seen, concerts are advertised in English. In sum, writing a story about Burmese punk or metal is a relatively achievable goal, especially for freelance journalists working on small budgets.

However, I argue that recent media interest in underground Burmese musics emerged for reasons beyond the comparative easiness of the story writing task. More importantly, European and American journalists understand underground punk and metal in Burma to be prime examples of the metanarrative they wish to pursue, that is, resistance against repression exerted by one of the world's most notoriously repressive regimes. This metanarrative can be found in reports about mainstream Burmese pop musicians, too. It is encapsulated in the title of a 2006 National Public Radio report about Iron Cross, for example – 'Iron cross battles Burmese repression with song' (Carrier 2006a) – and in the title of a *New York Times* article about a group called the MeNMa Girls: 'Myanmar's first girl band pushes limits of censors, and parents' (Anon. 2012).

Western journalists seem to be particularly interested in underground bands, because they see these bands as especially resistant to the forces of repression inside Burma. The titles of their articles reveal the core of the metanarrative. For example, a *Paste Magazine* article about the punk band Side Effect is titled 'Side Effect: The liberation of Burmese rock' (Mullin

2013). Another example comes from the *South China Morning Post*: ‘Mohawks in Myanmar: Punk rock runs wild in Yangon’ (Whitehead 2013). In this latter article, Darko C of Side Effect is quoted as saying, ‘You could get thrown in jail over nothing. The police used to pick up the punks and beat them up for no reason, and shave off their hair’. This quote supports the central claim of the meta-narrative, highlighting the repressive nature of the Burmese regime and showing that underground musicians are heroes for resisting it. It is interesting to note that Darko himself posted a comment in the comment section below the article, insisting that ‘!!!! I DIDN’T SAY THAT!’ If the quote is invented (having interviewed Darko myself, I think it probably was), it provides a clear example of how foreign journalists are determined to shape their reporting about Burmese musics in order to support the metanarrative.

The metanarrative is enabled by a particular discursive move: In these media reports, journalists conflate resistance against a brutal regime with the creation and performance of their *own tunes*, or original songs. In this understanding, the *copy thachin* phenomenon is a direct result of the military government’s control of the Burmese populace. Therefore, artists who refuse to perform *copy thachin* – such as underground punk and metal bands, who are committed to performing only their *own tunes* – are standing up against an overwhelming force that stifles creativity and freedom of expression. Patrick Winn of the *GlobalPost* elucidates this idea in his article about what he calls Myanmar’s ‘mock stars’:

Copy tracks can be blamed on the domineering junta that has only recently relinquished direct control. Over the last five decades, when the military wasn’t crushing dissidents

or driving the economy into the ground, it was struggling to quarantine the nation's culture against outside influence. (2013)

Later in his article Winn summarizes 'Myanmar's biggest stars: Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, R Zarni and Sai Sai' as 'essentially professional plagiarists'. Heidi Mitchell made the same connection in a *Daily Beast* article about the MeNMa Girls, which begins:

Two years ago, the only pop songs being generated in the country were 'copy tracks,' slavishly reproduced hits copying international stars like Britney Spears, Jennifer Lopez, and various 'K-Pop' idols from South Korea. The country was in mired in decades of military rule, its people reluctant to speak out against political leaders. (2012)

To state, as Mitchell did, that no Burmese musicians wrote their *own tunes* until 2010, is patently false. *Own tunes* have been part of the Burmese popular music scene since its inception, and as early as 1973, one prominent and commercially successful artist named Sai Htee Saing decided to devote himself entirely to his *own tunes* (MacLachlan 2013: 8). Moreover, mainstream pop music artists – that is, performers of *copy thachin* – resisted the military regime in many instances. The best-known recent example is Lay Phyu, lead singer for Iron Cross, who refused to perform at the wedding of a military officer's son (Carrier 2011: 166) and was therefore banned from performing for a time. Other artists subverted the censorship

board in a variety of ways, ensuring that their coded messages would reach their fans (MacLachlan 2013: 160–70). Resistance against government repression did not begin with underground bands – most of whom, it is important to stress, have emerged in the wake of the democratic transition, after the censorship laws were retracted. And more importantly, resistance against the Burmese junta cannot be linked in any facile way to the creation of *own tunes*.

Why, then, does this metanarrative persist in media accounts? In speculating about the answer to this question, I reluctantly indict my own profession: academia. Since publishing my book about Burmese popular music in 2011, I have received e-mails and phone calls from half a dozen journalists seeking to write stories about Burmese punk, metal and rap musics. Based on their mode of discourse, I deduce that these journalists are all products of British and American universities. In other words, they have absorbed the ‘hegemony-resistance’ discourse that became the dominant discourse in academia during the past two decades (Zizek 2002: 66). Therefore, as students of western academia, they begin their reporting by looking for resistance – resistance that may not even be present (Rosenthal and Flacks 2012: 192–93). One clear example of this journalistic orientation arrived in my e-mail inbox while I worked on this article; the message began, ‘I’m working on a story about the rise of Burmese rap as a form of protest’ (anonymous personal communication 11 September 2015).

In conclusion, Burmese heavy metal and Burma’s underground music scene are deserving of further study. It will be important for researchers to base their analysis on rich descriptions of musicians’ sounds, words and actions in context, rather than on preconceived

notions of what particular musics ought to represent. Researching Burmese metal promises to be a fruitful endeavour, and this article constitutes a first step towards that goal.

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