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**SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY  
HIGHER LEVEL  
PAPER 1**

Thursday 8 November 2012 (afternoon)

1 hour

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**INSTRUCTIONS TO CANDIDATES**

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage carefully and then answer all the questions.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is *[20 marks]*.

*Texts in this examination paper have been edited: word additions or explanations are shown in square brackets [ ]; substantive deletions of text are indicated by ellipses in square brackets [...]; minor changes are not indicated.*

*Extract adapted from Keeler, W. 2009. “What’s Burmese about Burmese rap? Why some expressive forms go global”. **American Ethnologist**, 36 (1), pages 2–19.*

Rap music is a new phenomenon in Burma. It is a popular feature of all-night open-air variety shows that consist of several parts, including traditional plays and classical dance, as well as modern theatre and music performances.

When I asked Burmese people about rap music, I was struck by unexpected responses.  
5 The older generation would say something like, “Did you know that Burma has its own rap music?” They were referring to a long-standing practice of call-and-response chanting known as *thañ ja’*. Because African American call-and-response played an important role in the development of rap in the United States (U.S.), the comparison seemed relevant. In *thañ ja’*, one person leads with a seven-syllable line, to which a group responds with an eight-syllable rejoinder. *Thañ ja’* used to be  
10 performed by young villagers during planting and flirting rituals, and most significantly, on festive days when people could joke about and criticize the authorities with impunity.

Younger Burmese, however, never mentioned *thañ ja’* on their own. When I eventually did, they would look at me blankly and either saw no connection between *thañ ja’* and rap, or did not even know the term.

15 The apparent parallels between U.S. and Burmese rap – that both developed in places with a long-standing tradition of verbal display – turned out, however, to be irrelevant. Even if U.S. rap is historically related to “signifying\*” traditions, many of rap’s current consumers in the U.S. like their Burmese counterparts, have no knowledge of those practices. [...]

20 Compared to Western rap, Burmese rap is striking for its mild content, usually about betrayed or unreturned love. Some rap lyrics include the sort of boasting characteristic of Western rap, although more restrained. Generally speaking Burmese rap is less complex and original than U.S. rap.

[...] The mild nature of Burmese rap lyrics can be explained in two very different ways. One explanation stems from the strict censorship the Burmese government exercises over all  
25 public media. Although this censorship is real, pervasive, and effective, it is not the sole explanation. A post-performance conversation with Burmese rapper Kou No We provided another perspective on the matter. In the performance when the audience was largest and most enthusiastic, Kou No We performed a range of rock songs and raps backed up by breakdancers. He was dressed in jeans, cap, glasses and other rap accessories. He had let down his long hair, which was free for him to  
30 toss, sometimes violently. Overall his appearance was aggressive as he stormed about the stage and screamed into the microphone.

However much his appearance in performance implied rage and threats, in conversation with me, Kou No We was perplexed about Western rappers’ crudeness. He had his mother and sisters living with him at home. What would they think if he expressed himself like that on stage?  
35 “We’re Buddhist”, he said, repeating a standard sentiment with which Burmese distinguish themselves from Westerners, “and we know shame”.

[...] In contrast to their use of language, what Burmese rappers do with great enthusiasm is imitate U.S. rappers’ self-presentation. Kou No We certainly looked the part of the energized, enraged rapper both in the way he dressed and how he moved. Burmese rappers use rap to present  
40 themselves in a way they care about: as rich, cosmopolitan and modern, in a society in which all such attributes have been maddeningly difficult to obtain.

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\* signifying: competitive verbal play with a poetic structure characteristic of African American oral tradition

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1. Describe how older and younger generations in Burma and the U.S. understand rap. [6 marks]
  
  2. Using theoretical perspectives, analyse how rap is adapted locally in Burma. [6 marks]
  
  3. Compare and contrast how rap has been used by younger Burmese with how another group has used a cultural practice from outside of its own culture. [8 marks]
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