




# Rethinking the Past and Contextualising the Present: Reading Moko Koza’s “Boy from the Hills”

Rhelo Kenye<sup>1</sup>



This paper critically examines Moko Koza’s music video, *Boy from the Hills* — and its account of the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills during the Second World War — as a creative process of culture. It locates the video as a contemporary text shaped by an intricate network of tradition, shifting cultural ethos, evolving musical sensibilities, and the access afforded by the globalised domain of digital media within the local milieu. Accordingly, it argues that the video enables alternate, yet grounded, ways of reading history and understanding the Naga sense of selfhood in the present. The paper explores the oscillation between accounts from the past — voiced by multiple perspectives in the song — and their retelling by Koza from a contemporary temporal location. It further examines how Koza’s emergence as a cultural representative, embodying a new form of iconicity in the contemporary music scene, is central to the consolidation of his persona as an authorial voice in the reconfiguration of history. Finally, it analyses the role of folk-fusion rap — the genre of this particular music video — in the broader debate on cultural change and loss in Naga society and its connection to the study of history.

**Keywords:** rap, Japanese invasion, Second World War, lullaby, fusion, cultural sensibilities

## Introduction

What is the link between rap music and the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills during the Second World War? How does a genre of popular music, with its origins in the Bronx borough of New York and grounded in the socio-political context and cultural ethos of Black communities, become a medium for recounting an event concerning the Nagas? And in terms of style, how — or why — does this same genre of rap, also known as hip-hop, merge with traditional Naga folk music to articulate a people’s history? Until recently, such a convergence would have seemed improbable. Among other factors, this is particularly so for the historical experience of the Naga aural public, whose musical

---

1. University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India.



**Figure 1:** Thumbnail of the official music video of *Boy from the Hills* (Koza 2023)

tastes have long been shaped by broader forms of Western music such as rock, country, pop, and church music — though traditional folk songs have endured. Moreover, from the standpoint of academic and public engagement alike, discourse on the Battle of Kohima has been conducted primarily through familiar mediums such as books and more intermittently through informal conversations among the local populace. Some of the books include Arthur Swinson's *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought* (2016), Robert Lyman's *Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India 1944* (2011), *Not Ordinary Men: The Story of the Battle of Kohima* (2012) by John Colvin, Charles Chasie and Harry Fecitt's *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War* (2017), Easterine Kire's *Mari* (2010), and the recently published *His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima That Shaped World History* (2023) by Mmhonlumo Kikon. Yet, on 18 September 2023, a six-and-a-half-minute folk-fusion rap music video based on this significant historical event was released on YouTube by Naga rapper and songwriter Moko Koza, featuring Nourhe Zatsu (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> This paper seeks to critically examine how such a mode of cultural production — Koza's song in this instance — is made possible in and through the contemporary Naga music ecosystem. This ecosystem is characterised by a network of intersecting factors: shifting cultural sensibilities, evolving musical orientations among the local populace, both acquiescence and anxiety towards change, the construction of musical identities, and the assertion and reinforcement of an existing notion of Naga collective selfhood. Taking the song *Boy from the Hills* as a case in point, I argue that this interwoven reality of evolving cultural sensibilities and identity/identities, actualised in the creative field of music, is not only deeply embedded in the temporal domain of history but also contributes to how that same history can be

2. The song was subsequently released on other platforms such as Spotify (as part of the album *Naga Manu*), Apple Music, and Jio Saavn. However, this paper's analysis pertains to the version released on YouTube, given its audiovisual dynamic of storytelling and performance.

perceived — and possibly reconfigured. In other words, the artistic agency manifest in Koza’s song makes possible alternate, though not necessarily definitive, ways of reading the history of the Naga people and their present, as well as existing notions of culture in context. This paper thus espouses a form of historical ‘retelling’ through the creative field of music by locating the song’s historicity.

In this regard, the paper also analyses how this potential ‘reconfiguration’ of culture and history is enacted through the performative aspects of the music video, its stylistic fusion, and its reception across different audience registers. The broader disciplinary framework of the paper draws primarily from literary and cultural studies: literary, in terms of analysing and interpreting the music video and its lyrics; and cultural, in terms of reading related questions of identity and representation in the music video, as well as treating the video itself as a text. The question of why the music video is employed as a stand-alone object of analysis deserves brief clarification. The first and seemingly simple answer is that it is a deliberate choice — one that uses the song as a critical entry point to engage the themes and questions at stake. Secondly, a close reading of *Boy from the Hills*, framed through literary and cultural studies lenses, reveals that the video is a “thick text” (Geertz 1973; Berger 2008), rich with themes, questions, and potential trajectories. Along these lines, the paper also considers whether a ‘contemporary’ genre such as Koza’s hip-hop fusion can serve as a viable mode for reading broad domains of cultural history in the Naga context. In the sections that follow, I first offer a brief contextual discussion on the emergence of Moko Koza as an artist — whose work is largely ingrained in the historical, cultural, and everyday ethos of the Nagas. In this context, I examine the viability of his craftsmanship and identity as a Naga musician in articulating a form of people’s history. This is followed by a close analysis of the song itself. The fusion of rap and folk elements — bearing critical implications for the dynamic nature of cultural representation in the Naga milieu — is also considered. Finally, I examine the song’s reception, particularly among Naga youth, and how it is endorsed by institutions such as the state in the broader music ecosystem within which it operates.

## The emergence of the boy from the hills: who is Moko Koza?

Before delving into the analysis of the song, it is crucial to briefly explore and locate Moko Koza’s emergence as a prominent musician in the local music scene as well as in the broader regional hip-hop context. Mvüko Koza — popularly known by his stage name Moko Koza — is a rapper and songwriter. Though a native of Khezhakeno, considered an ancestral Naga village (Zehol and Zehol 2009), and one around which the song in question is centred, Moko Koza grew up in Nagaland’s capital city of Kohima. Koza’s official YouTube channel describes him as “one of the first to introduce multi-lingual and folk fusion rap in Nagaland”.<sup>3</sup> Some of his other music videos that support this description include *Naga Manu*, a satirical rap about everyday Naga life written in Nagamese; *One Day (Khunhie Puo)*, written in English and Tenyidie and exploring the theme of hope; and *Puisa* — meaning ‘money’ in Nagamese — which reflects on the impact of money in Naga society. Thus, beyond stylistic versatility within the rap genre, Koza’s engagement with and articulation of socio-political and cultural issues in context

3. Moko Koza’s YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJBKh7oV\\_NVJHmHEmabuVDw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCJBKh7oV_NVJHmHEmabuVDw).

have contributed to the gradual consolidation of his persona as an emergent 'social commentator', in a manner reminiscent of another Naga musical icon: Methaneilie Solo.

Another significant aspect of understanding Moko Koza's place as an artist is his role as one of the key figures in launching rap or hip-hop music in the Naga music scene, particularly in terms of the reach his songs have achieved among Naga youth. While the late Michael M. Sailo from Mizoram is widely acknowledged as a pioneer of hip-hop music in Northeast India, Koza is part of the current and thriving hip-hop scene in the region and in the broader Indian context. This scene includes a range of forms, such as Dalit rap (Jose and Yeldho 2023), a sub-category known as Northeast Indian hip-hop, and Desi hip-hop.<sup>4</sup> One notable production highlighting this regional momentum is *Northeast Cypher* (2020), in which twelve rappers from the eight northeastern states collaborated, including Moko Koza who represented Nagaland (Singh and Das 2020).<sup>5</sup> He is thus an integral part of a new generation of musicians shaping a popular subculture in the region. While a deeper exploration of the emergence of hip-hop in the Northeast lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that Koza's pioneering presence and contemporary popularity grant him a certain voice — a form of cultural 'authority' over the musical public (Middleton 2006; Niranjana 2020) — which shapes the perceptions and imaginations of his audience. In the context of this paper, this culturally endowed authority, together with his identity as a Naga and native of Khezhakeno, positions Koza and his music as bearing the capacity to narrate and shape readings of Naga history.

Koza's repertoire as a multilingual rapper has also played a key role in constructing his image as a representative of the broader Naga collective — especially through his use of the colloquial Nagamese language. This seemingly straightforward observation holds critical implications in a linguistically heterogeneous society like Nagaland. Much like the legendary Methaneilie Solo — who cultivated a devoted following with Nagamese hits such as *Nagaland City Kuribole* and *Whisky* (also known as *Zuzu* in Tenyidie) — Moko Koza's use of multiple languages, particularly Nagamese alongside English, has enabled him to resonate with and embody a modern construct of Naga identity, which is a confluence of several linguistic traditions. I have argued elsewhere that, despite debates about its legitimacy as a 'Naga language,' Nagamese remains a crucial vehicle for realising a shared Naga consciousness — especially in the cultural domain and public life of its speakers across state and international borders.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Koza's single *Naga Manu*, which premiered on YouTube in 2022, has garnered over two million views on YouTube and has played a significant role in reifying a pan-Naga identity and its expression.

4. *Northeast Indian Hip Hop*. n.d. Volt.fm. <https://volt.fm/genre/4627/northeast-indian-hip-hop>.

5. *Northeast Cypher*, as the name suggests, is a music video in which twelve rappers from the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura came together to produce a cypher — a hip-hop term referring to a gathering or collaborative performance of rappers. The video underscores the need to situate the Northeast Indian hip-hop scene within the national musical landscape, while also engaging with themes of marginalisation and resistance in the nation–region dynamic between India and its Northeast.

6. The use of Nagamese in consolidating a pan-Naga identity across international borders — for instance, in Myanmar — demonstrates the role of Nagamese as a vehicle of agency in constructing a modern Naga political identity. See: Kenye, Rhelo. 2023. *Folk Blues, Howey and Pop: The Cultural Practice of Music in Contemporary Naga Society*. Doctoral thesis, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.

It is within this broad but intrinsic link between language and identity that Moko Koza’s persona as a form of pan-Naga figure emerges. Though arguably not yet on the scale of cultural figures such as Methaneilie Solo or Rewben Mashangva, Koza has nonetheless come to be seen as a Naga cultural representative — though not in a strictly ‘traditional’ sense.<sup>7</sup> His iconicity draws on contemporary sensibilities. In the Naga context, cultural representation has conventionally been rooted in a village-based communitarian ethos, closely tied to the past. While this traditional perspective is not dismissed, Koza’s identification as a cultural representative stems from a more contemporary lens — grounded in the intricate interplay of cultural sensibilities, identity, and historicity described earlier. This cross-tribal character of Koza’s cultural standing — though it might appear obvious — is a crucial precondition for reading and situating his song as a ‘text’ worthy of critical attention within the broader questions of culture, history, and identity in the Naga milieu. This locally distinctive facet grants the Naga hip-hop artist a certain agency and ‘authority’ in narrating history.

It may also be noted that Koza’s affiliation with Kohima bears significant implications, given that the city was the site of the 1944 battle between the Allied and Japanese imperial forces — an event described by some writers as the “Stalingrad of the East” (Dougherty 2008, 159; Ritter 2017, 123).

### ***Boy from the Hills: more than just a song***

During the premiere of the official music video *Boy from the Hills* on 18 September 2023, Infinity Inc. — the creators and music label behind the song — described it as “more than just a song”. They stated:

It is a powerful narrative that echoes the stories of our ancestors, the resilience of our people, and the indomitable spirit of Nagaland. The song speaks of a past marked by the Battle of Kohima, a turning point in history. It brings to life the tales of World War 2, the Japanese Invasion, and the strength of Naga mothers who sang lullabies amidst the horrors of war (Nagaland Tribune 2023a).

While the commercial dimension of this statement — given its source — cannot be overlooked, it is nevertheless important to critically engage with what this description conveys. To that end, an overview of the song, its lyrics, visuals, and participants is necessary. Directed by Asalie Peseyie of Infinity Inc., the music video opens with the clacking sound of a typewriter, lending it an antiquated mood and texture. The following words appear on screen as the video begins:

*1944, in the midst of World War II, the Japanese launched their U-Go offensive into India which led to the epic battle of Kohima. An event that changed the course of world history. An event that tested the resilience of the Nagas. An event that has been famously dubbed “The Stalingrad of the East”. “Boy From The Hills” draws its inspiration from these events.*

7. Naga musicians such as Methaneilie Solo from Kohima and Rewben Mashangva — often referred to as the “Father of Naga Folk Blues” — have been active in the Naga music scene for over three decades. Their popular songs continue to circulate and be received by Naga audiences, having carved distinct niches within contemporary Naga musical culture.

With a traditional Naga tune playing in the background, the scene shifts to the artist's native village of Khezhakeno, where two elders — one-hundred-and-five-year-old Kovotsheo-ü Phizou and ninety-two-year-old Kodolhou Ladu — recount memories of the British presence and Japanese offensive during the war. The video then transitions to an aerial shot of present-day Kohima (Fig. 2) — a panoramic top-down view that slowly zooms in on different parts of the city as the backdrop to Moko Koza's performance. These images of Nagaland's capital alongside Koza's verses reify both the emotional intensity and immediacy of the location for audiences, evoking the site where locals, alongside Allied and Japanese troops, bore the brunt of war.



**Figure 2:** Part of present-day Kohima depicted in the music video (Koza 2023, 1:43)

Following the elders' accounts in their native tongue, Koza begins to articulate the past in English-language bars such as, "Grew from the soil that was stained by the armies / Roots of my past firmly holds to a gory". This generational retelling is interwoven with the melodious strain of a Naga lullaby sung in Tenyidie by Nourhe Zatsu. The latter half of the song returns to Khezhakeno, featuring Moko Koza's ninety-one-year-old grandmother, Terilhwo-ü Ladu, who also lived through the war. In one verse, Koza recounts: "She never really knew how the outside was / Young and so fragile, she would get lost / My grandma told me stories how she ran away from home". The video ends with a dedication to those who died, a tribute to those who survived, and an affirmation of Naga resilience.

While this brief summary cannot do full justice to the song's complexity, it reflects how *Boy from the Hills* indeed aspires to be "more than just a song" — a cultural artefact that reanimates a pivotal moment of Naga history through a genre rooted in the Bronx, New York. The 'resilience' evoked at the song's outset is embodied by the voices of the Khezhakeno elders. By involving these individuals — who are among the few remaining eyewitnesses to the 1944 Japanese invasion — the video offers a platform to recover and transmit firsthand accounts from a war that profoundly impacted Naga society. These participants were, in many ways, direct actors in the wartime encounters

between Japanese forces and Allied troops. That such testimonies are revived nearly eighty years later via a popular music form is both rare and significant. No other song or medium of popular culture in the Naga milieu, to date, has tackled this historical episode — despite the event being rooted in a single village’s experience.

Here, the importance of the popular domain — and especially music — as a conduit of historical memory must be emphasised. Beyond books and institutionalised forms such as the Second World War Museum at Kisama, popular music like *Boy from the Hills* offers a mode of engagement capable of reaching broader audiences, especially younger Nagas. While the reception of the song will be explored further in a later section, it is worth noting that this intersection — between a historical event and an art form with no intrinsic connection to wartime experience — presents an intriguing cultural juxtaposition. It speaks to the changing landscape of Naga cultural sensibilities and the dynamic role of music in negotiating identity and history.

Another key aspect is the role of the artist within the narrative. Although the song recounts the experiences of Naga ancestors during World War II, it is titled *Boy from the Hills*, foregrounding the figure of the boy — presumably the singer himself. Does this risk displacing the historical focus, shifting it instead onto the performer? Do lyrics such as “Boy from the hills coming out like Jumanji” and “Sound from the trees, making waves like Tsunami” — which invoke motifs from global popular culture — indicate a reframing of the past for broader appeal? Do these images, together with the hip-hop form, lack resonance with the cultural ethos of the 1940s?

While such questions resist definitive answers, one may recall that the narrative voice in the song is collective. Koza does not dominate the story; rather, he allows others — particularly centenarian Phizou and nonagenarians Ladu and Terilhuo-ü — to narrate their experiences. In this sense, Koza’s presence does not override but rather coexists with these voices, suggesting a desire to ‘relive’ or reconnect with a shared past. This act of grounding himself within a broader historical narrative — through the medium of music — generates an affective immediacy and deepens the song’s cultural resonance.

Taken together, these observations support the paper’s central argument: that this is a creative process of ‘contemporising’ the past. While the question of whether the music video represents a collective Naga experience remains open, it nonetheless provides a significant platform for reimagining the past and reconnecting with the affective legacy of wartime memory.

## Reading history in the song

In his recently published book, *His Majesty’s Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima That Shaped World History* (2023), Mmhonlumo Kikon writes,

Almost 90 percent of the accounts available on the Battle of Kohima are written by the British, American or even non-Naga writers focusing primarily on the experiences of the British and the Allied forces. Even the Japanese have not done much in this regard. There have been attempts by local authors to write about the three months of ‘siege’ as it were, but most of the authors wrote on the Battle of Kohima and Imphal under the empire’s shadow. (Kikon 2023, 84)

Similarly, in the introduction to Charles Chasie and Harry Fecitt’s *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War* (2017), Easterine Kire, the well-known Naga writer, observes that while books have been written about the Battle of Kohima, all of

them (at that time) with the exception of her work *Mari* (2010), were authored by non-Nagas and “largely focused on the military aspects of a hard-won battle” (Kire 2017, 10). These observations point to the near absence of what might be termed extensive people’s accounts of the war, despite the fact that people from varied Naga villages encountered the Japanese forces in direct and intimate ways. The works cited — by Chasie and Fecitt, Kikon, and Kire — are among those published in the last decade or so that begin to address this lacuna. It is also worth noting a relevant video documentary, *Battle of Kohima 1944 WW2 – A Naga Peoples’ Perspective*, produced by the Kohima Educational Trust (KET) and edited by Highland Dawn Media, which was made available on YouTube in 2017.

In this context, a close reading of *Boy from the Hills* — brief though it may be — offers a window into how cultural texts may surface the nuances and complexities of historical memory. As suggested earlier, the cultural field of music provides a space for revisiting people’s lived experiences of “Britain’s greatest battle”, its enduring or fading legacies, and its place in Naga studies and historical consciousness.<sup>8</sup> In this sense, the song contributes to the growing corpus on the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills during the Second World War.

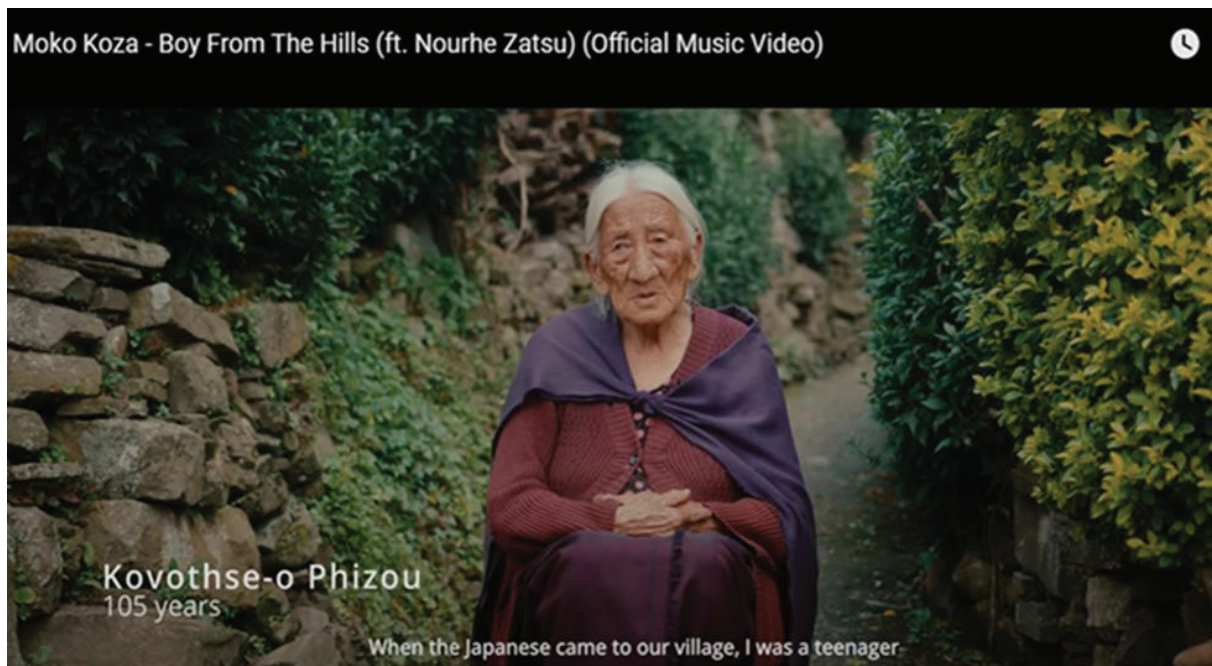
Some of the vivid memories recalled by the elders of Khezhakeno in the song include carrying loads for the Japanese to Kidima village, seeing a helicopter for the first time, observing the different kinds of rifles used by male and female Japanese soldiers, witnessing how the Japanese ate their food, and fleeing home as their village was burned.<sup>9</sup> Kovotsheo-ü Phizou’s memory of carrying loads (Fig. 3) resonates with the experiences of numerous other Nagas who served as porters for both the British and the Japanese during the war. In Arthur Swinson’s *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought*, for instance, one account reads, “Three Naga porters, on the 4th Brigade supply route, were met by a Japanese patrol which was evidently lying up in waiting for them. Their loads were taken, they were beaten up, and left tied to the trees” (Swinson 2016, 174). The point here, echoing Kire and Kikon, is that such porters entered history books through the eyes of the British — with no names, their experiences anonymised and impersonal. This does not diminish the value of Swinson’s work; however, in contrast, here we encounter a centenarian, Phizou, whose story is made accessible through the song.

I may add a personal note here: my maternal grandfather, also from Khezhakeno, recalled going to Kidima — then the Japanese base camp — with paddy grains as a young boy of seven, accompanied by other villagers. He also told of a Japanese soldier who, unable to retreat with his comrades, stayed in Khezhakeno for a time, blending into village life to avoid capture by the Allied forces, before eventually leaving. Returning to the music video, Kodolhou Ladu’s account of serving as a porter for the British troops in exchange for dry fish, seeing male and female Japanese soldiers with different rifles, and describing their manner of eating — all offer a way of viewing history from an ‘everyday’ lens. These recollections contrast with the more conventional and distanced narratives of the Battle of Kohima as a world-historical event. Notably, the mention of

8. The Battle of Kohima was voted “Britain’s Greatest Battle” by the British National Army Museum in 2013 — ranking above other significant battles such as the Normandy landings, the Battle of Waterloo, and Stalingrad.

9. During a conversation with my ninety-year-old maternal grandfather, L. Akro Koza, he recalled that Kidima served as the base camp of the invading Japanese troops. An important detail from the first interviewee — Kovotsheo-ü Phizou — was omitted in the video captions: she mentions the bayonets used by Japanese soldiers to stab those who crossed their path.

Japanese female soldiers and the particular type of rifle they used opens up new lines of inquiry within Second World War studies in the Naga Hills context.



**Figure 3:** Khezhakeno village elder, Kovotsheo-ü Phizou, in the music video, narrating her experience of the Second World War (Koza 2023, 0:24)

Although the accounts here — particularly those of Phizou and Ladu — are limited to two individuals and to a single village, it is arguable that their stories encapsulate broader communal experiences. In other words, their memories are not radically different from those of others who lived through the war. Their narratives focus a lens on the shared experience of the community. These descriptions also impart an affective texture to the reading of history. The sensorial interplay of sound and image in the music video amplifies the emotional dimensions of their testimony. Again, the value of these firsthand accounts — voiced and visualised in the music video — is central to this reading of history. Koza’s verses follow and extend the elders’ recollections. In a sense, they also represent stories passed down through generations. Reading history here implies a hybrid mode of narration, one that fuses actual accounts with poetic interpretation. The result is a composite of fact and lyrical reframing. In the first stanza, Koza situates himself as a descendant of a resilient hill community that withstood the ordeal of war. He reinforces his origin as a “boy from the hills” and expresses a desire to affiliate with the historical narrative of Naga wartime experience. Lines such as “Ready for whatever, I’m a prove it ’cause I’m on one / Son of a hunter, I go hard like a strong rum / Land of the bamboos and the mountain is where I’m from” point to this intent. In the second stanza, drawing on his grandmother’s stories, Koza reinforces this thread of intergenerational connection. The final lines, “My grandma told me stories how she ran away from home / Shook by the war, seeing people on a horse / These stories live on through the tales in the night / She would put me to sleep singing this lullaby”, evoke a powerful sense of continuity. The lullaby becomes a conduit of memory, connecting past and present.

This form of narrativisation, rooted in familial memory and musical form, reinforces Koza’s position within the legacy of wartime storytelling. His inclusion in the narrative

may also be read as an assertion of a legitimate contemporary voice in the act of remembering. A cultural revivalist impulse is discernible here — an impulse that will be explored further in the following section on fusion. At the same time, this desire to become a voice of history is not without its limitations. After all, this video remains a singular cultural production, largely anchored in one village's experience, and may not fully encompass the wider Naga wartime narrative.

Returning to the structure, we see a pattern of alternating storytellers that suggests a dialogic process between past and present. One notable moment is the visual parallel drawn between Koza and his grandmother sitting on a hillside and two actors — representing a mother and son — occupying the same space. As the fusion of rap and lullaby continues to play, these scenes evoke an emotional continuity between generations. The interplay of oral history, lyrical performance, and dramatised reenactment foregrounds the ways in which memory is layered and reconstituted.

Koza's music thus engages in a kind of micro-history. It revives the past in a manner reminiscent of Stuart Hall's view that the past is not simply waiting for us to recover it, but must be continually retold and reimagined; that it must be "narrativised" (Hall 1991, 58). Accordingly, the reading of history in *Boy from the Hills* exemplifies a process of what I term "contemporising the past". Although questions remain about whether this video can stand in for a broader Naga historical experience, it undoubtedly offers a compelling means for today's audiences to engage with and imagine the past.

In this light, the retelling of history through rap underscores the song's stylistic alignment with contemporary popular taste — particularly among youth. Simon Frith, in his essay "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music" in *Taking Popular Music Seriously* (2007), argues that one of music's sociological functions is to organise a listener's sense of time and to shape collective memory. He notes that music enables listeners to experience the 'presence' of the song by suspending time (Frith 2007, 266). Koza's song, in this sense, transposes the past into the present, allowing audiences to encounter history through a sensorial medium.

Conversely, the song also retrojects the present into the past. Rap — an emergent genre in Naga society — gets thrown back into history and overlaid upon an event from the 1940s. This genre, which emerged from the socio-political contexts of Black communities across the transatlantic world, is mobilised here to tell a story from a vastly different cultural ethos. While the notion of music as a universal language might bridge the gap, it does not fully resolve the tension between form and content.

Thus, this relocation of rap into historical terrain carries the risk of distorting the very past it aims to revive. Drawing from Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding (Hall 1973), the encoding of a contemporary genre into a past it does not organically belong to can pose problems of narrative coherence and historical fidelity. Some critics might contend that *Boy from the Hills* is, in part, a vehicle for Koza to insert himself into the historical stage. The fusion of rap and folk, as we will see next, adds further layers to this complexity.

## Folk-fusion rap and its implications

The affective sense of proximity and connection to the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills that *Boy from the Hills* evokes — particularly for Naga audiences — can be attributed in large part to its incorporation of Naga folk music. In addition to featuring the recollections of Khezhakeno village elders, the video fuses rap with an Angami-Naga

traditional folk tune, a lullaby titled *Nuo Kepfü Pfhe*, which may be translated as “the sound of carrying a child” (Fig. 4).



**Figure 4:** Scene from the music video featuring Nourhe Zatsu singing an Angami Naga lullaby (Koza 2023, 3:15)

A closer reading reveals that, before the beat of Koza’s rap begins, the music opens with a folk tune accompanied by the *tati*, a traditional stringed instrument. Although rap and folk eventually merge in the track, the choice to begin with traditional music establishes a tone and mood that allows the audience to engage with the cultural ethos of the community and its history. Beyond its aesthetic value, the use of the lullaby introduces a functional and everyday dimension of folk song into Koza’s creative work. Its inclusion is not simply a stylistic gesture to lend a ‘local’ or ‘traditional’ touch to the song; it is integral to the narrative. The act of remembering lullabies sung to children during the turbulence of the Second World War — situated within the broader Naga lifeworld — extends the contextual terrain of historical memory that the song seeks to inhabit.<sup>10</sup>

Returning to musical style, I have previously argued that the creative process of folk-fusion in the Naga context is often embedded in broader debates around cultural preservation and change. While I have explored this question elsewhere in greater depth, it is important to note here that the concept of culture in the Naga context is often equated with tradition, and this is frequently imagined as a legacy handed down from a “pristine past”.<sup>11</sup> This prevailing view posits culture as the accumulated customs,

10. I have not dwelt at length on the content or subject of the lullaby itself. It is evident, however, that the lullaby carries broader and older cultural implications, beyond its immediate context in the song and wartime setting.

11. I have engaged with this theme in detail in my PhD thesis, where the works of musicians such as Rewben Mashangva, Abiogenesis, and Methaneilie are critically examined in relation to questions of cultural change and loss. The theme of cultural anxiety in contemporary Naga society is also explored at greater length in another working paper currently in progress.

beliefs, rituals, attire, and practices — such as folk songs and dances — passed down from the ancestors. This notion is frequently animated by a romanticisation of the past and a concern about cultural loss.

In academic discourse, this line of thinking has been shaped largely by postcolonial studies, which attribute the erosion of traditional Naga culture to colonial and missionary encounters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Processes such as modernisation, proselytisation, and Westernisation continue to be viewed as forces of cultural disruption and disintegration.<sup>12</sup> To be clear, I am not disputing the legitimacy of such a perspective, nor the significance of those historical processes. Indeed, recent scholarship by Jelle J. P. Wouters, Dolly Kikon, and Kanato Chophy, among others, has critically engaged with the vernacular politics, tribalism, migration, Christianity, food cultures, and other dimensions that comprise the multilayered fabric of contemporary Naga identity and cultural life.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, this dominant discourse — both academic and popular — tends to reify culture as a fixed, bounded inheritance. It presents a temporally rigid framework, where tradition and authenticity are often positioned in opposition to external or modern influences. It is within this broader conceptual space that *Boy from the Hills* — as an instance of folk-fusion rap — must be located. The remainder of this section, therefore, critically examines how Koza's song, by blending a global music form with traditional elements, negotiates with this hegemonic narrative of Naga culture.

Notably, Moko Koza is not the only Naga musician to experiment with fusion music. Several others have established themselves through such hybrid musical forms. These include Rewben Mashangva, the Tangkhul Naga musician often called the "Father of Naga Folk Blues", whose music fuses folk with blues; Abiogenesis, a Dimapur-based band whose self-described genre "Howey" blends folk with rock; and the Tetseo Sisters, who sing *Li* — songs in the Chokri language of the Chakhesang tribe — infused with electro-folk, pop, and world music elements. These artists have created an experimental musical field that, to many, appears to embody a revitalised form of Naga culture.

However, as earlier noted, such creative interventions are not free from criticism. They sometimes provoke anxiety around misrepresentation of traditional folk music. In the feature-length documentary *Songs of the Blue Hills* (2013) by Utpal Borpujari, Ao Naga elder and folk musician Bendangyannger Jamir expresses concern that Abiogenesis does not perform "real" Naga folk music, precisely because it blends other styles. He also recounts being invited by the band to teach them Ao folk songs. This tension — between preservation and innovation — resurfaces in critical responses to Koza's work as well. It raises the question: how is the fusion in *Boy from the Hills* received in a milieu that remains invested in a rigid, historically grounded understanding of culture?

Firstly, Koza's folk-fusion rap underscores the fact that contemporary music-making — and its reception — is embedded in a socio-cultural present that is markedly different

12. Works such as Tezenlo Thong's *Progress and Its Impact on the Nagas: A Clash of Worldviews* (2014) and *Colonization, Proselytization, and Identity: The Nagas and Westernization in Northeast India* (2016) exemplify this perspective.

13. See, for example, Jelle J. P. Wouters' *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency: Tribe, State and Violence in Northeast India* (2018), and *Nagas in the 21st Century* (2017), co-edited with Michael T. Heneise. Also relevant are Dolly Kikon and Bengt G. Karlsson's *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India* (2019); Dolly Kikon and Duncan McDuie-Ra's *Ceasefire City: Militarism, Capitalism, and Urbanism in Dimapur* (2021); and G. Kanato Chophy's *Christianity and Politics in Tribal India: Baptist Missionaries and Naga Nationalism* (2021).

from the context in which the idea of “uncontaminated” tradition was constructed. Rather than being locked within a static conception of culture, *Boy from the Hills* reflects a creative negotiation with tradition in a globalised, multicultural world. As previously highlighted, the song stages a dialogic encounter between the past and the present — between a traditional lullaby and rap and between lived accounts from the 1940s and contemporary musical expression. The interaction between Koza and the war-era elders, the performance of *Nuo Kepfü Pfhe*, and the donning of traditional attire by Nourhe Zatsu, the actors playing mother and son, and Koza himself in certain scenes, all reinforce this sense of temporal continuity. In this light, the song contests the binary of tradition versus modernity. Rather than simple opposition, it gestures toward a layered articulation of cultural continuity.

Secondly, there is a subtle yet significant distinction in how *Boy from the Hills* fits into debates on culture and change. While the fusion genre certainly raises questions about tradition, the *content* of the song — its focus on the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills — is not directly enmeshed in that debate. In other words, the narrative material of the song does not centre on themes of cultural loss. Instead, it is the *form* — the musical style — that is engaged in cultural contestation. Rap, fused with folk, becomes the site of tension. This points to a broader concern: the dominant framework that positions culture solely as a legacy of the past may limit our understanding of the full spectrum of cultural expression in a globalised present.

In this regard, *Boy from the Hills*, despite its limitations, prompts critical rethinking. It shows that culture is not merely something inherited but something made, performed, and negotiated. From this perspective, we may return to the question that opened this discussion: what is the relationship between hip-hop and the Battle of Kohima? The answer, it would seem, lies in the creative use of music to reach contemporary audiences. It is through this aesthetic strategy that music and memory converge.

Although this aspect may lie slightly outside the scope of this section, it is worth noting that rap as a genre is frequently associated with themes of protest and resistance (Krimms 2000; Chang 2005; Ogbur 2009). Koza’s broader oeuvre reflects this characteristic. Songs such as *I’m a Naga* (2020), which borrows the iconic beat from Dr. Dre’s *Still D.R.E.*; *Northeast Cypher* (2020), where he represents Nagaland; *Naga Manu* (2022); and *Tribally Savage* (2021), are marked by defiance toward hegemonic structures, including the Indian state. In *Boy from the Hills*, protest takes a more subdued form: a tone of retrospection and historical resentment. Lines such as “Grew from the soil that was stained by the armies / Roots of my past firmly holds to a gory” convey an emotional reckoning with the violence endured by Naga ancestors. Viewed within the broader arc of Koza’s musical output, this song too expresses a mood of critique — albeit through memory rather than direct confrontation.

## Some perspectives across audiences and platforms

Given that rap is among the most current and popular forms in the local music scene, it may be inferred that the audience for Moko Koza’s songs consists largely of youth — or conversely, that the genre’s popularity is itself a result of its consumption by youth. This observation holds important implications for the analyses developed thus far. Chiefly, it indicates that nearly all those who have listened to or watched *Boy from the Hills* did not live through the Japanese invasion of the Naga Hills. As mentioned earlier, Koza’s aspirational tone — his attempt to connect with the past through his verses and the accounts of Khezhakeno village elders — points to the generational gap between

knowing about the war and experiencing it. Furthermore, given the general absence of this episode in everyday discourse, historical familiarity with the Japanese invasion and the Battle of Kohima appears to be relatively limited among Naga youth today — and virtually absent in Indian mainstream narratives. This is the broader audience context in which Koza's music video has emerged and continues to circulate.

Although not grounded strictly in Stuart Hall's reception theory, the observations here resonate with his view that the meaning of a cultural or literary text does not reside solely within the text but is actively interpreted by audiences. *Boy from the Hills*, in this regard, creates an imaginative space for its audience — particularly Naga youth — to engage with the history it narrates. Even beyond the Naga context, responses to the video on digital platforms such as YouTube reveal reception among audiences from the West, whose engagement reflects a shared yet geographically and culturally distinct perspective on the Second World War. These dynamics echo the argument developed throughout this paper: that reading history is a dialogic process, and that the possibility of reconfiguring both culture and history lies in preserving their essence while adapting their form.

In this context, the idea of culture and history in the Naga milieu cannot be restricted to existing frameworks — such as postcolonial approaches that emphasise decolonisation and often advocate for a return to a 'pure' or isolated past. The reception of Koza's video among youth, especially, points to a mode of cultural identification that exceeds such binaries. The video's blending of traditional and modern elements does not alienate its viewers but appears to invite them to see themselves reflected in both.

With regard to the fusion of rap and folk in the video and how it is received, a critical observation can be made: there appears to be a form of tacit 'consent' among audiences to accept the song as an authentic expression of Naga traditions and lifeways. Whether this consent is consciously articulated or not, it is evident in the comments on the video's YouTube page. Many viewers do not regard the fusion of rap — a genre rooted in the Bronx — with Naga folk as a contradiction. Rather, they embrace it as a creative affirmation of their cultural roots. Comments such as "Proud of you for promoting Naga culture musically", "It takes us back to the realm of our ancestral roots...", "Love it. Thank you for sticking to your roots. Being both modern and traditional is a task not easy, but it is the only optimal way forward for the present and future Naga generations", and "Your lyrics make us feel so good to be a Naga" reflect this receptive sensibility. This form of unconscious consent suggests that the audience is not merely consuming the song but participating in the collective imagining and reconfiguration of history and culture.

Another aspect worth noting is the institutional reception of the video. The official music video of *Boy from the Hills* premiered at the Regional Centre of Excellence for Music and Performing Arts (RCEMPA), a cultural centre established by the Government of Nagaland. The premiere was attended by officials and representatives of the state government's Task Force for Music and Fine Arts (TaFMA). This information highlights an important feature of the contemporary Naga music scene: the visible involvement of the state in its promotion and curation. TaFMA, which evolved from the earlier Music Task Force (set up in 2006), has since 2019 actively supported musicians across Nagaland, including those outside the principal hubs of Dimapur and Kohima. Moko Koza, for instance, was one of eleven recipients of the TaFMA Excellence Awards for 2022–2023 (Nagaland Tribune 2023b).

The point here is not to celebrate state intervention uncritically but to consider how Koza's song functions within a contemporary music ecosystem marked by collaboration between musicians, audiences, and state institutions. In light of the earlier discussions

around the song's cultural authenticity and its role in reimagining history, the fact that a government body endorses *Boy from the Hills* suggests that the question of whether it can be deemed a legitimate cultural artefact may be somewhat misplaced. Rather than asking whether the song represents 'true' Naga culture, it may be more useful to observe how different social actors — including state agencies — are co-producing a space in which music becomes a creative process of cultural expression, historical engagement, and identity formation.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to study Moko Koza's *Boy from the Hills* as a text that reflects a particular mode of articulating and responding to the contemporary sensibilities and perceptions of its audience — Naga youth in particular. The viability of treating the music video as a text, as a kind of document in its own right, is underpinned by the gradual emergence of the artist as a visible figure in the contemporary Naga music ecosystem and society more broadly. As discussed, Koza's musical productions are among the few in the current Naga music scene that directly engage with broader questions of culture, history, and identity.

The inclusion of multiple voices in the music video and the interaction between them, where lived accounts of war survivors are interwoven with Koza's lyrical retelling and the traditional folk tune of the lullaby, demonstrates how music can become a medium for representing the histories and everyday experiences of the Naga people. The video, in short, evokes an affective sense of proximity to the past and, in doing so, foregrounds an enduring cultural ethos of the Nagas as a collective. These considerations make a strong case for treating this music video as a stand-alone object of critical analysis.

*Boy from the Hills* exemplifies music as a performative and creative process of culture — one that contributes to the reconfiguration of meanings and perceptions of the collective self in the Naga context, while also preserving and reinforcing the values, aspirations, and sensibilities of that same cultural and political community.

## References

- Berger, John. 2008. *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Borpujari, Utpal, dir. 2013. *Songs of the Blue Hills*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FignA7kpuWg>.
- Chang, Jeff. 2005. *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*. London: Ebury Press.
- Chasie, Charles, and Harry Fecitt. 2017. *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War*. Norway: Barkweaver.
- Chophy, Kanato G. 2021. *Christianity and Politics in Tribal India: Baptist Missionaries and Naga Nationalism*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Colvin, John. 2012. *Not Ordinary Men: The Story of the Battle of Kohima*. Philadelphia: Casemate Publishers.
- Dougherty, Martin J. 2008. *Land Warfare*. San Diego: Thunder Bay Press.
- Frith, Simon. 2007. *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hall, Stuart. 1973. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." Discussion Paper. University of Birmingham, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

- Hall, Stuart. 1991. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anthony D. King, 41–68. Binghamton: SUNY Press.
- Jose, Jomal, and Joe Varghese Yeldho. 2023. "Arivu's Dalit Rap: Cultural Resilience and Harnessing Hip-Hop for Cultural Assertion." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X231168244>.
- Kenye, Rhelo. 2023. "Folk Blues, Howey, and Pop: The Cultural Practice of Music in Contemporary Naga Society." PhD diss., English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad.
- Kikon, Dolly, and Bengt G. Karlsson. 2019. *Leaving the Land: Indigenous Migration and Affective Labour in India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kikon, Dolly, and Duncan McDuie-Ra. 2021. *Ceasefire City: Militarism, Capitalism, and Urbanism in Dimapur*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kikon, Mmhonlumo. 2023. *His Majesty's Headhunters: The Siege of Kohima That Shaped World History*. Gurgaon: Penguin Random House India.
- Kire, Easterine. 2010. *Mari*. Gurgaon: HarperCollins India.
- Kire, Easterine. 2017. "Introduction." In *The Road to Kohima: The Naga Experience in the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War*, by Charles Chasie and Harry Fecitt. Norway: Barkweaver
- Krims, Adam. 2000. *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lyman, Robert, 2011. *Japan's Last Bid for Victory: The Invasion of India 1944*. Barnsley: Casemate Publishers.
- Middleton, Richard. 2006. *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music*. New York: Routledge.
- Moko Koza. 2021. "Tribally Savage (Official Video) (Prod. by INA)." YouTube, December 15. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rZMvfTjq9pI>.
- Moko Koza. 2022. "Naga Manu." YouTube, August 7. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vylA2NHVCIo>.
- Moko Koza. 2023. "Boy from the Hills." YouTube, September 18. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZWZo7LZA-KE>.
- Nagaland Tribune. 2023a. "Music Video of Moko Koza's 'Boy From the Hills' Hails Resilience of Naga Elders." *Nagaland Tribune*, September 18. <https://nagalandtribune.in/music-video-of-moko-kozaz-boy-from-the-hills-hails-resilience-of-naga-elders/>.
- Nagaland Tribune. 2023b. "TaFMA Excellence Awards 2022–2023: Eleven Achievers Receive Honours from Governor Ganesan." *Nagaland Tribune*, September 4. <https://nagalandtribune.in/tafma-excellence-awards-2022-23-eleven-achievers-receive-honours-from-governor-ganesan/>.
- Niranjana, Tejaswini. 2020. *Music, Modernity, and Publicness in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ogbar, Jeffrey O. G. 2009. *Hip Hop Revolution: The Culture and Politics of Rap*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Ritter, Jonathan T. 2017. *Stillwell and Mountbatten in Burma: Allies at War, 1943–1944*. Denton: University of North Texas Press.
- Singh, Abhilash, and A. J. Das. 2020. "Bringing Northeast Closer with the Entity That Is Hip Hop: Northeast Cypher 2020." *East Mojo*, December 24. <https://www.eastmojo.com/music/2020/12/24/bringing-northeast-closer-with-the-entity-that-is-hip-hop-northeast-cypher-2020/>.
- Swinson, Arthur. 2016. *Kohima: The Story of the Greatest Battle Ever Fought*. New Delhi: Speaking Tiger.

- Volt.fm. n.d. *Northeast Indian Hip Hop*. <https://volt.fm/genre/4627/northeast-indian-hip-hop>.
- Wouters, Jelle J. P. 2018. *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency: Tribes, State, and Violence in Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Wouters, Jelle J. P., and Michael T. Heneise, eds. 2017. *Nagas in the 21st Century*. Kohima: The Highlander Books.
- Zehol, Lucy, and Kevekha Kevin Zehol. 2009. *The Legendary Naga Village: A Reader (Khezhakeno)*. Dimapur: Heritage Publishing House.

