Shifts in Music Consumption : A Middle-aged Naga Woman's Perspective

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See the 9-year-old girl who tried to record herself singing 'Nobody's Child' by pressing 'record' on the family cassette player and erasing the original music on the inserted cassette. Listen to the 12-year-old tell her father that Madonna's 'Papa Don't Preach' was for him. Watch that moody teenager lose herself in the rhythms of Debbie Gibson's 'Electric Youth' or form a short-lived girl band with friends from high school, inspired by the vocal stylings of Wilson Phillips. Try to get that young woman's attention as she walks through Darjeeling, Mumbai, or New Delhi, with earphones on, a Walkman clipped to her backpack, listening to top-40 western pop compilations. She is listening to firangi music that takes her away from the banality of her strict, small-town Nagaland upbringing.

Now watch this other 9-year old girl lip syncing to a Cardi B song, while she also does the floss dance. She live-streams her 30-second video on her phone via a social media app for the likes, comments, and shares of her hundreds of followers. That video may go viral, perhaps even catch the attention of the original artist herself, who might re-share it with approving comments, thus bestowing some brief fame and glory on that little girl. But the girl's hoping that one day soon when she's older, maybe when she is 12, she can become famous, *and get paid*, for making even more creative variations of what is already out there on social media. She'd certainly do a better job with 'Nobody's Child' if it ever came to that.

As I write this in 2020, I'm an older woman and the world has changed far beyond my capacity or willingness to go with the flow. Music has changed. Listening has changed. Songs are 'consumed' on online streaming platforms that offer professionally curated playlists suitable for activities like exercise, cooking, reading, gardening, and baking. Up-and-coming performers use crowdfunding sites to finance the production of their music, and social media sites like TikTok have increasingly sophisticated tools which allow anyone from anywhere to create a mash-up of audio and video clips; TikTok in particular due to its 'impressive suite of video-editing tools, Snapchat like AR filters, and features that let you sync your video to nearly any soundtrack you can think of" (Lorenz, 2018).

Here's my disclaimer—I do not belong to the demographic which social media apps like TikTok appeal to, so it would be disingenuous of me to speak from the perspective of a knowledgeable insider/user. Instead, I would like to approach this topic from the perspective of an older, bemused but still curious onlooker, watching how the landscape is changing. Primarily, this perspective is channelled through a lens of music consumption – by approaching it from my personal history as a Naga woman.

To set the context, I identify culturally as a member of the Changki clan from the Ao-Naga tribe, which is part of the Naga tribal collective of Nagaland state in North-East India and, more recently, as an Australian of Indian origin.

I was born in the 1970s and grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, with music always a presence in my life. By 'music' I must clarify that I mean western music, music sung or made by English, European, or American singers and bands. This was the music I was mainly exposed to at home in Nagaland. Singers and performers who were the usual easy listening suspects were ABBA, Boney M., Bob Dylan, The Doobie Brothers, The Carpenters, The Eagles, Engelbert Humperdinck, Jim Reeves and his many Christmas albums, John Denver, and Kenny Rogers. All on vinyl.

When attempting to discuss music in a Naga context, let alone a Naga woman's context, it is difficult to set aside the influence of Christianity and its associations with western musical traditions and styles. So in church we encountered another kind of western music – Christian hymns in English, which were also conveniently available as translations in the standard Ao-Naga dialect, Chungli. This contrasted with the practice of the modern Aos using the Mongsen dialect for singing folk songs and conveying other traditional information and stories. My mother always ensured that all five of her children carried their own

copies of the hymn book for Sunday service. I think that is where I made my first acquaintance with the western notation symbols in music – by staring at them on the printed page of each hymn we sung in church, and eventually working out that those lines and squiggles represented the tune, the melody of the words we had learned by heart.

At the same time, western Christian contemporary music in the pop and rock genres was also becoming popular in the local church youth services. American Christian rock bands like Petra and Whiteheart were popular, as were singers like Amy Grant with 'El Shaddai' and the urban gospel sister duo Mary Mary with 'Shackles (Praise You)'. This musical evolution was a far cry from singing traditional hymns in the youth choir. Instead, here were devout men and women declaring Christian messages through musical forms that our parents did not approve of – rock, pop, heavy metal, and even rap.

Generally, in Nagaland an awareness about Christian mores and values tends to accompany music-making and consumption, more so than an awareness of the lack of gender equality in the same sphere. On the face of it, it seems as if there is a level playing field in terms of access to music education at least. There are a good number of music schools in Nagaland, all operating to some degree of success. In Chumukedima, Patkai Christian College offers a Bachelor of Music degree through the Margaret Shishak School of Music where the curriculum focuses on western classical, sacred, and ethnic music, along with tuition in instruments such as the piano and the violin. During my time at Patkai, male friends pursuing the music degree focused on learning classical guitar and classical piano, while female friends concentrated on vocals and sacred music studies. In Kohima, there are music academies such as MAK (Music Academy Kohima), Mountain Music Academy, and Cheli Music Academy, all of which offer similar curricula ranging from training in classical music, contemporary genres, and church music.

Capitalizing on this already-established culture of music making and consumption, a state government initiative originally known as MTF (Music Task Force) was rebranded in 2019 as TaFMA (Task Force for Music and Arts). MTF was 'created by the state govt [sic] to encourage Naga musicians to take up music as a profession rather than a hobby' (Ambrocia, 2019). The rebranding further expanded the task force's remit to include artists of all genres, while still retaining its special interest in promoting talented Naga musicians. For example, TaFMA has sponsored Imnainla Jamir, a teenager with a talent for the electric

guitar from the small town of Mokokchung, to study music at an academy in Kohima. 'She is young and extremely talented. When we saw her [Instagram] videos, we knew we had to get her here,' says Theja Meru, adviser to TaFMA since its rebranding (Agarwala, 2020).

I do not recall many folk songs original to my clan or tribe. Nobody I know sang the old songs, except maybe during specific Ao-Naga festivals. But I think Senti Toy's 2007 album *How Many Stories Do You Read On My Face*, a blend of jazz, blues, and pop, could be regarded as an early example of an original Naga album albeit sung mostly in English. It was made and produced in the US where Toy resides, but the songs are full of longing for a vanished homeland, circling around themes of Naga place, Naga female identity, and Naga belonging. Her song 'Say a Word' can be regarded as a fine example of an original Naga song, mainly because of the use of words from different Naga tribes, words that mean similar things – beautiful, dear, little flower. It is a song that I can imagine being sung by mothers to their daughters, reinforcing those feminine ties within a constricted patriarchal cultural context. The lyrics consist mainly of terms of endearment in the Ao, Angami, and Sumi dialects: *zivise* – beautiful, *anei-u* – my dear little boy, *akhala* – my dear little girl, *naroza* – little flower.

I grew up in a family with four male siblings, all with their own individual musical tastes, so there was always music at home. From one room, Iron Maiden would blast out; from the second, late 80s rap music; from the third shared by the two youngest boys, the sound alternated between 90s punk rock and Bollywood/ Hindi pop. And from my room, the classics of course – Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, New Kids on the Block, and all the other pop starlets and boy bands that came after. I did not discriminate – it was all one to me, a smorgasbord of ear candy, bright lipstick, big hair, shiny jackets, and rainbow leggings.

The point was that we all had control over the music because all of us had the means to play what we liked in our rooms, instead of fighting over the record player in the living room (fighting over the one TV set to watch MTV came later). We could choose which singer or band to listen to; we decided how loud or how low the volume would be in our rooms, give or take a few parental guidelines.

Later, the notion of control became more nuanced. We learned about copying and recording songs from one cassette to another. We learned that we could record different songs from different cassettes on to one cassette and create mix tapes which we gifted to our friends, girlfriends, or boyfriends. I still recall

hearing a mix tape compiled by someone's older brother, where every second song on both Side A and Side B was Michael Jackson's 'Billie Jean'.

After I moved to Australia in the early 2000s, one of my brothers regularly sent me mix CDs every Christmas, filled with his carefully curated playlists of songs that he hoped would improve my musical tastes beyond the top 40. By 2009, the mix CDs stopped coming, probably an unconscious response to the explosion in online streaming services and digital downloads of individual songs.

Looking back, I suppose those early forms of media sharing were, to paraphrase something from the movies, a kind of pre-historic music piracy, a venial precursor to the new forms of media piracy and media sharing made possible by advancements in audio-visual technology.

These advancements were not limited to technology but also included the devices themselves. How I liked having new devices through which to play music – portable compact disc players, Sony Walkmans, the first iPods, then iPod Nanos, and other MP3 players, and then suddenly, a plethora of ways to get, or listen to, the song you wanted without having to buy the whole album.

Here is a snapshot of how my access to songs and music evolved through time: the Sanyo player, the original 20GB iPod, the smaller 4GB iPod Nano, the CDs, the cassettes – I still have these items stored away in a box. I brought them out for a little photo shoot because it felt necessary to offer a visual record of these obsolete wonders.

These days, when I go for my morning walk along the esplanade, I listen to music saved on my Garmin smartwatch via Bose Bluetooth ear pods. These ear pods are not as sleek as the Apple ones and tend to stick out a little like Shrek the ogre's ears, but there you go … I've done my bit in not becoming an iClone.

Thus, from my limited perspective, 21st century 'music-consumption' seems to be subject to a great many factors, trends, influences, and ever-evolving technological developments.

When the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic occurred leading to lockdowns all over the world, like everyone else, I noticed interesting shifts in how we communicated with each other and how we consumed every form of media possible. Even when the physical location was off-limits, the local Queensland Council Library started offering unlimited access to its music and film streaming services via its website. And for the first three months or so of that soft lockdown, even the magazine app that we used for accessing the library's digital magazines expanded its titles, bringing in digital versions of magazines from South Africa, Singapore, Europe, China, and of course India.

It is common knowledge I think that the internet turned out to be modern society's saviour in many ways, not least its ability to keep people connected through social media.

In an online article that explores how the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic affected music consumption, we learn that:

> … TikTok saw an astounding 18% week-over-week increase in downloads in the U.S. from March 16th to the 22nd. In fact, the short video platform saw a 5% global increase in downloads from March 1st to the 23rd, compared to February 1st to the 23rd. TikTok has continued its surge, as it was the second-most downloaded non-gaming app worldwide in April, after Zoom. TikTok has shown that a younger generation actively wants to use music to express themselves and take part in the making of hit songs and artists." (Grant, 2020).

What I find interesting about this observation is not the impressive statistics, but the sentiment that an app like TikTok shows '… that a younger generation actively wants to use music to express themselves and take part in the making of hit songs and artists.' I would say that this desire is not the exclusive domain of the young and the now. I would also suggest that for as long as humans have been making music and performing for an audience, that desire has always existed,

and has generally, but not always, been viewed as a kind of catharsis. A purging that a citizen of Ancient Greece probably knew all too well, where the average citizen was encouraged to see a play to purge himself/herself of bad emotions by way of witnessing a kind of repetition on stage through the suffering of the hero.

Of truth, of light, of the forms. Early Plato wanted artists banished from his republic; he considered their craft a mere 'mimetic' representation of reality. But that is a discussion for a different essay. The Greek term *mimesis* meaning 'imitation' and its related term *mimeme* meaning 'something which is imitated' are the root stock for the modern term 'meme', and its own controversial by-product, the internet meme.

'Meme' as a word was first devised by British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. The tentative definition he offered was that a meme was a unit of cultural information, just as a gene is a carrier of biological information. Later, in a 2013 New Director's Showcase collaborative performance piece sponsored by Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide's Creative Board, Dawkins, with great enthusiasm, expanded on his original definition by acknowledging the internet meme as '… a hijacking of [his] original idea. … internet memes are altered deliberately by human creativity. There is no attempt at accuracy of copying … and memes are deliberately altered, with the full knowledge of the person doing the changing.'

In terms of the replication of artistic production, the ancient idea of mimesis seems a much more useful tool in understanding the desire to reproduce and the catharsis that comes from it.

But how does that tie in with the modern 'meme' culture on TikTok and other social media apps? How has the desire for making and performing music become a sophisticated process of impersonation, pretend, and mimicry over time?

There was a time when India, especially Bollywood films and music, had a reputation for copying western popular culture. Even in those pre-internet days, there were some memorable 'memes' (to use a current term) which we encountered in Bollywood films and on television advertising– the Charlie Chaplin slapstick imitations, the Michael Jackson impersonators, and in various youth sub-cultures, there were boys trying to look like desi versions of Bon Jovi and Van Halen, or girls trying to look like the Caucasian models on the covers of *Vogue*, *Seventeen*, or *Cosmopolitan*. And when pop star Alisha Chinai made a stand for original Indi-pop in the mid-1990s with her hit 'Made in India', she was still, ironically, lauded as India's answer to Madonna.

TikTok is in the business of reproduction. Yet the object of its replication is seemingly not about imitating reality but about recreating, extending, and riffing on previously shared material, mainly audio and video clips. 'Music is at the core of TikTok's design: Video creators have the option to choose from a library of sounds, copy a tune from another video, or make a split-screen duet with another user' (Poonam and Bansal, 2019).

So on the face of it perhaps the question is not about catharsis or some kind of ritual purging, but about issues of musical originality and artistic credibility; and in terms of the contemporary Indian cultural context, how such tools become crucial for earning fame, fortune, and likes. In a similar way, the same issues and concerns would have been attached to what is known as the 'remix culture' of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Briefly, this term refers to the sophisticated 'sampling' and 're-use' of recorded material, especially in rap music, to create 'new' works that call into question the traditional distinction between 'composer and listener, between creator and user' (Kramer n.d.).

However, with the banning of the TikTok app in June 2020 in response to myriad cyber security issues concerning China, its Indian stars and users have had to confront an abrupt end to their TikTok experience. They have had to find other ways and other mediums to express themselves and to creatively re-purpose existing material. Facebook and Instagram Reels, and more desi homegrown apps (with support from regional languages) like Josh, Moj, MXTakaTak, Chingari, Roposo, and Mitron have since attempted to fill that TikTok shaped hole in the landscape, with mixed results. Former TikTok creators have reported that the video-creating experience and the financial flow-on effects of using Reels or the homegrown alternatives do not compare with what they could once achieve through TikTok. One creator wants TikTok to return because he feels that it 'is the only platform where people from rural areas can showcase their talent and become popular. The app itself was so simple that people with even basic knowledge could use it' (Sekhose, 2020).

If there is any comfort to find in the loss of TikTok for its creators, it is that digital technology will continue to evolve and influence the creation and reception of all forms of art. Social media has fundamentally added a complex note to that song by changing the ways people talk to each other, share art with each other, and by shaping cultural behaviours to a degree that will probably keep the psychoanalysts busy for a while.

Meanwhile, the show goes on. Bob Dylan once sang, ‘The Times They Are A-Changing’, so here’s to that young girl from Mokokchung, Nagaland, armed with an electric guitar and viral Instagram videos, who wants nothing more than to play music her way.

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