

# Mizo Rap: Social and Spatial Discourses and an Experiment with Urban Sound

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## Abstract

Social and cultural discourse in Mizoram is constructed and heavily curated by traditional institutions of Church, Society and Y.M.A or Young Mizo Association. Other identities and subcultures vying for attention and a voice have next to no agency against this monolithic background. The lone attempt to foreground an alternate worldview has come only in the last decade from Mizo Rap music. Its central component is daring to pause old narratives while finding new language to interject and interrupt; reclaim spatial territory by redefining public discourses; exploring multiple ways of being Mizo in the post-internet universe.

**Keywords:** Culture; Mizo Rap; Redefine; Society; Spatial.

## Introduction

Society in Mizoram is organised around three dominant institutions; the Church or *Kohhran*, the Young Mizo Association or Y.M.A and the Society or *Khawtlang*. These three authorities are responsible for coding, producing, defining and organizing what is represented as Mizo culture. Anything disrupting these codes are 'interferences', subcultures that disrupt an orderly sequence, a disorder that blocks systems of 'acceptable' behaviour. Such subcultures survive in the periphery, but in many cases, thrive in such a manner as to represent a popular and an embraced culture by urban Mizo youth in contemporary Mizoram. One such subculture is that of Hip hop and what it represents.

This article will focus on three main areas; firstly, on the traditional role of the chant in pre-colonial Mizo tradition and its similarities with rap music; secondly, on the role of hip hop and rap music in reclaiming urban space; thirdly, on the new discourses informed by rap music that is perceived

as producing, defining and organizing new/alternate and opposing social worldviews compared to dominant discourse.

### **What is a chant in folk tradition?**

A chant is a form of speech with a rhythm, recited with a beat. This speech is more often than not, accompanied by instruments like the drum. The beat of the drum is as important as the chant as it *enters* the body of its listeners. Because chants and chanting are a deeply communitarian and ritualistic process, it is often manifested as involving a large group of people. Chants in Mizo oral tradition, according to Mizo historian B. Lalthangliana, are of two kinds; the *Bawhhlala* and the *Hlado*. (Lalthangliana 34) The *Bawhhlais* chanted when a warrior severs the head of an enemy clansman and lays claim to power and dominion over the spirit of the dead man in the after-life. Such a chant is performed in front of his clansmen, proclaiming and establishing his individual might and greatness for all to witness. Likewise, the *Hlados* chanted when there has been a successful hunt. The hunters as a collective, chant about their hunting expedition all along the path on their way back to their village, and right in front of the entrance to the village outside the boundary. The hunters shoot their rifles into the air chanting their *Hlado* while the many villagers surround the hunters and the dead animal to perform the role of the spectator. This ritual is performed both in celebration and as dominion and power over the spirit of the dead animal in the after-life. What is the significance of these chants in relation to their respective roles within their village and amongst their clansmen?

Chants do not particularly have any significance without the presence of the 'other'. A *Bawhhlala* and *Hlado* make meaning and construct signification when there are listeners to witness, agree and validate the severing of a head or the killing on an animal. The listener is both witness and participant. When chants are heard, a listener learns about an event. The chant creates vivid images, the chanters perform the event by re-enacting a killing. The cheering, bellowing, hooting and shouting of the many clansmen surrounding the event sustain and nurture the moment which is a spiritual and ritualistic climax. The storytelling and performance involved in these two rituals of the *Bawhhlala* and the *Hlado* have powerful underlying subtexts which have exceedingly similar functions to those of hip hop culture and of rap music in particular.

The event of the cypher in rap music has very similar ritualistic flavour to that of the chant rituals of *Bawhhlala* and *Hlado*. In rap music, a cypher has a

crowd of spectators and the rapper feeding off the energy of each other, a synchronicity and harmony which functions in conjunction with beat and rhythm. The cypher is ritualistic and functions as a response to the interaction and interface with spectators or the audience. In both contexts, it is the combination of the corporeal, the spiritual and the physical that produces meaning and lends a significance to the narratives and new discourses that arise out of these interactions. As demonstrated, the close link between a chant in oral tradition to a chant in rap music is interesting to note although rap is oftentimes seen as Black music with African roots. The genre of rap and its similarity to the chant do have a universal rendering. Hence it is hypothesized in this article that discourses in Mizo oral narratives are expressed through the *ritual* of chants and chanting that have similarities to modern rap music. The process of creation of beats and lyrics, of rapping and cypher are also *ritualistic* in urban sounds created in Mizoram by urban youth.

### **Mizo rap music and its cultural significance to urban society**

The dominance of two main genres of music in Mizoram is supported and accepted by the church, Y.M.A and the society which validate and legitimize their circulation, promotion and identity as representative of Mizo population. These two genres are *Lengzemor* popular music found in love songs, and Christian-gospel music. The music categories and genres are limited in scope although other genres like *Lenglawngor* traditional, patriotic songs sung in traditional singing style, and songs sung at funerals and the house of the dead known as *Khawharhla* do exist. *Lenglawngor* patriotic songs are representative of what the cultural institutions like the Y.M.A seek to promote, while the *Khawharhla* sung in all funeral homes by the members of the Y.M.A sets a tone and a definition of what Mizo identity looks like. These few genres of music and styles of singing conform to what would be considered Mizo, traditional and acceptable to the idea of Mizo identity and how Mizos view themselves. For many decades song lyrics and composition of songs were mostly generic and did not involve much complex musical execution. The shift in production of new meaning in music, new musical sounds and beats and new discourses in society came to be introduced through the new genre of hip hop and rap music in particular, in the beginning of the 2000s.

What ensued in the following two decades can be said to be a growth and coming of the age of rap music, an urban sound, a voice of the youth in the Mizo society that is marked by creditable and praiseworthy talent that reflects multiple abilities like composition of music, lyric writing, inno-

vative use of language, creation of new Mizo words to express emotion never verbalised before, and the use of resources available to them like online platforms and applications to explore newer sounds. It is the lyrics however, that take society, listeners of rap music and their message, on a much-needed journey into a new social domain and spatial environment. This journey is made possible only through the tenacity and daring, found in a subculture such as hip-hop and rap music.

Rap music and hip-hop culture reclaim the cityscape in a unique way. Aizawl city, a strip of land stretched out atop the ridge of a collection of high hills and low mountains, looks like an outstretched star by night. The city is, like all cities, overcrowded and pulsing with life. How do the young make space for themselves under the weight of concrete buildings, narrow by-lanes and steep steps that connect winding roads? How is space reinterpreted to form a new and separate space altogether? Hip hop and its cultures of graffiti art, of dance and of rap music come alive in certain hours of early morning and late evening. Young adults, teenagers and children can be seen practising their skateboarding, cycling and parkour activities on any empty space they find. The Aizawl Civil Hospital complex and the Millennium Centre Mall found in the heart of Aizawl city, have wide open spaces which are redefined into a place of recreation and play, places to perform and pursue individual pleasures. Many a time such activities involve trespassing, making 'noise', breaking rules and disrupting 'normal' atmosphere although such pleasures come to life when the public is long gone. Likewise, graffiti artists are known to make their presence seen through their 'art' on concrete canvases on sides of buildings and walls along Aizawl city roads. Such art is deemed to be 'defacement' and an illegal activity. Although some artists are often commissioned to work on certain spaces within the city, their art and infamy often go hand in hand as they express their art by inscribing their identity through graffiti. This claim over space is an attempt at redefinition and revision of old narratives and ways of being Mizo. In the old ways, being young was framed by cultural, collective and communal activities mostly geared towards ventures seen as beneficial to community and hence individual activities were unheard of.

Rap music makes its claim on the urban city in multiple ways. One of the first rappers to rise to both fame and infamy in the early 2000s and to stay visible and relevant to this day is Vincy Chhangte. In his famous composition *Aizawl*, he raps about his experience of Aizawl city from his own locus of control. Aizawl as a space is foregrounded as a city of dreams, a mix of sin city and a receptacle for his memories. Vincy's experience

and experiment with countering dominant social narrative begins immediately in the first thirty-five second prelude to his music video, before he begins the actual rap piece. He scolds a young boy listening to Eminem's rap music. Eminem, already considered to be a 'white' rapper in a predominantly black music genre is a complete stranger to his identity as a white rapper. The fact that Vincy links his own identity to being an outcast and an outlier in his own home city is strategic. Assumed to be his younger brother, he scolds the boy for wasting his time in listening to and aspiring to be a rapper, Vincy employs irony by advising him to be a "doctor, officer or pastor." (Mnowluck) This is the rapper Vincy, and rap music positioning itself as the proverbial outsider. To listeners of the lyrics of *Aizawl*, it is self-explanatory that he raps about what one would expect of any city to contain; numerous beautiful young women with angelic faces but who may not be as innocent as they seem; of consumption of alcohol and the dangers of arrest because of the existing prohibitions on selling and consumption of alcohol in the state of Mizoram; of being both weary and watchful of cops with their red berets out to arrest anyone on a whim; of dancing in parties amongst young people who may be more welcoming to visitors from other places; of desires and dreams for fame and fortune but this is easier to achieve with the right connections; of exploitation of artists by owners of studios who make all the money.

The interesting conclusion to this rap composition is Vincy's comment on class difference and wealth gap between visitors from rural Mizoram and the rich urban Mizos who own the world, expressed through their owning and flaunting of material possessions. He says the city has beautiful people, and in the same breath, acknowledges the existence of the ugly side of real Aizawl city. Vincy's experience and exploration of Aizawl city, is hard-hitting for many reasons but the most noteworthy is his refusal to gloss over the ugliness of the real urban city. His aural discontent is palpable, discourse is honest, a reportage on what he witnesses, his unapologetic take on the city. Yet, he claims it as *his* city. And just like the music video of *Aizawl* distinctly communicates, Vincy is sitting in a city cab riding along presumably with friends who have never seen the city before. He, Vincy is their introduction to this city maze, the sights, sounds and taste of Aizawl which in effect become a representation and comment on urban living. To the visitors, the internal and superficial exteriors of Aizawl city are curious spectacles witnessed and experienced through the eyes of the rapper Vincy. Hence, he is successful in engaging his listeners into a spatial exploration of both external cityscape and his own internal landscape.

Unlike Vincy, a young rapper who rose to immense popularity after 2011

G'nie, also recreates his experience of *his* city in the piece also called *Aizawl*. (ABG 318) G'nie immediately situates himself as a returning diasporic individual by claiming to represent the *Lushai hill*, as the land of the Mizos was once called, and roots himself in history by linking his ancestry to head-hunters. He does a hopscotch through the terrain, in and around Aizawl city by listing places known to young urban dwellers as places for collective fun. His lyrics read like a romanticization of the city merged into his own dreams and desires for his future as a rising rap artist. He inserts his presence against more established and institutional artists like Vincy. But G'nie's expectation of urban discourses around dominant culture seems more a matter of fact, something which he weaves himself into rather than positioning his identity as going against a giant tide.

The storytelling of rappers and the experience of urban-hood through the eyes of the young Mizo is a deconstructive and reconstructive exercise of building their own urban space, permitting their own spatial logics by daring to change social dominant discourses. Rappers through their lyrics have twisted the old into a new shape by reimagining urban space and sound, converging and merging and sometimes destroying hegemonic space to claim some as their own. By occupying these alternate spaces, they believe that they have remapped the way society and the general Mizo population view them. And because Mizo urban sounds have emerged out of experiences of rappers and hip-hop cultural experiences of the youth, what then, is the identity of Mizo rap? What are the ways in which society engages with this new voice?

### **Rap and its truth versus the dominant discourse**

Since Mizo rapping community is close-knit, it functions on affiliations and circulations which are forged amongst urban minority groups. There is no violent gang culture although marijuana use is surprisingly habitual and familiar. The widespread belief exists that an act needs to gain approval, maintain connections and receive support from their crew first and foremost, in order to succeed. A representative example of such groups that function as mentorship programmes is a Facebook group called THE PIT, which currently also uses other social media platforms like the YouTube. Young rappers learn the art of the rap battle, cypher battle and diss battle from seasoned rappers. The experienced rappers help young rappers to improve their skills. (Fanai 83) This method of learning and teaching has been carried on for over a decade and seems to only grow in influence. THE PIT has a system of ranking which is reminiscent of sport and spectatorship-based hierarchy. All rappers who enter the pit

automatically are Soldiers. They progressively climb these ranking levels to become Gladiators, Queens/Kings and Gods. (Fanai84)The gladiatorial imagery is interesting as it provides an alternateworldviewer way of experiencing the world to that of the existing dominant cultural discourse.

Groups and crews portray the gritty undersides of Mizo society, communicate the importance of the institutions of home, marriage, family and often acknowledge the builders of communities by focusing on the ones who destroy community through *their* corruption. In this way, the rap community emphasises a support and filial nurturance by providing a sense of community. This goes against social stereotyping that has arisen out of misinformation, misreading of lyrics and missed opportunities for bridging a gap over the proverbial difference in outlook and worldviews. In a way, society deems Mizo rap music and the community as standing outside society while those from within the community are trying to communicate a message and a desire for the old discourses to come unstuck. This has led to experimenting with new sounds that are local, localised and borne out of studios in urban cities like Aizawl. Mizo rap in fact, has a distinct vocal styleand slant in language use. The unapologetic, cocky, in-your-face vocal inflections, experimentation with cadence is wonderfully unique and useful when combined with hard-hitting lyrics. In this way, Mizo rap has succeeded in creating a new identity for young Mizos who have found a strong resonance and meaning in this movement.

What is this resonance articulating? The rugged discourses of the lyrics are selective in their subject. The early rap lyrics that were produced in the 2000s focused more on social issues and problems. Images of poverty, mental and emotional stigma, broken families, alcoholism, abuse, addiction, violence were writ large. This unapologetic tone and flavour is most pronounced in the classic 2002-2003 rap piece *Chun lehZua* from a rap act which goes by the moniker 'RD and the 3 Rappers'. (LALJO) This rap piece continues to remain socially relevant as it imagines a dialogue with the three institutions of church, society and family referred in the lyrics as *Chun lehZua*. It takes issue with authority figures like parents and caretakers. The charge in the lyrics is a sad yet true-to-life take on negligent authority, inattentive parents and adults in a family who pursue an existential glory in heaven and social recognition outside the home so much so, that their young children are disregarded and ignored. Children are left alone to find their way through the world and hence, become vulnerable to abuse and addiction, seeking validation outside the home. The refrain is accusatory, a simple polemical and rhetorical question on the agency of parenthood-childhood dynamic; *You*, who have not thought it through,-

Do you not see your young children in their smooth and inevitable path into hell?

Another defiant rapper positioning herself squarely against cultural gender roles is Vanrodingpuii, known popularly by her stage name Ladylicious. The 2006 classic rap piece called *BOLD Kanrawn ding chhuak* featuring Dr. Reuben was a game changer in terms of being a novel attempt at changing discourse around gender stereotyping and social expectation of young girls. (Zorimawi) The refrain is a self-motivation, a self-talk for herself, the rapper RD to tide through the deluge of public derision and criticism; to tolerate stereotyping and undermining of a female rapper in a male dominated industry. In a push against a taboo of daring to challenge society's expectation of how a girl *should* behave, RD has been able to set the tone for young girls like her, who want to chase a dream and are unabashed about it.

The other spectrum of rap music is represented by mundane and everyday concerns which are neither controversial nor discourse challenging, but engaging nonetheless. However, a quintessential Mizo rap sound seems to have emerged from rap pieces of Lilzo whose approach to composing is an even mix of storytelling and a rap song that can be *sung* along with by listeners. With a melodious rap flow, slow and engaging rap songs of Lilzo became very popular because of their ability to tap into Mizo sensibilities, of an invitation to sing along to lyrics that even children remember. His rap pieces for the first time succeeded in a popular breakthrough while other rap artists were beloved only of the rapping community. His song *Duatis* the first Mizo individual artist's work to reach a million views on YouTube.

Most Mizo rap lyrics seem to follow the pattern of a micro detailing of life which can be read as comments on Mizo society. They speak from a *here* which has never been heard before. The spatialities and discourses drawn in and enclosed into the lyrics have both descriptive and discursive elements that have no representation in other genres of music. The resonance that rap music has with urban Mizo youth is therefore found in the brutally honest and straightforward lyrics, in the sound, in the beats. Manipulation of language, engaging speech patterns and grammar are often employed in order to reconstruct a social system to include them as a group with things to say. This has been a powerful way rap music has highlighted their value as a genre. What Mizo rap does is to forcefully snatch an opportunity from the hands of dominant discourse that the youth have desired to convey, but find no words to express. In a way, such expres-

sions of dissent would have been immediately repressed and subdued. It is therefore in the Mizo rapper, the youth have found a way to speak. The rapper through the use of language and words in particular, in combination with subversion of stereotype has succeeded in constructing and producing a new meaning in the relevant social discourses.

### **Effect of Mizo rap music on society**

Rapping in the Mizo language was pulled off phenomenally right from its infancy in the early 2000s. Mizo is a tonal language in which each syllable in a word can be used as independent tone unlike a pitch-accent language. (Baycrest Centre For Geriatric Care) With nine tones that can be used to convey meaning, rappers are able to manipulate and utilize, be tensile, stretch meaning which simultaneously allows playful use of idioms and figures of speech in their lyrics. The Mizo language has been weaponized for the first time by rap music. What has this weaponization changed in the dominant social discourse of Mizo society? Who is listening to this genre of Mizo rap music other than the urban youth? Is there any stigma or stereotype attached to the genre? What ideology, if at all is attached to the exercise of rap music by the dominant cultures that be?

Rap music and rappers in general have been 'otherized' in such a way that listening to the genre is also misconstrued as an act of rebellion. In a communitarian culture and society like the Mizo, archetypal characters like the Trickster become very relevant to inject a villain into the framework of the main story. (Jung) The villain is the outsider, the threat to cohesion, the bringer of chaos and disrupter of society. The trickster quality is writ large over rap lyrics and the body of the rapper. The lyrics of rap pieces and the accomplished use of the Mizo language have already been illustrated. But what is noteworthy is the body of the rapper. The owner of the body, the rapper, insists on owning his movement, how he dons his outfits and his desire to be the one in control of his own narrative. His walk, gesticulations, style of hair, non-verbal language, his gaze, the size of his clothes and his nonchalance are well thought out. He sees this as an extension of his own personal identity and a form of self-expression. But the ideologies and the stereotypes placed on rap music and his body by dominant discourse are profound. Seen as wild and disrespectful unruly kids, this identification of a rap artist's existence and bodily presence is a creation of dominant structures and the powers that be. The artist's presence is a myth; a body that can be controlled by taking away the artist's legitimate space and place within the structured society. In this way, the honest compositions and important messages in the lyrics lose their le-

gitimacy. If an entire community of rap artists and their body of work lose their legitimacy, then they become trivial and non-threatening. At the same time, the rap community are looked upon like a spectacle, an exotic outsider who can never be fully understood and embraced as a part of larger society. Rap artists are often stereotyped as thuggish, social misfits and delinquents who have grown out from poor, disenfranchised homes. They are often assumed to be unemployed. But like all subcultures that are powerful in their popularity, rap music has become more significant and more powerful in its disruptiveness. This is the only means of the changing narrative; being the villain from within and the exotic alien on the outside.

By displaying their own codes through dress, behaviour, speech pattern, the rap artists through their music have been able to challenge and change the dominant discourse to some small extent. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the "carnavalesque" rings true as he saw such chaos as a way in which ideology, laws, morality and politics represented in both the institutions of the state and church were inverted. (Bakhtin) The sense of liberation and freedom from control from church and state, even though momentary, is a welcome exercise. Rap music has been used by the urban Mizo youth to communicate with each other. Since rap music is a great and easy way to spread an idea, the artist has manipulated this genre to its best use; to understand reality in any situation by confronting the most difficult emotions like trauma, pain, rejection and anger. It is also an effective medium to share knowledge and experience which a listener can share and learn vicariously. The urban youth hence see these lyrics and artists as sharing their own pain, expressing their own experience and hurts. Rap is embraced for its ability to speak face-to-face with another person, unafraid of criticism hence breaking prejudice and stereotypes.

## **Conclusion**

Mizo rap artists and their music compositions have been able, to some extent, inspire the public to think outside and beyond a boundary set for them by dominant discourses. The public has learnt to engage with new ideas and to listen. Children make up a large part of listenership and this is a positive hope that the younger generations will use their natural soundtracks in their bodies and in their minds to learn how to think creatively, problem solve, improve critical skills and develop language and vocabulary. Because Mizo culture and customs are performative in nature, the ties and deep relationship with rap music and its beats are only going to grow. It is in the genes to chant, not from nothing but from the

cultural legacies of oral learning. Thus, rap music as a genre has a means to change political and cultural discourse because Mizos have a natural sensibility to know, and feel music.

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