

Music as a Language

Project III Report

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M.Des Animation and Film Design

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the project work done is an animated short film for 4th semester M. Des Animation Design and submitted as a written report to the Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay is a record of the original work done by me under the guidance of Professor Shilpa Ranade. Unless otherwise stated, the contents of this report in the form of the text and image are entirely my own. The views expressed in the documentation as part of the written submission of the project are my own and do not necessarily represent the views of Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay


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Date

APPROVAL

The Report Committee for Animation Design, Industrial Design Centre, IIT Bombay certifies that this is the approved version of the following report on **Music as a Language** by

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Approved by

Project Advisor:



Internal Examiner:



External Examiner:



Chairperson:



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

First and foremost, I would like to thank my Professors and IDC for providing me this opportunity to express my views through this film. This film as a part of my P3 presentation was a great learning curve for me. From getting industry level guidance to insights into much larger fields, this helped in a personal as well as in a professional growth for me. I am to my guide Professor Shilpa Ranade, who has not only guided me through and through but also pushed me to venture out beyond my comfort zone and get a glimpse into what the rest of my life would look like. I am extremely thankful to Prof. Mazhar Kamran, Prof, Sumant Rao, Prof. Nina Sabnani and Prof. Phani Tetali, who have also guided me time and again and set me on the right path every time I lost sight of my destination. Of course, no acknowledgement is complete without thanking my close peers, friends and family members, who have supported me through and through in this extremely difficult journey and have been there to receive me on the other side.

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ABSTRACT

Music is a mighty means of communication. Its a medium through which emotions and intentions can be expressed even without a spoken language. But there exist languages which are not verbal and are just a tune or a melody. People in different parts of the world have been practising the whistling language. In places where this is practiced, it is termed as the *bird language* inspired by the nature. These languages are mostly practiced in hilly regions. Unfortunately due to the complexity and lack of practice of these languages, this rich cultural heritage is dying out and on the verge of extinction.

In India there exist a similar practice which is a rich cultural heritage. It is not a whistling language to be precise but it is unique on its own and is used as a means of communication. Nestled in the hills of Meghalaya, Kongsong is the village where this is practiced. It is also known as the whistling village of India. ***Jingwrai lawbei*** is the name of the practice, where a person have a unique tune as an identity. This tune is devised by the mother at the time of the birth to express the love for the baby.

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INTRODUCTION

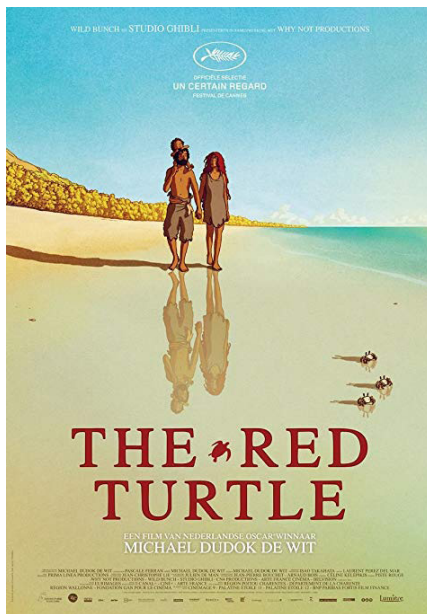
The North Eastern region of India despite its rich cultural diversity is not known to the mass. There are around 145 tribal communities in this region with each ethnic group having distinct cultural practices which is unique and worth exploring. A lot of these practices is not known to the people due to lack of documentation and media.

In a village name Kongthong which is nestled between the Sohra and Pynursla ridges in East Khasi Hills district in Meghalaya, there exist an age old custom of having a tune as an identity of a person. This practice is known as Jingwrai lawbei. Jingwrai means song and lawbei means clan ancestress. Jingwrai lawbei is used for communication by the locals. The tune is composed by the mother after the birth of the baby in the initial weeks. It is very rare and interesting fact that in Kongthong village, a new born is given a song before the name. The baby is first known to its family members by the tune devised by the mother and then later comes the actual name. The locals makes sure that no person in the village has a similar tune and no tune is repeated. Which means a song dies with the person. An individual is given a short tune and long tune. The short one which is known to them as the title of the song, is used in the village and the long tune is used when they are in the forest or farm fields.

This aim of this project is to use animation as an exposure to the practice in Kongthong village in Meghalaya to the people.

INSPIRATIONS AND INFLUENCES

I have always been fascinated by the diversity in Northeast India. There are various communities living together in this region each sharing distinct and unique cultural practices. As a fact, this information was not acquired textually. Studying in a boarding school I met students from different cultural backgrounds and we would try to find similarities in one's culture. There are many practises which was not known in my knowledge. One such is the Jingwrai lawbei. I was amazed by how people would call each other by singing a tune. It was not known, even to most of the people in Meghalaya until a piece of news was out. It was because there were no proper roads to this village. But after the news



was out to the mass, it slowly became a place of tourism. Still, a lot of people do not know such a practice exists, I want it to portray it through the animation.

This particular thought came to my mind as I have always wondered why Japanese animation is considered to be one of the best. I am fascinated by how they showcase and portray their culture to the audience worldwide.

Apart from animation, there are lot of things that has inspired me. As a part of my TA duties, I attended a course by Prof Mazhar Kamran which gave a lot of insights. One of which was works by an Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami who refused to leave his place and work outside. He said When you take a tree that is rooted in the ground, and transfer it from one place to another, the tree will no longer bear fruit. And if it does, the fruit will not be as good as it was in its original place. This is a rule of nature. I think if I had left my country, I would be the same as the tree.



Princess Kaguya background art



Princess Kaguya background art



Red turtle background art



A view of the fram fields in Kongthong Village



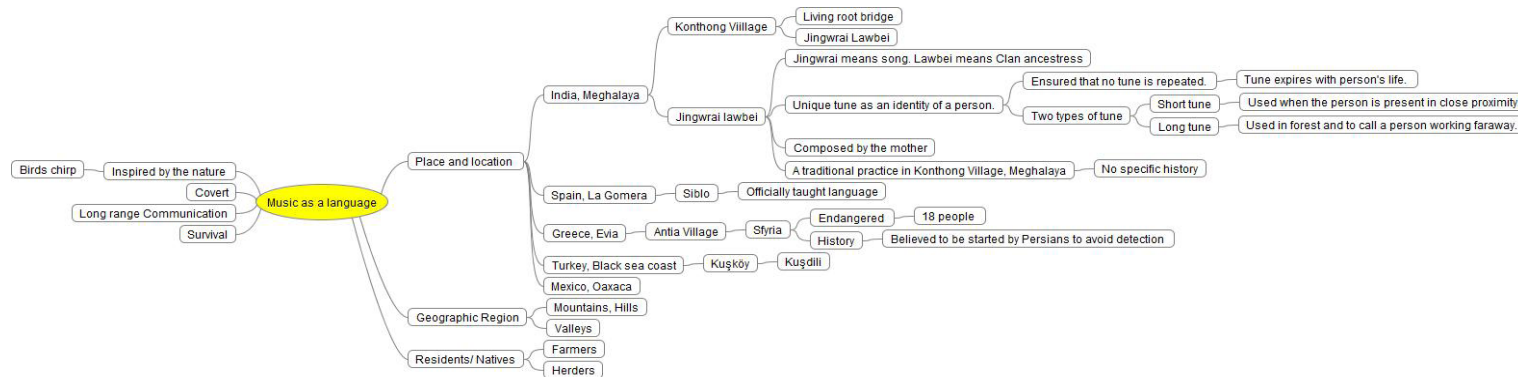
A still from the movie Okja



A still from the movie Okja

Research

The primary part of the research was to study different types of whistling language and find out the common traits between each other that exists and is practiced in recent times. Since Jingwrai lawbei is not a whistling language to be precise, but it is used for communication by the people in Kongthong village. There are many whistling languages which are practised presently. These languages, in general, are referred to as the bird language, despite having a different origin. It is said that these languages are inspired by nature and made for survival. Unfortunately, these languages are on the verge of extinction. In La Gomera, Spain the whistling language is known as Siblo. People in La Gomera has taken steps to preserve this language and today it is officially taught in schools. But in Antia village of Greece the whistling language Sfyria is endangered and has only 18 people, who can understand it. Taking all the whistling language into account, a mind map was drawn to find the similarities and affinities.



The topology of the places where these languages are practised is hilly areas. People used it for distant communication and according to Wikipedia, with the loudness of 130db it can reach up to 10km. By comparison of the languages in the mind map, it is clear that most of them are used by farmers or herders.



A village hut in kongthong



Honey beekeeping at Kongthong

The secondary research was to study in depth about Jingwrai lawbei. It is practised by the Khasi tribe in village Kongthong, Meghalaya. The village is nestled between the ridges of Sohra and Pynrsula in Kathar Snong district. The locals do not know the history of how it came into practice but some believe it was to ward off evil spirits in the forest. The livelihood of the locals depends on farming and since most of the time, they spend in the forest for farming they call each other with their unique tune. Each person in the village has a unique tune which is devised by the mother for the newborn. It is a very interesting fact that everyone in the village has a unique tune as an identity. To know more in-depth about this practice, I visited the village. The main aim was to interview the mothers about the naming process and build a story around it. Unfortunately, there was nothing much to be recorded as most mothers in the village said it was out of the immense love after seeing their baby and they do not think of a tune until the birth. Mr Rothel Khongsit of the village said the tune differs according to the gender. The female's tune is generally more melodious than the male's. It pretty much justified why the mothers do not think of the tune till the baby is born. The village is located at the top of the hill and the name Kongthong literally translates to a Lady's goal. The Khasi tribe being a matriarchal society has kept the name of the practice of Jingwrai lawbei in the honour of the lady who started the clan. Jingwrai means song and lawbei means the clan ancestress. The people in the village has a long tune and a short tune. The short tune which is referred to as the title of the song is used in the proximity of the village. The long tune is used in the forest for communication. The locals originally believed in positive spirits that resides around them and

worshipped them until they were converted to Christianity they were converted to Christianity. The locals believe that at night the tune has to be answered only when it is sung more than once. This practice is consider very sacred and is used only for communication. It is a rule that no one can respond to the Jingwrai lawbei of some other person.

Initially, the people in the village cultivated honey for a living. But in recent times it is being replaced by the broom grass. Since it was easy money the majority depends on this farming.



Childrens in kongthong



Interview of the village community leader, Mr. Rothel Khonsit



Way to the broom grass field



A man collecting the broomgrass



Heap collected



Heap of broom grass dried

Story Development

At the beginning the concept was to form a story around the idea of whistling as a language and its importance to the people who practiced it. In a small village name Kongthong nestled in the hills of Meghalaya, there exist a practice where people in the village have a unique tune as an identity. It is known to the people as ***Jingwrai lawbei***. All the following story concepts are based on ***Jingwrai lawbei***, a practice of having a song or a tune as a name which is practiced in Kongthong Meghalaya. People in this village call out each other with their unique tune. The tune can be either sang or whistled.

Concept 1

A kid trying to find a way home after she loses her way in the forest. With the help of bird mimicking her tune she finally finds her way back.

People in most villages in Meghalaya are cultivators/ farmers. In a village named Kongthong a family was blessed with a son. As per the tradition of the tribe the mother devised a tune for the newborn. As she had to look after the baby, she asked her elder daughter(9), to deliver food for her father working in the fields. Unfortunately the daughter loses are way in the forest on her way back. As she was humming the tune of the newborn and not paying attention to path she walked. Finally she finds her way back by following the sound of the bird mimicking the tune she sang all the way in the forest.

Concept 2

A story of an evil forest spirit who is learning to coo or whistle a tune, to lure the people in the village.

In a village called Kongthong, Meghalaya their lived an evil spirit in the forest. People believed once the spirit comes to know the name of a person, it latches on the him/her for the rest of the life. And to avoid this the villagers had a tune as a name to ward off the evil spirit. After much attempts the evil spirit gives up to sing a tune and thinks of a alternative. It tries to make a deal with birds to help it accomplishing to lure the people in the village

Concept 3

Every name has a story behind it. A story of a mother of what she goes through and how she device a tune for her baby.

A pregnant women while devising a tune for her baby recalls her memories of childhood. She tries to recall the tune sang by the birds which helped her escape from the evil forest spirit trap.

Concept 4

The fourth concept is amalgamation of all the concept 1, 2 and 3. The people in Konthong Village believes in positive and negative spirits exist in nature.

A story of a little girl who is lured by an evil spirit in the forest while she was helping her mother in the farm fields. But eventually the positive spirits and her unique tune guides her back to her mother.

Final Story

A song before a name.

The sun peeked through a hazy screen of clouds, painting the sky pale blue. It was a cloudy day. The sun would peek just for few seconds, over the tall broom grass on the slope of the hill. As the wind blows, the waves moves across the field. It was soothing for the women who was taking a break from collecting broom grass. As the breeze blew it carried away her fatigue, she could see her little daughter across the tall grass stacking the heap she had collected. The mother sings a melodic tune. As the mother collects the heap, she asks her daughter to stay at sight.

Something strange was peeking at the little girl for a long time. It was the evil spirit of the forest. The evil spirit tried to lure the girl away from her mother. Behind the tall grass, the little girl was attracted by a butterfly. It had glittering wings which tempted her to sneak past her mother. As the girl move towards the bait laid by the evil spirit, a frog appears and shoots out its tongue to devours the butterfly. The little girls seeing that the butterfly was gone turned back. The evil spirit followed the peeking little girl's movement. This time it sent a pineapple rolling down from the slope. The little girl was delighted on seeing the fruit. As she went to pick it up a worm comes out of the fruit. The evil spirits realises that the good spirits of the forest were helping the little girl. The evil spirit was furious and laid another trap. While the little girl was stacking the heap, the evil spirit lays a trail of the broom grass towards it. The little girl went ahead to pick up the trails. As the little girl was on the verge of falling in the trap, a bee flew to the mother's ear and buzzes the little girls tune. The mother recalls that it was the same buzz that she heard when she devised the tune for her daughter. She immediately turned back to see her daughter was not in sight. She sang the melodious tune of her daughter and on hearing this the little girl ran to towards her mother.

All the tricks and trap went in vain for the evil spirit. As it grew darker, the mother and the daughter leaves the broom grass field. The evil spirit could do nothing but peek at the little girl returning back home.

SCRIPT

EXT. MORNING VILLAGE

People in the village leaving for the farm field.

Shot of a honey beekeeping in a log outside the house and the mother and her daughter leaving for the farm fields, in the background.

EXT. DAY BROOM GRASS FARM

View of the broom grass fields.

Mother collecting the broom grass while her daughter picks up the heap.

Something unusual peeping at the little girl behind the tall broom grass.

A glittering butterfly enters the scene by which the little girl is attracted.

Little girl looks at her mother and follows the butterfly.

All of a sudden a frog devours the butterfly in a second.

The little girl is shocked and turns away.

The unusual peep from behind continues.

A pineapple rolls down the slope from behind the tall grass.

The little girl is surprised to see a pineapple but at the same time delighted to see it.

The looks here and there and as she moves ahead to pick up the fruit she creeps out.

She steps back looking at a worm coming out of the fruit.

EXT. BEFORE SUNSET BROOM GRASS FIELDS.

The unusual peep continues following the little girls movement

As the mother is almost done for the day. She collects all the broom grass and walks towards the village.

The little girl helps her mother collecting the heap as she walks behind her.

Strangely a trail of the broom was leading behind the tall grass.

2.

The little girl turned back to pick them up.

The mother walked ahead and stopped to see a huge beehive.

On looking at it she remembered the day she composed the daughter tune.

Flashbacks of her humming the tune for her baby daughter.

She turned back to see her daughter was not behind her.

The almost reached near the tall grass, but stopped as she heard her mother singing her tune.

The mother staring at the rock paved path, surrounded by tall broom grass and few wild flowers.

SHOT OF THE WILD FLOWER.

Little girl running past the flower towards her mother with
the broom grass.

The relieved on seeing her running towards her.

The mother caresses on her daughter's head and asks her to
put it in the basket along with rest of the heap.

The unusual peep continues.

As the mother and daughter walked towards the village, the
mother sings some different tune.

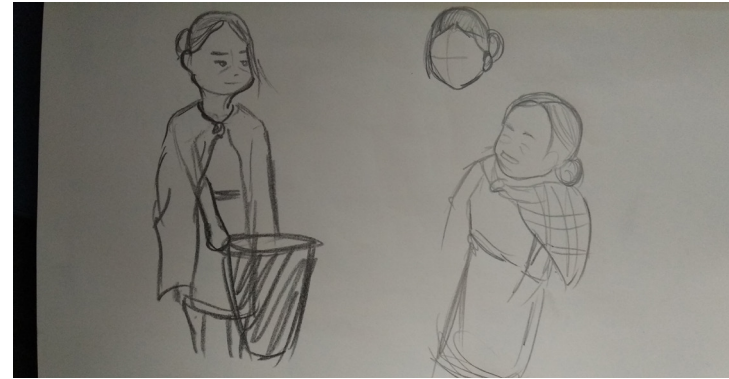
On hearing the tune another lady replies and comes out of the
bush.

DISTANCE SHOT OF THE FIELDS

After a while, people coming out of the broom grass field on
hearing different tunes.

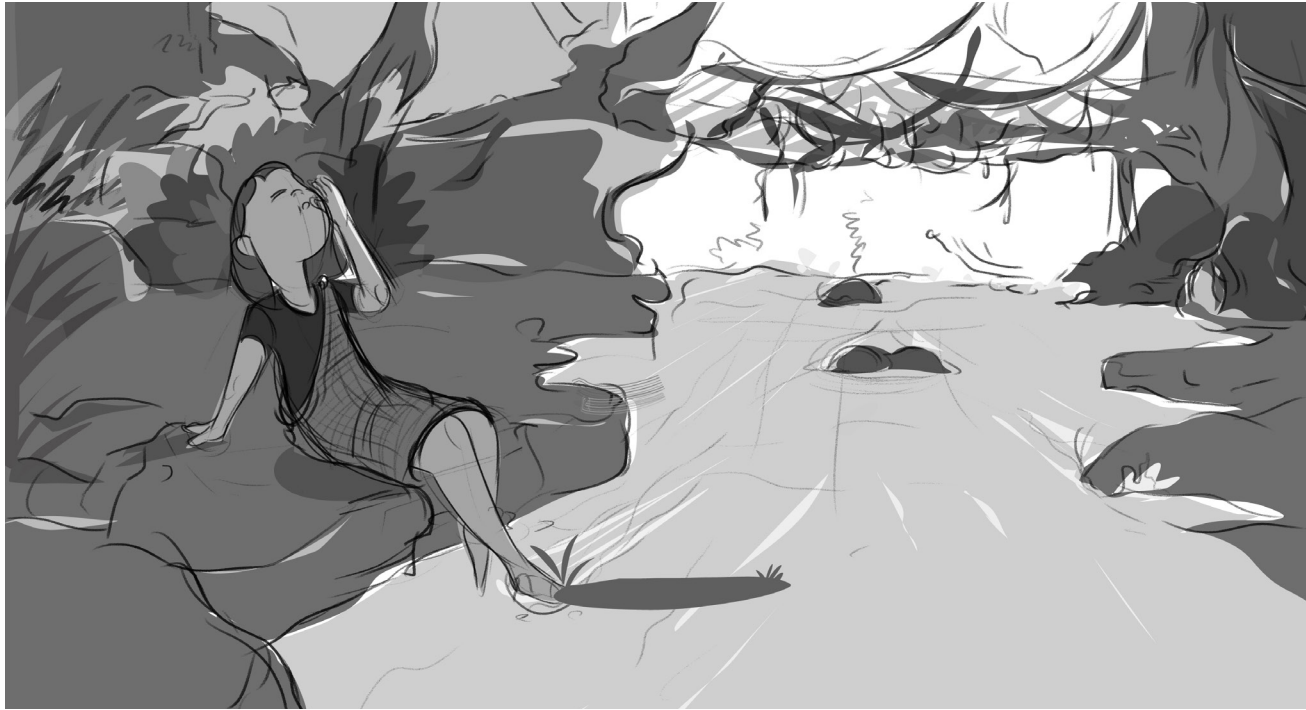
EXPLORATIONS





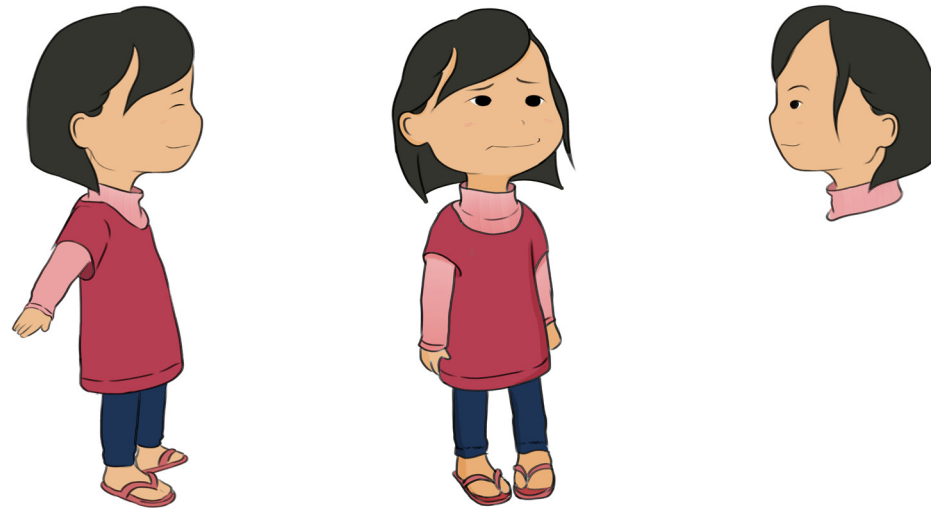
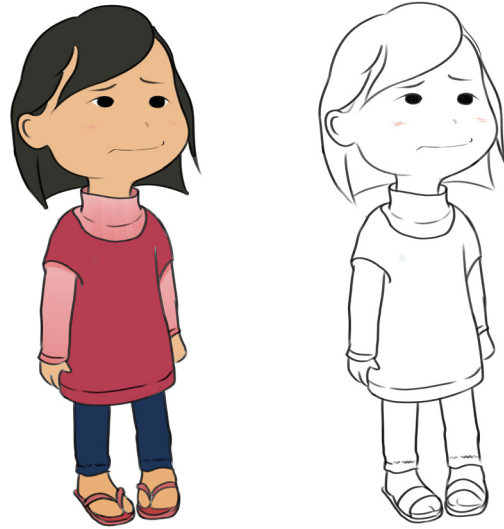
CONCEPTS





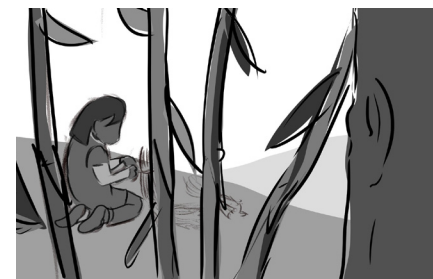
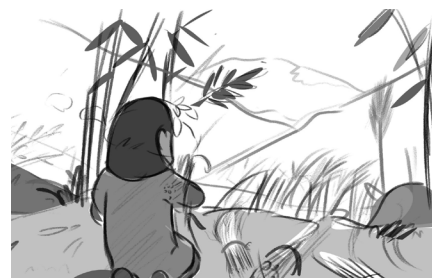
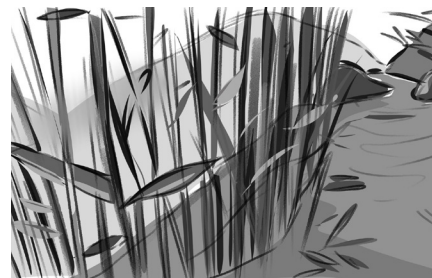
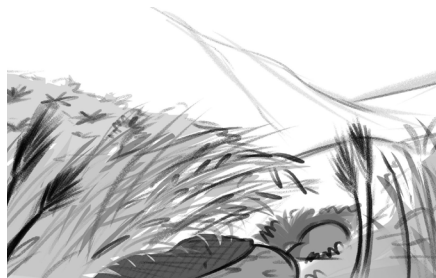
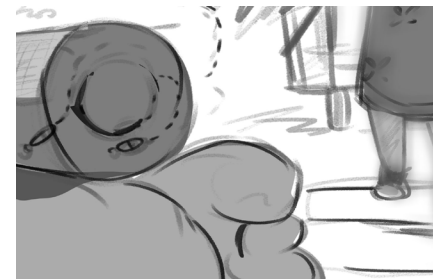
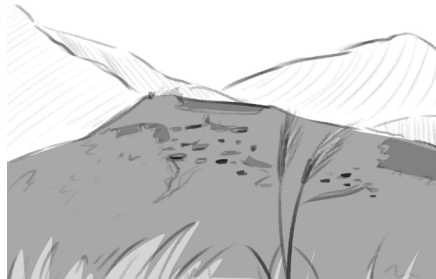
CHARACTERS DESIGN

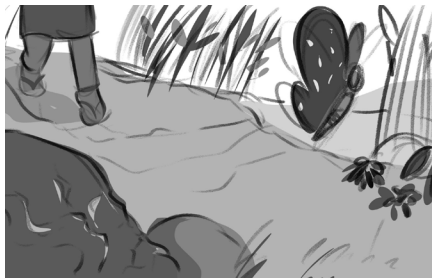
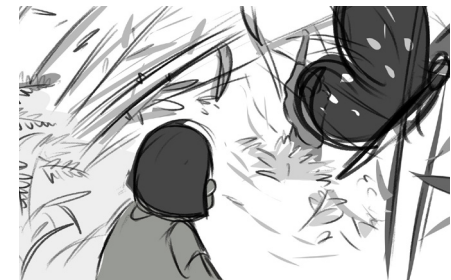
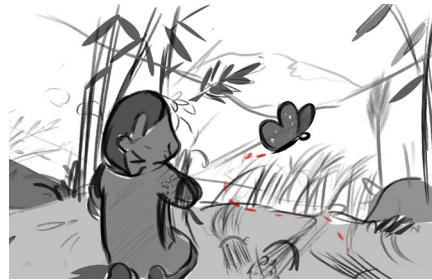
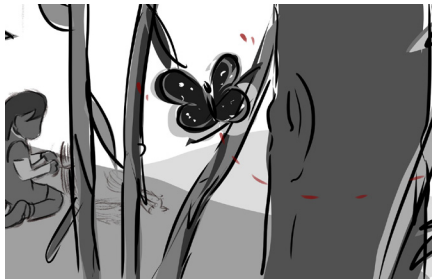


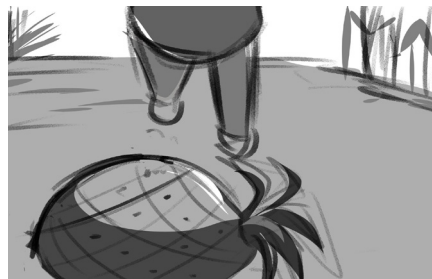
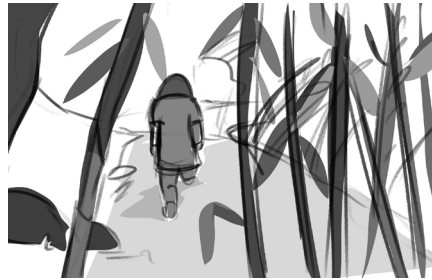


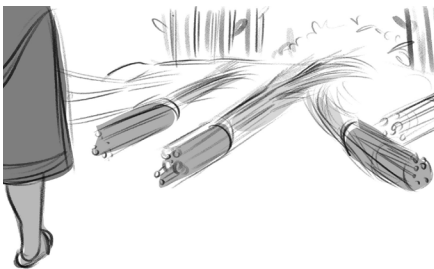
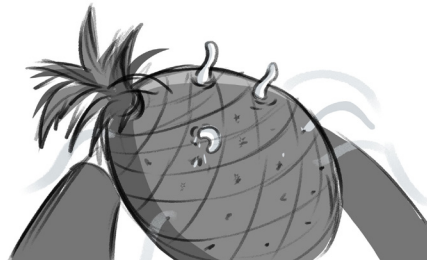
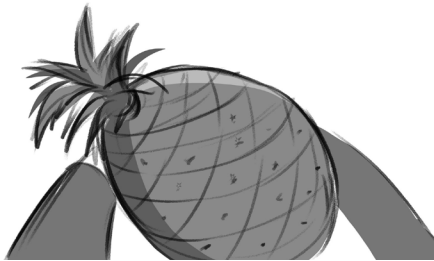


STORYBOARD

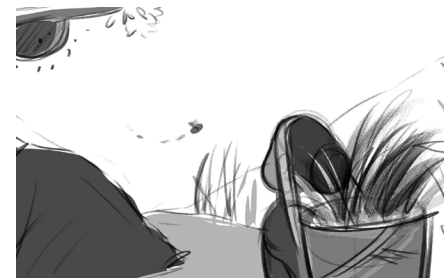
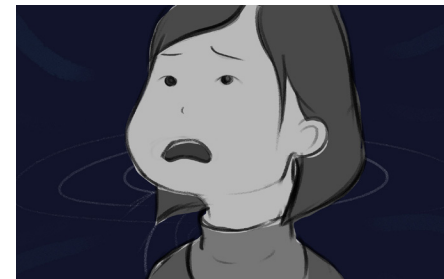
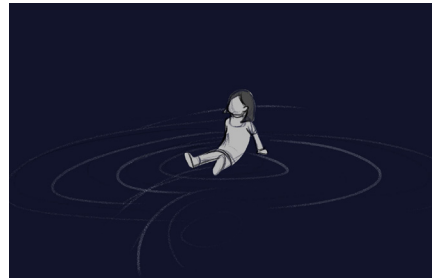
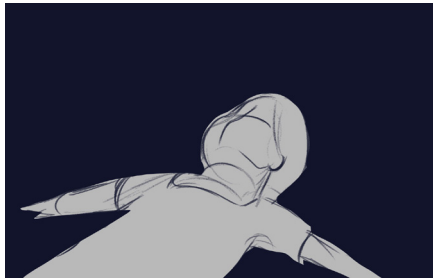


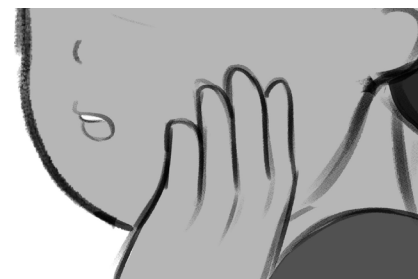
















SOUND

Background Sound

Creating the ambience with sound is one the difficult task in animation. While working on the production this project, I was constantly looking for the appropriate sounds that could add to my sound library.

Background Music

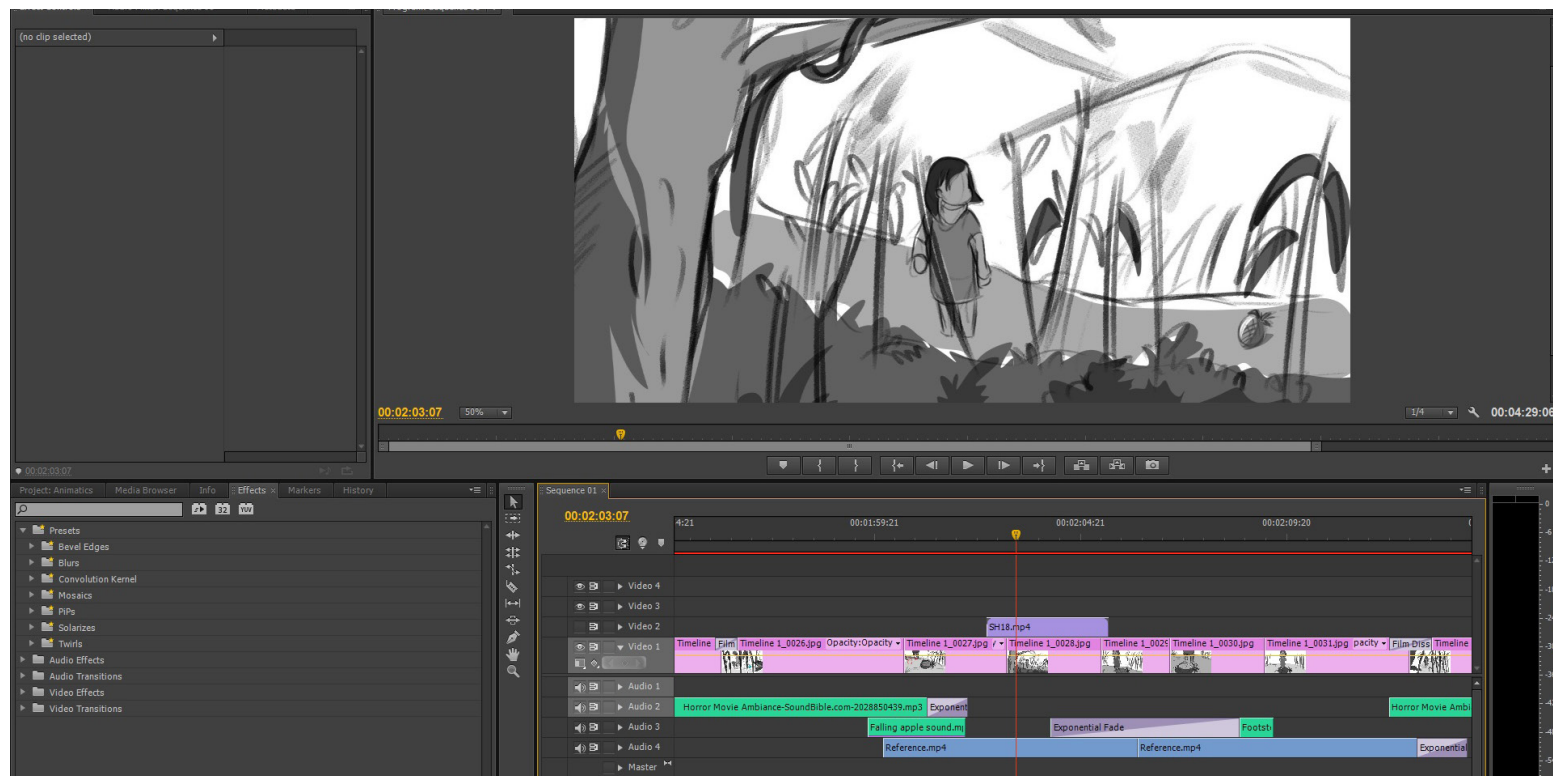
The main element in the story is Jingwrai lawbei, which is the unique tune of a person. Therefore adding a music could be a conflict to the element. which is why the animation short is just fill with ambient sound of the forest, trees and birds.

Dialogues

All the dialogues in this animation short film is in *Khasi*, a spoken dialect of tribal community in Meghalaya, India. The simple reason being to bring out the authencity of that place and the people living there.

ANIMATICS

To know the length of the film it was mandatory to make the animatics. It is crucial because it was important to know the right frames that is to be put on hold and also cut down some of the redundant scenes in order to chuck down the run time of the short film.



ANIMATION

Before getting started with the animation, I tried and tested tools and software which best suited my forte.

The Process

1. Rough Animation.

The entire rough animation is done in Clip Studio Paint EX. The reason being the brush it offered, and since my style of animation is inspired from Anime I thought it would be appropriate if I used it.

2. Cleanup.

Considering the time factor I chose limited animation. So the rough key frames were cleaned up and then timed to get the action right.

3. Inbetweening of keyframes.

In this step with the help of the onion skin, the previous or the next keyframes are copied and then transformed and warped to get the desired inbetween.

4. Coloring.

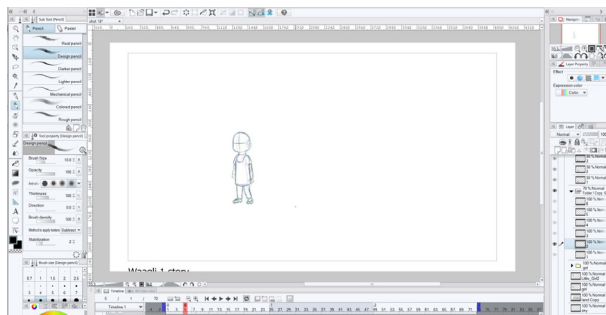
The coloring of each and every frame is done in clip studio paint. The reason being that it can fill gaps better in comparison to other tools. The light and shade is achieved by using the overlay mode of the layer based animation offered by the software.

5. Highlights and Shadows.

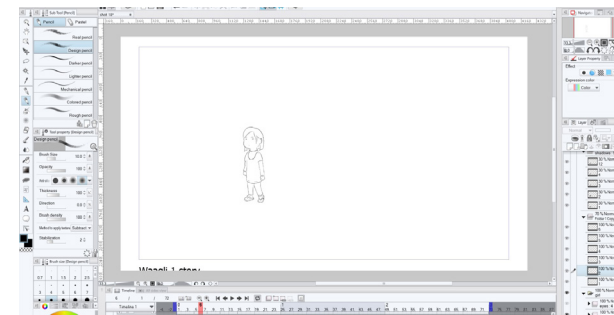
The highlights were created using an overlay layer on top of the colour layer. The shadows were created by duplicating the coloured frames and lowering the luminosity then transforming the layer to get the shadows.

6. Compositing.

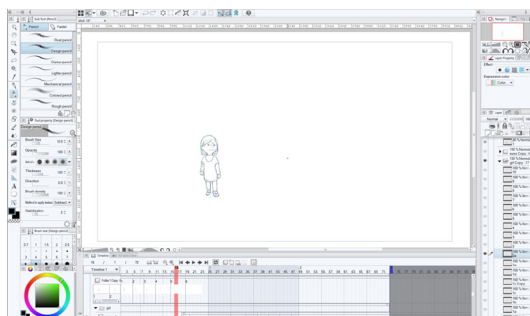
All the completed shots are aligned on premiere pro as per the animatics with some tweaks.



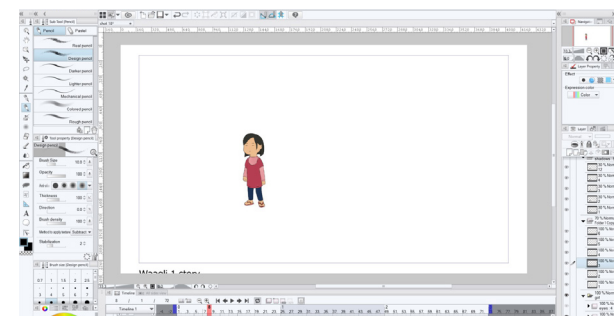
Rough Keyframes



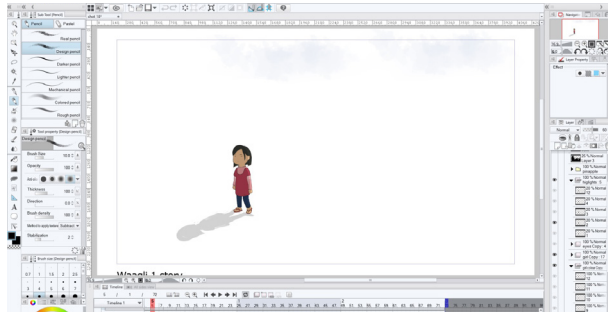
Cleanup



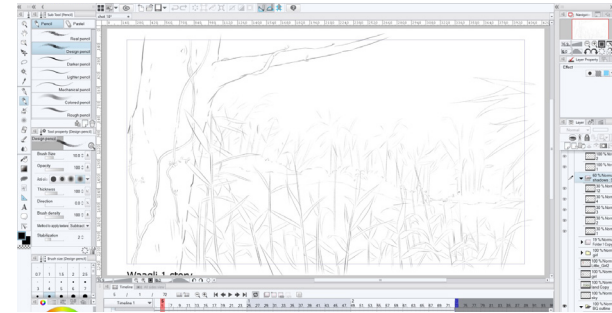
Inbetweening



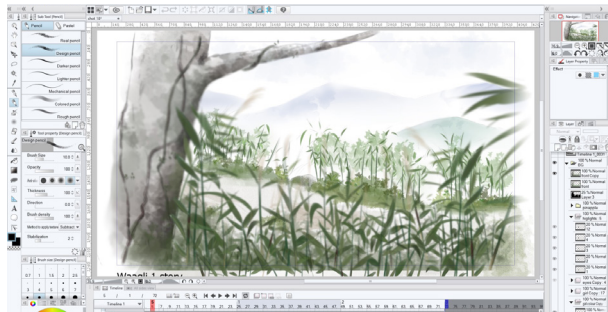
Colour



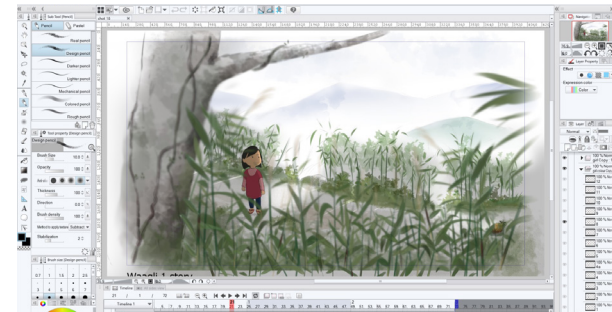
Highlights and shadows



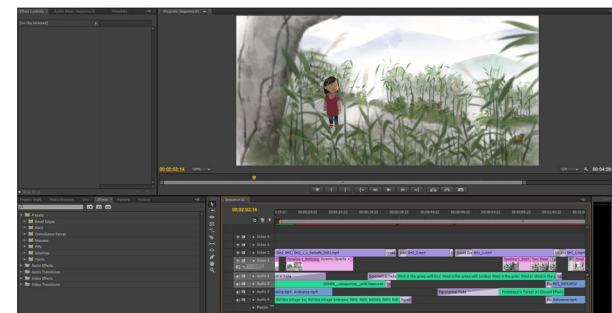
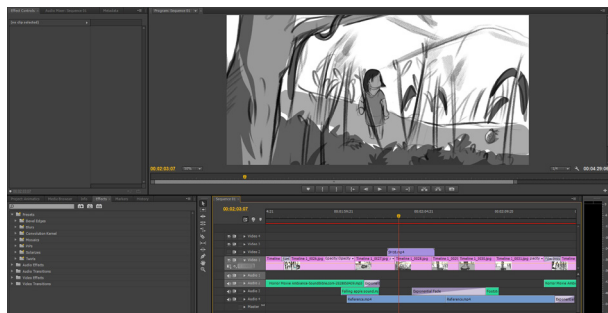
Background outline



Background colour



Final



Obstacles and Takeaway

For my previous project the research and studies were limited to reading articles online or asking people for experience. It was my first time undergoing a research by actually visiting a place. It was a great learning experience and chance to explore new place. It was a whole new thing for me to actually interview people. I had a hard time convincing people to come upfront for a interview about their village and culture. But I eventually could manage a handful of people agreeing for the interview. The village Kongthong is inspiring in many ways. The people here are very hard working and their livelihood is so organised and clean which have positively changed my approach.

With all the reference and ideas in my mind I was confused how to actually come to a conclusion and form a concrete story. So I picked out the important parts from the references and weaved a final story. With this project I have learned to discard and adapt ideas for better result. As for planning for production of the film, I assumed that the story would demand a lot of landscapes, vegetation and hills. So, I opted for a watercolor impression style for background, inspired by the background art done for Princess Kaguya . It is not easy as it seems to be but once I got used to, it did save me time.

Conclusion

Most of the people are not aware of the culture and practices of the people of Northeastern region. This is due to the lack of documentation. There are couple of documentations done but most of it has to be dug out of the old archives. Most of the younger generations are not aware of their cultural practices. I wanted to initiate it with an animation film. Every film has a purpose and a message within it.

There are lot of things which are yet to be explored from the Northeastern region of India. There are numerous facts and cultural practices which are not known to the people. Lots of untold stories and myths which needs to be told. With this animation short I want people to know that there are more of interesting stories and practices like this which are worth exploring.

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VIDEOS

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BOOKS

1. Film directing, shot by shot *by Steven D. Katz*