



Tattooed lady wearing a choker necklace and ear ornament with silver coins, Laru Village, Nocte territory.

Naga Adornments - A Collector's Overview

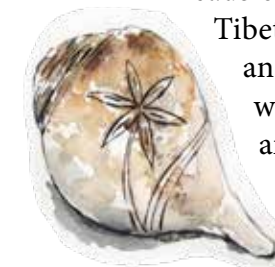
This book presents an extensive selection of Naga jewellery, clothing, hats and other adornments, from a collection patiently assembled over twenty-five years and built up during several trips to Northeast India. It illustrates the importance of adornment in every aspect of the Naga people's life and traditions.

The skillful Naga craftsmen have created magnificent ornaments with rudimentary tools from a vast range of materials.

As stated by Marion Wettstein, a respected anthropologist from the University of Bern, specialist of the Naga textiles : "the artefacts that a society makes are not simply physical objects but also the carriers of immaterial meanings and value notions".

The Naga people wear these fascinating ornaments, as a conspicuous display of their social standing, during festivities or the performing of rituals in order to enhance themselves within their group, to indicate status and rank and to display their wealth. To our knowledge, very few other tribal groups have reached such a high level of sophistication.

Confined for a long time in the northeast hills of the Indian sub-continent, the Nagas have been using locally available materials from the forest surrounding their villages as well as from far away lands. Glass beads are predominantly used in Naga jewellery.



Beads came primarily from India, but also from Tibet (the Tibetans themselves imported beads from China, Burma and Nepal). Trade was often conducted by the Angami with other non-Naga tribes such as the Apa Tani and the Meitei as intermediaries. Lakhimpur at the foot of the Himalayas, has long been an important trading centre for imported beads from far away, and still is today. Other types of beads may also have originated from Europe (possibly Venetian)

entering the sub-continent through the ports of Dacca or Calcutta.

Beads, besides their ornamental purpose, were also used as currency in the barter trade until the 1900's, when the British Raj



introduced silver Rupees to facilitate collecting taxes.

The origin for carnelian beads, particularly cherished by the Ao tribe, was Cambay in Gujarat which had been supplying beads to the Naga markets for centuries. It is located some 2,500 km southwest of Nagaland and those beads must have taken months to reach their destination. Rarity and distance meant higher value.

Seashells and cowrie shell beads of all shapes were mostly coming to the port of Calcutta from the bay of Bengal. Indian chank shells (*Turbinella pyrum*) were sliced, cut and transformed specifically for the Naga market.

Metal beads were not as frequently used and can be found in some necklaces and belts but they were also considered valuable. Brass spacers were imported from Manipur while the bone and wood spacers were made by the Nagas themselves.

The origin of the lesser used quartz crystal beads and rare opaque transparent glass beads sometimes called “heirloom beads”, remains a mystery to this day and more research will have to be done by scholars.

Hunting and gathering were important activities of the Naga tribal people, to bring food back to their villages and also to collect valuable items to be used for the fabrication of their adornments especially the hats : wild animal horns (buffaloes, goat antelopes, *takin*), boar tusks, bear skins and teeth, Hornbill feathers and ivory, monkey skulls, flying fox tails, beetle wings, pangolin claws, porcupine quills and the extremely valuable tiger’s teeth and claws.

Buffaloes, elephants and rhinoceros hides, for the fabrication of shields, were also obtained from Assam and often traded against rubber, sugarcane, salt, cotton, cardamon, medical herbs, beeswax and other natural products. Bamboo, cane, rattan and orchid stems were collected for the fabrication of bracelets, hats, leg bands and of course hunter’s baskets and household utensils.

It is interesting to note that while most of the 16 Naga tribal groups do not share a common language, there is some similarity in their dress code. An Angami or an Ao warrior could recognise the status of a Konyak or a Tangkhul warrior and what feats he had accomplished, just by the types of adornment he and his wife were wearing. The



right to use specific ornaments, body cloths, tattoos or weapons is all thoroughly understood, controlled and restricted to warriors having defended their villages against intruders, having carried out headhunting raids, killed a tiger or a bear or offered “Feasts of Merit” to their community. Only men were allowed to wear animal parts such as horns, teeth and claws and to tattoo their face not only to display strength but also to inspire fear to others. Warriors or hunters would also attach specific hunting trophies onto their headhunter baskets. Wealth status indicators were shown during festivities, when clan chiefs and warriors wear rare and expensive ivory armbands and their wives don magnificent necklaces with carnelian or crystal beads. Insignia including women’s hair and job’s tears used as beads were highly prized, while goat or dog hair dyed in red were more commonly used. Hornbill (*Bucerotidae*) feathers, revered by all Nagas were featured prominently on most warriors ceremonial headdresses, particularly by the Tangkhul. Heirloom brass bracelets with spikes were also worn by women on festive occasions. Women would try to outdo each others by wearing their most valuable necklaces, beaded belts and narrow skirts with chanks and bells. Even children would be adorned by the parents with small jewellery for special occasions.



The decline of Naga traditional jewellery and ornaments has been a consequence of the British efforts to eradicate headhunting practices and slavery. The number of festivities related to fertility beliefs decreased accordingly and with it the demand for such adornment. The introduction of silver British India Rupees at village level further reduced the barter trade value of the beads, shells and brass ornaments, which had been in place for centuries. Finally, during the Christianisation of the Nagas, the Baptist missionaries in the early 1900s try to discourage their converts from wearing ‘archaic’ ornaments.

The Nagas today have not completely abandoned wearing their traditional ornaments albeit they have been replaced by more modern versions, during festive occasions.

Silver Rupee coins, chank shells used in necklaces, long brass beads from Manipur, wild goat horns and Hornbill feathers used as head ornaments.



Erected stones cluster (*shaojong*) in Tangnyu Village, Konyak territory.
A warrior's head taking tally.

Foreword - Naga Material Culture

The Nagas material culture shows a wide range of elements, which can be considered from both a technological and aesthetic point of view. They share some of these features with other upland societies, in both the mainland and insular areas of Southeast Asia, such as the Wa in the Yunnan/Myanmar border area, some Hill tribes of the central highlands of Vietnam and Laos, the Igorot and Ifugao peoples in Northern Luzon (Philippines) and finally, the Dayak groups in Borneo and the Toraja in Sulawesi. In connection to headhunting, ethnographic parallels between the Nagas, the Dayaks and some ethnic groups in Southeast Asia/Oceania have been noted. E. Banks, a former curator of the Sarawak Museum, pointed out similarities with the Kayan in dress, weapons and ritual practices. However, these similarities do not refer to a shared genetic background of these people living far away from each other, but rather to an ancient Bronze age tradition common to Southeast Asian upland peoples. The Nagas lack a knowledge of bronze kettledrums, which is perplexing because of their proximity with Yunnan and Northern Myanmar/Northern Laos borders areas. No evidence of bronze kettledrums or of the musical set of gongs common in mainland and island Southeast Asia exist, although gongs as such are used. On the other hand, Naga culture does present affinities with Dongson imagery as depicted on the kettledrums and *situlae*. However, Dongson culture motifs are reflected in geometric patterns on textiles, carvings, and especially on bronze and brass jewellery i.e. : heavy torques, earrings and bronze/brass armlets, spiral brass gauntlets, other arm ornaments, spiked bracelets, spherical bells and various headgears.

Religious beliefs also show common forms in the region, a focus



Konyak tattooed warrior from Longwa Village wearing a black bear fur hat.

on an ancestor cult, and 'animistic' ideas associated with shamanistic practices, the 'soul' notion besides ghosts, spirits found in nature and large animals, such as the tiger. Furthermore, remarkably similar headhunting and burial rituals are shared between the religion of the Nagas and ancient beliefs of some Tibeto-Burman and Austroasiatic-speaking ethnic groups from Myanmar, and Yunnan who might have once settled in island Southeast Asia, Taiwan, and part of New Guinea.

The following cultural features are found among the Nagas: raised houses on posts, men's houses, bachelor's dormitories, log drums, stone circles used as ritual 'seats' in villages, small backstrap looms, terraced rice paddies, widespread usage of glass and stone beads, bone/shell ornaments, elaborate headgear decorated with Hornbill black/white feathers, painted rectangular shields made from hide, wooden effigies of the dead, traditions of raised platform burial and stone urn burial (skulls). The Nagas seem to have a limited knowledge of pottery as only simple pots, some with paddle-impressed decoration are made. Metal work includes the casting of various objects in brass (Konyak) and more generally, iron working. The Nagas used to obtain iron from lowlanders in the shape of spades that were remade into spearheads and *dao* cutlasses/

hatchets blades and axes. They also use brass ornaments and bells cast in Assam, Bengal and Manipur, obtained through trading; in the field of music, the mouth organ and in weaponry the cross-bow and barbed spears that are also common to other ethnic groups in Southeast Asia.

The eastern Angami had a tradition of trading with outsiders, this included local trading and exchanges within the Naga hills as well as long distance trading. According to Professor Kanungo, between 1886-1887, during the pacification of the Naga hills, there

was a four fold increase in the trade of glass beads and ornaments imported into the area, traded by barter for fowls, pigs and also dried fish. This situation was still significantly prevailing in the



Angami woman weaving on a backstrap loom in Khonoma.

early 1900s. J.E. Hutton, an anthropologist and an administrator in the Indian Civil Service during the period of the British Raj, reports that one Angami village, Khonoma, was the most active in the trade of ornaments in the region. Perhaps it explains also the early historical references about trade of carnelian beads, glass beads and shells used as ornaments by the Angami people. Angami men would travel great lengths to Bengal (Calcutta) and return to the Naga hills via Myanmar and Manipur areas.

For defensive reasons, Naga villages are usually located on ridges, and the summit of hills up to 1200-1400 meters above sea level. In headhunting times, they were protected by a series of ditches, stone walls, stockades or fences of thorn, and dikes fortified with pointed bamboo sticks. Houses are usually large with various shapes and built close to one another. Some groups build them on raised posts, while others (southern groups) build them on the ground. The size of the house varies with social status. Accordingly, house decoration reflects prestige, especially among Konyak, interestingly the Ang (chiefs) may have several wives. The village's space is divided into several blocks or areas, the *khel*. This Assamese word corresponds to a clan, patrilineal or dialectal group, whose members gather in the same area of the village. *Khel* are usually separated by open spaces as a protection from fires. Among the Nagas, the men's houses are known as *morung*. These large buildings show carved and painted decorations which are much more elaborate than that on individual houses. According to custom, each *khel* in a community has its own *morung* which functions as a men's club and a bachelor's dormitory. Younger boys, from age six or seven, may also sleep there. In the past, the *morung* used to be the center of social life and work organisation in the village. Male work teams connected to various activities, feasts, building of houses and agriculture, would form there. Human skull trophies, *Mithun* and



Lainong warrior with Chin tattoo. Lahe Naga Festival, Myanmar.

other animal skulls, are kept in rows or on shelves in the *morung*. In short, the *morung* as a social institution, owns land in the village territory, distinct from the village lands and the privately owned agricultural lands.

Naga society is based on chiefdom that allows the expansion of the group. J.E. Hutton remarked that the Sema chief authority would have been easily weakened, if he could not send off his sons or younger brothers to found new villages. This segmentation process is crucial, it explains the exceptional ethnic and cultural differentiation that took place in the Naga hills. Given the high demographic density in the region in the past, expansion could only take place through intertribal warfare. The ‘Sitting Circles,’ where founder ancestors are supposedly buried, serve as ceremonial centres, and occasionally for the dancing that occurs at great feasts. It can be noted that large stones are also hauled to the village during ‘Feasts of Merit’ as a way of gaining rank.

Feast-giving was the most important mechanism in the creation of prestige and rank within the society. Distinct from both the



Entrance of the *morung* (Lijo). *Khel* of the Mokholee clan. Yachem Village. Phom territory.

life-cycle rituals and agricultural celebrations, the Feasts of Merit are ranked in scale and each phase has a special value and importance. For the important men in the village community, the wealthy and the chiefs, participation in the feasts established the rights to wear or use new kinds of personal ornaments and house decoration items. Somehow, the feast takes the shape of a potlatch where a great amount of meat from slaughtered cattle, *Mithun* and pigs and quantities of rice-beer, provided by the feast-giver, are consumed, enhancing his rank and overall prestige. The ritual and sacred dimension of the Feasts of Merit is linked to the notion of *genna*, i.e. the accomplishing of a rite that conveys the idea of a tabu and/or prohibition in space and time,

applied to the village. The main ritual acts carried at the Feasts of Merit are the sacrifice of a *Mithun*, the erection of wooden Y-shaped posts – a female sex symbol –, the attachment of carved house horns on the gable or the hauling of large stones in the village, as personal feats of power. Memory stones erected in honour of a feast-giver

are of many shapes (vertical or round). In some communities, the women would follow a similar set of feasts corresponding to that of the men so that they could raise their status in the village. Generally, only the wealthy who had a surplus of rice and other resources, could indulge in participating in the cycle of Feasts of Merit. Participation in the feasts creates the rights to use specific ornaments, feathers, motifs and items of clothing for both men and women. The feasts link metaphorically, human sexuality, fertility of the plants and vitality. In a similar vein, at a village level, headhunting is associated with well-being, sexuality and fertility. Pre-marital sex was common. Equally, the prestige of an individual increases by collecting trophy heads, fighting and participating in warfare and headhunting raids.



Konoma Village ‘Sitting Circle’ platform. Angami territory.

Until a recent period, headhunting, the taking of fresh enemy heads, was an essential part of social and religious life. Traditionally, there were many intergroup, intervillage or clan feuds. All these conflicts were an occasion for murder and head taking. Before the imposition of the *Pax Britannica* by the Raj, the Nagas would raid the plains of Assam to get heads. They would fight by using spears and shields, and *dao* were used for decapitation. Interestingly, guns were introduced in the Naga Hills early in the 19th century, even before British occupation of the region. The ‘spiritual’ aspect of headhunting revolves around the notion that the human and animal head – especially those of the tiger, leopard, bear, monkey – have a ‘vital principle’ or essence, which is defined as beneficial to humans and for crops. It is only by regularly bringing new trophies to the community that this can be achieved. Human skull trophies – which are decorated with rattan casing, tassels, *Mithun* or wooden horns –, bring an increase in wealth, of children and rice harvests. Prosperity and fertility are conceptually linked to the practice. Among the Angami, headhunting also had the function of placating evil spirits. Basically, it united the village community in a common activity. Besides human skulls, Hornbill/animal skulls, especially those of gibbons and monkeys, are painted, decorated and worn as breast or hat ornaments by men. Warriors’ outfits

show a unique aesthetic elaboration in connection to celebrations following a successful head taking. It is also assumed that the larger the number of captured heads, the larger the crop harvested would be. Fertility is transmitted to the crops by the sheer presence of fresh human heads in the village, however, these have to be renewed periodically.



Front view of the log drum (11 m. long) of Aliba Village, Ao Territory.

Thus, the accumulation of skull trophies in a village also raises its status. Similarly, a man who failed to take a sufficient number of heads would have great difficulty finding a wife. Hairpins used by warriors – their hair was worn in a knot at the back of the head – show the tally of heads taken, indicated by marks, or carved heads. The headhunting practice associates huge log drums made up of a single tree, as among the Wa of northeast Myanmar/Yunnan with the placement of trophy heads either in the *morung*, or on stone platforms. Headhunting is also linked with megalithic monuments, large scale gatherings and dancing in the village space and at its periphery, especially at head-receiving feasts.

Besides language and custom, the Nagas state their identities with rich adornments. It allows them to differentiate themselves from their neighbours. The same can be noted about the tattoos worn by men and women. Traditionally both sexes wear very little clothing, the main items worn being the loin-cloth (male) and narrow skirt (female), to which Body cloths or shawls are added. Thus it is not surprising that ornaments have a ostentatious role. Earrings are especially noticeable, when combined with facial tattoos, framing the face. Both boys and girls have their ear lobes pierced in order to insert studs which are made of various materials (bone, horn, metal, bamboo...). On warriors' hats and neck bands, leggings and armbands, strips of red-dyed rattan and yellow orchid skin are intricately woven, combined with cowrie shells, bear fur and wild boar tusks (on hats). Ornamental styles developed by the major Naga groups are very distinctive. The chiefs and their wives, the wealthy involved in exchanges and prestige-seeking during Feasts of Merit, also wear special dress and ornaments that differentiate

them from the rest of the society. The Nagas follow strict rules for who can use specific ornaments and how to get the rights to wear them, such as the display of courage or of wealth. Significantly, even when working, women used to keep on their ornaments and necklaces. In craft making, wood-carving and basketry are men's work whereas weaving is exclusive to the women.

Tattooing combines aesthetics with the display of status on the body, especially for men as well as for girls. It corresponds usually with rites of passage at crucial periods of their life (adolescence, marriage, giving birth). Among the scantily dressed Nagas, tattoos add to the use of jewellery and ornaments. Tattooing is common to both genders (Chang, Konyak, Nocte, Lainong). Among the Northern Naga groups facial tattoos were the most noticeable. Successful Konyak headhunters had the right to wear a symmetrical facial tattoo of thick black patterns around the brows and the eyes - they were dubbed 'looking glasses' by some colonial observers. The tattoo stresses the social value of the face. Nocte women had finer vertical patterns drawn on the chin, the nose and the forehead, indicating clan membership. Another kind of design was formed of crossed lines on the legs, looking like laced leggings (Ao). The most spectacular was the wide chest tattoo of the Angami headhunter. This motif may relate to the *Mithun's* skull shape with its long curved horns.



Large megalith near Khonoma Village, Angami Territory.

Specific motifs can be observed among the various Naga groups. Some are carved on wood posts, house and *morung* architectural parts, on log drums and rectangular shields (hourglass pattern or lines, circles, zigzags) painted with lime, while the large triangular cane shields display more complex designs. Bronze and brass items show geometric and stylised patterns (spirals/double spirals, lozenges, lines, zigzag, circles, rope patterns) solar symbols, stars or triangles. In woodcarving, other designs are recurring: female breasts, human heads, whole human body, the *Mithun* head or horns carved on fork pillars, wooden seats or *morung* front. The 'enemy teeth' pattern, carved on Y-posts with a *Mithun* head,



Carved panel in the entrance of the house of the Ang of Wakka Village. Wancho Territory.

a status symbol, is unique to the Nagas. The Hornbill, head whole body or only its feathers, is widely represented in painting and carving. Stylised *Mithun* heads are carved on the village's gates, as among the Angami. The body cloths or shawls worn by the Sema, Chang and Sangtam headhunters show simple designs stitched in cowrie shells: a human figure and circles, representing heads. The prestige cloths exchanged with the Meitei of Manipur, also display stylised elephants and horses motifs besides bright floral patterns. Painted bands on Rengma Body cloths combine various motifs : sun discs with rays and animals (elephants, *Mithun*, deer, tiger, dog) and geometric patterns. Mostly warriors' figures, animals are represented in black on light bark cloth belts. Women's narrow skirts display other motifs, mostly geometric. Such patterns, lozenges and lines, made either in beads or shells, decorate armlets made of cane and fibres.

Some brass items such as bracelets, carry engraved decorations made of dots, mostly spirals and circles. Finally, among the southern Nagas, on constructions such as the *morung*, the houses of chiefs' or wealthy men, large crossed 'horns' on the ridge are noticeable. They have a sacred value, linked to the participation in Feasts of Merit, or sometimes, wedding ceremonies. They reflect fertility and wealth.

The successive adaptation and transformation processes that took place among the Nagas during the last century have been tremendous, but their core cultural values and crafts have been perpetuated, taking on new expressions.

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Drawing of the log drum (9 m long) of ToupHEMA Village. Angami Territory.