



Among the Naga, shell, rock crystal, glass, and nowadays even Perspex are used for making jewelry.

Earrings of the Naga

Text and photos by Karin van Paassen

The young Naga woman in the photo wears glass earrings that have a diameter of 55 mm. The earrings connect by a strand of cotton threads that is placed over the head so that the jewelry doesn't have to be inserted through the earlobe. Originally, women wore the round earrings through their earlobes. Big holes were needed for that. It took years to stretch the hole so that the ear ornaments (plugs) could be inserted, and the weight of the disc caused the lobe to stretch even more.

Symbols of cultural identity

This type of earring was mainly worn by the Ao and the Tankhul, and it was considered a sign of wealth. The jewels had an enchanting and seductive effect, especially at night, because the wearer's face is reflected in the material.

The Ao call the earrings *tongpang*, while the Konyak call them *naju*; there are also many other names.

The round shapes were made of glass, rock crystal, and shell. Sometimes the ornaments were square in shape.

These earrings, as well as other types of jewelry, are symbols of a group's cultural identity.

Hair ornaments

The glass and crystal earrings are made in Myanmar. Young women today choose to wear earrings in this style, made of Perspex. Even this lightweight replicas are not worn in the lobe, but on a strand of cotton threads that lies across the top of the head and is held in place by a hairband. Each earring is attached to the ear with a small wire through a hole in the lobe. The earrings are also called hair ornaments.

The habitat

The Naga have lived in northeastern India and



1. Glass earrings (diameter of 55 mm) connect by a strand of cotton threads that is placed over the head. Photo Karin van Paassen

2. Old Naga woman (Ao) wearing the original earrings of rock crystal through their earlobes. Photo Retlaw Snellac

3. Earrings made of shell (*Turbinella pyrum*) with decoration consisting of dots, typical for the Naga. Photo Karin van Paassen

adjacent northwestern Myanmar for centuries. Until recently, the area where they live in Myanmar was not freely accessible. The population is a collection of about 40 related ethnolinguistic groups. The word naga is said to originate from a Burmese word that means something like "with holes in the ears" and refers to the ear decorations. The Naga use many parts of shells in their ornaments. These include the large snail shells of the *Turbinella pyrum* and cowrie shells. Both of these come from the Indian Ocean, and it's striking that this is quite far from the places where the Naga live. Tusks, teeth, claws, horn, metal, bones, seeds, hair, wood, feathers, and processed amber are other materials used in the jewelry.

Strict rules

Each group has its unique, traditional decorations that come with symbolic meanings. The jewelry clearly shows the hierarchy, status, and age of the men and women wearing it. Its use is subject to strict rules and associated ceremonies. The jewelry must be 'earned', for example through a conflict victory, a spectacular hunt, or, in the past, headhunting. For every head taken, the headhunter received a metal charm on a necklace. Both women and men have tattoos, including on

their faces. The different patterns all have meanings, and they, too, must be earned. Young people no longer follow this practice.

New Year's Eve

The Naga celebrate every New Year's Eve with impressive ceremonies, alternately in Myanmar and in India. In 2015, we experienced this New Year's Eve celebration in Leshi, in Myanmar. Thousands of men and women danced and partied for several days. Everyone wore beautiful and colorful traditional clothing, jewelry, and woven cloths. The men also wore large, impressive attire! It was fantastic and unforgettable!

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Additional readings

Jacobs, J. (1990). *The Nagas: hill peoples of Northeast India*. London: Themes & Hudson

Kanungo, A.K. (2006). *Naga Ornaments and the Indian Ocean*. Pune (India): Deccan College Post-Graduate & Research Institute

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