

***E*THNOGRAPHIC A DESCRIBED : THE NAGA PIPES OF NORTHEAST INDIA**

In a Northeast corner of India, close to the border of Burma in the east and China in the north lies a quadrant known as the Naga Hills District, once known as Assam. It is believed that a people like the Nagas was known in this area some 2000 years earlier. Today, about one million Nagas live in other Indian states and in Burma, but the great majority still occupies what is called Nagaland. The name Naga, however, is used by people who live in the plains area, not by the Nagas themselves. While their past is more sketchy than their present, these brown-skinned Mongoloid natives, influenced by other cultures over time, are, more or less, a collection of assorted Neolithic tribes, but the total number of tribal groups is unknown. Sometime in the 1840s, the British arranged formal treaties between the Nagas and the sovereignty of Assam, since the Naga territory was viewed as not being integrated into that sovereignty.

While the Nagas are an interesting cultural and social group to study, this article focuses only on one of their customary implements, the smoking pipe. Like so many other ethnographic and anthropomorphic artifacts used for smoking that are now in museums and in private collections, the Naga pipe is fantasy and fascination for many interested in the technology of native smoking habits. The Nagas are simple artisans, but they are well known for their

basketry, pottery, metalwork, and wood-carving. There is, interestingly, a division of labor between the sexes. Wood-carving, basketry and metal crafts are predominantly male skills in most Naga tribes ; pottery may be exclusive to either the male or the female in some tribes ; and bone, ivory, and shell are shared crafts among some other tribes. Moreover, certain tribes are more noted for working specific mediums, such as the Konyaks and Kalyo-Kengyus who are master craftsmen noted for their fired, cast and hammered iron and brass. Pipe are just an expression of the Nagas' collective artisan skills.

Naga warfare is measured, in part, by head-taking. Although different



Northeast Indian and Burmese hill tribal pipes, J. Trévor Barton collection

communities treat captured heads in different ways, the head is an important aspect of village life, and it plays a central role in various Naga rituals. Suffice to say that head-taking is a cultural, social, and ritualistic phenomenon in the Naga culture, as one Konyak has been quoted as saying : 'If we do not get a head every year, the crops will be bad, the pigs and cattle will not increase, our children will get ill'. Thus, the human head is a central theme, a motif expressed in many artifacts, as depicted in some of the illustrated Naga pipes.

Of course, the Nagas have been exposed to tobacco. The Angamis, for example, living in the south-central Naga Hills District, as reported by Hutton, knew only one narcotic : tobacco ! While Western village tribesmen chew the plant (dried and pounded) their Eastern counterparts smoke it through water. The materials used for pipe-making typically consist of bamboo, indigenous woods, pottery, iron and brass. Some Naga pipes have been confused with those attributable to Assam, and certain brass and iron pipes have been wrongly identified as coming from the African Cameroons or Nigeria. The wooden pipe with carved effigy human head on the bowl, figures on stem, and characteristic upward slope from back to front of bowl is unmistakably Naga. Most are, generally, straight-stemmed dry tobacco pipes or water pipes (in the

B. b. 1.

9½ in long. "Council Pipe" used by the Jaborha Nagas - an independent tribe inhabiting the Patkoi range of mountains, between Upper Assam and Burmah. About 27° N. - 96° E.
From J. M. Foster, Esq. Medical Officer of the Assam Tea Company

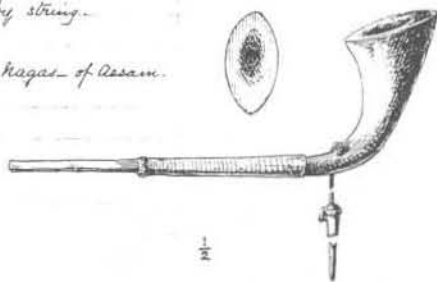


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Figure 3 : Bragge Drawing B.b.1

B. b. 2.

8½ in long. Bowl of dark wood, of pointed over section. Preter attached by string. Preter, a thorn.
Used by the Nagas of Assam.

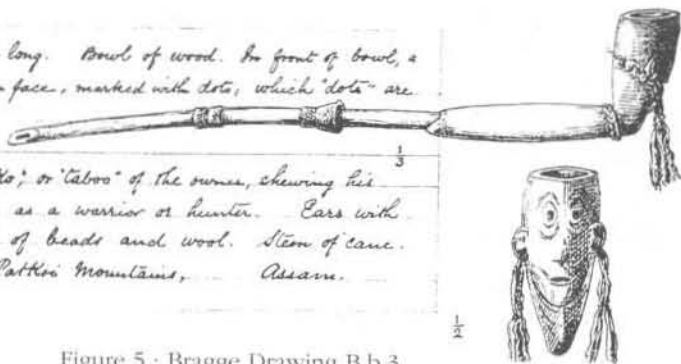


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Figure 4 : Bragge Drawing B.b.2

B. b. 3.

20½ in long. Bowl of wood. In front of bowl, a human face, marked with dots, which "dots" are the "Atto" or "taloo" of the owner, showing his success as a warrior or hunter. Ears with tassels of beads and wool. Stem of cane.
From Patkoi mountains, Assam.

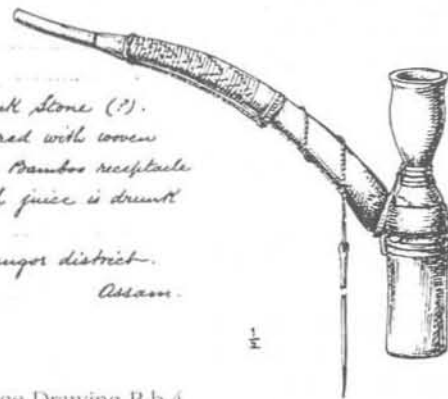


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Figure 5 : Bragge Drawing B.b.3

B. b. 4.

9 in. long. Bowl of Black Stone (?). Stem of wood partly covered with cowen grass. Below bowl, is a bamboo receptacle for Tobacco juice; which juice is drunk after a feast.
From Sebsaugor district. Assam.



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Figure 6 : Bragge Drawing B.b.4

B. b. 5.

8 in long. Bowl of horn, with Receptacle for Tobacco juice, with stopper.

Stem of Horn and Bone.

Assam.



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Figure 7 : Bragge Drawing B.b.5

B. b. 6.

9 in. long. Bowl of hard wood, with point at bottom. Stem of silver and cane.
From Aboor, Assam.



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Figure 8 : Bragge Drawing B.b.6

style of the nargileh and the hookah) and, as expected, shapes and construction vary from tribe to tribe.

The tribal groups to which the most commonly found pipe materials are attributed are :

- Ao : Plain wood bowls with decorated red cane stems. Bamboo dry tobacco pipes with carved decoration on bowl. Iron and brass pipes with plain metal bowls and metal stems decorated with coloured rattan and cane. Water pipes with bamboo water reservoir and wood or pottery bowl.
- Chang : Bamboo dry tobacco pipes with carved decoration on bowl and stem.

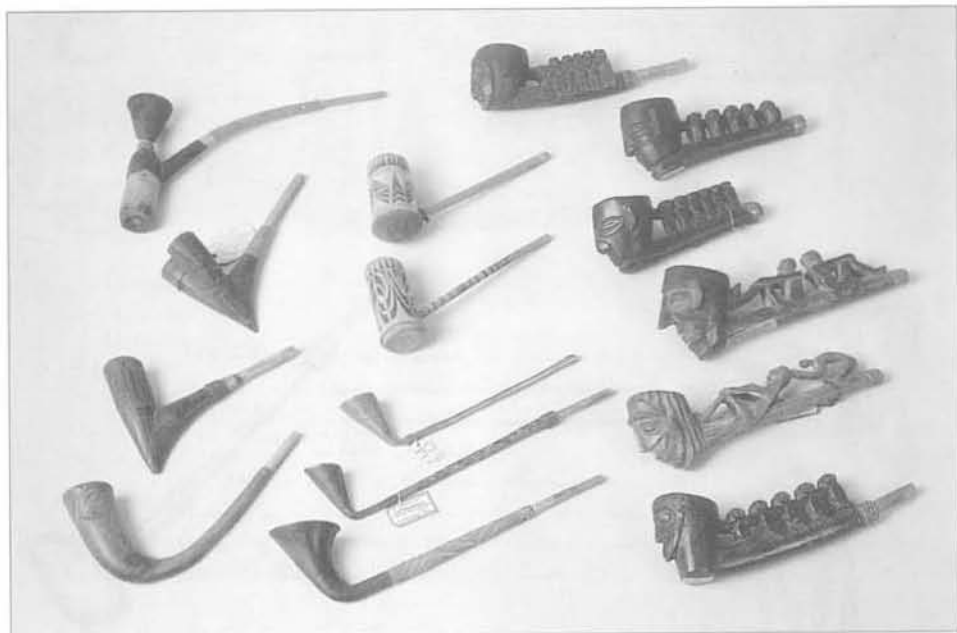
- Kalyo-Kengyu : Pottery pipe bowls with bamboo stem.

- Konyak and Phom : Carved wood pipes, typically with effigy human head on bowl and high-relief-carved stylized figures along shank or stem.

- Kuki (not shown on map) : Brass pipe bowls with small concentric circles linked together as bowl and shank decor.

- Lhota and Sema : Water pipes with bamboo water reservoir, and wood or pottery bowls.

As a way to categorize (and identify) these anthropomorphic pipes, a series of photographs and line drawings drawn from three collections provides ample evidence of Naga pipe art with



Naga Pipes from the Pitt Rivers Museum
(Courtesy, J Jacobs, Hill Peoples of Northeast India)

their traditional shapes and stylised carving. As mentioned earlier, head-taking is evoked in pipes, and some of the best examples are found in the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, England. The British Museum is believed to own pipes belonging to William Bragge, F.S.A., and while the authors are not confident as to whether, or how many of these are Naga, several pipe drawings from the portfolio that Bragge commissioned are shown. Although smaller than the original to-scale drawings, these reflect the fine detail and the customary hand-written descriptive notes that typify the Bragge drawings.

The last group of Naga pipes cited belongs to one of our Academicians, J. Trevor Barton. Trevor's principal penchant is collecting ethnographic examples of tobacco pipes, so it comes as no surprise that he has not only the breadth, but also the depth, in fine examples of this Naga art form. Of the many pipes in his collection, Trevor has selected a quantity to exhibit the infinite variety of tobacco-smoking utensils crafted by these hinterland peoples. At the top are Lhota and Sema water pipes, and Ao and Kuki iron and brass pipes are on the left ; on the right are Konyak and Phom carved wood pipes, the stylized bas-relief figural heads incised on the bowls and the high-relief (and often crude, or naive and stick-like) figures arrayed on the shanks. Figure 10 exhibits frontal views of four effigy head pipes, and Figure 11 displays a side view of another. Figure 12 displays a broad

array of dry tobacco and water pipes in various mediums, styles, and shapes from the Abor, Dafla, Mishmi, Kachin and Shan Hill tribes of Northeast India and Burma.

While many of today's pipe collectors remain transfixed on the late 19th Century ornately carved meerschaum pipe with amber mouthpiece or the multi-colored European porcelain pipe, the rustic pipes of distant lands and remote peoples still provide measured interest to some other collectors and to anthropologists and ethnographers. These latter pipes are often curious, sometimes whimsical, almost always crudely crafted man-made utensils for tobacco consumption, and they cannot be summarily discounted in any serious study of the smoking culture of Man in his time and place. The Nagaland pipes are no exception to this general observation.

Further reading :

Julian Jacobs, **Hill Peoples of Northeast India : The Nagas, Society, Culture, and the Colonial Encounter**, Thames & Hudson, London, England, 1990.

J.H. Hutton, **The Angami Nagas**, Macmillan, London, 1921.

Alfred Dunhill, **The Pipe Book**, A.&C. Black Ltd., London, 1924.

J.T. Barton (compiler), **A Portfolio of William Bragge and His Pipes of All Peoples**, privately printed, 1991.

**J. Trevor BARTON
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