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Naga Cultural Attires and Musical Instruments is an attempt to present the traditional costumes and ornaments and the musical instruments used by the Nagas of North East India. It has been written by Kajen Mongro, a school teacher-turned-cultural officer with the Nagaland state government. But though he wrote the material for the book, he did not live to see its publication—it has been compiled and edited by A. Lanunungsang Ao, the head of the Department of Sociology in Nagaland University. It has three sections, the first of which deals with the attire of Naga men. The second section deals with women's clothing and the third section with the different Naga musical instruments. The Nagas are a colourful people who inhabit the forests and hills of the Nagaland. The term Naga is generic and used to refer to any of the different Naga tribes like Ao, Angami, Lotha, Sema, Mao, Phom and Thangkhul. All Nagas rely heavily on the forest for their subsistence—they are shifting cultivators who practice jhum cultivation. Each tribe has its own dialect and speech, and this diversity has given rise to a variety of beliefs and cultural practices. Nevertheless, the Naga tribes share the same cultural ethos and that seems to make them stand out as a distinct cultural group—whatever the differences between the Naga tribes may be, they present themselves as belonging to a Naga culture.

The book starts off with the section on men's attire. The author starts with the head, and describes each item of clothing and ornamentation in great detail. He also gives an account of how a particular item is made and its ritual and ceremonial significance. He starts with the hornbill feather, which is worn on the head, and proceeds with the descriptions one by one to the leggings. He describes nineteen items in this section, ranging from clothes to ornaments and implements of war, like spears and shields.

Of special significance is the shibu, or Boar Tusk necklace. This is used extensively by different Naga tribes. While the Konyak, Chang, Phom and Yimchungger use it occasionally as a necklace, the Ao and the Sema use it regularly. A few other tribes use boar tusks as part of their headgear. The making of the shibu begins with the hunting of the boar. This is usually done by using traps at the watering holes of the wild boar. Another method of hunting is to track a family of wild boar and then digging pits around it. The bottoms of the pits are covered with sharp spikes. Then the pits are covered with leaves and sticks. When the wild boars stumble into the pits, they are injured and easily hunted. After the boar is hunted and the meat shared among the hunters, the leader of the hunt gets the boar tusks. There are two varieties of shibu—the ajapa, a two-tusk necklace and the shipureb—a four-tusk necklace. Both these are made using thread, wood, cane, red cane, conch shell pieces and red beads along with the tusks. The tusks are held together by a piece of wood and plaited red cane. The conch shell pieces and red beads make attractive adornments to the necklace. Once the necklace is made, it has to be sanctified by the arasentsur—the shaman. Only a properly sanctified necklace is worn. Of the two types of necklaces, the two-tusk necklace is worn by all, while only warriors who are skilled in warfare wear the four-tusk necklace. The warriors wear the necklace during dances and festival times. Another elaborate item of adornment for men is the head plate, which is worn only by those who have taken at least one head in battle. Headhunting has long been a source of great pride for Naga warriors. The head plate marks out those warriors who have been successful in their quest for heads. This elaborate head dress is held on the warriors head and shoulders by an ingenious device called the tying string. This is a piece of string made using cotton and woolen fibres. It is made in such a way that it is strong enough to keep the head dress in place and at the same time, soft enough so that it does not cause any discomfort. This passes beneath the wearer's chin and behind the back of his neck, holding the heavy and elaborate head plate in place.

A very important component of the Naga man's possessions is the shield. The Naga shields are made either of bamboo or leather. The bamboo shields have a framework of strong bamboo and are covered with a smooth layer of woven...
butterfly. The leather shields are made from the dried hides of the milhun buffalo. Both shields have an h-shaped handle and a shoulder string and cover the body fully, from the neck to the knees. While the bamboo shields, which are lighter and stronger are preferred for battle, the heavier leather shields are used for dances, as it is easy to draw designs on them. The production of both shields entails a set of strict laws. A period of kimo, ritual purity, is maintained for seven days before the making of a shield. During the kimo, no one in the house of the maker of the shield should eat in another's house; the maker of the shield shall abstain from sex; neither the maker nor his family members may visit a house where a death has taken place; the maker's children should keep away from the village dormitory. After the seven-day kimo, the maker goes to collect materials for the shield. After the shield is made, the shaman examines it for signs of any knots or bits that have not been smoothened properly. If no such thing is found, he sanctifies it and the shield is ready for use. If, however, the shaman finds a knot or a rough spot on it, the maker pays a small wage of some rice or salt to a man to throw away the shield in the graveyard. Any rough spot or knot in a shield is believed to shorten the life span of the user.

The shields are classified into three based on their use. War shields are used by warriors in battle. The smooth bamboo surface of the shield is made wet with water by the warriors just before a battle—this makes the front slippery and the weapon of an opponent will skid off the surface. After a battle, the shield is sanctified by the shaman. When it is not used, the shield is hung above the fireplace in the Naga home—the soot form the fire strengthens it. The Tiger shield is used while hunting a tiger. Sometimes, when a tiger came into the village and troubled the people, the Naga warriors would track it into the jungle. Once they spotted its lair, they would build an akuchi—a strong wooden and bamboo fence around it. Then they would enter the akuchi, the tiger shield in one hand and a spear or dao (traditional Naga knife) in the other. Thus they would hunt and kill the tiger. The Dance shield is used only on festive occasions when the warriors perform a war dance. They draw decorations on the shields using charcoal, limestone and pieces of burnt animal bones. Apart from these three shields, which are of special significance and can be used only by warriors, there is the common shield. This is used for fire fighting—people use it to ward off the heat from a fire as they chop down the huts in its way to stop it from spreading. It is also used by children and those training to be warriors, as they cannot use any of the other shields.

The second section on women's attire is organised similar to the men's section, with descriptions and the significance of nine items. The aggu-u, a brass hair band, the asakipili, a soft hair band, the longpang, a crystal earring, necklaces of different types of beads, the tukutsukrestu, a bodice, the mokhala, a skirt, the kisen, a bangle, the putte, a stocking and the angnaku, a shawl, are among the items of clothing and adornment that are described.

The final section is a description of six musical instruments—three wind, one string and two percussion instruments. The cup violin is the string instrument that is described. It is a small violin-like instrument made using the dried shell of a bitter gourd or a hard and thin bamboo. This forms the cup, while a thin bamboo stick forms the stem. The string of this violin is the hair of a woman, obtained by the artisan from the head of his ladylove. This is played using a bow made from a bamboo stick and a thin bamboo fibre. Another typically Naga instrument is the bamboo flute—so popular it is that all the Naga tribes use it. The Angami lou, the Sema fulili, the Zeilam nthiam, the Konyak wewo, the Ao and Phom jemji, the Lotha philili, the Rengma kheili, the Khiamnang poippoi and the Sangtam khoungkoli—all these are nothing but the bamboo flute. It is made out of ani, a thin bamboo, cut between two nodes. This is finished with a dao to make a flute. The Nagas usually play the flute just after sunset. Both men and women, young and old, play the flute. In three sections, the book covers three major aspects of the material culture of the Nagas.

While the work has all the makings of a good repository of information on Naga material culture, there are a few glaring defects that render it practically useless as a reference. The first is the absence of any kind of introduction. What passes for a preface is a wildly rambling tale of how the author and the editor met. The absence of an introduction makes the reader feel a bit lost. Who are the Nagas? How many different tribes constitute the Nagas? And do all these different tribes use all the things described in the book? These are the questions that arise as one reads the book. The descriptions themselves are quite arbitrary, some are very short, while others ramble on and on, delving into related myths and legends. Again, the names of the items described are given at random in a few of the different Naga dialects. There is no consistency or pattern to this. A little more organisation, a little more uniformity in the presentation and a little more orientation towards a reader who is new to Naga culture would go a long way in making the book a valuable reference for scholars who wish to study Naga material culture.