

# THE CONCH PIERCING

In the piercing world we have come to call the piercing of the ear's concha, a "conch" piercing, pronouncing the ch softly, as in "church." However, per *Webster's New World Dictionary, 2nd Edition*, the correct pronunciation of the ch should be hard, sounding like the letter k. I bring this up merely as a matter of curiosity or trivial fact. I am certainly not suggesting the piercing community change tradition.

Sometime in the early 1990's the original Nomad body piercing shop in San Francisco, owned by Blake Perlingieri and Kristian White, started referring to this piercing as the "Sadhu," a rather catchy name that has stuck. This term appears to refer specifically to placement in the bottom of the conch, sitting vertically. The term Sadhu refers collectively to Indian Hindu Holy men. "Incorrectly they are sometimes referred to as 'Fakirs' who were originally Moslem street magicians who adopted a few yogic techniques for their repertoires and used them solely for entertainment."<sup>1</sup> It is a particular subset of these Sadhus, the Gorak Naths or Gorakhnathis, that have their conchae pierced. There is a minimum of historical documentation on the conch piercing. Its practice seems sporadic within different cultures. Other than the Gorak Naths, I have found only the Mangebetu to have strong cultural ties to the perforation and adorning of the conchae.

The Mangebetu, sometimes spelled Mangbetu, are an African tribe found in the Republic of Zaire, (previously known as Congo). The Mangebetu were formerly regarded for their sophisticated court and developed arts. It is the women of this tribe who still can be seen wearing the beautiful long pieces of ivory in their conchae. The conch perforations often "hold monkey bones which are used to part their hair."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the bones were simply for decoration. In the past when elongation of the skull was more widely practiced, and hair styles were worn high to accentuate the skull's shape, the conch jewelry was used to support the hair. The woman's hair was sometimes extended using hair of the dead from an enemy tribe. It is, of course, impossible to say when the conch piercing was practiced for the first time. The history of the Sadhus has been long debated. Some archeologists believe that asceticism was implicit in the teachings of the Rg-Veda, written in the Vedic language, what we know as "The Vedas," holy texts which came to India with the "invasion" of the Nordic Aryan Tribes around 1500 BCE. These Aryan Tribes became the upper castes, the Brahmans, in the Hindu society. The other camp believes that yogic ascetic and other shamanistic practices can be traced much further back to the Indus Valley Culture, already fully developed in 2500 BCE. As is usually the

case in history, it is probably a little of both.

"Almost nothing is known of the historical Gorakhnath. His personality was quickly distorted by myth and magical folklore...It seems he was an ascetic yogi who lived sometime around the 9th to 12th Century, CE. He established a new synthesis between Pasuhupata Shaivism, Tantra and the so-called Teachings of Siddhas. He was closely linked with Vajrayana (Tantric) Buddhism, and is also credited with the authorship of a lost treatise, called simply Hatha Yoga, and with the foundation of the movement of that same name. His teachings also involve the so-called "left-hand" path of Tantra, which involves sexual tantra with a partner, as opposed to simple visualization (the "right-hand" path)."<sup>3</sup>

"The main symbol that characterizes the Gorakhnathis, are huge earrings worn in split ears. Gorakhnathis are also called Kanphatas or Kanphata Yogis ('Kan' meaning ear and 'phat' meaning split), because at the initiation ceremony the ears are split to insert enormous earrings. These earrings are commonly called "yogi's earrings" and are made of agate, glass, and various materials. Traditionally rhinoceros horn was a favorite due to its durability and because it is a sacred animal. Such rings covered with gold have been found. The wearing of the earrings is of great importance. If one is broken, another must be substituted before the yogi can eat, engage in conversation, or carry out religious duties. Modern adherents claim this piercing the central hollow of the ears is a technique by which the acquisition of magical powers is promoted."<sup>4</sup>

The piercing procedure is performed "with the double edge 'Bhairavi knife' (Bhairavi is a manifestation of Shiva). Before the operation, the Nath Babas are called Aughars, meaning 'unfinished' and many will never reach the second stage."<sup>5</sup> It is not known at what point in the development of this subgroup of Sadhus, that they began piercing their conchae, if they originated the practice, or if the practice existed in a previous sect. They have certainly been the only Hindu practitioners of this ritual for some time.

<sup>1</sup> Shiva, by Paula Fouce and Denise Tomecko, Tamarind Press, 1990. Page 79

<sup>2</sup> Africa Adorned, by Angela Fisher, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishing, 1984. Page 79

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.kheper.net/topics/natha\\_siddhas.html](http://www.kheper.net/topics/natha_siddhas.html)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.philter.ucsm.ac.uk/encyclopedia/hindu/devot/gorak.html> by Richard Shaw, Lancaster University, St Martin's College.

<sup>5</sup> Sadhus Holy Men of India, by Dolf Martsuiker, Thames and Hudson 1993. Page 35