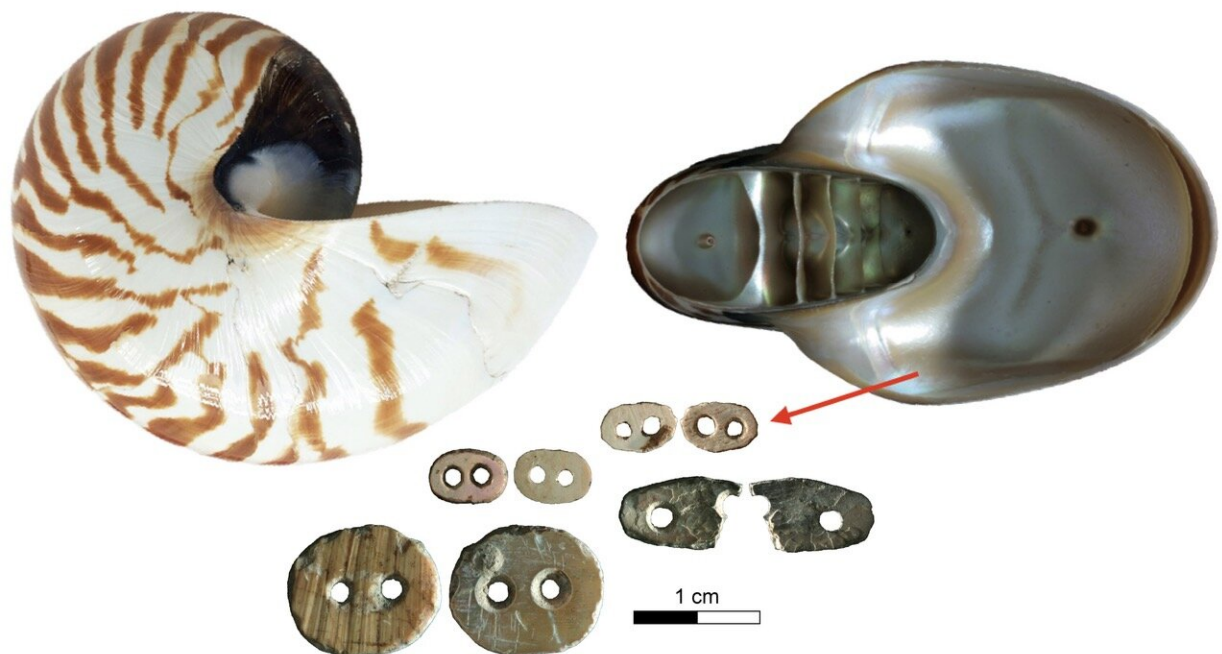


# Sea sequin 'bling' links Indonesian islands' ancient communities

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Credit: Griffith University

A team of researchers have found a shared penchant for sewing reflective shell beads onto clothing and other items across three Indonesian islands that dates back to at least 12,000 years ago.

The team, led by the Australian National University's Professor Sue O'Connor with Griffith University's Associate Professor Michelle

Langley, used advanced microscopic analysis to investigate Nautilus shell beads from Makpan Cave on the Indonesian island of Alor, and that the trends in style were shared with at least two other islands.

Striking similarities between the beads of Alor, Timor, and Kisar indicate that there was a shared affinity for sewing the reflective beads onto clothing or other items, therefore, the team deduced that there must have been shared ornament traditions across the sea in the region from the Terminal Pleistocene (late Ice Age) around 12,000 years ago.

Recent DNA evidence has shown how people on different Indonesian islands were genetically related, but until now it wasn't known how culturally similar the populations were.

To answer this question, the Griffith and ANU teams analyzed the beads from Makpan and found that not only were they incredibly consistent in their method of production, but also similar to beads previously found on the islands of Timor and Kisar.

"The time and skill required to create the tiny shiny beads in the numbers found archaeologically must have been extensive, suggesting that the beads were an important part of the Makpan community's repertoire of adornment," said Associate Professor Langley, lead author of the article published in *Antiquity*. It is titled "Sequins from the sea: Nautilus shell bead technology at Makpan, Alor Island, Indonesia."

There was also an intensification in fishing technology during this period with shell fishhooks appearing at associated sites, as well as exotic obsidian and artifacts appearing in the assemblages.

The similarity between the beads and fishhooks from different islands coupled with the skill and effort required to produce them implies that the practice was a tradition shared between islands, indicating frequent

interaction across the sea.

Furthermore, the team who excavated at Makpan found thousands of shells in the food waste.

"What is interesting," said ANU's Dr. Shimona Kealy, "is that Nautilus shells, which were used to make the beads, are almost entirely absent from this discard pile of ancient shellfish feasts, indicating that Nautilus was not collected for food but specifically for crafting."

Professor Sue O'Connor recalls, "When we were excavating at Makpan Cave in Alor we were amazed at how many [shell](#) beads we were finding, and how we just kept on finding them even into the lowest levels of the excavation. In view of the great depth of the excavation we thought that there was a high likelihood that the oldest beads would be in Pleistocene-aged deposits."

Importantly, this means that Makpan's occupants were collecting Nautilus purely for the purpose of making [beads](#). This presents a society that was secure enough to invest effort into harvesting and processing resources for aesthetic uses without any obvious practical benefit.

All of these factors combine to create "an image of an inter-island 'community of practice' with shared values and worldviews" said Associate Professor Langley.

"It is likely that the populations of these islands shared a distinctive culture, exchanging style, goods, technology and genes across the sea."

**More information:** Michelle C. Langley et al, Sequins from the sea: Nautilus shell bead technology at Makpan, Alor Island, Indonesia, *Antiquity* (2023). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2023.97](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.97)

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