
Culture: The Language of Beads

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Every visitor to Africa encounters beads sooner or later, whether it's an Egyptian reciting the 99 names of Allah on his prayer beads, or the Maasai women in Kenya and Tanzania with their elaborate collars. From the intricate costumes of South Africa's Ndebele people to the rich adornment of Nigerian kings; from the markets of Morocco to the stalls of Senegal, beads are a way of life.

Just what are these little bits of stone, glass, wood, seeds, metal, shell, teeth, clay, plastic and bone? Where do they come from, what do they mean, how are they used, what are they made of, why are they valued? Beads are an integral part of African history from time immemorial. They function as money, they possess power, they indicate wealth, they are spiritual talismans, and they form coded messages. Such is the language of beads-a language rich in beauty and tradition, a language that tells the story of trade with foreigners, vast migrations, and vanished empires. Behold the humble bead! If it could talk, what stories it would tell!

Early African Beads

In the pre-Christian era beads were prevalent in Egypt, the most common being faience, a quartz precursor of glass that was coated with a copper glaze of blue or green. Excellent examples of ancient faience beads are found in museums the world over. Jewellery was an important facet of Egyptian culture-from kings to commoners. Even pets were adorned. Colours and materials included everything from glass and gold to semi-precious stones and shells.

But jewellery was not only for adornment. Gold pendants were used as badges to signify high-rank. Cowrie shells were thought to increase fertility. Beaded amulets and talismans warded off evil spirits and had the power to cure illness. And jewellery played an important role in funerary equipment assigned to the departed.

Gold was plentiful in Nubia, and mines in the Sinai provided many precious stones, but even this early in history not all Egyptian beads had their origins in Africa. Beads were common all over the ancient Middle East. The Phoenicians are thought to have introduced Sumerian, Persian and Assyrian beads into Egypt and down the eastern coast as far as Madagascar.

Ancient faience is much harder to find today, although spectacular discoveries of lost Egyptian tombs containing beautiful jewellery still make headlines. Persian faience appears from time to time, turning up in forgotten trunks in the bowels of North African bazaars. Such finds are often sold at a bargain because merchants are not always aware of their value. Far more common are so-called Roman Eye beads-dating from 1000 BC to about 500 AD. Though it is assumed that Romans traded with these beads, they are more likely of Syrian or Byzantine origin. Some scholars argue that they are really from the sub-Saharan, products of a process now lost to time.

The modern epicentre for Ancient Eye beads is the medieval city of Djenne in Mali. A casual attitude towards archaeological sites in the region makes it difficult to date the finds accurately.

At first such beads appear to be rather lacklustre and ordinary, but when trans-illuminated, they reveal spectacular shades of blue. Buried in the sand for centuries, many are in remarkably good condition considering they may be 2,000 years old. As one of the poorest populations in Africa, local people know full well the value of such beads. They are painstakingly dug out of the desert one by one, then sold to merchants in Mopti who assemble a strand of several dozen for sale to collectors. In Mali such a strand can easily fetch £500 or more. By the time the beads are resold by dealers in Europe and America, the price can increase ten-fold. Often the Mali wholesalers will throw in a few other rare beads to complete a strand. Such beads typically include stone amazonite, intricately carved quartz crystals, or Fustat faience (thought to come from medieval Old Cairo). Many of these early beads are equally valuable.

African Trade Beads

By far the most popular African beads among collectors are known as African Trade Beads. They come in all shapes and sizes and are generally glass or ceramic. In the age of exploration and the subsequent colonization of Africa, beads manufactured in Europe were regularly used as a medium of exchange. The most famous of these beads include polychrome millefiore beads (thousand flowers) and multi-layered chevrons. The early Venetian styles were soon copied by other Europeans, including the Dutch and artisans in eastern Europe. Between 1500 and 1900, millefiore and chevrons were in wide use throughout West and North Africa as payment for gold, salt and slaves.

Though escalating in value, chevrons can still be found in West Africa. The best deals are in Mali, followed by the markets of Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Dakar (Senegal), and Banjul (The Gambia) A strand of 20-25 chevrons (100-400 years

old) will cost about £250, while a strand of 100-year-old millefiore can be had for less than £15. Single chevrons can be bought for about £20. Morocco and Tunisia also have bead markets but prices there have skyrocketed.

While some might entertain the notion that pre-colonial Africans were easily impressed with worthless bits of glass that resembled precious gems, history shows this was not the case. These new intricate and complex European beads represented a state of technology that was beyond anything Africans had ever seen. After all, beads were already a part of culture throughout Africa and their use as money was well established. Africans quickly learned the techniques of European bead-making, a science that has created cottage industries in villages now wholly devoted to the craft. Most notable today are the Kiffa beads of Mauritania, Krobo glass from Ghana and Bida glass from Nigeria.

Status, Wealth and Ritual

In Africa there is no gender boundary in the realm of beads. Both men and women wear beads for a variety of reasons- including adornment and status. In the Congo (formerly Zaire) the Kuba kings wear elaborate costumes decorated with colourful beads and cowrie shells. Most splendid among these is the royal ceremonial bwaantshy, worn on state occasions. These extravagant costumes can weigh over 180 pounds, including the tunic, robes, belts, gloves, shoes and an elaborate headdress with an attached beaded beard. Surrounding the king are symbols of office, his throne, the dais and the royal drum- every square inch covered in beaded designs. When a king dies, he is buried in his bwaantshy. Equally exquisite are the royal Kuba masks covered in beads and cowrie shells. These masks are thought to impart psychic powers to the king, enabling him to detect those who might plot against him. Further north are the Yoruba and Dahomian kings of Nigeria and Benin. Yoruba kings wear crowns that are cone-shaped and sport beaded veils. In Yoruba tradition, strands of beads are the emblems of the gods. In addition to geometrical designs, royal attire often features beaded representations of ancestors and creatures who facilitate communication with the spirit world.

Bamum beadwork from neighbouring Cameroon is legendary. Cowrie shells (mbuum) were used as money and to this day mbuum is the Bamum word for money. When the Bamum Kingdom expanded at the beginning of the 19th century, beads were extremely rare. Tiny glass beads called "seed beads" were imported from Nigeria and coastal areas to the south. The Bamum conquered the small kingdom of Mamegnam and brought their bead-makers to the royal court, establishing a tradition of beaded royal regalia. The Bamum kings controlled the money supply (beads and cowries), enabling them to establish an aristocracy whose beaded clothing signified their authority.

Bodum beads from Ghana are the ancestors of present-day powdered glass beadmaking in Ghana. Old and valuable (imbued with magical and medicinal powers), they are passed down through families and are also used in funeral ceremonies. Legend has it that Bodums are born of the earth- and if buried again, will reproduce themselves. The Akan kings and queen mothers of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire also wear beads on state occasions. Beads are often part of a royal treasury and during festivals, they are loaned out to relatives and members of the royal court.

All across West Africa, beads have long held a sacred place in animist religions. The voodoo priesthods of Benin, Togo and Ghana use beads in rituals, and they are often left at shrines as offerings to the gods. It is forbidden to touch beads worn by a priestess or the Queen Mother of a royal family. These customs extend to fetish cults from Ghana to Sierra Leone and north to Senegal.

In South Africa, the Zulu sangoma are respected elders who function as traditional healers and perform acts of sorcery such as predicting the future. The sangoma prepares bead-covered gourds that contain herbs and medicines to assist in healing and to protect the wearer from various misfortunes. One preparation called an ishungu is designed to induce fertility in women who experience difficulty in conceiving. The sangomas also use divination tools covered in beadwork and wear beaded costumes and head attire. Colours and patterns convey messages, in a complex litany of coded meanings that are unique to Zulu bead culture.

Communication and Intent

Adornment remains the primary use of beads throughout the continent. As an item of beauty and craftsmanship, beads transfer their essence to the wearer. And because adornment is often linked to romance, beads play a significant role in attracting members of the opposite sex.

In Ghana, some young men fashion beads from bamboo and give them to girls they like. If the girl likes the boy she will wear his beads. Beads play a role in lovemaking as well, both in the Arab regions in North Africa, and all the way from Senegal to Sudan and south to Cameroon. The beads that are worn beneath a woman's skirts are considered erotic and are often fondled by both parties before and during the sexual act. They are seldom (if ever) removed, not even during bathing. Men swear oaths on them. A woman might be considered an adulteress for even describing them to another man.

As displays of wealth, beads are valuable in attracting a mate. In Ghana, a young girl from the Krobo region wears many pounds of ancestral beads designed to show her family's wealth (see Edition 10, p114). The Fulani women of the Sahara wear copol amber beads- some as large as plums. Unlike Baltic amber, copol is opalescent, not transparent.

Older beads crack and are repaired with intricate filagree inlays of copper and brass to keep their shape. Such beads are becoming increasingly rare and repaired ones are highly valued. Only a few decades ago, copol amber was still used in bride price purchases. One large bead was the equivalent of four cows. To this day cowrie shells are still official currency for bride price among the peoples of north-east Côte d'Ivoire, southern Burkina Faso and north-western Ghana.

A Language all their Own

The most complex use of beads anywhere in Africa must be the rituals of courtship and marriage among the Zulu. Zulu beadwork is actually a language system where colours, patterns and items of apparel convey specific meanings. Tiny seed beads are woven into messages that regulate behaviour between the sexes. Beadwork communication acts as a substitute for speech, thus avoiding the discomfort or embarrassment of direct discourse on sensitive topics involving affairs of the heart.

Zulu men wear beads to show commitment to women they intend to marry. Because of incestual implications, mothers, sisters and daughters never give beads to their male relatives.

Beads worn by females immediately convey status: married, unmarried, engaged, uncommitted, has children, has unmarried sisters, etc. Additional colours and patterns even pinpoint the region she comes from. With these signals a man in a crowd can easily pick out females that he may approach without fear of being rejected or embarrassed. Patterns convey additional meanings. The three points of a triangle represent Father, Mother and Child. Worn with the point down, it designates an unmarried man or woman. Two triangles joined to form a diamond signify a married woman. Two triangles joined at points to form an X indicate a married man.

The vocabulary of Zulu beads extends to colours, with both positive and negative meanings. Black can represent the happiness of marriage or the sadness of death. Pink indicates privileged wealth but can also mean laziness. Red portrays physical love and strong emotion-or heartache, anger and impatience. Only white is always positive: spiritual love, purity, virginity and chastity.

But if you buy Zulu beads and intend to wear them, be careful you understand their meaning. The ucu is a simple strand of white beads some five metres in length. It might include a tassel done in the appropriate white and blue, indicating chastity and fidelity, and is worn in coils around the neck as an engagement token. It is absolutely unthinkable that an ucu should be made of black beads with a tassel of pale yellow beads. Such a design and combination literally translates into uthuvi benkonyane (sh*t from a calf). Illustrating the vengeance of a woman scorned, a group of young ladies brought a black ucu to the village of a man who jilted his betrothed. Not finding him at home, the girls wound the beads around the neck of the first dog they found and left in a huff. To avoid the stigma of being thought a coward, the young man sheepishly wore them to two wedding ceremonies before finally selling them to an innocent tourist.

The Ndebele are another South African culture devoted to beads. As with the Zulu, a wide variety of garments mark the transitions in a woman's life. Upon marrying, an Ndebele woman receives a bridal apron containing five beaded panels. She adds more bead embroidery, incorporating motifs that depict her home and things dear to her. A by-product of these skills is the beaded coverings of many objects that find ready buyers in the tourist markets. Beaded objects include everything from eggs and dolls to coffee cups and licence plates.

Nomads and Nilotics

No discussion of beads is complete without reference to the people of the Sahara and the Rift Valley in East Africa. Tuaregs roam the desolate sands from Timbuktu to Khartoum, trading and transporting a variety of goods as in days gone by. The African Nomad is largely responsible for the proliferation of beads throughout the continent. The Tuareg are renowned silversmiths and have evolved a style of jewellery unique to their culture. Tuareg silver (enriched nickel alloy) is fashioned into all manner of crosses, pendants and talismans, often incorporating antique beads and semi-precious stones. Inscriptions and silver capsules containing messages reflect teachings from the Koran. Similarly in Ethiopia, Telsum beads are small silver boxes given to Christian children at birth. They often contain charms and prayers and are worn as religious symbols.

The Nilotic peoples of the Rift Valley include the Nuba, Dinka and Tobothen in Sudan, Turkana and Samburu in Kenya and the Maasai of the Serengeti bordering Tanzania. All of these cultures are known for their elaborate beadwork, but it's usually the Maasai who come to mind. Because their homelands coincide with vast wildlife reserves, the world is now familiar with television scenes of Maasai women and their fabulous beads. Women of marriageable age wear stiff flat beaded collars. Only a married woman may wear a string of long blue beads called Nborro. The wedding necklace consists of three elements-a headpiece with beads running across the forehead and eyes, a choker around the neck, and a large circular necklace that spans the shoulders and has strings of beads with cowrie shells at the bottom.

A Maasai warrior wears strings of beads across his chest and back plus bands of striped beadwork around the neck. Beaded armbands and legbands are gifts from mothers and girlfriends and are worn as signs of love. When a warrior becomes an elder he surrenders his beaded attire, but he may still use beaded objects such as a tobacco container or

the traditional rungu stick (a symbol of authority).

A Passion for Beads

Given the incredibly diverse kinds of beads and beaded works of art found throughout Africa, it is only natural that many cannot be mentioned because of space. We can only marvel at the variety of materials used to make beads. Many exotic woods like ebony are turned into beautiful beads. With the ban on ivory, hippo teeth are fashioned into realistic simulations. The vertebrae of pythons are worn by royal executioners in Ghana. Even the shells of ostrich eggs are filed into disks and become beads.

Historians cannot agree on what are the world's most ancient beads. It has often been thought that the oldest beads originated in the Russian steppes-perhaps 40,000 years ago. Adornment of the human body certainly predates all written history, and exact dates are difficult to establish. Nonetheless, it appears that the oldest documented beads on record actually come from Africa. Stanley Ambrose of the University of Illinois excavated ostrich eggshell beads found in the Enkapune Ya Muto rock shelter in Kenya. Using carbon dating, they have been positively aged to sometime between 37,000 and 39,900 years ago. Thirteen complete beads and nearly 600 shell fragments were found; the shapes of these disks reveal each was individually fashioned. Did Africa invent jewellery? Ambrose speculates that the wearing of beads by early Africans may have enhanced social solidarity. This solidarity may have stimulated a population increase that led to the spread of modern humans out of Africa and into Eurasia.

Whatever their origin, whatever their meaning, from the very simple to the very complex, from ancient to modern, African beads are exquisite works of art. They provide beautiful souvenirs and make ideal gifts for friends and family back home. As collectibles, antique and rare beads are excellent investments. Even a single old chevron is a singularly unique work of art. But most of all, beads have a practical function. They are portable and can be worn-their beauty shared.

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