AESTHETICS, TYPOLOGY AND FUNCTIONALITY OF BEADS AMONG THE PEOPLES OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

Beads are perhaps among a few products of crafts that have a long history, stretching from the early to the present. And have continued to wax strong even in the face of modernity. So that while beads served various purposes in the times past which today may no more be in vogue as a result of modernity, even many more new uses to which beads can be deployed have evolved. This paper takes a look at the place of beads in the early times up to the present. The place beads have found in the life of the people is unmistakable. This paper advocates government intervention to modernize the practice of bead making in Nigeria and so to encourage young school leavers to take to this vocation. And thus combat unemployment.

Introduction

Beads have been defined variously by different people. The Oxford Advanced learners Dictionary (2010) defines beads as small pieces of glass, wood, plastic or any other possible material with a hole through which it can be put on a string with others of the same type, colour, size or varied. Ibeabuchi, (2012) on his part defined beads as small round and perforated objects which are usually strung to form a necklace or bracelets or attached to a garment, or articles of clothing for decorative effect. From the definition of beads as enunciated above, it becomes evident than a great variety of materials can be used in the making of beads. These include: glass, plastics, aluminum, bone, coral, wood, brass, silver, ceramics and precious stones. The mode of producing these beads and materials used differ from community to community or from country to country and depends largely on the culture of the people in the community.

These beads are made in different shapes, patterns and colours. Some are even carved in wood and painted in different colours, coated with enamel or fired as ceramics. These beads can be formed into all kinds of shapes including rectangular, square, spherical, triangle and many more. Beads can be opaque, transparent or translucent. Alvina and Tarrant (1974) stated that: Beadwork is arguably human kind's oldest art form. From time, immemorial, men and women have made bead with shells, seeds, bones, cowries, and leathers which is animal skin.

Brief history of beadwork

Bead work is an ancient craft universally practised among the various ethnic groups of Nigeria dating back to antiquity. Nok culture provides evidence of the earliest civilization in Nigeria with some of its terra-cotta figures depicting human figures, wearing what are presumably strings of stone beads around their necks, wrists and ankles. According to Ibeabuchi (2012) a large quantity of beads was excavated in Igbo-ukwu from the tomb of a 9th century high priest - king. He further stated that at ile-ife red beads were also discovered during archeological excavation and around Wagadougoo too in 1909 by Leo Frobenius, a British archaeologist who called these beads “the beads of Ulifians”. Ile-Ife, for a long time has been known as a famous city of bead makers. To buttress the link of Ile-Ife

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and bead making, Ibeabuchi (2012) noted: "The wife of Oduduwa, Olokun Senaide established the art of glass bead making in the ancient city of Ile-Ife and Igbo-Olokun (Olokun Grave) is known to be her workshop". He notes that this covers a vast area of land and shows how important bead making is to this part of Yoruba land. According to Eigbe(2012), beads have been worn in Africa long before the advent of the Europeans especially the Portuguese and the Spaniards. They are made from different materials like glass, stone, coral and shells. He also believes that the Portuguese may have introduced these beads into Benin Kingdom during their early contact with the Bini and noted that the portuguese influence in Edo culture is immense especially in the area of costume and clothing. According to him, this dates back to the fifteenth century during the reign of Oba Ewuare the Great who was believed to have popularized the use and production of these ornaments within the Benin Kingdom. This encouragement by the Oba turned most Benin craftsmen of that period into experts at carving stone beads which were coveted by the royal court. To Eigbe(2012) Beads are considered so important in the old Benin, that no titled Chief was allowed to visit Oba unless he wore his necklaces (beads) and if the Chief lost them, he could be punished by death. He notes that the beaded regalia of the Oba became increasingly elaborate until the seventeeth century when the entire costumes of coral beads including skirts, shirts and crowns became the official royal dress.

The most popular beads among the Bini people are the coral beads Eigbe (2012) noted. According to him, these are known as Ivie and Ekan. These are usually gotten from the ocean and then polished as jewelry. Ekan, he says, is more like a stone and is grayish in colour while Ivie is another type of coral beads and is an important type of jewelry worn by Edo chiefs. The use of Ivie and Ekan he went on, is controlled by the Oba of Benin. It is worthy of note that there are some shapes that are reserved for chiefs and non titled people cannot wear them.

It should be noted that coral beads as worn in Edo area are very different from those worn in the Northera and eastern parts of this country. And those of the Western part and indeed.

Beads have over the centuries served more than every Yoruba speaking communities as article of jewelry. They have been used to express political history, religious beliefs and social status.

Types of bead

Beads have over time been differentiated by many factors. These may be colour, designs or materials used in making them. For instance here in Nigeria, Ibeabuchi, (2012) notes that some locally made beads mostly worn by the Binis in Edo state are called Aggrey or Akori. These are mainly blue in colour and are made by local craftmen.

Along the coastal areas of the River Niger coral beads are very popular among the communities. In these communities the traditional rulers and kings (Obi, Igwe, and Oba) adorn themselves with these beads as part of their regalia. Among the Yoruba, some of their traditional rulers, the Oba wear beaded crown as a way of showing their position in the hierarchy of their Chieftaincy.

'Akka' beads are very popular among the Igbo. They are also worn as a local ornament by the people around Bida in the present Niger State of Nigeria. The 'Akka" beads are of different colours. They could be white, dark red, blue, yellow, dark brown and light green. In the Bida area there are also the striped type called "Erinla". Waist beads known as Jigida are also very popular among the Bida and the Igbo. These are usually worn by their females. The very young ones usually wear them in series from their navel down to the waist without cloth.

The Bida area is also noted for glass beads. They source their materials from discarded or broken coloured glasses from

which they create beautiful glass beads. Their craftsmen are highly specialized in the production of these glass beads. Apart from broken coloured glasses, the Bida beadmakers, also use a mixture of sand, chalk and natron as materials to produce beads of high aesthetic quality.

Bead making methods

According to Ibeabuchi (2012), today, bead workers recycle old jars, broken plates and empty pharmacy bottles, pomade and drinks bottles to make beads. In a small workshop there may be one, two or three bead workers. These workshops are usually small round huts with triangular windows and low corrugated roofs. They prepare the fire and make it hot enough to melt the glass. The glass is first of all heated in a clay bowl until it melts and then a blob of half melted glass is put on to an iron rod which is rotated with the left hand and the glass is shaped with iron tongs held in the right hand. Sometimes, the bead worker adds glass of a contrasting colour to the beads to form stripes.

Beads and Their uses

According to Iroegbu (2012) beads function as an important part of personal ornamentation as they are used as decorative as well as protective ornaments such Purposes as amulets or charms and as a sign of social status among the chiefs and kings for which these beads are deployed for many decades abound. This cuts across the various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria.

Beads are also used as necklaces and bracelets. In the past and up to the present, waist beads are used as an important form of adornment for women. The girls may wear nothing else but just waist-beads until they reach the age of puberty. The adult women too, single or married, wear waist-beads under their wrappers or gowns. This is to emphasize their hips, as generously proportioned hip is assumed to enhance feminine beauty. Some cultural dancers also wear costumes that have waist-beads as a prominent feature.

As Iroegbu(2012) noted "beads especially the waist beads are mostly worn by women in order not only to enhance their waist line but also to show the sexuality of women with the aim of attracting the men". These beads are worn under the clothes traiditonally by matured African women he added.

Waist beads have many connotations ranging from rites of passages to enticing their husbands even in cultures outside Nigeria. In Egypt waist beads usually called 'girdles' are worn by women to do the teenagers (girls) without any sexual connotations. In Ghana, women use waist beads to give their body some particular shape. Some wear them to sexually attract the male. In some other cultures in Africa and India, women use beads as a tool to know when they are putting on weight. The younger women use them to show potential suitors their fertility. Waist beads therefore enhance the woman's body, its beauty and its crows.

However, it should be noted that access to waist bead is private and only the person who shares the intimacy of the woman has the privilege to see it. According to Iroegbu (2012) in some African cultures waist beads are therapeutic. They are used according to their belief to cure kidney ailments, the health of the elderly and related aches and problems related to age.

Materials and tools for Bead making

A collection of the bead workers tools reveals the following: wire, needles, cardboardsheet, pieces of clothes, glue, thread, cutter, scissors, stopper, fishing line, tiger tale string. Those tools are handy and enables the bead worker to produce a wide variety of goods, including necklacess, bracelets, earlings, bags, flower vase and many more. These are usually woven (plates 1,2,3,4,5, 6,7,8,9,10,11 and 12).

Conclusion

It is evident that bead craft is spread across all nooks and cranies of Nigeria. It is a well known craft in a wide range of communities. Their uses are many, for both the women and male folks. For the women to enhance their beauty for the traditional rulers and chiefs in different areas of the county, it serves different purposes. The use of these beads is therefore sustained as many new uses are discovered. It will therefore be a development welcome among the people if the government will see bead making as a vehicle for fighting unemployment if the young ones are encouraged to go into this vocation. This government can do this by injecting funds into the vocation to modernize and make it attractive for young school leavers.

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Pictures of the beaded work



Plate 1: Beaded flower vase



Plate 2: Beaded bags



Plate 3: White coral beads

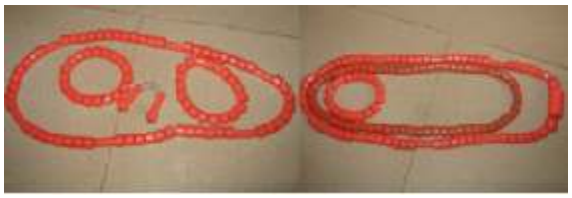


Plate 4: Red coral beads



Plate 5: Coated bead necklaces



Plate 6: Glass bead necklaces



Plate 7: Stone beads mixed with metal



plate 8: plastic beads



Plate 9: Crystal bead bangles



plate 10: Crystal bead necklaces



Plate11: Wooden bead necklaces



Plate12: Beaded walking stick