

## **USE OF BEADS IN CONTEMPORARY FASHION INDUSTRY OF SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Nigeria is a very rich cultural center. The diversity is one of the major strength the nation has although, it has its own advantages and disadvantages. However, most Nigerians are only concerned about their own ethnic group, which is not good for true patriotism and unity. Most Nigerians have little or no knowledge of other ethnic groups, worse still, little knowledge about their own culture and ethnic extraction. This has become a trend among the younger generation of Nigerian youths who embrace western culture, religion and dressing. This paper explored an aspect of fashion in the Nigerian culture, which is the use of beads to compliment the dressing code in South Western Nigeria.*

**KEYWORDS:** Nigerian Fashion, Traditional Beads, African Culture

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The term African Beads refers to beads locally produced by indigenous people of the African continent as well as Trade Beads that have travelled from other parts of the world and now circulate or were recently sourced from Africa. Together, these beads have played enormous roles in the culture, fashion, economy, and artistic expression of the African people. Today, they are cherished by collectors, jewellery makers, and everyday people who just love wearing African beads. African tribal beads and glass beads hold a special mythical significance as well. Beads and Bead making has a long history in Africa. Beads have been made by indigenous Africans for thousands of years. In ancient times Egyptians, Greeks, and Indians established trading bases in East Africa and eventually the Arabs invaded in the eighth century and established trade routes with the wealthy kingdom of Ghana in modern day Mauritania. The Arabs brought glass beads to the Niger Delta to trade for gold and slaves. European explorers and traders began to arrive in the 15th century and this was followed by tremendous influx of beads during the colonial period. Today, the tradition of beads continues to be is still deep-rooted in Nigeria culture and old trade beads are still used for internal commerce.

The modern production of beads is in some sense a family tradition where tools and techniques are passed from one generation to the next. Bead making is a labor-intensive process and since many beads are handmade, this leads to variability in the appearance of individual beads even within a single strand. Production of beads is distributed throughout many countries on the African continent however the Hausa people of West Africa are particularly known for dominating the bead trade where they travel extensively to locate beads in villages, modify many beads, and sell them to local and foreign merchants. African Beads are made from a diverse array of materials. Some of the oldest beads were made from natural materials such as stones, clay, plant materials such as cylinder palm nuts and bamboo stems, animal materials such as ostrich eggshells, bones such as the Batik Bone bead of Kenya, buffalo horn, and marine shells such as the Conus. These materials continue to be used today. Similarly, metal beads have been made from gold, bronze, and brass especially in West African countries such

as Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Mali, Cameroon, and Senegal. Silver has also been traditionally popular in Ethiopia.

Finally, glass bead making is also an ancient tradition in Africa where it has been practiced for at least 1000 years. The two techniques for making glass beads that dominate in Africa are Powder glass Bead making and *Bida* Glass Bead making. The uses of beads in Africa are as varied as the materials used to make them. Beadwork is very popular in many African nations and is integrated into many art forms including clothing such as the stand-out collars of the *Maasai* tribe, headdresses and belts, wooden sculptures, small leather amulets, and a myriad of jewellery items where beads are regarded as items of wealth, power, and status. Because of their long history, beads play a role in many traditional rites and ceremonies such as coming-of-age, circumcision, marriage, burial, and local festivals.

Bead work is an ancient craft universally practiced among the various ethnic groups of Nigeria dating back to antiquity. *Nok* culture provides evidence of the early civilization in Nigeria with some evidence of its terra cotta figurine depicting human figures, wearing what are presumably strings of stones bead, around their necks, wrists waists and ankles. Many ethnic groups that make up Nigeria have a strong attachment to the use of beads as an important part of their

For the *Yorubas*, beads play a very significant role in many cultural events. They are a major feature during many traditional festivals during which devotees and participants decorate their bodies with beads of different shapes, colours and sizes. The Yoruba speaking people occupy the South Western and north central of Nigerian in states such as Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ogun, Ekiti, Kwara, part of Kogi and Lagos. They are major tribes in Nigeria. They have rich cultural history which dates back to Oduduwa as their earliest progenitor. The Yoruba people are very jovial and respectful. They also love partying and enjoyment generally. They are not lazy people. Their traditional system revolves around *Ooni* of Ile-ife and *Alaafin* of Oyo which are seen as the apex custodians of Yoruba culture. Ibebabuchi (2012) mentioned that Ile-Ife red beads were also discovered during archeological excavation. It was mentioned by the author that the beads were discovered around *wagadougoo*, in 1909 by Leo Frobenius, a British archeologist who called the beads, the beads of illifians. Ile-Ife for a long time has been known as a famous city of bead makers. Beads have over the centuries served more than every Yoruba speaking communities as articles of jewellery. They have been used to express political history, religious beliefs and social status.

The Yorubas are extremely glamorous in dressing, using a lot of beads as necklaces, ear rings, and bracelets sometimes, they even use it to decorate their hair. Mostly the crowns, shoes and walking sticks of *Obas* and *Kabiesies* are decorated with expensive beads to show case royalty. However, in recent times, beads are being used in the fashion industry to show case fashion and wealth or something that is trendy among both the old and the young in this generation. In most part of South West, coral beads are true signs of royalty. It adorns kings and members of the royal household. Nobles in many Yoruba kingdoms distinguish themselves with beads. The beads are of different varieties and come in various shapes, sizes and colours. In most kingdoms, any man sent a bead by the king is automatically made a chief while coral beads sent by a king or prince to a young single girl makes her his betrothed and she is bound by tradition to accept them. Also in many parts, commoners and royalties do not wear the same type or shape of beads. Coral beads have strong presence in traditional marriages South West Nigerian cultures. It is common to see a bride's hair adorned with beads while she wears some as necklaces. In some culture, a beaded sleeveless blouse is worn by the bride. The grooms are not left out. Most cultures provide for a single long bead necklace dropping to upper abdomen

while others allow for more. In some kingdoms of Yoruba, the bead you wear with accompanying staff of office tells your royal status.

### Fashion Industry in Nigeria

Recognition for Nigerian fashion has been shown in the global fashion industry, which is mostly based in North America and Europe. Many assume that Africans only wear traditional costume or using clothing solely functionally, that is to cover and protect the body from environmental factors. Yet, in many African countries, clothes have historically been decorative as well as scaring, painting, tattooing or jewellery as form of beads. The fashion industry involves significant creativity and innovation, satisfying the criteria of both aesthetic design and utility to consumers. Fashion designs may also be manifestations of art, culture and symbolism.

**Figure 1 Modern and traditional beads as worn by brides in Nigeria**

**Source: Bead Collector Network and its users**



### Traditional Nigerian Beads

There are definite distinctions between traditional Nigerian beads and western beads. A traditional bead signifies which ethnic group one belongs to, and can indicate one's gender, class, religion and region. Nigerian traditional beads have reflected the cultures of hundreds of ethnic groups. In modern times, many only wear the traditional beads on special occasions, and also for religious gatherings, for example, for "ifa" festivals or Yeye Osun festivals, better still for traditional weddings.

However, Nigerian fashion has been greatly influenced due to westernization, individual preference and social status, but the fact still remains that despite all this rich culture, Nigeria is still in existence through changes in terms of colour combination, texture, durability among other factors.



**Figure 2. Yeye Osun priestesses and followers during a festival**

**Source: Bead Collector Network and its users**

### **Beads**

Beads have over time been differentiated by many factors. These may be colour, designs or materials used in making them. There are various types of beads that are currently in vogue in western Nigeria; one of them is the natural bead which Yoruba people called “*Iyun*”. Beads generally are small round perforated objects which are usually strong to form necklaces, bracelets, or textile decorations. They are made of glass, copper wood, silver, brass, aluminum bone, ivory, shell, coral, pearl, mineral including precious stones, ceramics and plastics.

They come in different colours and shapes. The earliest beads in Nigeria are “*Segi*” and “*Iyun*”. The “*Segi*” is a translucent blue tabular bead while the “*Iyun*” is an opaque red bead. These beads were excavated in vast quantity from the tomb of an oba at a site near Ile-Ife. It is said that the oldest red stone beads that were early used in the ancient Benin Kingdom were bought from prince *Oranmiyan* the son of *Oduduwa*.





**Figure 3** *Iyun* beads

**Source: Bead Collector Network and its users**



**Figure 3** *Segi* beads

**Source: Bead Collector Network and its users**

The fashion industry involves significant creativity and innovation, satisfying the criteria of both aesthetic design and utility to consumers. Fashion designs may also be manifestations of art, culture and symbolism. Beaded jewellery is more or less a huge part of the culture of most Nigerian and indeed south-west. Bead necklaces are worn by both men and women, to occasions and traditional events. When worn on traditional Yoruba ethnic attires such as fabrics as laces, Ankara prints, and more, the beaded jewellery makes a bride or any occasion celebrant appear royal, and also makes celebrants look elegant. in beaded necklaces worn on traditional Yoruba attires made out of such ethnic fabrics as laces, ankara print styles, and more.

The Nigerian bead necklaces for traditional wedding/engagement ceremony has gone beyond the simple, long red coral bead to assorted designs, styles and colours, as can be seen in the pictures below. The Nigerian beads are even loved by women of other African countries. Nigerian handmade beaded necklaces come in many different designs and styles: some are plain strings of beads without any additional embellishments, while others are designed with

additional details using brooches, pendants, gemstones or even (Swarovski) crystals. These kinds of details make the African and Nigerian handmade beaded jewellery look more authentic and visually attractive. Waist beads were and still are worn for seduction. For some, the beads possess intimate appeal and can provoke desire. Some women are said to lace their beads with charms and fragrances that are recommended to be irresistible to the opposite sex. Some women wear different shapes of beads during intimacy as a means of enhancing the sexual experience of her and her partner. The beads to some women resemble what lingerie is to Western women. Wives would often lure their husbands with the rattle of the beads or use them as a means to communicate their fertility during the month.

### **Significance of colours and types of beads**

Yoruba beads were also used for trade. Ceramic and recycled glass beads were used for exchanged for food or livestock and was used as an early means of currency. In some West African countries, trade beads have their own special markets because they have become precious and rare, they can be used as a method of investment. Beads also played a big role in the beliefs of Yoruba societies. Many amulets and charms consisted of beads. These would be thrown on a mat by the flick of a wrist to determine one's fortune; they could be contained in guards which would be shaken to ward off evil spirits. Beads were used as part of African religious rituals, increasing their value and respect for beads.

Many other societies in Nigeria had unique uses for their beads, such as for attracting members of the opposite sex, and as play items for young children and adolescents. Beads therefore had a big part to play in Yoruba cultures and held great meaning to those that believed in them. Many ethnic groups that make up Nigeria have a strong attachment to the use of beads as an important part of their culture. The Igbos call it *Mgbaji* while for the Hausas, it is referred to as *Jigida*.

For the Yoruba, beads play a very significant role in many cultural events. They are a major feature during many traditional festivals during which devotees and participants decorate their bodies with beads of different shapes, colours and sizes. Colours like the coral red and blue were used for marriages and funeral activities in the olden days while in recent times other colours such as green, purple, white, orange and other colours being made of glass and ceramic materials are used for festivities.

### **Beads, royal significance and fading local production**

The *Olowu-Kuta* of *Kuta*, in Osun state, Nigeria, Oba Adekunle Oyelude affirmed that beads signified royalty and distinguished a royal father from his subjects, he also noted that traditional and honorary chieftaincy title holders wear beads also as a sign of their status, bead were more used by monarchs. Every Yoruba son and daughter home and abroad, know that apart from the crown and horsetail, beads are another important element of traditional rulers. It is a mark that one occupies higher traditional position. It separates the king from his subjects. Apart from the king, the prince and princess also have right to wear beads, especially on their wrists to serve the same purpose of identification. According to findings by Nigerian Tribune, September, 2017 beads are grouped into different categories according to their quality. *Iyun* is said to be the choicest and most expensive of all the categories. This submission can be found in the Yoruba axiom which asserts: *Iyun* is described as the father of all beads. *Iyun* is deposited at the basement of the river prior to extraction. Digging for *Iyun* is said to be comparable to the

search for gold. After it is successfully extracted, work then shifts to polishing it to reveal its colours of wine and red.

Today, the dearth of persons interested in the *Iyun* extraction business has reportedly taken a toll on the availability of *Iyun* in the market. According to Taiwo and Kehinde of ModupeOluwa Twins beads outfit at *Oje* Market, Ibadan, the Oyo State capital, for *Iyun* beads available in the market, it is assumed that such beads must have been sold by one who inherited it from late parents. "In fact, those who still have it don't keep it at home. They deposit it in the bank for safe keeping. This is to tell you how expensive and valuable *Iyun* is. It has existed since ancient times and is still very valuable till date. Traditional rulers and rich men and women use it. But they must have inherited it from their forefathers," they stated. Ranked next to *Iyun* is the one called *Akun*. Like *Iyun*, *Akun* is also scarce. But unlike *Iyun*, it is made of stone and filtered before it is ready for market. The third in the category is *Eyin Erin* (Ivory). It is also expensive. There are other beads like *Segi*, *Opoto* and *Ikan*, all of which serve the same socio-cultural purposes. Beads can be used for birth control, preventing stillbirths.

According to findings, beads are used for religious, cultural and beautification purposes. Nigerian Tribune(date) also gathered that Ifa devotees, for instance, go with green and brown beads while their Osun counterparts wear white. However, this variation, it was also learnt, does not suggest any spiritual connotation. The renowned Ifa Priest, however, clarified that beads worn on the neck and wrist were adorned for the purpose of status identification. While noting that it was a practice that exists till date; Elebuibon stated that "This is a way to showcase our rich culture and tradition. It is cheaper than spending scarce money on expensive jewellery. She said wearing of beads was part of Yoruba culture, a culture that has been a source of attraction to the foreigners. She recalled her daily interaction with the whites and their remark on Yoruba culture, regretting what she called blind consumption of western culture.

## CONCLUSION

Beadwork is old and eternally young handicraft. It does not lose its purity and colour sonority with the passing of time. It has got some connections with repercussions of our distant ancestors and, owing to beadwork, we know tastes and colour preferences of forefathers. The use of beads is not restricted to the neck and wrist, as the waist and legs is also regarded as home for beads as further findings revealed, a practice which cuts across ethnic borders. Waist beads are said to accentuate the shape of female's lower region. Culture analysts would see it from the perspective of making an appeal to men folk as a fashion statement Beads have strong presence in traditional marriages in many Nigerian cultures. It is common to see a bride's hair adorn with beads while she wears some as necklaces. In some culture, a beaded sleeveless blouse is worn by the bride. The grooms are not left out. Most cultures provide for a single long bead necklace dropping to upper abdomen while others allow for more.

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