

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BEADS IN THE RITES OF PASSAGE
AMONG SOME SOUTHERN GHANAIAN PEOPLES

Brigid Sackey *

Introduction

Beads have considerable significance in the cultures of some Ghanaian peoples. They are used by nearly all the ethnic groups but my main concern here is to discuss their extensive use, particularly by the Akan and Ga-Adangbe peoples of Southern Ghana in the rites of passage, that is, the rituals and ceremonies that accompany the changes or transition from one stage of life to another. This includes birth, puberty and death. The focus of the paper is on the significance of beads as insignia in these important ceremonies in life among these Ghanaians, from the cradle to the grave.

Some General uses of Beads

Primarily, beads are considered to be a form of jewellery and objects for adornment as shown in the Fante (Akan) word for beads, "ahondze"; "ho" means "self", "body"; "ndze" is derived from "ndzamba" i.e. "things". Thus beads, "ahondze" mean bodily things or adornments. Beads are used by both males and females but more extensively by the females who wear them in the hair, around the neck, arm, wrist, waist, knee and ankle. Beads determine the rank of a person in society so that the beads of a chief are different from those of his subjects. Cardinall (1924 : 289) observed in respect of the Gold Coast (Southern Ghana) that "those of the highest distinction wear on their arms and necks strings of beads which they call aigri....". Among the Ewe people of Southern Ghana, a person who has distinguished himself by means of a great achievement abroad, e.g. in war and in recent times after successful completion of studies overseas, is welcomed with a string of precious beads. During the Yam Festival of the people of Aburi (Akan) three precious beads are tied below the knee of the officiating priest as a sign of his office (Opoku 1970 : 29). Traditional priests are often recognisable by the manner in which particular beads are worn. Akan priests wear a bandolier of tiny red beads, while Ga priests wear a string

*Research Fellow, Institute of African Studies, Legon.

of black round beads and white flat beads as their priestly insignia.
(M. Field, 1961: 187)

Some types of beads were used in slave trading on the Gold Coast and their economic value is recorded by Cardinal "... a necklace of these corals, of the thickness of a finger and of the length of an inch, will cost as much as the value of seven negroes" (op. cit.: 289). Also the "Fantees prefer the plain yellow bead, the Amanaheans the blue and yellow for which they will give double the weight in gold" (op. cit.: 288). Eva Meyerowitz (1959: 207) writes that from the fifteenth century onwards the Bono people (Akan) exchanged gold for "Bota" and "Bodom" beads.

According to Asante (Akan) oral traditions, beads were used in the legal system to ascertain the truth. An accused was given a 'Bodom' bead in water to swallow and confess. Should he tell lies the beads would choke and kill him.¹ Peter Sarpong (1974: 45) writes that witchcraft could also be transferred from strangers, usually from old women to the younger ones in the form of beads as gifts.

There are many other uses of beads but since the subject is on beads and rites of passage I shall limit myself to the few examples above.

'Aggrey' Beads

Beads vary in material, shape, size and colour. They are made of stone, wood, seeds, cowries, animal bone and teeth, coral, glass and other minerals. But before I begin, the controversial term 'aggrey' (also spelt aggy, aigri, accorry, akori, akoli) which is used to describe any pretty, coloured bead in Ghana is worth considering. There has been a controversy over the very nature of the bead with many schools of thought but there are two major widespread theories. One says the original 'aggrey' is a coral and the other thinks it is glass.

Cardinal identifies three types of beads called 'aggrey'. One variety is single coloured, another is mosaic and a third is striped. Although he is convinced about Barbot's account that the original 'aggrey' is a blue coral growing in branching bushes at the bottom of rivers and lakes in Benin (Nigeria), he nevertheless gives the other kinds, the mosaic and the striped, a Venetian origin and thinks they had been made purposely for the African trade. Van Landewijk (1971: 96) is rather convinced of a local

origin of the original 'aggrey' which he believes to be a blue bead that comes from a silicate glass slag, a by-product from local iron ore smelting. To substantiate this he gives evidence that glass slags have been excavated at Beifikrom, Asebu and Begho in Ghana. James Anquandah (1983) has thrown more light on the subject from which it appears that the hypothesis of Landewijk is more credible. According to both Landewijk and Anquandah, the material for obtaining the iron ore is a local laterite and black river sand which contain certain impurities that give the silicate slag its blue colour. Anquandah talks of some Akan states like Adanse, Dompooase, Edubease and others which used laterite in smelting and dates the period of this technology to the second century A.D.

Landewijk (op. cit.: 93) has compiled the different theories of the nature and origin of the 'aggrey' bead as follows:

- 1) The original aggrey bead was a blue, locally found coral.
- 2) It was a blue locally found mineral.
- 3) It was made of glass.
- 4) It grew in the ground or was produced by thunder or formed by supernatural powers.

Sources of Beads

From my research conducted among some Akan people in 1983, two main types and sources of the beads they called "ahondze pa" i.e. genuine or precious beads were given. The first type is a blue bead called "Ekuar" which is found in rivers of Nigeria and Camerouns, and which supposedly found its way into Ghana through Hausa traders. The second type of beads are believed to come from the ground. These are either multi-coloured, mostly with a yellowish back ground with designs of stripes, spots, stars and other motifs or have a uniformed colour of light red, yellow and light green, the latter sometimes with long stripes of gold dust. Some of the Akan names for these coloured beads are "Bodom, Bota, Ntsetseaso, Nen-kyerma" etc. The material of these "ground" "ahondze pa" could not be ascertained since my informants give it a supernatural origin and rather claim that Europeans used to make imitation of these "ahondze pa" from

glass. This claim has been confirmed by Alastair Lamb who states (1975: 39): "we have good evidence for European imitation of Bodom type (of beads) that must date back to at least the eighteenth century".

On the term "aggrey" unknown to the elderly folk and used by the younger generation for any kind of bead, especially the multi-coloured ones, one informant thinks it might have got its name from one Papa Aggrey of Dentsedo, Elmina, who was the first indigene to import European imitation of "ahondze pa" from Europe and whose name the beautiful, multi-coloured beads consequently came to bear. As already stated, the older generation does not use the term 'aggrey' for any genuine bead and I think 'aggrey' beads must refer to the blue bead, just as Landewijk has established. Some of the vernacular names for the blue beads are "akori" (Benin Nigeria) and in Ghana "Ekuar or Kor" (Akan) "Koli, kori" (Ga-Adangbe). It is therefore a misnomer to apply the term 'aggrey' to almost any bead which is old, valuable and pretty. Nowadays any glass beads, even those manufactured locally with all kinds of materials are all termed 'aggrey'. Perhaps this is so because there is no single universal name for the genuine beads. However it must be clear that both the blue beads and the multi-coloured beads are to the elderly folk, who are experts in the knowledge of beads, not 'aggrey' but simply "ahondze pa" i.e. genuine beads, for which each tribe has its peculiar name. Some of these are "Bodom, Bota, Ntsetseaso, Nenkyerma" (Fante-Akan), "Akosu, Adjaba, Ocomboshie" (Ga-Adangbe), "Bata, Age, Hudega" (Ewe).

My informants hold steadfast to the supernatural origin of the ground beads. According to them (also Cardinal and Lamb) a spiral evolves from the ground after which follow the beads and sometimes with some gold dust. This fortune is found mainly by hunters and farmers in the forest. It is said that when a man sees the vapour he must hide till after the beads have emerged to form a heap because if the finder shouts the beads would sink back into the ground. The finder then takes some tree branches or uses the loin cloth of his wife, if the latter is around, to beat down the heap of treasure and then finds a fowl to slaughter in thanks-giving for the fortune. Reference was made to the mystical find of genuine beads by Ekow Abonyin of Cape Coast who died in the 1950's. One day as Ekow Abonyin, a palm wine

brewer, went to work he saw a very unusual hen vomiting gold dust under one of his palm trees. After the vomit, the hen vanished and vapour started coming out from the spot where the hen had stood and hundreds of "Bodom" beads came out.

There is a general attempt to discredit the supernatural origin of ground beads. Many writers, including Cardinal and Lamb, think that these beads had been recovered from ancient burial sites. I do not attempt to disprove this hypothesis, because of lack of evidence. But normally the Akan bury their dead just on the outskirts of the village or town and not in the forest where this treasure is supposed to be found. Of course there could be accidental deaths in the forest but in Ekow Abonyin's case hundreds of beads were believed to have been found and no person wears so many beads and goes into the forest. In Elmina the most recent find is said to have occurred about 25 years ago.

According to popular belief some of these beads take the form of a dog when it is coming out from the ground. Others say the bead barks like a dog; especially when some misfortune is about to occur in the family where the bead is kept, thus the name "Bodom", the Fante word for dog. It is also believed that a "Bodom" bead will multiply and yield its kind when buried provided certain rites, like seasonal pouring of libation, and women in their menses avoiding the place where it is buried. It is interesting to note that when a menstruating woman goes near the place where the bead is buried she disrupts its growth but on finding the treasure of beads a woman's loin cloth can be used to beat down the evolving beads (see comments on the section on Puberty below).

Although my informants believe in the supernatural origin and power of the genuine ground beads they could not give the source of this belief. Perhaps this supernatural concept could find its roots in the belief that other beads like seeds, stone, animal bone and teeth etc. carry "per se" magical and medicinal powers because the tree or stone and other objects from which they originate might themselves be inhabited by powerful spirits as traditional African religion teaches. Animals like lion, leopard, elephant, are very powerful creatures, so that their bones and teeth when used as beads may also be regarded as equally powerful.

Similarly, the beads that come from the earth be it the native version of 'vapourisation' or van Landewijk's assertion of derivation from iron ore dug from the earth - must with higher probability contain some greater mystical powers because of the special position of the earth in Ghanaian beliefs. In many Akan beliefs she is supposed to be the wife of "Nyame", the supreme being. According to Busia (1954: 195) the earth has a spiritual power which makes the plants grow. It is the earth that gives shelter to the dead. Therefore the earth must be more powerful than the lesser spirits in trees, stones etc. and definitely the beads the earth brings forth must in my opinion be endowed with greater supernatural qualities.

THE RITES OF PASSAGE AND BEADS

Birth

Because of the belief in the power of mystical dangers before birth, ritualistic devices are resorted to in order to ward off evil omens in pregnancy, in most Ghanaian societies. Charms on wrists, ankles, neck, waist are worn. These include beads called "Akuhuni" and "Egyinamoani" worn by Akan pregnant women on the waist as protection. A child becomes eligible to be ushered into Akan society when it has survived the eight day after birth. On this day it is accorded a name as a sign of its "humanisation" (Peter Samping op.cit: 90), having conquered the powerful influence of the seven spirits which control the seven days of the week. Since until the eighth day, a child is not treated as a proper human being, it is also not lavishly adorned. Thus "baha" fibre is used as armlets and leglets on the baby until the eighth day (Rattray 1927: 57). Then as a symbol of transition from the spirit world into the human world, the child is welcomed into the midst of the living with beads called "Gyanie, abia, nwanana'ti" interspersed with gold nuggets and other charms² (Rattray op.cit: 62). The Fante use little gold nuggets with little "bodom" beads ("bodomba") or any one big genuine bead as a necklace for the child. Tiny white beads called "mfufua" (Akan) are also tied to both wrists, neck, legs and waist of the child. The mother and close relatives also put on "mfufua" to signify their victory and joy. Two strings of red and black tiny beads called "Abrekuni" (Akan) are tied round the child's neck to protect and hold the fragile neck from falling back.

The 'bodom' bead which has a yellowish tincture is said to influence the nature of the baby's faeces. The latter, when yellowish in colour and has a certain consistency, is supposed to indicate a healthy baby.

In Ghana twins are regarded as special people and are given special charm called "Abam" (Akan) which is a string of beads consisting of a red bead, "Nenkyerma", a yellow bead "Bodom" or "Bota", the blue bead, "Ekuar" with gold nuggets. This is tied to the left wrist of each twin. Among the Ga people the "Bodom" or "Bota" beads in the "Abam" are replaced by a white flat and black round beads, normally worn by priests and persons dedicated to the certain deities. The purpose of the charm "Abam" is to protect and help the twins lead a normal life because twins are believed to possess supernatural powers, and evil spirits might influence them to misuse their powers when still young if they are left unprotected.

Puberty

Puberty rites determine the transition from childhood to adulthood, in the case of the female, from girlhood to womanhood. In these rites which vary from one ethnic group to another, girls are ritually cleansed, taught about the secrets of married life and adorned with beads as a visible mark of change in the social status.

Puberty rites are ostentatiously performed by the Ga-Adangbe group to which the Krobo people belong. The series of rites is known by the Krobo as "Dipo" and include instructions and games which are brought to an end by the adornment with heavy accumulation of old, genuine beads around the neck, waist, arms and legs. These precious beads display both their new status as women and the wealth and status of their families (Jesse and Cole 1977: 22).

Since the main aim of puberty rites is geared towards marriage and reproduction precious beads like "Bodom" which are believed to possess fertility qualities are necessary in them. An enormous pile of heavy, colourful beads are put around the neck to hang down over the naked bosom and also around the waist to cover the pubic area of the initiate. In other words, they are worn so close to the reproductive organs so as to make their fertility potential effective. "Akuaba" fertility dolls, which are possessed mainly by barren women are also adorned with beads so as to induce fertility.

Until the attainment of this status of womanhood, not much consideration is given to nudity and concealment of the sexual organs. The Fante word for an adolescent girl, "akataasia", when analysed may suggest the meaning "keep covered". "Kata" means "cover or conceal", "asia" comes from the verb "sie" i.e. "bury" or "keep well". In other words, the designation for a girl after puberty may in the broad sense mean "keep covered" i.e. "protect the sexual organs till marriage", thus instilling the norm of chastity in the young.

Beads are used not only to protect and preserve womanhood but they are believed to serve also as a stimulant during sexual relations. The rattling of the woman's waist beads is said to stimulate the male partner. Waist beads also help to form the female waist into a particular shape, considered beautiful in the Ghanaian sense of judgement, which makes a "substantial impact" on men (Kofi Antubam 1954: 92). Waist girdles could be compiled of any kind of beads according to the social and economic rank of a person. However during puberty rites only the precious ones like "Bodom", "Bota", "Ekuar" etc. are used.

The reproductive power of beads is further illustrated in the Ashanti Stool History Series (AS 77) in which one finds an ancient belief that beads can give birth even to human beings. For example the members of the "Asene" clan are believed to have descended from a bead called "Berewua". Children of Asante Kings were washed in powdered "Bodom" beads to make them grow (Rattray op.cit.: 22).

In addition to the positive, there are negative aspects of beads. During menstruation, the beads girdle is replaced with a string or fibre because of the belief in the supernatural nature of beads. Since a menstruating woman is a taboo and regarded as unclean she should not go near a place where a "Bodom" bead is buried otherwise she disrupts the bead's power of self reproduction. On the other hand, it is a woman's loin cloth, an object mainly used to hold menstrual blood, that is said to be used to beat down the beads when they are coming from the ground.

The explanation for the apparent contradiction of using the latter to touch the sacred beads may lie in the belief that once a sacred item is touched by an impure one it loses its power. Although in this specific instance, the loin cloth would be a fresh one - since a woman in her period would be unable to accompany the husband to work. There is still the strong belief about its impurity and therefore once it touches the beads, they would lose their power and withdraw and thus remain with the finder.

Perhaps the whole mystery surrounding menstruation should be considered. Firstly, it is a biologic fact, which given a source of recognition legitimises

womanhood and reproduction of society. Alleged sameness of blood is said to be the basis of matriliney among the Akan. The rationalization for this descent principle is that an Akan chief's sister sacrificed her son in order to save the whole Clan, but it is only a rationalization. Blood means life and one of the striking differences between the living and the ~~ancestors~~ is that the latter lack blood, and the periodical blood of the woman which through washing gets to the earth - the original abode of the ancestors - can be said to "revive" ~~them~~, thus restoring contact between the living and the "physically dead" ancestors. Perhaps that is the more reason why sexual relations are prohibited during menstruation so that the period of solitude or sacredness between the woman, and for that matter the living and the ancestors should not be disrupted. So it is that there exist the strong belief of the Akan and others that children are sent by the ancestors through the woman and does not menstruation qualify her to be able to bear children? Almost in all libation prayers children are desired (See also Rattray 1927: 73 - 160).

However this concept of menstrual uncleanness is widespread. It is also in the Bible (Leviticus 12) but what gave rise to this thought in the African tradition? According to my meagre knowledge in biology, menstruation takes place because an unfertilized ovum inside the woman is destroyed. This causes a flow of blood which is darker in colour and different in odour than normal blood, and the loss of blood - be it normal or menstrual - could weaken the woman and even make her sick. Since there is a strong African belief that every sickness both physical and spiritual is effected through the force of evil spirits, I am inclined to think that those who instituted this 'unclean phenomenon' might have justifiably or unjustifiably construed that this menstrual process might be a form of sickness being steered by evil, and if so then a menstruating woman must certainly possess mystical dangers harmful to society and therefore needed to be secluded from the rest of the community during this period.

Death

In Ghanaian society a person is at no time so honoured and respected as at that of his death, because death is one of the requirements for one to become an ancestor - a spiritual being which can inflict punishment as well as blessing on his living relations, according to the latter's behaviour.

Although there is the acquired habit of wrapping the dead in a shroud or suit, beads are never missing on the corpse. At death no matter what position a woman might have held in life two girdles of waist beads, a necklace and wrist beads are used to adorn the body, though the selection of the type of beads normally reveals the social status of the dead. In the case of a man, a short striped bead called "Brempon asen ma" (Fante, meaning "a worthy person has passed away"), is tied to the left foot of the dead man. If he happened to be a twin or one of the special children³ entitled to "Abam" (See section on birth above), the string of the "Abam" beads is tied to the left wrist. Mourners may wear any kind of dark beads to signify their grief. Widows and orphans wear particular beads to denote their special state. Among the Asante a widow is recognised by a particular kind of beads called "Gyabom" which are fastened onto the right wrists and the ankles (Rattray op. cit. 171).

A dying Asante King is given a concoction of water, rum, gold dust and a "bodom" bead (Kyerematen 1970: 6). The bead signifies the power of the Queenmother which is supposed to come from the moon (E. Meyerowitz 1958: Ch.I). However the bead is removed while the other contents are made to seep into the dying body. It is believed that the bead is only added to give the dying king assurance that the lunar power of the Queen mother is accompanying him into the other world to help him through just as she did in his life time.

Conclusion

Beads are objects used to indicate the passage from one status of life into the other: from the spirit world into the living world and in the living world, they mark the different stages of life e.g. birth, puberty, death till one returns to the spirit world. Beads are used mainly as charms for protection. They protect the pregnant woman from evil spirits that may endanger the life of the unborn child and ensure safe delivery. They protect the young baby and keep it healthy. They protect the adolescent till marriage. They accompany the dead to the other world to bear witness that they had been into the living world.

Beads I think were chosen for the rites of passage not only because of their durability and magical nature but they also show the beauty and

importance of the different stages in life. That the same old beads are used from generation to generation portray the living tradition of these Ghanaians, a tradition that links the activities of yesterday with that of today.

NOTES

- 1) Considering the size of a 'Bodom' bead which has a diameter ranging from 2.5 cm - 11 cm and a length of between 2 cm - 9 cm it is not unusual that one could easily get choked on swallowing it.
- 2) A parallel rite is performed in Zululand. When a child began to crawl, a medicinal amulet - a special berry which served as a charm for good health - was replaced by a single string of beads called "ingeje".
- 3) E.g. the third successive female or male child, the seventh, ninth, tenth and the child born immediately after a twin are all special children and entitled to wear the protective charm of "Abam" beads.

LITERATURE

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------|--|
| Agyeman-Duah, J.
(recorder) | 1963 | Ashanti Stool History - AS 77, Institute of African Studies Library, University of Ghana, Legon. |
| Anlang B. Brottom | 1972/3 | Zulu beadwork in <u>African Arts</u> Vol. 6, Los Angeles California University of California. |
| Anquandah, James | 1983 | Extracts from "Our Cultural Frontier" Ghana Radio Broadcast 11th October, 1983. |
| Antubam, Kofi | 1954 | <u>Ghana's Heritage of Culture</u> , Leipzig, Koehler and Amelang. |
| Busia, K.A. | 1954 | The Ashanti of the Gold Coast in Daryll Forde (ed) <u>African Worlds</u> . London, O.U.P. |
| Cardinall, A.W. | 1924 | Aggrey Beads of the Gold Coast in The Journal of the African Society Vol. 24. |
| Cole Herbert & D. Ross | 1977 | The Arts of Ghana. Los Angeles. University of California Press. |

- | | | |
|-------------------------|--------|---|
| Field Margaret | 1961 | <u>Religion and Medicine of the Ga People.</u>
London, O.U.P. |
| Kyerematen, A.A.Y. | 1970 | <u>Kingship and Ceremony in Ashanti,</u>
Kumasi, U.S.T. Press. |
| Lamb Alastair | 1975/6 | Krobo Powder - Geaso Beads in <u>African Arts</u> Vol.9, Los Angeles, California. |
| Meyerowitz, Eva | 1958 | <u>The Akan of Ghana,</u> London, Faber and Faber. |
| - | 1959 | <u>The Sacred State of the Akan.</u> London Faber and Faber. |
| Opoku, A.A. | 1970 | <u>Festivals of Ghana,</u> Accra, Ghana Publishing Corporation. |
| Rattray, R.S. | 1927 | <u>Religion and Art in Ashanti,</u> London. O.U.P. |
| Sarpong, Peter | 1974 | <u>Ghana in Retrospect.</u> Accra-Tema, Ghana Publishing Corporation. |
| Van Landewijk, J.E.J.M. | 1974 | What was the Original Aggrey Bead?
<u>Ghana Journal of Sociology, Vol. 6,</u>
<u>No. 2.</u> Institute of Adult Education,
Legon. |