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HAUSA TRADER displaying a threaded length of beads for customer at Treichville market in Abidjan. While waiting for their clients, traders often pass the time by stringing beads. One end of a piece of raffia twine or cotton fiber is attached to the stringer's toe, and while sitting with his leg outstretched, beads are passed rapidly through a stringing needle onto the taut raffia. Necklaces are tied into bundles of ten which can be easily counted and transported.

West African Trade Beads

SYMBOLS OF TRADITION

Christopher Steiner
In West Africa's Côte d'Ivoire, most African women today have little interest in adorning themselves with beads dating to the era of the slave trade—identifying instead with images of Western women promoted by fashion magazines and weekly broadcasts of American television. They wear modern European-style gold, silver, metal and plastic jewelry, as well as locally manufactured ornaments of gold-plated filigree. The only African women who still buy European trade beads in the local markets are usually either medicinal or ritual specialists who continue to value the beads for their spiritual potency (Cole 1975).

Trade beads have found a new audience in the West, replacing the diminishing African demand over the past several decades due to the introduction of monetary currencies and loss of visual appeal. As they continue to circulate along specialized routes of transnational commerce, satisfying European and American material appetites, their re-circulation spans a broad trajectory through the entire economic world system. It has been reported, for instance, that beads from African trade which once flooded the United States market in the 1970s are now being resold to accommodate demand in Asia, the Philippines, Mexico and Guatemala (Liu 1975). In the American Southwest, Northwest Coast and Alaska, beads from the African trade are being marketed to tourists as authentic beads from the Native trade (ibid 1975).

Originally introduced into West Africa by seafaring traders as early as the fifteenth century, these colored glass beads made in Venice, Holland and Bohemia (a province of modern-day Czechoslovakia) functioned as a medium of exchange through which Europeans could acquire African goods and slaves. Bead production reached its

**Bead Necklaces** being distributed by British officers to members of the Dahomey court. Detail of an engraving from Archibald Dalziell, *The History of Dahomy* (London, 1741). Published by permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
peak in the middle of the nineteenth century (Francis 1979; Du
bin 1987:107-114), and now the same European beads which for
centuries were prized by Africans are sought by those inhabiting
the very shores from which the beads originated. While the appearance
of the beads has changed only somewhat through wear and ag
ing—they are smoother, more rounded or chipped from centuries
of use—the meaning of the beads has been drastically altered.

Once prized for being "European", they are now prized for being
"African"—valued for their "exotic" qualities in both their original and
present markets. To the Africans who acquired imported beads
in exchange for the riches of their land, they were desired because
they came from far away, and were unavailable locally. Because they
represented contact and rapport with a powerful outsider, they were
loaded with symbolic meaning. To the travelers who now, centuries
later, buy these very same trade beads in the markets of West Africa,
their appeal, at least in part, stems from the fact that their long pres
ence in Africa has again made them exotic. Once more, they have been
packed with a symbolic charge: this time, however, their symbolism is
that of a romanticized vision of tradi
tional, pristine Africa.

The assimilation, or what might be
called the "naturalization" of foreign imports is not unique to the
history of beads, but is a process that has occurred in various con
texts and at different times. In his tours of Great Britain during the
reign of William and Mary, Daniel Defoe observed that the wearing of
fine East Indian calicoes and the furnishing of homes with delicate
tableware from China had become
so integral to English taste that they came to represent "Englishness"
more than they did "Otherness"
(Bunn 1980:306). A similar process
has also occurred in Africa where
women traders give indigenous
names to the imported European
factory cloths which they sell in local
markets. The names establish
group-specific meanings and meta
phors which transform a foreign
commodity into an item of local
"production" (Steiner 1985; Touré 1985).

Beads of European origin which
are sold in the marketplaces of
West Africa are collected from vil
lage sources by professional traders
who travel through rural areas in
search of beads, masks, statues, utilitarian/household items, and
whatever other artifacts can be ulti
mately resold to Western buyers.
Although most traders at this level
of commerce do not specialize in
any particular type of goods, a num
ber of them are extremely knowl
dedgeable about beads and will
search village sources more thor
oughly in order to find some of the
rarer bead types.

It is ironic to note that trade
beads are collected through the
very same barter mechanism with
which they were originally distrib
uted four centuries ago. The goods
that the village-level traders uncover
are transported from town to
town, and sold to different dealers
who channel them through the
market hierarchy toward coastal cit
ics and major ports of trade. By the
time a trade bead necklace reaches
Paris, New York or Tokyo, it has
been handled by scores of mer
chants, and its value has been con
structed and renegotiated numer
ous times (Steiner 1989).

Today, in the markets of Abidjan,
the chief port and economic capital of
Côte d'Ivoire, heads of European
origin are displayed in vast quanti
ties for sale to foreign tourists, deal
ers and collectors. Traders of vari
ous African ethnic origins (Hausa,
Dioula, Wolof) sell both loose
beads and strung necklaces from
their wooden stalls. They depend
on the sale of beads to tourists and
other visitors, employing such
modern marketing techniques as
displaying a popular European
magazine cover portraying a glam
orous model covered with African
trade beads and beaded bracelets.

Most traders also have a regular
clientele of dealers and private collec
tors; a number of bead enthusi
asts who reside as expatriates in Ab
idjan have developed close links to
some of the major bead suppliers.
In return for a slightly higher price
or occasional loan, bead collectors
urge their suppliers to guarantee
them first selection from a newly
arrived lot of beads. Like the Swazi
sumptuary decrees which anthro
pologist Hilda Kuper describes as
regulating the sale of specific bead
designs to certain kings or chiefs
and their families by European sup
pliers, Europeans are now regulat
ing through economic incentives
the distribution among themselves
of these same beads by their cur

In social anthropology, there is a
recognized tradition for the study
of translocal exchange systems and
the circulation of commodities. In
the 1920s, for example, anthro
pologist Bronislaw Malinowski first
described the circulation of deco
rated necklaces (soulava) and arm
shells (nwalu) among the South
Pacific's Trobriand Islanders. He
uncovered a complex network of ex
change (kula) which centered on
the circulation of specific cultur
ally recognized objects of value.
The whole system was based on a
principle of temporary ownership:
the point was not to keep a kula
valuable forever, but rather to gain
prestige by passing on the object to
a carefully chosen trading partner.
In each transaction, the object ac
quired new meaning and value as it
shifted from one context of own
ership to the next (Malinowski
1922).

The study of the re-circulation of
HAUSA BEAD TRADER at Treichville market in Abidjan. Traders in urban markets do not usually personally collect beads from rural sources; instead, they rely on itinerant merchants who scour village households for whatever can be resold in the art market. Suppliers travel to Abidjan about once a month selling their goods to the marketplace stallholders.

West African trade beads lends itself to similar analysis. Since the meaning of a bead is not intrinsic to the object itself, but gains attribution because of its associative value, a trade bead can change meaning through time or by the unfolding of its individual “life history” (cf. Appadurai 1986).

Once considered in the West to be trinkets which were circulated as prestige items in foreign lands, trade beads have returned to the West in a new guise—as valuable objects worthy of collection and emblems of all that stands for Africa and its “traditional” past.

REFERENCES


Christopher Steiner, a doctoral candidate in the department of Anthropology at Harvard University, conducted field research among art traders in Côte d’Ivoire as a Fulbright Scholar in 1987-88. He is currently completing his dissertation on the history and sociology of the West African art market.