

Through the eye of the bead

Fieldwork and collecting in Ghana

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Abstract | The photo essay presents selected aspects of a two-month field research and object collection on Ghanaian bead culture, carried out in the spring of 2023 with the assistance of Kati Torda, a Ghana-based bead expert of Hungarian origin. For the Museum of Ethnography, I documented – through photographs and videos – seven bead-making techniques using various materials: glass powder, crushed glass, bauxite, snail shell, brass/bronze, plastic, and horn, I also collected objects ranging from raw materials to finished products, including tools. The research further explored the cultural significance of beads: their role in rites of passage (birth, naming ceremonies, initiation of adolescent girls, marriage, and death/funerals), their use in expressing social status and special functions, and personal attitudes towards wearing them.

Keywords | Africa, Ghana, bead, fieldwork

In the spring of 2023, I had the opportunity to conduct two months of fieldwork in Ghana, which was preceded by a decade of planning and several attempts to secure research funding. The purpose of the fieldwork was to compile a bead collection for the Museum of Ethnography with the aim of presenting a comprehensive overview of Ghanaian bead culture. This was made possible by Kati Torda, who has been living in the country for 45 years through marriage and with whom I have had a personal relationship spanning two decades in connection with the Africa collection. Thanks to her work as a jewellery designer, maker, and dealer, she has not only gained a deep and comprehensive understanding of bead culture, but has also become an active participant and promoter of it through exhibitions, lectures, publications, and workshops. I was not the first person she introduced to this milieu, as Kati is a key figure for anyone interested in the subject. Her jewellery store in Accra is one of the hubs of her extensive network of contacts in Ghana, West Africa, and beyond.

During my field research in the capital, Accra, and several rural locations – Koforidua, Kumasi, Tamale – I documented the techniques used to make beads of various materials and types, covering the different stages of production from raw materials to the final product, including tools and supplies. My research and collecting work have covered certain particularly important European and Ghanaian glass bead types (Murano chevron, locally made *bodom*, *akoso*, etc.) their ancient and modern types as well as their development, use and significance. In addition to old, typical types of beads, those made from recycled modern materials (plastic objects) were also the subject of research and col-

lection. I documented a total of seven bead-making techniques: beads made from glass powder and glass granules, bauxite, giant African snails, horn, recycled plastic, and brass beads produced using the lost-wax casting method. In the northern part of the country, traditional jewellery is made by blacksmiths, and I was able to gain insight into their craft. I also obtained other types of imported beads used in Ghana from local sources, the bead market, and directly from traveling merchants.

Another aspect of my research and collection was to examine and document the symbolic and practical role of beads in the life cycle, in various rites of passage, and in the expression of social status. I sought to process the themes of birth, naming-ceremony, the initiation of adolescent girls into womanhood, marriage, and death and burial through participant observation and interviews. I planned my fieldwork for the spring because this is the period of initiation for girls among the Krobo, the country's most famous bead makers and users. I participated in the initiation of girls in their two sub-groups, the Manya and Yilo Krobo, which allowed me to make comparisons. They complemented each other as I was able to observe community events taking place at the site of the rituals in one group, while in the other, I could observe celebrations within the extended family. Where possible, I also tried to collect data on individual relationships with beads, stories, and intergenerational transmission.

In addition to careful planning, a number of coincidences during my fieldwork helped me in collecting items together with data on the use of beads and indeed other elements of culture, visually documenting these throughout. The collection of more than 900 pieces arrived in Budapest in a shipment weighing 200 kg.

Gyöngyszemen keresztül Terepkutatás és tárggyűjtés Ghánában

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Rezümé | A fotóesszé a ghánai gyöngykultúráról végzett kéthónapos terepkutatás és tárggyűjtés egyes részleteit villantja fel, amelyet az ott élő Torda Kati gyöngyszakértő segítségével végeztem 2023 tavaszán. Különböző anyagok (üvegpor, üvegszemcse, bauxit, csigahéj, sárgaréz/bronz, műanyag, szaru) felhasználásával készülő hét gyöngykészítési technikát dokumentáltam fotón és videón a Néprajzi Múzeum számára, valamint gyűjtöttem tárgyakat az alapanyagoktól a szerszámokon át a végtermékekig. A gyöngyöknek a kultúrában betöltött szerepe, az átmeneti rítusokban (születés, a csecsemő névadása, a serdülő lányok nővé avatása, az esküvő és a halál, temetés) és társadalmi státusok, illetve speciális funkciók kifejezését célzó használata, valamint a gyöngyviselethez való egyéni viszonyulások szintén a kutatás tárgyát képezték.

Kulcsszavak | Afrika, Ghána, gyöngy, terepmunka

Photos by Edina Földessy



Kati Torda at the entrance of her bead shop with her bead arrangement, *Beads of a Lifetime*. Accra, 5 April 2023

2–8. The process of recycled glass powder beadmaking in the workshop of Johanes Narh. Koforidua-Aboabo, 11 April 2023



2–3. Open-air beadmaking workshop of Johanes Narh, outside and inside



4. Inserting cassava leaf stalks into the holes of the mould to form the bead holes after firing



5. Pouring painted powdered glass into the mould with tin funnels, also creating motifs with different colours



6. Turning each bead after the first firing and placing it in the kiln for a second, shorter firing to achieve a domed surface on each side



7. Painting beads with very fine powdered glass mixed with ceramic pigment and water



8. Polishing beads with fine sand and water on a grinding stone

9–14. Translucent and opaque glass beadmaking in the workshop of Okrah Tetteh. Koforidua, 15 April 2023



9. Set of raw materials and tools for making translucent beads from fragments of broken glass, retaining the original colours of bottles or industrial glass products



10. Breaking bottle glass with a stone or hammer



11. By placing crushed glass of different colours in the mold, multicoloured translucent beads can be created



12. Imported factory-made glass seed beads are also used to mix colours



13. Just after firing, each bead is pierced with a homemade pricker and shaped by turning it in the hole of the mold. This operation requires great skill and practice.



14. Women can have different roles in the beadmaking process, such as filling molds with powdered or crushed glass, creating motifs by pouring glass powder of different colours into the mold or by painting, and stringing beads for sale.



15. At the Thursday bead market in Koforidua, locally made glass beads are usually sold by women, while beads from around the world are traded by merchants. Koforidua, 13 April 2023



16. Abompeh is the only settlement in Ghana where bauxite beads are made, thanks to a nearby bauxite mine. Simple tools are used, and holes are drilled with a bow drill. Because of their red colour, bauxite beads are mainly worn at funerals and during mourning. Abompeh, 14 April 2023

17–18. Koforidua Zongo, 12 April 2023



17. In Ghana, beads are no longer made from the shells of the giant Ghana snail. Kati Torda knew the last woman who practiced this technique and asked her daughter, Lebene, to revive it for documentation. The multi-phase process – crushing the shells and shaping them into discs with a bush knife, roasting in a pot, boiling in soapy water, making a pricker, drilling with a bow drill, stringing, and polishing on a stone – took an entire day, with some technical steps needing reinvention. The finished shell discs were delivered the next day, as Lebene was dissatisfied with their polish. She had forged the bow drill bit herself in a simple portable oven.



18. Although Lebene had difficulty operating the bow drill with a string, she managed to use it thanks to the sticking friction of the shell powder.



19. Twenty years ago, Mrs. Amina discovered – through a kitchen accident she saw as divine guidance – how to make beads from melted plastic. In a space of less than two square meters, using simple kitchen utensils, she produces thousands of beads in various colours and shapes. Kumasi, 20 May 2023



20. The Kumasi region is famous for its brass and bronze production. Using the lost-wax casting process, artisans create beads in various shapes and with different motifs from beeswax wire. Sokoban Krofrom, Kumasi, 1 May 2023



21. At the start of the Dipo initiation ceremony, symbolizing a girl's coming of age, Krobo girls replace their everyday waist beads with ritual ones. Yellow stands for wealth, maturity, prosperity, and long life. Somanya, 21 April 2023



22. During the initiation, girls are adorned with large amounts of beads, especially on their breasts and waists. These are passed down through many generations and symbolize a family's wealth and status. Beads can also be purchased for the occasion or hired from women who rent out collections for this purpose. Somanya, 23 April 2023



23. Initiated girls from an extended family are grouped together to be photographed by a professional photographer. In the past, scarifications were made on the body to prove that the stages of initiation had been completed. Today, photographs serve the same purpose. Nuaso, 15 May 2023



24. Beads are an obligatory part of the gifts from the husband's family to the bride, publicly presented during the ceremony. At one wedding, where the absent groom was represented by his brother, the bride received a bowl of glass beads. The two families sat facing each other, and after the bride-asking rites, she moved to sit with her new family. Odumase, 28 May 2023



25. For funerals, people wear black and red to express anger at a sudden death, and black and white if the deceased was over 70 and had lived a full life. Beads are worn in accordance with this colour code. On the road between Nkwanta and Wli in Volta, 25 May 2023



26. Traditional healers and priests have their own special beads, some inspired by their guiding spirits. We met Togbe Hogbe by chance in a village, and he was willing to share his life story with us. Taviefe Avenya, 10 April 2023