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21. ROMANCING THE HIDDEN BEAD, Peter Francis, Jr. (1992, 21:12-15)

The uses of beads are legion. One which has not been examined has implications for researchers and for those who use beads. It has only rarely been reported, and the sources are difficult to access, so I shall quote most of them at some length.

Quarm (1989:47-48), in an unpublished “long paper” (a sort of bachelor’s thesis) at the University of Ghana, Legon, reported the results of an extensive survey conducted by him and his classmates from different ethnic groups in Ghana. In his section on the uses of beads he stated (I have made a few minor corrections):

The rattling of beads is said to arouse sexual interest, especially in men. An informant at Ahwanease of an advanced age told me that the feeling of it is sufficient to awaken an impotent penis (name withheld for courtesy). Whereas it serves as an invitation to sex (or *twe draa* as the Akan call it) in bed it is considered as a plaything for the men. This was mainly expressed by informants above forty years [in age]. The young men and women appeared to be quite ignorant of that experience. This notion of bead use is, however, common in all the areas I visited.

... In the Asante, Akim, Nzima and Aowin areas, I learned that one can swear on oath by one’s wife’s waist beads. Bead are held sacred and it is believed to bring bad [luck] if one gives a false statement or evidence. This sacredness stems from the fact that some beads are believed to possess some productive influence on the women’s fertility potential and this could be impaired in the case of falsehood. [A shrine attendant and a queen mother told me] that the telling of the kind and colours of beads a married woman wears by [to?] a man is tantamount to adultery and the person can be sued for damages.

The erotic use of beads worn around the waist and under the skirts of women is (or was) widespread among several groups in Ghana. The “bead dance” of the Laobe of Senegal appears to have such connotations (Opper and

Opper 1989:5), and the private erotic use of beads has been confirmed for Senegal and Mali by Marie-José Opper (1992: pers. comm.).

A similar account was given by El-Tunisi (El-Tounsy 1851:334-335) when discussing beads in Wadai, now part of Chad. El-Tunisi lived in Wadai in 1811-1812. The following is my translation from the French by Perron:

These two types of beads are employed by the Fors as a hidden ornament, that is to say... in a sort of girdle worn next to the skin. The intention of this type of adornment is to excite the voluptuous emotions of the men, who are provoked and excited by the hint of the light rattling of the girdles at the time of amorous contact. When one meets a woman alone and wants to entice her, he touches the girdle and makes the beads rattle. If the woman appears to accept the provocation and does not distance herself immediately, he will take her hand and they will come to terms. If the woman repels him, he will go on his way.

What proves that the Fors do not wear these girdles of beads in order to hear the rattling by accident, is that the first turn is very solidly fixed to the loins, whereas the others are mobile and almost floating.

The beads which El-Tunisi just discussed were the *mangoûr* and the *rougâd-el-fâqah*. The *mangoûr* were yellow and green furnace-wound beads made in Hebron in the West Bank, which have more recently been recycled by Hausa traders who ground their ends flat and now sell them as “Kano Beads” (Francis 1990a:23-26). It is not clear what sort of beads the *rougâd-el-fâqah* were. El-Tunisi described them as smoother and more beautiful than the *mangoûr*. They were also more expensive and worn by the wealthier Fors (El-Tounsy 1851:334).

El-Tunisi also discussed a bead called *khaddoûr*. These he said were long and white, red or blue (El-Tounsy 1851:339). They were little esteemed and worn by the poor and servants. The word *khaddur* in Arabic means hidden. El-Tunisi had also discussed them in Darfur, in modern Sudan, where he lived from the age of 14 (1803 to 1811) before moving on to Wadai and then home to Tunisia. While he does not specify their use, he hints at it:

Around the loins and against the skin, the Fors wear different sorts of beads. Among the rich women the beads are the size of a nut, and are called *rougâd-el-fâqah* (the sleep of tranquility); among the women of medium means, it is the *mangour*, and among the poor women, the *harich* or the *khaddoûr*. These beads are made in Syria (El-Tounsy 1845:210).

It appears that El-Tunisi is indicating that all these beads serve the same purpose, the choice of bead largely made by the economic status of the woman wearing them. The bead not discussed above, the *harich*, is merely a smaller version of the *mangoûr*.

In 1873-1874, Gustav Nachtigal visited Wadai and Darfur. His account often mentioned beads and he included *khaddur* in several lists of beads. On one occasion in Wadai he described it thus:

In addition to the cotton goods which have been mentioned, imports from Cairo include the large red clay beads which, with the name *khaddur*, "hidden", are used as women's ornaments, worn under their clothing around the waist, large amber beads, and small quantities of silk, velvet, cloth, and shirting (Fisher, Fisher, and O'Fahey 1971:201).

According to El-Tunisi, the *khaddur* were made in Syria (that is, Hebron). Nachtigal says they were from Cairo, but they may have only been brought from there. Nachtigal says they were clay. This may account for their relative poor standing among the beads El-Tunisi discussed, despite their large size. On the other hand, it is difficult to see how clay beads would rattle very well, unless they were glazed, which might explain why El-Tunisi said they were red, white, and blue in color. Their exact identification must await further work.

In any case, it appears likely that these beads are no longer being used for this purpose. They were out of style in Darfur in the 1930s (Arkell 1937). Whether other beads have replaced them is not known.

What we do have, however, is confirmation of the erotic uses of beads worn on women's waists under their skirts in what are now five modern sub-Saharan nations: Ghana, Senegal, Mali, Chad, and Sudan. These countries are not all contiguous, and if linked they would form a broad band across the continent. In how many other places is (or was) this a custom? Soliciting answers to this question is a major reason for writing this note.

Another reason for this note is the significance of this practice to bead researchers. A few years ago Karlis Karklins went through the African photographic collections of the ethnographic departments of several of Europe's major museums. He was perturbed to find relatively few pictures of beads being worn in West Africa (Karklins 1988: pers. comm.).

I have observed the same effect in similar collections in the U.S. and West Africa. It is well known that there

are a lot of beads in West Africa. This is obvious from the vast quantities coming onto Western markets from there. Trade figures which have been published for Senegal and Gambia (Curtin 1975:252, 1978:88, 90) and Ghana (Francis 1990b:6-7, 1992) show that glass beads and beads of other types were imported in large numbers by Europeans to their colonies over the last few centuries. Now we know why they are not visible in photographs: we have been looking in the wrong places (I shall refrain from suggesting how we might look in the right places).

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