

Review Article

Heavy Beaded Adornments and the Cultural Significance in Africa

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Abstract: This review article explores the traditional use of beads in Benin culture, Midwest Nigeria, examining craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, and social significance. It investigates the various materials used for adornment, features and significance of beaded adornments, stages of beaded adornment, and major forms. The study also unveils the values placed on bead use in Benin culture and discusses the sustainability of beaded culture amidst cultural diffusion and dynamism.

Keywords: Heavy Beaded, Adornments, Culture, Significance, Africa.

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INTRODUCTION

Culture is universal, yet its unique nature must not be undermined, as it defines human identity at the regional level Omonijo et al., (2019) where its international viewpoint may not be relevant. Similarly, human beings are found worldwide, but in diverse shapes, colors, and characters, with race and culture intricately linked. Crucially, modern forms of culture evolve from traditional ones through refinement and advancement, particularly during national development. Labeling a culture as "primitive" disregards its complex historical and social contexts, insulting the knowledge and experiences that shape it.

African culture is often tagged barbaric by western nations, hence the imposition of western culture on Africans. The question remains, would the imposition make Africans western? Certainly no! The imposition has led to cultural conflicts and identity crises. The example of Africans wearing suits in hot weather illustrates the disconnect between adopted cultural practices and local environmental conditions. This highlights the importance of respecting and valuing indigenous cultures, rather than imposing external norms.

In Africa, diverse cultural practices significantly influence people's lifestyles (Adetola *et al.*, 2019; Olowokere *et al.*, 2021). An outstanding example is the use of heavy beaded adornments, which not only serves as a vital source of income for artisans but also plays a crucial role in beautifying people's lives, reflecting the rich cultural heritage and aesthetic values of various African societies. This study focuses on the Benin Kingdom in Nigeria, aiming to describe various materials which Benin people use to produce adornment. Aside that, it delves with its various features and significance, stages of beaded adornment and their major forms. Additionally, it unveils values placed on the use of beads in Benin culture and ends with concluding remarks.

Brief History of Benin Kingdom

The origin of Benin as a kingdom stretched back to around 13th century. However, the artistic and political influence and prowess was not known nor great as it were until during the period between 15th to 18th century. Benin kingdom is located in the present Edo state, southwest of Nigeria. The culture of Benin people was highly influential in and once ruled the major parts Edo at that time. There was the city wall called *moth* which was used to fortify the entire region of Benin empire which unfortunately had become a ruin today.

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Benin kings known as “Oba of Benin” were believed to be the descendants of the king of Ile-Ife. Hence, they have the title “Oba” from Yoruba language meaning king. (Symbols of power and authority:7) Oba of Benin’s succession is monarchical in nature; passed down from a king to the male child usually the first son irrespective of age. So, because a crown prince is equally considered a king, they are usually trained and brought up outside the kingdom since no two equal Kings live in same domain.

Benin kingdom is well known to trade in art and they are good in wood carving, clay molding, woven cotton, raffia, brass works, ivory works, bronze casting, (then latter Benin royal art) and bead works. These works of art were so enormous in Benin that they attracted people to Benin and led to undue attention to the kingdom which was responsible for expedition of Benin in the 19th century during the reign of Oba Akensua.

According to Benin oral tradition, weaving (clothes) was one of their major art and it started in the pre-monarchical era, i.e before AD 1170 and was organized into a guild (*Owanan’ido*). The costume and bead makers were included in the guild who were affiliated to the palace society that were in charge of the Oba’s wardrobe maintenance (the *dwebo*). Variety of colors were obtained from leaves and barks of trees to dye the clothes: Red from cam wood (*Ume*), blue Form indigo etc. However, these forms of adornment were incomplete without the use of beads by various classes of people as the occasion demanded. (*Courtyard Exhibition of Lagos Museum:13*). Beads especially coral, remain a main ingredient of traditional adornment in Benin kingdom which is further demonstrated in an annual ceremony called “*Ugie-Ivie*” interpreted to mean; “the coral bead ceremony”.

Materials for Adornment in Benin Kingdom

Coral Beads

Coral, like pearls is an animal product from polyp with a frankly odd and complicated life style that forms large colonies. A limestone skeleton is then constructed from calcium that is extracted from the sea. These are eventually branched or cut out like trees. Mostly, beads made from these coral stones from the seas are polished and shaped into small designs. In presentation, Coral comes in a variety of colours ranging from soft pink to red to black. The gemologist (experts in arts and craft of gems) belief that the more even the colour of coral, the greater its value! The coral that is

used for jewelry is called precious. It has a hard core or internal skeleton that can take a high polish. These corals are cut into beads to form necklaces, cameos or flower for brooches. These valuable beads are lavishly and elegantly used at wedding ceremonies and equally used for funerals among Benin people. They are highly valued in the culture of Edo in general but mostly by Benin. They also represent how important a person is or was. Red coral which is ‘Oxblood’(colour) is also known as the *Precious Coral* existed over 30,000 years ago and displays uniform colour. Due to the nature and value placed on them, Coral jewelries are often worn after other dressing, make-up and perfume and needs to be taken off whenever the wearer go for swimming, washing or cooking. They are and should be stored in soft fabric pouch to avoid scratch. Part of the care for the coral jewelry is to blow off dust from it with a can of compressed air which are on sale or cleaned with a soft clean cloth and rinse in warm soapy water but must never be soaked! The coral beads used in Edo, among the Benin people are different from the ones in the other parts of Nigeria like Yorubaland, Northern Nigeria, even the Eastern part of the country among the Igbo people because of the make and the importance attached to its use in Benin kingdom.

Other Types of Beads Used in Benin

Apart from coral, there are other materials used for making beads used in Benin, these are glass, some special stones, shells, clay, cowries and others. These materials are fashioned into wearable shape of bead and are used at different occasions. It is believed that the Portuguese may have introduced some of these bead materials to Benin. They are most socially used in Benin especially in the recent times.

Adornment and Colour

Red is love and love is what binds us together. In Benin adornment generally, red colour is expressly obvious. The use of red in Benin attire, beads and other accessories is an indication of love. In marriage proposals, love is expected to be the basis therefore, when a lady accepts gifts, she is bounded to comply with the offer of love. Benin’s governance is monarchical in nature and the citizenry are all for the king therefore, the love of the monarch for the citizens and vise-versa is displayed in their admiration of the colour of love; *RED*. Most adorable attire in Benin dressing comes in red except for few designs on the clothing. The accessories are equally in red in most cases especially the coral which have different shades of red.

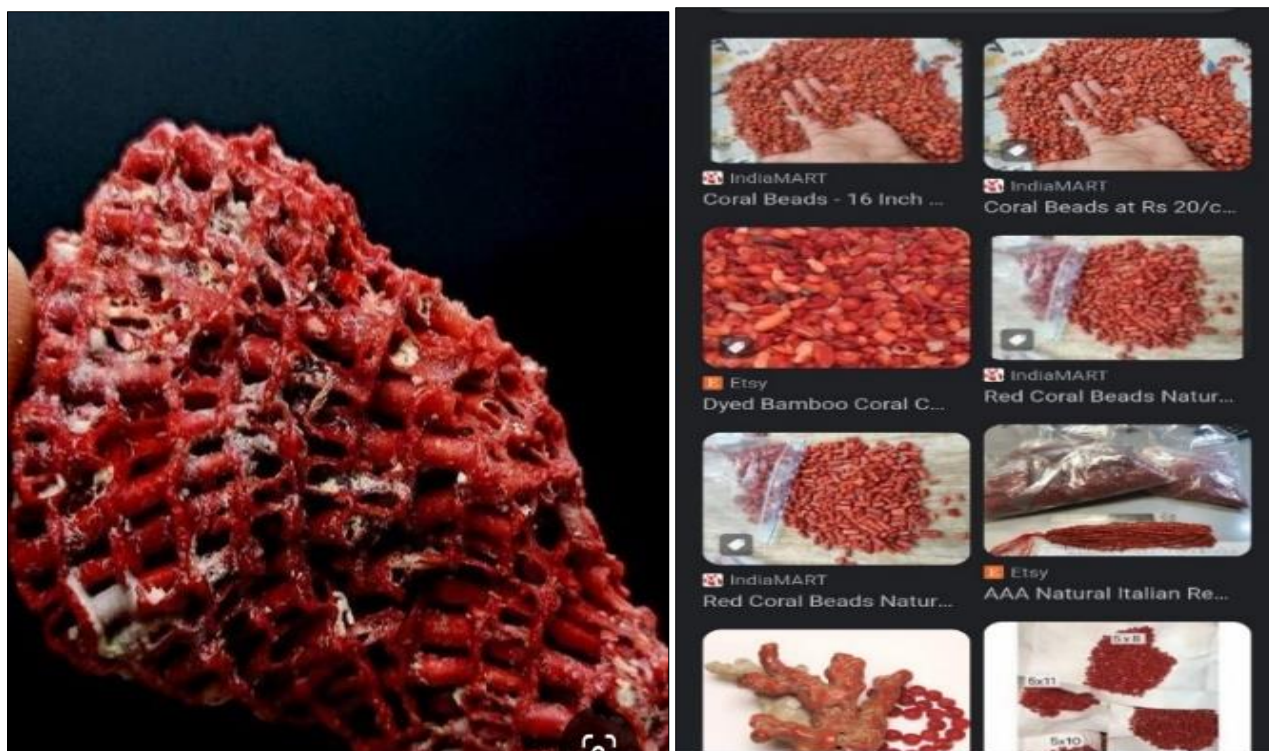


Fig. 1: Different types of coral materials used for beads



Fig. 2: Samples of beads used in Benin Kingdom

Fig 2, shows three types of coral ranging from brown to red, glass bead. They are produced from the same material but appear in different shapes to fit human adornments.

Features and Significance of Benin's Cultural Adornments

An average Benin person is usually well and best dressed. This reflects mostly in their gorgeous beaded dresses and hair do. In recent times, due to the influx of civilization, decorated shoes or slippers especially during occasions or celebrations are parts of their use of beads in adornments. Likewise, Benin's palace is well decorated with plaques made from bronze but reflects the beaded way of Benin dressing. Then, it

will be an understatement to say a Benin king or anyone in the royal clan of Benin is always well dressed.

Apart from the traditional garbs wears for men and women called "*bomba*", in Benin, men also wear long loose trousers, loose tunic shirt called "*pagne*" and thin loose top, "*esan*". Traditional attire which consists of *ukpesan* are worn specially to important events like marriage ceremony. The most attractive item of adornment in Benin from the time immemorial was and still remain beads and beaded materials.

Though, Benin women tie beautiful wrappers made from a variety of fabrics such as; velvet, lace, gorge and also use *ashobi* (a blouse, long skirt and a headgear),

the most prominent of their dressing still appears to be beaded wears. They wear *ewu-ivie*, a beaded cape or blouse (woven *ive-obo* with bead), their necks are well decorated with coral beads known as *ivie-uru* and wear on their heads beaded head cover interlocked into their

hairdo, they put on beaded earring, and carry beaded hand bags made of coral beads as well. Until recently, Benin women appear mostly in dresses made of beads in full and their whole body are adorned in beads especially coral.

Table 1: The notable common set of materials for beaded adornments for both male and female in Benin

S/N	Materials
1	Woven clothes
2	Beaded apron
3	Beaded woven hair
4	Beaded Rings
5	Beaded clothes
6	Beaded/decorated wrappers
7	Gorgeous hairdo
8	Full/half Beaded crown for both male and female
9	Beaded hand bags
10	Beaded/designed shoe or slippers
11	Beaded ceremonial sword
12	Beaded horse whip and staff of office
13	Anklets and bracelets made from beads

Source: Abakun & Omonijo, (2025)

Stages of Beaded Adornment in Benin Kingdom

One outstanding feature that distinguishes Oba of Benin's stool to others in Nigeria is the heavily beaded dressing! The Oba of Benin's outfit remains classical and eye catching for everyone globally. The thematic focus of Benin adornment culturally including the aesthetic are all orientated towards the glorification of the personality of the Oba and this is more fundamentally ritualistic and political than economical because the hierarchical pyramid of Benin kingdom is from Oba --- Oba's household --- chiefs --- commoners (men and women) -- - slaves and servants. So, there are three broad adornment pattern identified in Benin kingdom namely; *Palace Costumes, chief/ noble costumes and the commoners' apparels!*

The Palace Costume

Oba of Benin's Adornment

The Oba of Benin commonly wears *Iyeruan* and *Akhuan*, a large item of regalia, a peculiar type of woven white cloth from local clothing material woven by the royal guild. But, the most spectacular outfit of the Oba is a regalia called *Akpa*, usually for ceremony. This regalia is a heavy net skirt of beads with every knot finished with a *large coral bead weighing about twenty-pounds*. Together with this, he wears a belt of coral (*ukugbalia*), a closely meshed high coral with collar (*odigba*), a crown closely meshed in coral with beaded cone (*erhu-ede*), a beaded head band (*udaha*) numerous rolls of beads not rising over the chin and many tightly strings of beads that its large piece stands out from the neck in circle about a foot in diameter. The arm is enclosed in beaded bracelets from the wrist to the elbows. Oba of Benin is usually heavily beaded in the arm that two servants have to be by his right and left sides to carry his hands for him because he cannot by himself.

Apart from the clothing, every other thing the Oba wears is majorly red coral. Sometimes, the Oba wears sandals all covered with beads.

The King's Wives' Adornment

The routine wear of the king's wives (the *ilos*) consisted of simple and unsophisticated wrappers covering their body from chest to the ankles but are specially costumed for occasional outings. Sometimes woven to the fabrics are motifs made from bronze in a rhythmic form such as tiger, the leopard, or the king's image and it is strictly forbidden to be worn by all other women in the entire kingdom. In spite of the cloth for coverings, in Benin kingdom, the use of beads is of high rate in the palace as it is mandated that; No *ilo* (Oba's wife) should be seen outside unless adorning her exposed parts of chest with varieties of coral beads. Their hairdos are equally decorated with beads most especially on ceremony/festival or days of importance like *igwe* to distinguish them from the wives of other men. This distinctive adornment is for the king's mother too. They are mostly profusely decorated with beads from their head to their feet.

The King's Children's Adornment

Oba's children are usually distinctively adorned to reflect palace costume through minor decoration, to distinguish them even from children outside the royal household. Until recently, it is a taboo for a princess to wear earring because it is meant for girls outside the royal family though, princesses are exclusively reserved the right of using enormous brass coils as anklets but, a matured teenage princess is entitled to a special form of *okuku* hairstyle full of beads as a symbol of maturity to announce her availability as a possible wife for the noblemen of the palace court only.

(<https://www.thejournal.com>–*Beaded Ornaments*). The princess' clothing comprised of white satin simply tied around the waist but extending down wards to the ankle. The exposed part of the body; the torso particularly the belly is decorated with body scarification known as *iwu* and identification marks. Despite these decorations, they are also well and generously decorated with beads like the queens.

Beaded Adornments of the Benin Chiefs

The chiefs are recognized easily in Benin kingdom by their impressing beads been next in adornment to the Oba and the royal family. The chiefs' adornments are in three categories. The usual wears are the *eyan* and *Iyenuan*. distinctively; the *eyan* is for the chiefs' appearance in the presence of the king without which no chief is permitted to see the king according to tradition while the *Iyeruan* (the more gorgeous, elegant and colourful) is used during festive periods. A more prestigious costume than these two is the *ehan-eghetta* which is exclusively for the chiefs who have acquired the highest chieftaincy rank and are the Oba's favourites. More important in the feature of their adornment are beads which they use profusely. One major bead the chiefs wear is called *Ikele*. It is threaded with rope so that they tampered above the navel but some threaded with wire to achieve the right round necklace. They are mostly two in number but only one is worn when going for burial since it is not too joyous an occasion. Many at times, the number of the coral necklaces freely worn by a chief denotes his status. The use of coral is as dictated by the Oba of Benin and it is so important in Benin dressing that *a chief is forbidden to see the Oba without bead around his neck!* Other fine beaded dresses are displayed by non-tittle elders known as "*ibierugba*".

Commoners' Apparels

The common men and women in the culture of Benin especially in the times past wore a simple cloth over their nicked body a variety of which was wide drawer, multicolored stripes fabric etc but adorned usually with body marks and beads. In the kingdom, it

was only the slaves especially the palace servants that go nicked! A practice that had since gone into extinction.

Major Forms of Beaded Adornments and Their Uses in Benin Kingdom

Beads are so important in Benin, that different situations call for the use of different types of beads and each has a name according to their tradition, these are:

Ulekun: This is a tiny bead strand with beaded pendant worn around the neck of those who want to receive tittle and those who already had their initiation bath. These are oval shaped and this results from stringing the coral beads with metal wire. They are used by the chiefs when going to the palace. (<https://artsandculture.google.com>) Importance of bead. The use of these beads reflects the symbol of nobility. It is not to be worn anyhow or for ceremonies.

Ikele: This is a type of standing rounded strand of beads usually in pair (2strands) worn on the neck. It is worn by those who have been made qualified and are given to wear it. This is done on the 7th day of the chief's initiation ceremony after they must have gone to the river and received their own title. It must not be worn if one does not have the prestigious haircut called '*Iguakpata*' because it belongs to the king. But, only one strand is worn when it is for burial right.

Omonurhue: This is a type of white bead that is worn by the chiefs in Benin kingdom for the period of three (3) months. They are permitted to wear this whenever or at the period when the purification ritual of beads (when chiefs submit their beads to the Oba) is on-going because they are not to appear without beads especially in the palace.

Udeguogho: The beads here mentioned is worn on the neck when going to the palace and it is used at Olokun's shrine. It is also worn when going for ceremonies, parties, and any function by the chiefs because the *Ikele* cannot be used for such.

Oghighe: The bead in this category is worn on the ankle. It is a pair of bead worn to carry out initiation. Another bead will be given to an initiate to wear on the neck during initiation rites so as to be able to usher in their 'deity' as quickly as possible. They are mostly made with cowries.



Fig. 3: Decorated Wrappers, and Full Beaded Dressing of Oba of Benin



Fig. 4: Beaded Royal Male and Chiefs' Adornment



Fig. 5: Benin Heavy Beaded Bridal Dressing/Adornment



Fig. 6: Full Royal Female Adornment in Coral Beads

Value Placed on the Use of Beads in Benin Culture

Values originate from individuals, but their influence expands over time, attracting more adherents within a culture. Eventually, they evolve into distinctive characteristics, becoming integral to the identity of the people who uphold them. The values that the Benin people assign to beads is of great value as shown below.

- a. Beads, most especially Ikele, symbolize nobility and are a mark of honour bestowed by the Oba. The greatest honour anyone can get in Benin kingdom is to be decorated by the king with a bead called Ikele because it is a symbol of nobility
- b. Beads are considered property of the Oba, a special gift from the Olokun deity, highlighting the king's divine connection with the gods.
- c. Only the Oba permits the use of beads. This goes to illustrate his authority and control over his subject as a king
- d. During Ugie-Ivie festival, coral beads are submitted to the palace for purification, showcasing its spiritual significance in Benin kingdom. Beads are so important that there's a festival for beads called Ugie-Ivie. At the commencement of this festival, all coral beads are submitted to the king's palace for the purpose of purification. This lasts for three (3) months in the year.
- e. Chiefs wear specific beads (omonurhue) during purification rituals, demonstrating respect for tradition.
- f. Wearing beads while fighting, carrying heavy loads, or dragging loads is prohibited, highlighting the value placed on beads.

- g. Beads also serve as a source of income for artisans.
- h. Beads are integral to Benin cultural heritage, reflecting the kingdom's history and traditions.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the Benin kingdom's rich cultural heritage, particularly its iconic beaded adornments, is a testament to its vibrant history and traditions. While modernization and cultural exchange have influenced traditional practices, the significance of beads remains profound. The Oba's efforts to preserve and promote cultural heritage, such as reactivating the Ugie-Ivie festival, are commendable. Encouraging the adoption and appreciation of Benin's beaded adornments globally can help ensure their sustainability and cultural relevance. By upholding and promoting this aspect of Benin culture, we can support the preservation of its heritage for future generations.

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