

BOOK REVIEWS

African Beads: Jewels of a Continent.

Evelyn Simak and Carl Dreibelbis. Africa Direct, 2300 Krameria St., Denver, CO 80207. 2010. 216 pp., 163 color figs. ISBN: 978-0-9816267-2-7. \$69.95 (hard cover).

African Beads: Jewels of a Continent is a magnificent showcase of African beads. The beads are presented as if they are in front of the very eyes of the reader and one can reach out and touch them. The book entices and one cannot help reading until the last page. The quality of the publication and the colorful beads urge the reader to read on and never leave the book.

African Beads is the most recent publication (2010) by Africa Direct and is a comprehensive work on beads made in Africa. The book gives due credit to African craftsmen and women and promotes the economic value of beads. In the final analysis, the book has documented African beads in a way that most Africanist historians have wished to see.

The book approaches the subject on both the macro and micro level. At the macro level the history of African trade from antiquity to the present day is covered. In terms of manufacture, the history of African clay-work and blacksmithing are included, as well as glass beadmaking. At the micro level, reference is made to specific countries; e.g., silver in Ethiopia, and the famous beadmaking centers such as Mauritania for Kiffa beads and Ghana for Ashanti powdered-glass beads.

The book's key thematic areas address what beads are made of:

- Bones, teeth, claws, shells, stone, and plant materials in particular when presenting early indigenous beadmaking technology;
- Amber, clay, wood, and glass; and
- Precious and base metals, such as gold, silver, brass, copper, aluminum, and nickel.

The artistic significance of bead colors is one of the many interesting topics. The book identifies three colors (white, red, and black) which are basic to the continent and attributes a generalized cultural meaning to them. This

helps us to understand why and how certain bead colors are utilized.

The authors' extensive collections of beads from all the different regions of Africa were used in the preparation of the book. As a result, we see excellent assemblages and photographs of beads that have been surface collected, recovered from archaeological sites, or attained through purchase. All the photographs are provided with informative captions and many of the photographs are full-page views.

The authors' background in photography and the collection of African beads have provided the right combination for the creation of a successful publication. They have produced a marvelous book with beautiful, different, and special kinds of photographs and accounts. However, dwelling more on legends about beads, which Africa is rich in, and including an African as either a co-author or editor would have added more value to the book.

The bibliography has two categories: African-Made Beads and African Beads. The references are complete and include both primary and secondary sources but few of them were printed on the African continent. A glossary would have helped the cultural outsider or bead novice to better understand the themes of the book.

African Beads: Jewels of a Continent is mainly descriptive due to its wide coverage (the entirety of Africa) and less analytical, though not without sophistication. The book has a special style and approach that sets a new standard to be followed by professionals and amateurs when collecting and writing about beads. Although the price makes the book unaffordable by many Africans, it is recommended for purchase by African academic and public libraries.

The book categorically refutes the belief held by some that beads made in Africa are less attractive and interesting than those produced in Europe. Furthermore, the book is indispensable for those wishing to have a comprehensive knowledge of African beads.

Ato Hansemo Hamela
P.O. Box 33788
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
E-mail: hansemo@yahoo.co.uk