

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *Beads and Beadwork of West and Central Africa.*

**Margret Carey.** *Shire Ethnography* No. 21, Shire Publications, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, U.K., 1991. 56 pp., 45 figs., 1 map, index. £3.95.

A companion to Ms Carey's "Beads and Beadwork of East and South Africa" (*Shire Ethnography* No. 3), this is one of several books in a series "intended for students of ethnography and the interested layman." As such, this volume provides a wide range of bead and bead-related information pertaining to an extremely large area of the African continent. An introduction to the various bead types utilized in the study area is followed by a discussion of the beads and beadwork of the following areas: Senegal, The Sahel and Ghana; Nigeria; The Bight of Biafra to Gabon; and Zaire and Angola. One of the keys to success in producing a general work such as this is to treat all of the sub-topics in a manner that allows each one to be proportionally representative within the larger context of the general subject. Given the wide diversity of information offered in this book, the author has succeeded in presenting certain basic facts in a format that is relatively easy to follow.

The text is fluid, the explanations appear to be correct, and most of the essential information regarding the topic of beads and beadwork in this part of the world is included. The photos, even though all but the cover are in black and white, give valuable support to the text, and attest to the talents of African artisans; e.g., the "belts" from Sierra Leone, Republic of the Congo, Gabon, Zaire and Cameroon. Also of interest are the photos of royal stools of chiseled wood covered with beads from Cameroon and the well-known beaded calabashes that, in former times, contained the remains of the skulls of deceased kings.

In her discussion of beads and their uses in Cameroon, Ms Carey has unfortunately forgotten to mention the very important transparent drawn glass

beads with longitudinal white stripes which, in Cameroon, are among the most precious of beads. They are worn mostly by kings and royalty in necklaces of one or several strands, alternating with large "chevron" beads. These assemblages are also sometimes used by important high-ranking persons other than royalty during certain celebrations and gatherings. The value of these time-honored drawn-glass beads is extremely high (Harter 1981).

Other troublesome gaps in this book concern the countries of Mali and Mauritania which are hardly mentioned at all. In particular, and despite their centuries-old importance in Mauritanian customs, beads of amazonite (a greenish variety of feldspar) have been completely overlooked in the section concerning beadmaking in West Africa. This is an extremely significant subject that has been well researched and documented (Mauny 1956), and deserves mention even in a general work such as this. Amazonite beads have been held in very high regard since prehistoric times, and continue to be avidly sought to this day by certain populations inhabiting the Sahara from Mauritania to Chad.

Concerning information about the fabrication of glass beads in Nigeria, Ghana and Mauritania, the author's presentation is clear and explicit for those readers who are being exposed to African techniques for the first time. The photo of a terra-cotta mold for making beads from Ghana is very informative. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the fabrication of beads using inexpensive crushed glass beads from Europe is also practiced to a great extent in Ivory Coast as well. In this part of West Africa, women who are ill wear these African-made beads around the ankles as a way to cure their maladies.

Also concerning Mauritania, Ms Carey describes glass beads made in and around the towns of Kiffa and Oualata as resembling millefiori beads from Venice. It may be true that certain styles resemble the millefiori motif, but an even more significant number

of the beads, especially those which are triangular in shape, have their own unique styles and motifs. The author also states that Kiffa and Oualata beads have a central core made of "white glass powder paste" (page 16). This is not the only technique used: a large number of beads are fabricated simply by using an inexpensive monochrome European glass bead as a core onto which differently colored powdered-glass pastes are applied to form the outer layer of decoration. A simple piece of bottle glass, ground to the proper form and polished, is also sometimes used as a core.

Another omission worth mentioning concerns the incomparable beads made from the wood of "faux-ebene" trees that grow along and near the Senegal River. They are inlaid with fine silver threads in motifs that protect against the evil eye and are worn principally in Mauritania. Also, beads made of scented paste, popular throughout Africa, especially in Senegal, Mali, Mauritania and Togo, represent a very important subject that is not mentioned either.

In the description of Prosser-molded or "tile" beads on page 9, the author writes that "most of these beads come from Czechoslovakia." It is important to note the Bapterosses Company of France was, from the late 1860s to the 1970s, among the principal suppliers of this type of bead to West and Central Africa. In particular, toward the end of the 19th century, Bapterosses beads were in great demand in the Congo (Fourneau 1954). These same beads were appreciated throughout Africa for their quality, form and color for many years (Bessone 1987).

Although the above-mentioned omissions, among others, may be deemed important enough to have been included in this book, it should be noted that any work with such an enormous scope might be considered to have gaps in the information it provides.

*Beads and Beadwork of West and Central Africa* is interesting because of the author's well-chosen research sources, as well as its inexpensive price, especially for "the interested layman" who is being exposed to the subject for the first time. However, for many, including scholars and researchers, the book risks being a point of frustration because of its weak bibliography that significantly reduces the potential value of the general information contained within. The omission of specific reference information

concerning the "useful articles and monographs" on page 55 is extremely limiting to those who read her book and desire to further their knowledge of this most interesting subject. Although it is stated that "many interesting articles can be found," there is no way to follow up on this fact, leaving the reader hungering for more but with no further hope to satisfy the hunger.

Finally, it should be noted that IFAN, mentioned in the book as the *Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, was renamed the *Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire* after Senegal's independence in 1958. This may not appear significant to those who are unaware of the institute and its overall mission, but to those who are, this incorrect name will surely be the subject of some concern.

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*Shell Bead and Ornament Exchange Networks Between California and the Western Great Basin.*

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