Progression of Aesthetic: a Study of Beads and Adornment in Contemporary Krobo Society

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Progression of Aesthetic: a Study of Beads and Adornment in Contemporary Krobo Society

Jordan Ashe
[Spelman College]

Project Advisor: Dr. R.T. Ackam
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi

Academic Director: Olayemi Tinuoye
Abstract

1. **Title:** Progression of Aesthetic: a Study of Beads and Adornment in Contemporary Krobo Society

2. **Author:** Jordan Ashe (jseashe@gmail.com; Spelman College)

3. **Objective:** The objective of this project was three-fold:
   i. To learn the traditional and contemporary practices of Krobo style and adornment,
   ii. To examine the traditional and contemporary importance of beads in Krobo: what was their traditional significance and use as opposed to now? What is the significance of beads today?
   iii. To explore the evolving attitudes towards beads, adornment, and style in Krobo, and the transitional flow of its history

4. **Methodology:** To gain insight into the role of bead heritage and adornment in Krobo, I spent 18 days in Krobo-Nyaso, learning how to make recycled glass beads called *giga*, and observing the use of beads in daily life and ceremonious occasions. I observed one wedding ceremony and parts of a Dipo ceremony, though I was unable to attend a naming ceremony or funeral. To gain insight into contemporary bead culture, I interviewed Krobos of all ages, occupations, and social ranks, including one bead vendor, two bead makers, two chiefs, one priest, and four Krobo women. I also sought out previously written accounts on bead and Krobo history, in attempts to create a chronological understanding of Krobo beading history.

5. **Findings:** The data obtained showed that the contemporary appreciation of beads in Krobo is highly dependent on age and academic status, though the use of beads in ceremonies has remained relatively constant throughout the ages. Reaching far beyond the start of written documentation, there have been many political, economic and religious influences that have made bead use what it is today. The progress of bead heritage has taken styles and beads from other cultures, and adapted it to Ghanaian ideals, creating a history that remains steadfast in some areas, and culturally flexible in others. In spite of these multiple influences, beads continue to be a symbol of cultural and financial wealth.

6. **Conclusion:** Though there is a large gap between the academic knowledge of beads and social knowledge of beads, both sides play integral parts in the contemporary use of beads in Krobo. People may not know the name of a specific European trade bead, but it is still used the same way it was all those centuries ago: to visually communicate social messages through arrangement and pattern. Be it with a chevron bead, a millifiore bead, or the ever-controversial aggrey bead, the arrangement of beads is able to make a social statement about the wearer, even in today’s society. In spite of the uncommon and occasion-specific use of beads today, their presence is intricately, controversially, and in my belief, permanently woven into the lives and culture of Krobo people.
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Introduction

As a student at Spelman College, an all-girls HBCU, I have experienced firsthand the links between adornment and tradition. From the school’s requirement to wear a sleeved white dress to the annual Founders Day assembly, to the trademark pearl necklaces Spelman students are known to wear, the very idea of a “Spelman Woman” is inextricably linked to the image of a “successful” black woman, clad in a business suit, black pumps, perm-pressed tresses, and of course, the string of pearls. As a renowned institution in the African American community, Spelman attracts its students with the unspoken promise of transforming them into this Spelman Woman archetype, bestowing upon them the social and decorative poise she represents.

Personally, as a geeky artist, I’m often at odds with this collegiate sensation; yet I’m continuously fascinated with the role of adornment in both campus and cultural identity. Simply put: the identity of a Spelman Woman is deeply woven into the aesthetic of the Spelman Woman in the black community. And though that aesthetic changes with the flow of time to meet the demands of popular culture, it also struggles to maintain the traditions that shaped the aesthetic in the first place. The evolutionary dynamics of fashion and popular culture fuse with the rigid nature of tradition and adornment to create a contemporary but identifiable cultural identity. It was my interest in this evolution of contemporary aesthetic that led me to a small bead-producing town in the Eastern Region of Ghana: Krobo.

In the lands of Manya and Yilo Krobo, beads have been woven into the peoples’ cultural identity since their historic establishment on Kloyo, or Krobo Mountain. The Krobo are known throughout the country as the bead people, renowned for producing, wearing, and trading a wealth of beads, on both a local and international level. Though Ghana at large is considered to
be a bead appreciating country (Francis Jr.: 1992), I have been told many a time that the Krobo people identify with beads in the same historic way the Asantis identify with gold, having incorporated beads directly into their heritage and cultural identity.

Yet when I arrived in Krobo, I quickly realized there is a fascinating—and familiar—dynamic in play, between their revered bead traditions and the contemporary society in which the traditions are taking place. It took very little time to realize the role of beads in Krobo had shifted from its original historic purpose, and adapted to the demands of popular culture. But I was curious as to how: how has the use of beads and decorative aesthetic changed in Krobo over time? What traditions were being altered, and what has been maintained? How do beads fit into the style and heritage of the people today? To answer these questions, I aimed my research towards the roles of contemporary and traditional adornment in Krobo: to discover the tradition and history of beads and other garments, but to also discern how those traditions manifest themselves in the town’s contemporary aesthetic.

Important Note:

When I first began my Independent Study Project, it was not focused on Krobo beads and adornment in specific, but the idea of African Art at large. I initially aimed to study the Ghanaian definition of the Western idea of African Art, but as I began my research and interviews, I realized I did not have the academic background to really give commentary on the subject, much less make assertions about it. Beginning a conversation of the Western idea of African Art required an in-depth knowledge of that field, and as an independent major focusing on American Studies, I did not have the required survey knowledge.
After an interview with Wiz Kudowor, an internationally known Ghanaian painter, I also realized that such a topic involves more research on a Western idea than a Ghanaian one: the problem of how African Art is perceived outside of Africa is an academic problem that is not debated in general Ghanaian conversation. Much like how art in the US is just considered to be art, and not “Western” art, African Art in Africa is simply art made by Africans, case and point. Through the interview with Wiz, I realized problems in the Ghanaian art field did not circulate around how African art is perceived, but more around how African Art is marketed, and used to make money in a struggling economy.

The marketing of African Art did not fit my initial study-abroad goal: to research the visual melding of art and society in Ghana. So I drastically altered my project, narrowing the concentration of my ISP from perceptions of African Art as a whole, to perceptions of one African Art: bead making. I already knew that bead making has a deep cultural significance in the township of Krobo, so to study how that culture was expressed and thought of in current Krobo society would still allow me to gain insight into “how Ghanaians perceive African Art.” But it would enable me to look at African Art the way it is seen on the continent it comes from, rather than from a distant academic perspective. It also allowed for a personal connection to the topic, as I have always been interested in expressions of culture through aesthetic, and come from a college where such fashion dynamics are constantly in play.
Methodology

Process

When I first began my research on Ghanaian beadmaking, I went to the SIT Library to find sources on beadmaking. With the help of SIT faculty member Papa Attah, I found the book *The Ghanaian Bead Tradition*, as well as a couple student reports on beadmaking and life in Krobo. I had already settled on Krobo as my base of research: though there was a bead community in Accra, Krobo was both the cultural hub for beads in Ghana, and one of the most active beadmaking sites. The town is also the place where *Dipo*, a highly decorative puberty rite, is held; once I discovered my time in Krobo would overlap with the annual *Dipo* ceremony, it was settled.

During the eighteen days I spent in Krobo, I learned how to make giga, or recycled glass beads, and also observed a wedding ceremony, and *Dipo*. I was taken by my instructor Emmanuel Kpabitey to meet three community figureheads: Nene Obitiapong VI, King of Krobo-Agomanya, Nene Boahene III, King of Old Nyaso, and Nene Madjanor Otreku Okumo, the head priest of Manya Krobo. In all, I interviewed eleven individuals of diverse ages and social statuses.

During this flurry of beadmaking and interviews, I made many realizations that changed the direction of my research. I came to Krobo to study the use of beads in Krobo customs and rites of passage, such as marriage, outdooring, and funerals. I wanted to study color symbolism, historic significance, and then hopefully make my own Krobo-inspired custom to bring back to Spelman.
Yet with each interview, I began to discover that the role of beads in Krobo was much subtler than I had imagined. Very few specific beads had ceremonial or color-specific functions; rather, the bead was a vessel for overall traditional, cultural, and personal expression. And even then, I was finding there were generational conflicts within the perception of beads: the importance of beads and tradition depended on one’s age.

So to find the overall importance of beads in Krobo, I realized I would have to talk to a high volume of people, and compare the contemporary attitudes towards beads with the past relevance that led up to it. The way they are worn today was only part of the picture: I would have to study the history that imbued them with such significance. In order to discover the multifaceted meaning behind wearing beads (especially with the time constraints I faced), I realized I needed to study the past and the present simultaneously, and see where they merged.

To do this, I interviewed as many younger and older people as the language barrier allowed, while also travelling multiple times to Accra to gain book research. In a trip to The Wild Gecko, a trade-artisan store, I discovered the book *Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks*, by Esi Sutherland-Addy, Ama Ata Aidoo, and Kati Torda Dagadu. The sources of their book led me to the University of Ghana’s Archeology Library, where I was led to two other valuable resources: *The Bead Is Constant*, and *Where Beads Are Loved*. These three books provided a wealth of information on how beads were used, allowing me to track the history beads from the Late Stone Age to this past year of 2011.

As I pieced together significant events that affected the perception of beads in West Africa, Ghana, and Krobo, I realized I would need to construct a timeline in order to organize the history of beads. I also realized there was a wide gap between the common knowledge of beads,
and the academic knowledge of beads. The interviews were revealing a mysterious, romantic, but ultimately vague description of where beads came from, and why they are used. So I began to modify my interview questions to try and gage the common knowledge of beads, and how that merged with their traditional and contemporary value.

Much of my last week in Krobo was spent writing, interviewing, observing Dipo, organizing the pictures I had taken, and narrowing down the amount of research I had collected.

**Obstacles**

The most significant obstacle to my project was the time constraint, as I started researching with only two weeks to generate, fine-tune, and write out my research. The second most significant obstacle was the language barrier: many of the people I wanted to interview, on both formal and informal levels, did not speak English, and I was unable to hire a reliable translator who would be constantly available. The third obstacle was the inability to rent out books in the University of Legon Libraries. There were multiple books I could only take notes from, and even if I made copies, I would be limited to what little information I could take back with me. If I didn’t take care to clearly write down all of a quote, or the entire explanation of an idea, I would be unable to use it later, as Krobo is a two-hour trotro ride from Accra.

The fourth and last significant obstacle would have to be the age of the literary resources. The book *The Krobo: Traditional Societal and Religious Life of a West African People*, by Hugo Huber, for example, is the most comprehensive written account of Krobo life. But it was written in the 1960s, and much of the information it gives has passed out of common knowledge. Many a time I would ask my beading mentor about a Krobo term I had discovered, but he wouldn’t have heard of it, nor would the others I interviewed. Yet many of the more recent books still use
Huber’s book as a contemporary source, as it was republished in 1993. The lack of connection between the past and the present, in academic sources proved to be a huge obstacle in researching contemporary Krobo.

**Recommendations:**

To anyone who was researching the history of beads in Krobo, and the current attitudes surrounding that history, I would recommend a survey to help evaluate the common knowledge of beads. I had planned on amassing a small collection of beads, and approaching people to see if they could name any of them, in English or Dangme, and tell me of their significance. Not only would such a survey allow a glimpse into the common knowledge of beads, but it would help me learn the various classifications of beads on a social and academic level.

I would also recommend further research on the influence of Nana Kloweki on the Krobo, and other religious figures who have influenced the use of beads in Kroboland. Further research of the economic influence on bead history would be beneficial, more specifically further research of J.F. Sick and Co., and their effect on beading in Ghana.

My last recommendation would be a comparison of the attitudes of towards Krobo beads between cities, towns, and villages. Though the town of Krobo is the hub of beading activity, its beads reach all types of settings, producing a range of responses that create the contemporary response to Krobo beads in Ghana.
Chapter One: A Chronological Account of the Bead in Ghana

Mystic Origins

The beginning of bead history in Krobo—and in Ghana at large—can be found in an interconnection of mythological and archeological accounts. The most commonly known place of bead origin is at the end of a rainbow, after a heavy rainfall; yet this claim has been academically attributed to the erosion of old burial grounds, where the beads of the deceased resurfaced after a storm (Kumekpor 1995: 15). Indeed, the earliest evidence of beads in Ghana trace back to the Late Stone Age, after archeologists discovered a man and woman adorned with stone beads at their burial site.

Even with an academic explanation of when beads were first used, the source of their creation is still a mystery, described only by fantastical lore. Stone beads found after a heavy rainstorm were said to be produced from thunder, while some heirloom beads were considered vectors of witchcraft (Sutherland Addy 2011: 17). Powdered-glass bodom beads were said to have grown from the ground itself, and were historically thought of as a living entity, with the ability to breathe, reproduce, and bark at the approach of danger (Kpabitey: 27Apr 12).

First Influences of Trade

Beads were still imbued with this mystical and traditional value when foreign trade began with nations such as Benin, La Cote d’Ivoire, Egypt, Timbuktu, and even India, as early as the 4th century (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 19). But influence of coastal and trans-Saharan trade beads significantly shaped the use of beads in Ghana, resulting in aesthetic integration and adaptation. The infamous blue koli bead, for example, is renowned for its role in Ghanaian naming ceremonies, as a marker of the child’s soul. But the bead itself does not actually originate in
Ghana; it rather begins its life as a blue, drawn, tubular bead, imported from Nigeria (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 59). Once in Ghana, it is “cooked,” or boiled in such a way that the original color deepens and turns opaque, transforming the imported bead into the rich blue koli (Kumekpor 1995: 9).

Another example would include the 9th century red carnelian beads that were excavated from a West African site, presumably traded from the Cambay region of India (Kumekpor 1994: 11). The trans-Saharan products were perhaps used in Ghana for traditional expressions of mourning, anguish or distress, as those emotions are culturally expressed through the color red (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 37). While there are few written accounts of the pre-European bead trade, there are many clues towards the aesthetic interaction that came before it.

**Begin Western Influence: European Trade Beads**

The establishment of the Elmina Fort in 1482 heralded the start of a beading phenomenon that still has heavy influence in Ghanaian society today. As stated in the book Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks: European traders seeking to penetrate the coastal market designed beads to “meet exciting tastes and demands and… blend into known trading patterns.” (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 85). By the 1600s, Europe dominated the West African bead trade, though the number of imported beads was relatively low. According to Alexandria Wilson, editor of *The Bead Is Constant*, this low import rate was due to the enforcement of sumptuary laws. Established by West African kings, sumptuary laws dictated the types of beads and clothes one could wear, depending on their social status and rank. As a result, the type of beads that were imported were carefully monitored and controlled. In 17th century Benin in fact, if a person outside the appropriate status was caught wearing coral beads, they could be executed (Wilson 2003: 33).
Yet these aesthetic restrictions began to diminish as the British removed power from the chiefs, and the bead market became more of a commercial venue, “producing more variety for less cost” (Wilson 2003: 33). The popularity of Venition, Dutch, and Bohemian glass beads soon overshadowed that of locally produced beads, and by the 18th century, European bead industries such as James Town British Accra were marketing to Africa alone, reaching the peak of prosperity in the following 19th century.

It was during the 19th century that the Dutch company J.F Sick and Co.—the most prominent company of its day—popularized the term “European trade bead” by creating informational sample cards of nearly 10,000 different types of beads, each with the sample bead attached. These cards helped establish a “hierarchal pedigree” of beads, respected by Europeans and Africans alike. In fact, the chevron bead, called *powa* (meaning “pride”) in Krobo, was also called the “aristocrat of beads” by European traders. Not only would one of these beads be worth its weight in gold, but worth one or more slaves, depending on its size. (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 57). Through both reasonable and unreasonable means, Ghanaians coveted these trade beads as much as, if not more than the British coveted the “stock” they received for it.

**Economic Decline of the 1900s**

With the onset of the 20th century, the economy began to change for the worst. The bead business, for both Ghanaians and British, slowed over the century, reaching an all-time low by the 1970s. An interview account of a trader named Naa Dei—who was in her seventies by 1972—sheds light on the era of decline:

“[Naa Dei] and her mother only sold wholesale to traders who came from the villages to buy… In the late 1920s when business was very good, they employed four people steadily as bead polishers. In a good month they might have sold £2,000 worth of beads. In the late 1940s when she was trading on her own, she sold mostly small beads as the
large ones were not available. The amount she sold was probably more, but the profit was less. In 1972, she was simply selling off her old stock and claimed that the bead business was ruined.” (Robertson 1986: 105) (Wilson 2003: 35).

In an interview with Nene Boahene III, the King of Old Nyaso in Krobo, he also pointed to the seventies as a time of economic disparity. The end of the decade heralded a deep lull in traditional expression and interest, as the price of traditional African cloth began to rise and the people of Ghana turned to cheaper, more westernized styles (Boahene interview, 23 APR 12).

It is perhaps due to this lack of interest in tradition that there is very little information on bead culture in the late 1900s. The book *Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks* refers to a time in the 20th century when it was considered unladylike to wear the now-popular waistbeads, or strand of small beads that are tied around the waist to be worn under the clothes (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 39). Though there was no exact publishing date to be found, I am also led to believe by the date the preface was written, that the controversial book *Dipo Custom and the Christian Faith* was published in either the late 1970s or early 1980s. In this book, Rev. B.D. Teyegaga gives an in-depth analysis of why *Dipo*, a highly decorative puberty rite for Krobo girls, should be abandoned for its “pagan” rituals. From these historic clues, I tentatively assert that the 1980s was a time when Western ideals in Ghana were at their peak, and casual use of beads passed out of popularity. It was likely this period of social indifference that prompted the creation of the Ghana Bead Society in 1993, which aims to promote an appreciation for the traditional use of beads, and preserve bead heritage (Kumekpor 1995: 31).

**The Present Day: A Revival of Interest**

There has indeed been a resurgence in interest towards the traditional and contemporary value of beads. Though the most prominent of enthusiasts include scholars, collectors, fashion
designers, and other elite members of society, the establishment of the Krobo Bead Society in 2006 proves that there are local, active supporters of the bead industry, striving to deepen the appreciation of beads both at home and abroad.

The end of the 20th century changed the way beads are worn and regarded in Ghana, and the resulting dissidence can still be seen today. The following section will describe the present day social attitude towards beads, as well as their contemporary uses. From sumptuary laws allowing only certain social figureheads to wear particular beads, to the period of indifference where even waistbeads were out of fashion: how are beads worn in Ghana today?
Chapter 2: The Bead in Contemporary Krobo

Contemporary bead use serves a multitude of purposes, from adding cultural flair to a Western outfit, to serving as an essential decorative component to traditional rites of passage. The descriptions of these multifaceted purposes are divided into two sections: the first to explain the how individuals of all social statuses use beads to adorn themselves, and the second to describe their use in contemporary Ghanaian ceremonies.

Section I: Individual Use of Adornment

Casual vs Formal Attire

After reading and hearing about the importance of beads to Krobos, I rather foolishly arrived in town expecting to see beads around every other neck and wrist. But after days of observance, I discovered the casual market attire in Krobo, though pretty diverse in its expressions of both African and Western style, does not typically include beads. There may be a few gold charms on delicate chains, and a bead bracelet here and there, but rarely did I see any ornate beads along with the casual outfits worn to the market.

In talking to many members of Krobo society, it was revealed that beads are predominantly worn for formal occasions. The two bead vendors I spoke to pointed out that old beads were not for wearing to the market, as they could easily break, get lost, or stolen. Bead trader Paulina Amegashie emphasized this in *The Bead Constant*: “Beads can be worn around the neck just for adornment and day-to-day wear, but more importantly they should be worn for festivals, durbars, and going to church” (Wilson 2003: 73).

As beads are often passed down in the family as heirlooms, it is important to keep them in a safe place, only removing them for special occasions. In fact, safeguarding the family beads
used to be a serious responsibility, traditionally held by the oldest woman or oldest daughter in the family (Wilson 2003: 30). While some families still follow this practice with the same time-honored severity of their forebears, it’s now more common to distribute the family beads amongst the following generation, leaving the preservation of the beads to whomever happens to own them (Kpabitey interview, 26 APR 12).

**New Beads**

As a result of this generational safeguarding, the production of “new” painted, powered-glass beads has become popular, especially when strung onto elastic bracelets. The definition of “new” in this context does not refer to time of production, but to the recent innovation of the design: these beads do not follow any particular tradition of pattern that one may find in an old Krobo or European trade bead. Whether strung in a mixed pattern of multicolored beads, or painted uniformly with a design inspired by the beadmaker’s surroundings, these new beads have become the epitome of casual, popular bead aesthetic. Young and old generations alike buy new beads to match their daily outfits, and to express their individuality. And as these beads lack the traditional and social significance of the older designs, they are free to be worn at school, the market, or any casual meeting place.

It’s this lack of customary significance however, that makes new beads uncommon and sometimes unacceptable in rural areas, where traditional values outweigh the modern. In such areas, new beads are called tsoğsisi, which literally translates to “bought it under the tree,” implying cheap taste and low standards (Boahene interview, 23 APR 12). Since tradition dictates the only respectable beads are old heirloom beads, wearing a new bead is said to mean that “you
have no grandmother” to give you quality beads to wear in public (Obitiapong interview, 16 APR 12).

This standard of quality tends to hold true with Krobo’s older generations, be they in rural areas or not: when I attended a traditional wedding while wearing a blue bracelet of new beads, my mentor Emmanuel Kpabitey chucklingly told me that the older women in attendance had been gossiping about the low quality of my beads. Yet when I asked others Krobos, both young and old, about the new-beads-means-you-have-no-grandmother ideal, it was brushed off laughingly as a standard of older people who weren’t with the times, so to speak. It would seem new beads, be they of low traditional quality or not, are considered acceptable by the majority of individuals in contemporary Krobo, even though older beads are still more ideal in formal situations.

**Waistbeads**

The other most commonly worn bead is one you actually won’t see on the street, as it is always obscured from view. Overshadowing bracelets of new beads in popularity, the phenomenon of waistbeads has a history all its own. The long strand of tiny beads tied about the waist had many practical functions: before the introduction of underwear, waistbeads were used as a sling for loincloths. As read in Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks, they are also used on babies and children to measure their growth: if the child loses weight, the beads will slip off (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 41). And according to Abena Baah, a Krobo woman of 55 years, waistbeads were also layered in abundance to act as a child’s seat. When strapped to the mother’s back by yards of cloth, the beads acted as extra support for the child to sit upon (Abena interview, 29 APR 12).
While underwear and subtler, smaller beads have replaced some of the original functions of waistbeads, they are still an essential part of the womanly wardrobe. They are thought to shape the body into the desired “Coca Cola shape,” and elegantly distinguish the sexes (Beatrice Kpabitey, informal conversation). Infamous for their intimate implications, the subtle presence of waistbeads are said to arouse passion in men, and it used to be a custom for a woman to indicate her desire for lovemaking by rattling her waistbeads. Such an act was expressly meant for the man she was married to; it was considered great slander for a woman to describe her waistbeads to any other man (Francis Jr. 1993: 13). Today, there are no such fashion taboos, but the string of beads around the waist still remain a daily component of Ghanaian women’s lives, as a compulsory symbol of femininity.

Social Figureheads

Though they do not have much of a daily function outside of fashionable new beads and intimate waistbeads, old beads play an integral role in the apparel of priests, kings, and queen mothers in Krobo. As beads were used in the past to distinguish leaders of the community, they are still used for that purpose today: to show status and wealth.

Kings and Queen Mothers

Though I was unfortunately unable to interview a queen mother, my formal interviews with Nene Obotiapong VI and Nene Boahene III (the Kings of Krobo-Agomanya and Krobo-Old Nyaso respectively) shed light on how royalty adorns itself in the town of Krobo. I also received insight on the aesthetic of queen mothers through interviews found in *The Bead Is Constant.*

Both kings and queen mothers dress elaborately to reflect their social and financial status. During festivals and large gatherings, kings can be found toting beads, gold, skins, bracelets,
rings and a gold crown, all while being carried in a royal palanquin. On quieter occasions however, a simple ring, bracelet, and necklace combination will do (Boahene interview; 23 APR 12). According to the interviews found in The Bead Is Constant, the queen mothers of Krobo have designated people to decorate them in intricate kente, expensive beads, and traditional accessories such as *ablade*, or traditional shoes (Wilson 2003: 90). A lot of money goes into dressing, as they must display themselves as the exemplary role model for women.

The placement and use of beads assist in accentuating this display. Chiefs often wear old beads around the neck and right wrist, to display their royal heirlooms and resulting status as king. Per example, Nene Obotiapong VI has a yellow bracelet passed down from his great grandfather—so when he wears it, people can see the age of the beads and recognize him as royalty. Beads worn around the leg and under the knee are also strategic symbols of royalty, more specifically for queen mothers. In the time of sumptuary laws, only those of a certain status could wear beads below their knees; but even in today’s time of aesthetic freedom, queen mothers can still distinguish themselves from the rest by wearing band of beads below their knees.

Age and color are two other important aspects of royal bead aesthetic. If a king wants to be extravagant, he can wear multiple necklaces of old yellow beads, as yellow is the color of wealth, cultural quality, and success. As described in the book *Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks*: “These beads are said to represent ‘fire under control’ and personages of royal status, dressed in their ceremonial regalia during festivals will display long strings of yellow beads often made up of the precious ‘bodom’ sometimes in combination with gold beads and nuggets” (Sutherland-Addy 2011: 31). Yet Nene Boahene emphasized that it is not the quantity of beads that indicate wealth, but the age. Referring again to Nene Obotiapong’s bracelet, its age makes it equal in
quality to an entire set of yellow beads. If a chief is simpler in his tastes, he can wear just one strand of ancient beads, declaring his status in a minimalistic and powerful way.

In the face of all this cultural significance, it was interesting to discover that the distinction between the beads of a common person and the “stool regalia” of royalty lied mostly with the bead’s financial value, instead of the bead’s royal purpose or significance. Though traditions are respected and displayed in formal events, it is no longer a matter of who can wear specific beads or not, rather than a matter of who can afford them. Anyone can wear old chevron, mete, or bodom beads, but because they are more expensive and historically known, social figureheads are expected to have many in their possession. Returning again to the bead’s general symbolism of wealth, the culturally and financially wealthy members of society are expected to reflect that status through their ownership of old, expensive, quality beads (Boahene interview; 23 APR 12). But like the rest of the community, the actual wearing of this finery is restricted to special occasions such as durbars, festivals, weddings, funerals, or political functions. Otherwise, kings and queen mothers are able and expected to wear any kind of bead they choose.

Priests

The decoration of priests in Krobo was the most difficult to discern. As I only interviewed Nene Madjanor Otreku Okumo, the head traditional priest of Manya Krobo, I had no other priest or priestess with which to compare his attire to. This was especially constricting since the only consistent part of his attire was a white turban; two of the three times I met him, he wore a large bracelet of new beads on his right wrist. But when he orchestrated the Dipo ceremony, the bracelet, turban, and towel-like over-cloth were the only distinguishing articles of clothing he wore.
His simple attire contradicted all the literary research I had attained before meeting him: I had read in M. Steegstra’s description of Dipo that Krobo priests often wear the La, a well-known trio of beads that I will describe in the next section. Even in a picture of Nene, found in The Bead Is Constant, shows him decorated in multiple strands of presumably ancient beads, along with his signature white turban.

Yet when I asked him about the La or other priestly insignia, he shrugged, saying he owns the La and other beads, but only wears them to specific functions. And such specific functions did not include conducting Dipo, as he carried out his duties wearing nothing more than a bracelet of new beads. Nene pointed out that the people around him already know his communal role, so there is no need to constantly wear a bead that marks his status (Otreku interview, 22 APR 12).

There are many unanswered questions about the constancy of which priests wear the La, or any other distinguishing bead. Previous accounts of life in Krobo claim that there are beads worn constantly to affirm status, while Nene’s laid-back approach to bead-wearing suggested quite the opposite. Perhaps the constant presence of insignia beads passed out of daily use over time; or perhaps they were never required, but always preferred until recently. The data remains inconclusive.
Section II: Ceremonial Use of Adornment

Though beads may play subtle roles in daily life, they are featured exclusively in Krobo ceremonies, and rites of passage. Beads are used to mark pregnancy, birth, puberty, marriage and death: their presence not only heralds these important stages of life, but visually communicate subtle details about them. In this section, I will briefly describe the use and significance of beads in these transitional contexts.

Pregnancy, Birth, and The Naming Ceremony

In Krobo and the rest of Ghana, where the mother mortality rate is relatively high, the successful birth of a child is ample reason to celebrate, and employ the use of beads. Even leading up to the birth, expectant mothers can wear one sting of brown beads around the neck, to ward off negativity and ill-will (Obitiapong interview, 16 APR 12). But once the child is born, the mother will not wear any beads for eight days, symbolizing the customary waiting period before naming the child (Heaney 2006: 11). Traditionally, this is to make sure that its soul will definitely remain on this earth, and not decide to return early to the other side (Sarapong 1991: ). On the eighth day, the infant is “outdoored” and officially welcomed into the world; it is during this outdooring ceremony that the mother dresses typically dresses in white cloth and beads. baby is presented with a name and the La, a special trio of beads.

The La

The beads of the La include the tubular blue koli, the white nyoli, and the black tovi seed. Though the La is best known for its use in naming ceremonies, the three beads are also said to represent the Krobo priestly office, and the royal status of Krobo chiefs. Nene Boahene III
described the message of the La as “coming for ones’ own,” be it presented to a priest, a chief, or a newborn child.

In the naming ceremony, as researcher M. Steegstra observed, the tying of the La to the baby’s wrist is symbolically connected the announcement of the name. This is perhaps a metaphor of physically tying the infant’s spiritual essence to its body. The koli, presented by the father, is indicative the infant’s soul and connected name, while the white nyoli symbolizes victory in childbirth, and good luck in the future. The black tovi serves as a more sobering reminder that everyone will eventually die, and return the ancestral world from which they came (Kpabitey interview, 16 APR 12). Though all three beads make up the La, the koli is tied independently from the tovi and nyoli, the latter of which are presented together on the same string.

Exploring the traditional symbolism of the tovi and the nyoli yielded conflicting results: the information I received from my interviews was the opposite of the information I read in Hugo Huber’s foundational book *The Krobo: Traditional Social and Religious Life of a West African People*. In describing the significance of the nyoli and tovi, he referred to the Krobo’s belief in gbetsi and kla. Huber describes the gbetsi as the spiritual husband or wife one leaves before they are born into the human world, and the kla as an intimately connected protector:

“They say, in case you left your spiritual spouse without his or her permission, or if you neglect to take care of your spouse in this world, your gbetsi is likely to persecute and harm you here… [Yet the] kla… is defined as osusuma noku ba lighbin (your soul which you came with on the day you were born”). In contrast to the gbetsi, the kla is rather regarded as bringing good luck in life. While the gbetsi is thought of as an outside agent, the kla is believed to be intimately connected with one’s self; but at the same time it is conceived as a protector. Some put it thus: “Your gbetsi always says ‘Let us turn back!’ (which means to die), while your kla replies: ‘No! let us stay longer! (which means to live a longer life.’” (Huber 1993: 138)
In my interviews, I heard no such reference to *gbetfi* and *kla*, and when I asked my mentor about it, he was unfamiliar with the terms. He nonetheless agreed with the analogies they painted: that one bead does signify death and the spirit world, while the other symbolizes hopes for long life. It is also true today that the tovi and nyoli are attributed to traditional, and therefore non-Christian values; the tension between the two beliefs often results in the nyoli and tovi being left out of the naming ceremony. There are a lot of holes in the history of the white and black beads, but their link to traditional ideals may cause them to fade from use, especially as the popularity of Christianity increases.

**Post-Pregnancy**

The communicative use of beads, in regards to parenthood, does not end with the naming ceremony. The mother will continue to wear white beads until her baby is three months old; yellow or green beads indicate that the baby is between three and six months. After the infant passes six months of age, she can wear any color bead (Heaney 2006: 12).

Though not as popular now as it was in the past, it is not uncommon for babies to wear beads around their joints: above the elbow, below the knee, and around the wrists. This is believed to strengthen the baby’s body in those areas, and give it a pleasant shape as it grows (Heaney 2006: 12).

**Dipo**

When referring to the use of beads in Krobo, *Dipo* is often the context under which the beads are described. The Krobo coming-of-age ceremony is renowned nationwide for its decorative nature, and use of old, expensive strands of beads. It is also known for being as old as the Krobo culture itself: the same priestess who is fabled to have led the Krobos to their ancestral
home on Kloyo, or Krobo Mountain, is the same priestess who created Dipo for the girls of the clan.

As a ritual of womanhood, Krobo girls historically spent a year with the head priestess of the Krobos, learning how to cook, clean, care for a family, among other necessary practices of becoming an exemplary Krobo woman. At the end of this year, the initiates would undergo a weekend of tests and rituals for spiritual purification; at the conclusion of this time, the initiates would be outdoored and presented to the community as Krobo women, decked head to toe in regal beads and cloth (Dipo Observation, 13 MAR 12). Beads are even included in the purification rituals themselves: before the Dipo initiates complete their last test, they are wrapped in nothing but a red loincloth and a girdle of old beads wrapped around the waist. Though the time dedicated to Dipo has dwindled from a year to one week because of schooling, beads remain a crucial component of the initiation and outdooring process.

Marriage

Marriage is also a rite of passage that features the use of beads. Both the bride and groom wear multiple strands of old heirloom beads, to both display their identity as a Krobo couple, and demonstrate their wealth. It is customary for the bride to change outfits throughout the traditional wedding ceremony, to show she is entering a new state (Kumekpor 1995: 20). I was fortunate enough to attend a traditional wedding: the bride did indeed change outfits three times. The first outfit was white and blue, complete with four bead necklaces and a silver chain. The second outfit was comprised of a beautiful yellow kente dress, with two yellow bead necklaces, and a myriad of gold chains. Yet the last outfit was the most extravagant: dressed in the same cloth as
her husband, the bride wore gold chains and a large cloth hat, completing the look of the newly-wed couple.

Funerals

Just as it is customary to wear red, black or brown to a funeral as an expression of mourning, it is customary in Krobo to wear red, black, or brown beads as well, to reflect their relationship with the deceased. I have also read that the reddish-coral bauxite beads are also worn to funerals. As stated in Ghana: Where the Bead Speaks: “They are worn in regal and classy subtlety around the necks of those who know their true value”(Sutherland-Addy 2011: 47) I was unable to attend a Krobo funeral, but in viewing my neighbor, Abena Baah’s outfit before she left for a funeral, she was wearing a black dress with red beads.

According to Paulina Amegashie, a bead trader interviewed in The Bead Is Constant, black and brown beads worn together around the neck indicate that the wearer is a widow. Traditionally, the widow must wear these beads all the time until they fall off about six to seven months later; then the woman is free for another man to propose to her. Even in death, the final rite of passage, there are multiple ways to express the social reactions to it.
Conclusion

In contemporary Krobo society, beads serve as a quiet indicator of fashion, heritage, and changing times. Both old and newly made beads serve as a lasting symbol of cultural exchange and cultural progression, providing visual evidence of a centuries-old industry that continues to shape Ghanaian culture today. As new beads and designs are created in cities, towns, and villages, old European trade beads are still being sold in shops and bead markets.

It has been fascinating to see how the history of these beads overlap their functions in Krobo society: while everyone can name the chevron and identify it as one of the most expensive beads on the market, only those who academically specialize in beads could tell you what sinister prices would be paid for chevrons in the past. Yet a market vendor who could not name a millifiori, akori, or mosaic bead could still distinguish an ancient polished bead amongst newer but rugged-looking beads. The same artistic methods of communicating social transitions like puberty, marriage, parenthood and death have survived centuries of political and economic change. Even though sumptuary laws are now merely regarded as “the way things used to be,” those traditions are still carried out by social figureheads today—and the silent messages that have been communicated by bead patterns, colors, and arrangement for thousands of years are still commonplace in contemporary Krobo society.

Yet the changes that have occurred within the beadmaking tradition communicate the multifaceted status of social thought in Krobo. The popularity of new beads reflect an era of casual wear and artistic innovation, while the fading of the nyoli and tovi beads from the naming ceremony reflect the rising influence of Christianity in the community. The older members of the community value beads as tangible indictors of heritage, tending to gossip disapprovingly if you deny that heritage by wearing new beads—whereas younger members of the community see
beads as an ambiguous and stylistic symbol of culture, that can represented by old and new beads alike.

It would take years to begin to scratch the surface of the history of beads, and their use in Krobo. But I am convinced that their use will continue to grow, evolve, and flourish with time, as has been the case since time immemorial.
Informants

Abena Baah. (29 APR 12). Interview on Past Uses of Beads – How were beads used in the past, and what was the popular fashion of her youth. Krobo-Nyaso: New Town – Baah’s house.

Agnes Kpabitey. (26 APR 11). Interview on Popular Beads – Where are beads worn, and what is a durbar. Krobo-Odumase: Thursday Bead Market.


Eunice Tete. (26 APR 12). Interview on Popular Beads in Krobo – What is the common knowledge of beads in Krobo, and which are the most popular. Krobo-Odumase: Thursday Bead Market

Gertrude Ntem. (28 APR 12). Interview on Popular Beads in Krobo – What is the common knowledge of beads in Krobo, and which are the most popular. Krobo-Nyaso: New Town – Gerty’s Internet Café

Nene Boahene III. (23 APR 12). Interview on the Changes of Krobo Fashion and Traditional Use of Beads – How kings and queen mothers dress for occasions, the importance of beads in Krobo culture, and the generational value placed on beads. Krobo-Old Nyaso: Nene Boahene’s house.


Nene Obotiapong VI. (16 APR 12). Interview on the Significance of Krobo Beads and Traditional Attire – How beads and color were used traditionally, versus how they are used in the present day. Krobo-Agomanya: Nene Obotiapong’s house.
Resources


Appendices

Appendix A: The Individual Use of Beads

Fig. 1 – Example of “new beads”

Fig. 2 – Example of contemporary style and popular use of beads
Fig. 3 – Demonstration of how waistbeads were used in the past

Fig. 4 – The decorative wear of a queen mother
Fig. 5 – The extravagance of a King

Fig. 6 – The old, yellow beads of royalty
Appendix B: Traditional and Ceremonial Use of Beads

Fig. 1- Beads around the wrists and neck
Fig. 2: Beads placed under the knee

Fig. 3 – A new mother with a baby under three months
Fig. 4 – *Dipo* initiates after the last test.

Fig. 5 – *Dipo* outdooring and graduation
Fig. 6 and 7 – The first two outfits of the bride.

Fig. 8 and 9 – The last matching outfit, and the entering of a new stage.