

Decline of Glass Beads Production in Ashanti Region of Ghana

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Abstract

Bead heritage and powder-glass beadmaking arts of Ashanti have evolved over several centuries. This glass beadmaking tradition which forms a significant part of Ghana's cultural heritage seems to be fast declining. The study was an attempt to investigate the decline of glass beadmaking in Ashanti. It was conducted mainly in three glass beads producing centres in the Atwima Nwabiagya district of Ashanti Region. The sample in this study consisted of twenty-five participants who were purposively selected. Besides interviews and observations, secondary data inputs generated from published materials were the instruments used to gather data for the study. Findings of the study revealed that the use of obsolete equipment and inefficient production techniques, marketing challenges, slow adaptation to modern designs and technology, and abolition of some traditional cultural practices are among the major causes of the decline of glass bead production in Ashanti. This study recommends that the decline of glass beads production in Ashanti could be solved by introducing simple but efficient machinery and better processing techniques, producing new glass bead designs that have a contemporary look and appeal to the international export market, focusing on innovation and exploration of new bead designs that could serve as a mixed media for other contemporary artistic products and re-position the glass beads producing centres in Atwima Nwiabigya district to make beadmaking art and bead heritage as destination for cultural tourism.

Keywords: Beads, glass beads, glass-powder beads, design, beadmaking techniques.

1. Introduction

Beads and beadmaking arts have a very long history in the world but its exact origin remains unclear. Several attempts have been made to provide information on the origin of beads. One such attempt by Cole and Budwig (1994) traced the origin to the component of a belief system where the Anglo Saxons used bead article as praying object. They derived from Anglo Saxon word biddan to pray and 'bede' meaning prayers. This is associated with rosaries that are used today by world's religions. One well known fact about bead is that it's been produced since their first appearance some 40,000 years ago (Cole and Budwig, 1994). They come in great variety of sizes and materials, Newman (1981); Withers and Burnham (1999) grouped materials for beads production into metals, organic materials, ceramic, glass, and semi-precious beads. Of all the materials for the production of beads, glass seems to be the most versatile and widely used today. Dubin (1987) reports that the first example of man-made glass dated to the last quarter of the third millennium, it was the period when glass beads were first made in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Early glass were known from 2181-2160 B.C. and were first manufactured for commercial market in 1400 B.C. in Egypt (Dubin,1987). The development of glass satisfied the desire of the people to wear beads that emulate precious stones of the wealthy members of society. Glass beads first found their ways in Africa through transcontinental trade over the Sahara from the eight century and the ocean-going trade from 1480's (Gotts, 2014; DeCorse, 1989). These trading activities provided a means for transporting finished beads and raw-materials for local glass production. It also provided networks for bead artists to share both local and transcontinental beadmaking technologies.

Back home in Ghana, there is solid archaeological evidence of local beadmaking which goes back to at least three hundred years. Excavations at archaeological sites of Begho, discovered glass beadmaking residue in the form of solid end wasters. This according to radio carbon dating was in the early 17th or early 18th centuries (DeCorse,1987 ; Anquanda, 2003). Also archaeological research carried out in Elimina in 1987 provided ample evidence of locally made glass beads (DeCorse,1987). Further evidence was provided by Gotts (2014) who recounts the earliest ethnographic accounts of Ghanaian powder glass bead making by a Gold Coast British Inspector of Mines P.R. Wild 1937, he described a facility at Dunkwa (Denkyira) by an Nzima artisan. Gotts further indicates that Wild's descriptions of glass bead production technique is similar to that of those of contemporary Ghanaian beadmaking. The local beadmaking technology has been sustained in Ashanti and Krobo areas in Ghana. Africa Beads (2013) noted the revival of glass beads production in Ghana began in the 1950's when the industry faced the prospects of severe poverty. Beadmaking artists from Ashanti and Krobo ethnic groups decided to pool their beadmaking skills and talents with the objective to resuscitate the industry.

The significant role of Ashanti in the development of glass beads was confirmed by Anquanda (2003) who indicated that by the 1960's-1970's as many as twelve Ashanti villages were engaged in glass beads production. The villages mentioned include Dabaa, Ohwim, Asamang, Manpong, Wiamoasi, Tantakro and Woo. Many inhabitants then invested in family industries and were producing up to twelve variety of glass beads. The

existence of many Ashanti glass beads production villages was also collaborated by Francis (1989) who stated that he verified five of the eight Ashanti glass beads villages listed by Technology Consultancy Centre of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi and discovered four others. Ashanti region has been noted for holding on to its rich cultural heritage especially in the area of preserving the traditional crafts. The rich cultural heritage of Ashanti of which traditional crafts feature prominently is acclaimed world- wide. There is the famous Kente cloth at Bonwire, wood carvings of Ahwia, adinkra printing cloth of Ntonso, the traditional pottery of Pankronu, metal casting (lost wax) of Krofofromu. These traditional crafts have been practiced in Ashanti since ancient times, and have sustained the rural economy and indeed placed Ghana high on the world tourist map. However Ashanti beads heritage and glass beads making arts are on a serious decline. The once enterprising and vibrant glass bead making villages are dormant with the workforce moving to the cities in search of non-existent job opportunities. The study provides a more in- depth investigation of the decline of glass beadmaking in Ashanti.

2. Methodology

Field investigations were conducted in three villages, Dabaa, Atwima Akropong, and Asuofia Asamang all of Atwima Nwabiagya district, and the French Line of Kumasi central market, the largest beads market in Ashanti region. These areas were chosen, because they are the only communities currently in Ashanti where some form of glass bead making activities are going on. All other bead making villages mentioned earlier where glass beads production have ceased were also visited for verification. The population for the study included traditional glass beads producers, both retired and those in active practice, knowledgeable people in the communities, bead traders and dealers in the supply of raw- materials for glass beads such as glass in the form of bottle, firewood, ceramic colouring oxides among others. Twenty-five participants (N=25) were selected for the study through purposive sampling. Interviews were conducted, typically conversation in tone, despite the existence of a guiding protocol .The emphasis was on interviewee providing detail information of glass beads production in the past and what sustained the industry then. The key themes of interest were the challenges of the industry, causes of decline of glass bead industry in Ashanti and the possible ways of resuscitating this ancient craft industry from total collapse. Besides interviews and observations, the study also made use of secondary data. Secondary data inputs were generated from published materials, selected reports and journal articles that touched on the theme of the paper.

3. Results and Discussion

The study revealed that Ashanti is fast losing its bead heritage and glass beadmaking arts. Of the more than twelve glass beadmaking villages in the 1980's only three villages are currently engaged in bead making. These are Dabaa, Atwima Akropong, and Asuofia Asaman all in the Atwima Nwiabigya District of Ashanti Region. At Dabaa where beadmaking in Ashanti is known to have originated, production is on a very low scale. Similar situation exists in Atwima Akropong where the beadmaking business is currently managed by only one man who occasionally gets assistance from family members. In the case of Asuofia Asamang, the industry is virtually collapsed. A facility provided by African Development Fund (AfDF) for glass bead production is now occupied by national service persons posted to the community. Equipment like grinding, polishing and some other machines have all broken down and there seems to be no plans to repair them. The situation is in sharp contrast to the 1970's and 1980's where the entire community was engaged in the glass beads industry. In those days almost every family member was engaged in one way or the other in serious beadmaking business. The study revealed a number of factors contributing to the decline of glass beads bordering on production processes, marketing issues and changes in traditional and cultural practices.

3.1 High Cost of Production

Production cost of glass beads is extremely high. The cost of raw-materials as well as its processing is relatively high. Though all raw-materials with the exception of ceramic colourants are readily obtained in the localities, but at high cost. Processing of the raw-materials involves chopping of firewood into smaller bits, pounding of recycled glass, screening pulverized glass into very fine particle size and preparation and fashioning of clay into suitable moulds among others. These operations are labour intensive, time consuming and attract high fees. Contributing to this high labour cost is the fact that, there are only few elderly people ready to provide these services. The youth are not interested in these jobs thereby making demand high and expensive.

3.2. Risky and Tedious Nature of the Job.

The glass bead production as observed from the study is laborious, tedious and risky enterprise. The entire production processes is labour intensive, energy sapping and tedious. The glass beads production as it operates in the study area involves handling and manipulating of harmful and toxic materials in a hazardous environment. Operations such as pounding and sieving of pulverized glass, working in high temperatures and smoky

conditions, as well as handling ceramic colouring oxides, majority of which are heavy metals and therefore toxic make the entire business risky. These have serious health implications and require strict enforcement of health and safety measures. In all cases production take place in and around rudimentary and poorly designed fire wood burning kilns constructed under sheds. However well design workshops equipped with some good processing machines and gas kilns have broken down.

3.3. Obsolete Equipment and Production Techniques

The study also observed that glass bead production in Ashanti has over the years relied on inefficient, obsolete and improvised structures and equipment. Metal mortar and pestles usually fashioned from such objects as gas canisters and worn out automobile drive shaft have been the known equipment for pounding broken bottles. Stones are used for polishing beads. Leaf stem or mid-rib of cassava leaves are the only material used to create holes in the beads, whilst poor designed firewood burning kilns are used for firing pulverized glass into beads. It was not until the 1990's that, some modern and efficient equipment were introduced. The Ghana Export Promotion Authority built a workshop for beads production at Dabaa. It was subsequently equipped with grinding and polishing machines. At Asuofia- Asamang there is a factory built for the local co-operative bead manufacturing and marketing society. This was put up by 31st. December Women's Movement and the African Development Fund. The facility was equipped with some modest raw- material processing and finishing machinery. It was meant to enhance production processes, increase production and the quality of the product. It was also to cut down the drudgery and painstaking processes involved and to provide a more decent working environment. Currently all these facilities are malfunction for lack of maintenance. The glass beads production in Ashanti as at now is marked by the use of old production techniques and obsolete equipment, lower production capacity, wasteful and time consuming processes .The result of all these is the high cost of production, making it extremely difficult for producers to compete favourable in both the local and international markets.

3.4. Slow Adaptation to Modern Designs and Technology.

The glass bead artists and bead production in general are slow in adapting to latest bead designs, improve methods, innovative and new technological processes. The glass bead industry has been in the hands of elderly, majority of whom are literate and preliterate. They lacked the capacity to seek for the latest information on contemporary bead industry. This category of producers are also unable to take advantage of international bead networking and exchange of ideas. The glass bead producers and designers of Ashanti have remained faithful to the old technology of the conventional powder glass beads with mould-formed design. They also failed to take advantage of the exploits of translucent and painted beads which their Krobo counterparts have fully embraced. With the gradual shift to painted beads and other glass bead forms, the Krobo beads artists are transforming and sustaining their profession with new product innovation and exploration of new marketing strategies. The painted bead design has several advantages over the mould filled glass beads. It could be produced much quicker, and does not require extensive apprenticeship. Gotts (2014) describes painted beads design as having more significant appeal and best suited to meet local needs for affordable version of heirloom trade beads. Confirming the present status of the two predominant glass beads production centres in Ghana (Sordinars1965; Lamb1976; Kalous 1979; Johnson1979; Francis,Jr.1990,1993; Haigh 1991), as cited in Gotts noted that during the twentieth century, powder glass beadmaking became centered in Ghana's Krobo and Ashanti areas with the Krobo beads artists eventually becoming the primary producers and innovators in powder glass beads. Whilst Ashanti beadmaking is on a downwards trend, Krobo bead industry is sturdily developing. They have continued to practice and refine the beadmaking arts with inventive forms of glass beads. Their exploits on painted and translucent beads have saved the industry from decline. These new forms of glass beads are becoming popular and dominating the local market, featuring prominently in the tourist and export trade.

3.5 Marketing Issues.

Apart from production issues, the study also revealed a number of marketing related challenges, hampering development of beadmaking in Ashanti. The bead market in Ghana is characterized by a wide range of imported beads offering very stiff competition to the local beads. These beads come in all sizes, shapes, colours and materials ranging from plastics, metal, glass and varied found objects. The imported beads in the local markets are much smaller, smoother with better finishing and well packaged. Noticeable features of these imported beads are its smaller sizes and lighter weight compared to the powder glass beads with mould-formed design. The bigger size of the local bead is a technical challenge linked to the creating of holes in glass beads of mould-formed design. Another marketing issues adversely affecting Ashanti beads production is less patronage by traditional trade partners from West African countries. Ashanti region in the past had a very large bead market that attracted numerous customers from neighbouring countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire as well Europe and America. In the past the overseas traders highly patronized glass beads which was regarded as authentic and durable. This probably encourage them to concentrate on producing the same old

powder glass mould-form beads. Currently the demand for glass beads is shifting to the new translucent and painted beads which have been embraced by both local and the international export market.

3.6. Current Fashion among Ladies

The current fashion among ladies is related to the sizes of glass beads. It is fashionable these days for Ghanaian ladies to wear tight dresses. This has influenced their preference for smaller beads around waste. As pointed earlier the local glass beads are relatively bigger and heavier which show through skin tight ladies dress. These kinds of ladies dresses make no room for local glass beads and contributing to poor patronage.

3.7. The Abolition of Some Traditional Cultural Practices.

It is also strongly believed that the abolition of some traditional cultural practices as a result of modernization, education and missionization has contributed to poor patronage and usage of beads. There were some cultural practices that patronized and promoted the production of glass beads in Ashanti in the past. One such notable cultural practice is *Bragoro*, a puberty rites which marks the transition from girlhood to adulthood. The celebration of *Bragoro* in the past was characterized by elaborate decoration of the initiates with beads. This cultural practice propelled families to acquire and treasure a large collection and display of heirloom beads. With the abolition of this initiation rites in Ashanti, the Krobos on the other hand have been able to sustain a similar cultural practice known as *Dipo*. Though it is continually undergoing changes, but has stood the test of time. Data gathered indicates that most people believed *Dipo* has sustained bead production in Krobo land. Anquanda (2006) maintains the growth of the artistic glass bead industry in Kroboland is as a result of the celebration of a special cult ceremony, *Dipo*. One important feature of *Dipo* celebration is the massive use of beads in decorating the initiates and exhibition of heirloom of beautiful and colourful beads. Wilson (2004) emphasizes the significance and usage of beads in Krobo rites of passage and indicates it is the most well-known bead wearing occasion of any ethnic group in Ghana. The other cultural practice that stimulated the production of beads in the past was the traditional Ashanti outdoor ceremony. This cultural practice was celebrated to honour women who have delivered. The newly mother is outdoored with elaborate decoration of beads and showcase of heirloom beads. The rich display of beads indicates the status of the new mothers and their families in the communities. This cultural practice is fast fading off especially in the urban communities. This and many other cultural practices sought to promote the growth of glass bead production in Ashanti in the past.

Finally, religion has also contributed significantly to the decline of glass beads production in Ashanti. Some religious faith forbid usage of beads thereby discouraging members from patronizing beads. There are also some beliefs linking beads to spiritism and witchcraft. This has led to significant reduction of heirloom beads in Ashanti. Again some overly zealous Christian's family members are made to believe that heirloom beads are associated with witchcraft prompting members to abandon or destroy their treasured beads collection.

4. Conclusion

This study was intended to investigate the decline of glass beads heritage and beadmaking arts in Ashanti region of Ghanaian. It is clear from the study that this unique art is fast declining and if left unattended to, Ashanti and Ghana as a whole will lose completely a rich cultural heritage and an enviable status. An ancient craft that UNESCO recognizes and supports as traditional craftsmanship, under the initiatives for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage. The decline is attributable to the fact that for considerable period of time, the glass beadmaking arts in Ashanti has not seen much significant change. Glass bead artists have remained faithful to the old production techniques. They have used the same techniques, equipment and old designs. The glass bead industry has for a long time focused on mould-form design with little or no change to other forms of bead design such as painted glass beads. These new forms of bead design have been embraced by the Krobo who and are excelling in its production. They have succeeded in developing it to a level that is gaining much recognition and acceptance by both Ghanaian and foreign consumers. It is this trend in beadmaking that has led to the survival and tremendous growth of the industry in Krobo.

5. Recommendations

On the basis of the findings of this study it is suggested that the decline of glass beads industry in Ashanti could be salvaged through the following ways. Introduction of the use of simple modern tools and equipment will enhanced glass beads production. The use of simple and efficient machinery, well design kilns and better working environment will increase productivity, reduce the risk, and tedious nature associated with mould-formed bead design.

The youth should be encouraged and motivated into glass beads industry. They could be taken through a well-structured apprenticeship schemes specifically design for glass beads production. Selection into these programmes should be based on interest and the creative potential of the youth. Such youth will be better positioned to inject new ideas into beadmaking.

To ensure good health and safety of beads producers, they must be educated on the harmful effects of the toxic materials, the poor working environment in which they operate. Consequently they could be encouraged to use appropriate protective clothing and employ the best and safe workshop practices.

There is the need for change from the centuries old beadmaking techniques (mould-form glass design) to current glass bead design forms and production techniques. In this direction, focus should be on translucent, painted beads and others which have much contemporary look and greater demand. These new glass bead design forms are now becoming popular, much easier, quicker and economical to produce. Again, these new beads design forms offer greater freedom of creativity to the beadmaking artists.

On the question of poor patronage of glass beads as a result of abolition of some cultural practices in Ashanti, beadmaking artists should focus on innovation and exploration of new bead designs. They will have to diversify their designs and create new ones whose usage goes beyond body adornment. In this wise, beadmaking artists should create bead designs that could serve as mixed media for other contemporary artistic products. Such products may include chandeliers, bedside lamps, candle holders and some fashion accessories like bags, sandals, belts and many more.

The surviving glass beadmaking communities in Ashanti like Daaba, Asuofia Asamang and Atwima Akropong should be supported in a bid to revive and sustain the industry. These communities should be opened up with modern facilities that will position beadmaking art and bead heritage as destination for cultural tourism. As in the case of Bonwire and Ahwia all of Ashanti region where kente weaving and wood carving respectively are known worldwide for its tourists attractions.

Beads producers, designers and traders should come together to form Bead Manufacturing Associations and the existing ones like the Asuofia Asamang Co-operative Beads Manufacturing and Marketing Society should be revived and strengthened. It is through these association that they will be able to elicit for support from both technical and financial institutions. Through stronger and vibrant associations, beads producers will be able to intensify their collaboration with some non- governmental organizations notably Aid to Artisans, Ghana (ATAG). This organization among others is known to have assisted beads artists in the past in upgrading the skills of beads artists. Forging stronger collaboration with such organization, the local beads producers stand to benefit in the areas of product development, business management and access to new local and international markets.

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