

# Waist bead among the Yoruba

*By Alloysius Nduka Duru*

**T**HE usage of beads especially waist bead in Nigeria is wide spread across the various nationalities that make up the nation. There are similarities and peculiarities in their usage.

However, the Yorubas developed the most varying and peculiar uses for the waist beads. The Yorubas have developed a culture of bead usage that cuts across both material and spiritual aspects of the life of the people. In addition, they have also the capacity to produce the beads for varying purposes ranging from royalty, body adornment, deification and decoration.

The Yorubas are found in the South Western geo-political delineation of present day Nigeria. They are a vibrant and social people that accentuate their ways of life in their day-to-day activities.

Beads are usually small round piece of glass, wood, metal or nut, pierced for stringing. They are either used for adornment such as the waist, neck or ankle beads or as decorative ornament in art works or even for royalty purposes.

The art of beading is serial in process and serrated in composition. It has a step by step or one by one approach in stringing when traded together, beads stands for unity, togetherness and solidarity.

Beads of the waist is said to possess the power to attract and evoke deep emotional responses, they are a sign of success and affluence as well as spiritual well being.

The Origin of the Nigerian beads is still speculative due to its fragility portability and popularity.

Beads have been traded and used since time immemorial. However, the earliest known African beads are traced to Libya and Sudan. In Nigeria the Nok Terracottes and Igbo Ukwu arts display some element of the usage of beads in those societies as early as 500BC, however there is no concrete statement of origin to the beads.

A common usage of the item is for adornment especially on the waist. There is however varying purpose for which people adorn the waist beads.

The common users of the waist beads are mostly the women folk, only in exceptional theatrical performance will a man adorn a waist bead to symbolize feminism. The waist bead is synonymous with feminism.

The Yorubas have esteemed usage attached to the waist beads. They refer to the waist bead as Ileke, "Lagidigba" the term lagidigba means something big, thick or massive. The Lagidigba is made of palm nut shells stringed together, while the bebe is made of glass.

The Yorubas have a belief that the waist beads possesses some erotic appeal, they have the power to provoke desire or deep emotional response on the opposite sex.

Waist beads in Yoruba are also used for birth control, the beads are laced with charms and worn by the women to prevent conception.

Beads are precious ornaments to the Yorubas, hence when adorned by women, accentuates her femininity or beauty. Beads also helps to portray the chastity of a maiden or women sensuality. Parents show their love for their girl child through gifts of waist beads that are colourful and expensive.

The lagidigba or palm nut shell beads are used for fecundity purposes. The nuts signify multiple births as they are in clusters, thus one can infer the high incidence of multiple births in Yoruba land to the usage of the lagidigba bead.

Brides seduce their spouses with the beads they adorn, some women are said to lace their beads with charm to make them irresistible to the male folks. The Yorubas can easily comment on a woman's moral standing in those days by the interpretation of the movement of the waist bead adorned by the woman. The way she moves her buttocks can depict her morals either seductive or reserved.

The Yorubas have a popular saying that "it is the beads that makes the buttocks to shake".

Other users of the waist beads in Yoruba land are the Orisas or devotees of water deities and other priestesses, they adorn the waist beads for protection against spiritual attacks as well as part of their dress regalia.

The waist beads are also used to adorn the Ere-Ibeji figurine on the death of a twin, there is the belief that when treated well the spirit of the dead twin will not harm the living twin and will return to the family to stay.

Waist beads are also adorned and laced with charms to ward away the Abiku spirit (mermaid spirit) from a woman.

Because of the regard on the waist beads, some erotic songs have been composed and sang by the Yorubas based on its usages.

A Song Says

"She goes up

She goes down

Like buttocks beads.

Another song says;

Don't flirt with me

Don't flirt with me as you do with your husband.

Don't wriggle your waist beads at me

Don't lock the door on me and throw away the key.

Apart from the Yorubas, other groups in Nigeria also have similar usages of the waist beads in their culture the Ogonis in Rivers State refer to beads as Loo, its uses range from covering the private parts of women to adornment as a sign of affluence. The beads are a measure of value to the Ogonis and are also worn by bride as part of her bridal rites. The Igbos called it Mgbaji, also for adornment and a sign of social status.

The Hausas refer to it as Jigida. To the Kalabaris, the waist bead has the potency of transforming an ugly woman into a beautiful maiden once it is worn. The Ibibios see it as Nkwa-Isin, they adorn it on a female baby to help give her a good waist line, as she grows, beads of her size are adorned on her.

Priestesses of deities also wear the beads that are always colourful as part of their regalia. They also use the waist beads laced with charms for birth control. The maiden dancers (Aban) also wear the beads doing dance to give a graceful hip movement when they dance.

Waist bead in today's fashion is relegated; ladies have a preference for western costumes such as belts, chains, g-strings to the waist beads. The culture of waist bead is going down rapidly to extinction. Religion and other spiritual reasons have been adduced for the neglect, however it must be pointed out that waist bead usage as practiced in the past is an essential element of African body adornment that is harmless and meaningful, a pride and precious item which should be encourage today.

- Nduka Duru discussed this topic with National Museum Study Group