



Celebrating Womanhood: Bead Adornment as Female Power in Agwagune Culture of Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines the role of women in traditional African society (Agwagune) through the agency of bead adornment. Agwagune is a close-knit community in the Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, Nigeria. The paper notes that in pre-colonial Africa, maidens exerted supernatural powers and influence in their communities through the adornment of beads on their waist. The paper adopts the qualitative research method, applying semi-structured interviews. Using the theory of Africanfuturism that focuses on African culture, history, and experiences, this paper argues that African values and cultures should be an integral part of the future where African spirituality and indigenous knowledge can serve as the foundation for modernity.

Keywords: Womanhood, Beads, Female Power, Agwagune, Culture

Introduction

In recent times, bead adornment has been described as an exhibition and display of immorality and a display of irresponsibility. It has been condemned strongly by Christianity and proponents of morality because it is deemed to have devalued the woman. But in traditional Agwagune society, bead adornment was celebrated and promoted because of the values it inculcated in the minds and way of life of the maidens, as it empowers them to be the custodians of the community. Maidens in this civilisation were not ashamed of adorning their waist with beads because they grew up to assimilate the value of it. The power they wield goes beyond the one assigned to women by Chinweizu (1990). In the book, Chinweizu argues that women control men through mother-power, bride-power, and wife-power. Egbung (2021) argues that human society has evolved to the level where sexes can swap gender roles as the need arises because the concept of gender complementarity is entrenched in some traditional African societies. Bead adornment as a practice celebrated by the Agwagune people has been an age-long practice that was handed down from one generation to another. The Agwagune people belong to the Egi-Ipa Clan in Biase Local Government Area of Cross River State, South Nigeria. The three components of the people are Odumugom, Okurike, and Itu-Agwagune communities. These three communities speak the Agwagune language. Ugot (2013) argues that the Agwagune Language, with the Agwagune cluster, has been raised to the status of an LGA Language with the creation of the new Cross River State in 1987, as it stands out as the largest homogenous group of languages within Biase, as it contains the largest number of speakers in the LGA.

She goes further to highlight the Agwagune language cluster to include Erei, Abini, Adim, Abayongo, Etono II, Etono Central, and Agwagune speakers, because mutual intelligibility is found within this group of languages. Okurike, as a community in the Agwagune group of villages, is made up of people known for farming, fishing, hunting, and trading. The relationship between members of the three villages is intertwined with other communities, as almost every kindred in a particular village has relatives in another village; also, their cultures are the same. Okurike community is located within the rainforest of Nigeria, and the even distribution of rains and the surrounding river make the land extremely fertile for agricultural and fishing purposes. Agriculturally, the people are self-sufficient;

they produce yams, cassava, cocoyams, plantains, and vegetables. They also practice fishing and hunting within their environment, but fishing is mostly favoured by the people because of the availability of fish ponds and other small bodies of water in which fish incubate.

Culturally, the people cherish their culture and other ways of life that make up their tradition. They strive to maintain and promote their culture by conforming to group norms that seek to consolidate social relations, affirm ideology, and propagate inter-communal cultural exchanges such as invitations to feasting, inaugural ceremonies, and cultural performances. Their social organisations or groups operate on an age-grade system. An important aspect of social groups in Okurike is that they maintain continuity in membership. Such groups include the Abu Society, the Ekpe Society, the Inyono Society, the Onene Dance group, Egip Dance, and Ekorone dance. All these societies work for the betterment of the community. Ekorone dance is the maiden dance that adorns women with beads adornment as celebrating womanhood, and is showcased and promoted by the Agwagune people. This will be explored using the theory of African futurism.

Osman (2025) argues that African futurism is a theory coined by a Nigerian American writer, Nnedi Okorafor, as a response to the broader Afrofuturism movement. African futurism is rooted in African culture, history, and experiences, and looks forward to a future that incorporates the cosmology of pre-colonial Africa. (<https://www.geeska.com>.) Osman (2025) goes further to opine that the term African futurism is a direct offshoot of Afrofuturism, a movement that emerged in the mid-20th century, primarily focused on the experiences of the African diaspora, particularly in the United States. Afrofuturism included artists such as Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Octavia Butler. They aim to imagine a future where Black identity and creativity could thrive and be free from the constraints of racism and marginalisation. Sayers (2021) argues that “African futurism is closely related to science fiction”. He, however, observes that while Afrofuturism centres on the Black experience in the West, African futurism is a more recent term, first introduced by Nnedi Okorafor to emphasise that Africa’s future is unique and distinct from the Western or diasporic perspective. African futurism is more concerned with the African experiences on the continent - its struggles, histories, and future. Where Afrofuturism might envision a world beyond slavery and systemic racism, African futurism imagines a world beyond colonialism, where African cultures are not relics of the past but integral components of the future.

African futurism creates a space for creativity that is distinctly African, where the positive aspects of spirituality, traditional knowledge, and indigenous technology can serve as the foundation for modernity, rather than being in opposition to it. Osman submits that African futurism is a means of reclaiming Africa’s past and asserting control over its future. He argues further that African futurism demonstrates that the future is not merely a place where Africans will continue to suffer the consequences of our past; instead, it suggests that the future is a space they can actively shape, drawing on both the lessons of the ancestors and the innovations of the modern world. It is a form of resistance that challenges the notion that Africa is destined to remain in the shadow of colonial exploitation. It contests the idea that African stories must always be told through a Western lens. African futurism defies the notion that the future is something to be feared. African futurism is a sub-category of science fiction.

Nathaniel and Akung (2022) argue that “Okorafor’s African futurism is hinged on the fact that there are narrative convergence and departure for both concepts”. They argue further that African futurism could weave the African system of deifications, socio-political heroes, myths, ideologies, philosophy, identities, and cultural practices into its narratives” <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/404/> Ekorone dance is the agency through which maidens display their female power as well as celebrate their womanhood. Ekorone dance (maiden dance) is a dance performed by the maidens of Okurike around the village after every weeding and cleaning of the stream called Efe emot. Efe Mot is a stream located at the uppermost part of the rings of streams in the village. It is dedicated to the worship of the water goddess; therefore, maidens who go there to fetch water must adorn themselves with beads on their waist, and the upper part of their bodies is covered with a locally made fabric. Men and married women also fetch water from the stream. The men go there with only wrappers around their waist; the married women tie wrappers around their chest, while the young men wear knickers. Going against the rules of the stream amounts to an abomination, and committing an abomination requires some rituals to be performed to appease the spirits of the stream. An abomination is a crime committed against a god that expects an appeasement; the offender will be punished. (Amadi, 2005). The Ekorone dance is performed after the maidens have finished weeding the grasses surrounding the river. They are decorated with ajigija (beads) from their waist to the hips. Thereafter, they are decorated with white chalk all over

their bodies, and they file out of the stream, with a leader who holds a small calabash containing white chalk, which she rubs on passers-by, a signification of sharing peace with the community. This dance was handed down from one generation to another because of the values it inculcated in the minds of the maidens. This generational shift has become a norm as it guides the younger generation in their way of life. This cultural transmission is a form of traditional education that empowers the young ones to participate actively in the traditional society. The education empowers them to be active participants in all spheres of human endeavour (Egbung & Akpagu, 2019; Egbung & Owan, 2019). Studies have called for Africans to articulate and celebrate their cultural identities and reclaim them from colonisers. This call is imperative because Western civilisation came and despised the African cosmology that the people held in high esteem. These cultural identities were an integral part of the people's way of life before the advent of Christianity (Nwahunanya, 2010; Uwen and Ukam, 2024). Traditional practices that enabled them to uphold virtues in their traditional setting. In the Okurike (Agwagune) culture, beading was a metaphoric representation of all that was good in the traditional society.

Materials and Methods

Data for the study were obtained through an ethnographic research approach during a one-year fieldwork involving a representative sample of 40 participants who were among the maidens. Apart from being an indigene, the justification for the sample size is that the selected participants are custodians of the traditions of the Agwagune people and were recruited based on their deep knowledge of Agwagune tradition, as well as the maidens who wear the beads. The participants were adequately informed, and their consent was obtained before they participated in the exercise. Other ethical issues regarding the concealment of their identity and beliefs were adhered to. Regarding the demographic information about the participants, 32 (80%) were females, 30 maidens and 2 female custodians; and 8 (20%) were males. The females (maidens) were within the age bracket of 15 to 20, and the female custodians were between 70 and 75. Male custodians were between 75 and 80 years old. The higher number of females is because the beads are worn by maidens who are women, and the custodians who themselves had participated in the maiden dance when they were maidens. The age bracket of the participants was based on the people who are expected to dance by tradition and the custodians who are knowledgeable in the religious performance. Among the participants, 25 were devotees to the traditional religion (75%) while 15 (25%) were Christians. This allowed the researcher to extract diverse opinions on emerging attitudes towards bead adornment.

The methods used for data collection were participant observations and semi-structured interviews with the aid of audiotape recorders and field notes. Participant observations offered the researcher (who is an indigene of Agwagune) the opportunity to participate passively in the performance. The researcher is connected to the subpopulation from whom the data were extracted. Here, the researcher assumed the position of a passive participant and an unbiased observer in all the community's events. There were no limitations; rather, being an indigene of Agwagune helped to remove every barrier and obstacle and afforded the researcher the opportunity to learn more about the significance of the Ekorone dance. Using the semi-structured interview technique, the researcher deployed open-ended questions to extract responses that provided insights into what informed beading adornment as a maiden dance; their metaphorical interpretations, and how beads celebrate womanhood, create traditional religious identities that are related to the belief systems of the custodians and the maidens who participate in the dance. Also, audiotape recorders and field notes were used for the recording and documentation of participants' opinions, which helped in the validation of the study.

Results

The data analysis adopts the descriptive method, where data are interpreted based on the views of the participants that reflect the traditional religious worldview of the people. To achieve this, beading as celebrating womanhood through the Ekorone dance, which has been influenced by the people's attachment to their traditional religious worship and doctrines, is categorised into subheadings to capture the different dimensions of traditional religious identity performances.

Discussion

Beads Adornment as spiritual clothing

Beads are traditionally worn by women as a symbol of beauty, sexuality, femininity, fertility, well-being, or maturity. Maidens from Agwagune wear beads of different sizes and colours when weeding the Efe mot. Thereafter, they are expected to dance around the village with the Ekorone songs and dance. The dance has a spiritual implication. Okurike cosmology celebrates the world of the spirits, where they have ghosts, fantasies, gods, goddesses, priests, rites, and

rituals. These do not in any way make them primitive, as criticised by European critics. The African worldview has been promoted by Tutuola (1952) even though it has been dismissively classified as ghost novels, romances, quest romances, fantasies, allegories...and is considered problematic because they introduce supernatural beings and occurrences into human affairs, which European academics officially regard as superstition worthy of belief only by the “primitive” or “infantile” mind.

This categorisation by European critics completely negates Africa’s worldview, values, norms, and traditions. The Ekorone dance, where the maidens are adorned with beads, has some spiritual implications. The goddess whom the maidens are appealing provides some supernatural coverage for the maidens and the community at large. She protects them from any danger that might come their way in their day-to-day activities. This buttresses the fact that even Christians and detribalized people pay homage to traditional religion in their difficult moments (Chinweizu et al. 1980)

Bead adornment as spiritual clothing protects the community from invasion from the neighbouring community, who might want to engage the Okurike (Agwagune) community in communal warfare. This is achieved through the periodic weeding and cleaning of the stream, which the maidens perform. In that regard, the goddess is appeased. She rewards the community by offering spiritual protection to ward off intruders. Chinweizu and friends argue that “when things get tough, you run back to your roots and ancestral ways”. They recognise the importance and relevance of ancestral powers, hence their advocacy for the return to one’s roots. This accounts for why, in today’s society, young girls wear beads on their waist. Waist beads, particularly in West African cultures, have a rich history and a deeper meaning that goes beyond aesthetics. They’re actually connected to the spiritual side of things (<https://www.koussikustoms.com>). Therefore, the adornment of the beads by the Agwagune people has so many spiritual underpinnings that only natives from the community can reckon with. The spiritual relevance of women was recognised in Africa before the advent of Christianity. This is explored in Achebe (1958), where the powerful Okonkwo, the central character, had to consult Chielo, the Priestess of Agbala, over the fate of his daughter, Ezinne, who is sick. Salami-Boukari (2012) argues that “Western culture and Christian religion brought by colonialism carried rigid gender ideologies, which aided and supported the exclusion of women from the power hierarchy”. But this paper brings insight into the spiritual relevance of women(maidens) through the adornment of waist beads.

Beads as an adornment of purity and pride of womanhood

In the Okurike (Agwagune) culture, bead adornment by the maidens is a demonstration of the purity and innocence of the girl-child. The Ekorone dance, which she participates in, showcases her to the community. It is a rite of passage that transitions her into womanhood. Tariemi (2022) notes that “In some African societies, female children are adorned with waist beads by their moms once they get their period to mark their rite of passage into womanhood. These beads symbolise the female child’s transition from childhood to adulthood, proof of her fertility and sexuality” (<https://www.guardian.org>). Another dimension of the rite of passage is the fattening room, where the maiden is confined in a room, fed to become rounded and prepared for marriage. Egbung (2018) notes that “The concept of fatness in African cosmology connotes fecundity, wealth, and acceptability in the society; this gave rise to the institution of the fattening room in some African societies”. Participation in the Ekorone dance by the maidens gives them and their mothers, who themselves have undergone this stage in their childhood, a sense of belonging. Salami-Boukari (2012) argues that “Parents insist on the rite so that their daughters can be marriageable”. Some young maidens have been betrothed as future wives after they participated in the Ekorone dance. They carry their purity and innocence to their husband’s house, which is a virtue. In some cultures, these waist beads represent purity and are only to be taken off by her husband on her wedding night, signifying that the maiden is married as a virgin (Tariemi). Waist beads, in recent times, have been trending, where young girls in metropolitan cities wear them for different reasons. Several reasons have been put forward as to why girls/women wear waist beads. Some argue that it enables them to know when they have added weight; others argue that it is worn to beautify the waist, and some others believe that it is used for seduction. This researcher agrees with the second school of thought: to beautify the waist and give the woman the shape she needs. This position is in tandem with the African futurism theory, which foresees Africa in the future where Africa’s positive way of life is blended with contemporary reality. This corroborates Idowu’s (1991) argument that values from the traditional society that represent virtue should be upheld and preserved for posterity, and that is the crux of Africanfuturism.

Bead adornment as clothing of cultural guardians

Bead adornment has been made as a form of cultural clothing for the Agwagune maidens. This is metaphoric in nature in the sense that the beads protect the community. It is believed that they wear them to scare away evil from the land. Therefore, their songs demonstrate the courage of the guardians of the community. Studies have shown that waist beads are a beautiful and culturally rich adornment that originated in various African societies. They're traditionally made of glass beads, crystals, or gemstones strung on a cord or wire, and they're worn around the waist or hips (<https://www.koussikustoms.com>). The roundness of the beads at their waist represents the shield the maidens provide to the community. Songs such as

Inun bejere anung ni ogbo ano

Inun ekakun adani ogbo ajuk o

Nong nun ogbo ehe

Atogbo nong nun ogbo

Ogbo ayoro ejunani

Translation

Our forefathers prepared the land for the good of everybody

Present chiefs have desecrated the land

Repair the land

Owners, repair the land

For our land has been desecrated.

The myth that maidens wearing the beads to dance the Ekorone dance have empowered them as the custodians of the community is based on the fact that they are pure and innocent. The Agwagune people believe so much in this myth. Humans create myths not only to explain certain imponderables but also to structure society and its members (Inyabri 2009). The role the Agwagune people have bestowed on the maidens encourages them to keep themselves pure and stainless until they transition to another level, which is womanhood and motherhood. They achieve individuation and live up to it. Bolen (1992) notes that individuation is the process of becoming an authentic person, true to oneself, and the process of growth toward the true self that makes life meaningful spiritually. The maidens become the spiritual guardian angels of the community who ward off evil that may want to invade them.

The guardian roles played by the maidens are more or less masculine roles, but because they have been empowered by the goddess, there is a reversal of gender roles. This is what Amadiume (1987) argued in her anthropological text: that in traditional African society, gender roles were flexible. She notes that daughters could become sons and subsequently males. To corroborate this argument, Egbung (2011) also argues that the reversal of gender roles debunks patriarchal society's stereotypical role prescriptions.

The water goddess empowers these maidens to perform male gendered roles of protecting the community, and the presence of a goddess-focused religion does nothing but favour the acceptance of women in status and roles of authority and power (Salami-Boukari 2012). Referencing the goddess is a common practice in some African cultures. This is due to the roles the goddesses play in the affairs of men; therefore, a violation of their rules is meted out with stiff punishments. Achebe (1958) acknowledges this fact, which is why Okonkwo is warned about the consequences for beating one of his wives in the week of peace, which was marked in honour of the Goddess of Peace. And the warning goes like this: "The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan. The earth goddess whom you have insulted may refuse to give us her increase, and we shall all perish". The respect for the goddess and her worship is the traditional way of life of the Agwagune people, which has been disrupted by westernisation, and these cherished cultures have fallen apart. Larson (2000) notes that, like in *Things Fall Apart*, what falls apart is the traditional African culture, weakened by the onslaught of the English missionaries (and the British government officials). Ukelina (2024) argues that the constraints to women's autonomy and progress are rooted in colonial and imperial histories.

Bead adornment as clothing of fecundity

In Agwagune culture, bead adornment around the waist has been attributed to invoking fertility and fecundity. This complements the Ekorone dance, which is a fertility dance. It is believed that the river goddess who brings fertility is appeased when young maidens go to the stream to weed the grasses with beads on their waist. Inyang (2007) notes that long ago, Agwagune people believed in their various goddesses, whom they consulted and sought approval before embarking on some community projects. This is the myth that has been passed down from one generation to another, hence the community's effort to uphold it. Inyabri (2009) notes that myths are veritable media through which humans interpret and control the world around them. Thus, it follows that myths are culture-bound. The belief in the potency

of the river goddess to invoke fertility is demonstrated with the words of the songs and dances the maidens showcase during the Ekorone dance. Songs such as

Ada gwang ano, ada aduk ano
Da ye rimiye sin nyene ga jen
Da ye rimiye sin nyene ga jen
Nje nje nje muda gwang

Translation

Keep a child

Keep a bottle of drink

Pick the one you want, let me see

Pick the one you want, let me see

I know that she will pick a child

The above Ekorone song demonstrates the importance the Agwagune people attach to children, hence their promotion of the wearing of the waist beads by their maidens. Tariemi (2022) notes that Waist beads hold deep cultural significance peculiar to the different African societies, worn by women or sometimes men. These beads are viewed as a symbol of femininity, fertility, sensuality, and spiritual well-being.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to interrogate the concept of beading as the celebration of womanhood and the power she wields from the adornment in the culture of the Agwagune people of Nigeria. This research is an ethnographic work that showcases the worldview of the people using Africanfuturism as a compass. The benefits derived from this deep cultural celebration can only be imagined by the custodians of this rich cultural heritage. Many sources have been cited to buttress the arguments of this paper. It is believed that this work will add to the rich cultural heritage of African culture that is yet to be acknowledged and celebrated globally.

Recommendation

This paper recommends that traditional African values, which enhance the development of society, should be promoted and upheld, and not discarded as obsolete; rather it should be infused into the contemporary world where the lessons of the older generation are merged with the innovations of the modern world.

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