



# Kofridua Bead Market

In the first of our new series on African markets, Cordelia Salter-Nour looks at the thriving bead industry in Ghana

**K**ofridua, a regional town about an hour outside the Ghanaian capital, Accra, is famous all over West Africa for its bead market. Once a week, the hot and dusty market place is flooded with traders who showcase beads of every imaginable colour, shape and size. Some are strung as bracelets and set in piles on the ground. Others are

hung in long strings over wooden frames looking like coloured hair. Bowls and baskets full of loose beads are everywhere. There are glass beads, brass beads, clay beads, bone beads, beads with 'special magic', beads that have been melted down to make other beads, and beads that have come from faraway countries, including India and the Czech Republic. It all shows that the

bead business in Ghana is thriving.

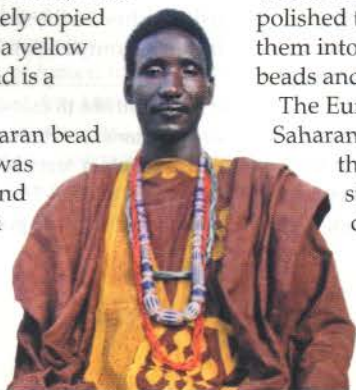
Down one side of the Kofridua market are the antique bead traders like Hudu Yahyaha, who spend their lives travelling West Africa searching out rare beads and then searching out rich customers. They have on display beads such as the Venetian Mille Fiori which were brought to Africa in vast quantities during the European trade boom. Deep



down in the pockets of their gowns are even older beads that tell stories of earlier bead trading.

**W**hen the Sahara was greener and the West African kingdoms were at the height of their power many goods were brought into the region from the north-south and the east-west Saharan trade routes. This coincided with the spread of Islam and many Africans went on the pilgrimage to Mecca. Glassmaking was a speciality of the Middle East, where it was invented, and the glassworks at Fustat (Ancient Cairo) produced beads for the West African market. Named after Fustat, these beads have been widely copied ever since and today a yellow and black striped bead is a common design.

Another trans-Saharan bead is the Hebron which was made from the salt and mineral-rich sand on



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the shores of the Dead Sea. For a long time they were very popular in Sudan and Chad but then fell out of fashion. A trading legend says that the enterprising Kanu bead traders from northern Nigeria bought them up at a very cheap price and took them back to their workshops where they ground them down and polished them. They then reintroduced them into Sudan, calling them Kanu beads and they became fashionable again.

The Europeans knew about the trans-Saharan trade and wanted a way into the African market. They closely studied local taste and it became common practice to send

samples of valued beads to Europe to be copied. The European trade expansion coincided with advances in glassmaking and the glassmakers of Venice and Bohemia were repeatedly challenged to copy African beads.

The Europeans copied the beads they knew had the most status. The Bodum and Akoso beads were highly valued. Traditionally, they could only be worn by Asante and Ewe kings. Today bead-makers in Ghana copy both the old African beads and the European ones.

Back in Kofridua there are fake Venetian Mille Fiori beads that have been hand-painted using liquid glass by the women of Somanya, a nearby village. At a distance they are indistinguishable from the Venetian Mille Fiori that the antique bead traders are selling.

Florence Martey has a stall at the market. She is one of Ghana's leading bead designers and her speciality beads are greatly sought after. She often complains that her designs are copied but that's part of the beading tradition.