



# Return to Ghana

By **Lesley Woodcock**

In Issue 6 of *Bead* we featured an article from Lesley Woodcock about her trip to Ghana. Read on to find out all about the fun she had on her return trip.

I enjoyed my trip to Ghana so much in 2007 that I returned in January 2008, this time I went with an organised bead tour. What a great time we had!

John our tour organiser met the five of us, who were arriving from various parts of the world, at Accra airport. We spent two wonderful weeks travelling around Ghana visiting various local bead makers, attending workshops and having a wonderful time.

The first place we visited was Abompe; the village of Bauxite (stone) bead makers. We were met by Suzanne, a Peace Corp Volunteer who has been working tirelessly with the locals, helping them develop their bead making skills into a lucrative business and encouraging artisans to work together to promote each others work. After we were greeted in the usual formal hospitable Ghanaian way, and we all had introduced ourselves, the locals gave us a fascinating

demonstration of how they effortlessly chip away at the bauxite stone they have collected locally, making beads of different shapes and sizes. Once they are happy with the shapes, they thread them onto a piece of wire and polish them by rubbing against a large stone with some water, skilfully turning and constantly rubbing back and forth until a smooth surface is achieved. The beads are then made into magnificent jewellery, which of course we felt compelled to buy! After a wonderful traditional Ghanaian lunch prepared by the village locals, it was our turn to have a go and make some beads. We all chatted enthusiastically about what we were going to make and soon realised that it was a lot harder than we thought! The locals gathered around and patiently showed us how to hold the tools of the trade; we seemed to be a source of entertainment for them... can't think why, as we clumsily chipped away at the bauxite! I would like to say that we



Darbaa Beads Making - Gateway to bead heaven!



Skilfully pouring the fine powdered glass into the mould



Feeding wood into back of kiln used for firing the glass beads



Painting dye onto fired bead



Painted beads drying prior to firing again



need caption

made enough beads for a bracelet each, but it was all we could do to form anything that resembled a couple of beads each – it was truly an art form and one that clearly takes many hours practise to perfect.

### Pounding and sieving

After all the farewells we drove further north to the Ashanti Region, to the small village of Darbaa to learn the art of powdered glass beads. Michael the owner has trained his children to become proficient bead makers; they proved this by demonstrating how they make the clay moulds for the beads and showing a

variety of different forms available.

Once shaped, the moulds are placed in the sun to dry. The holes are continually reshaped several times as the clay mould dries out, prior to being placed in the kiln for about one hour. The glass is continually pounded with a large pestle and mortar then sieved through a piece of fine netting; it is this very fine powder that is used to create the beads. Coloured glass is limited as they use old broken bottles found locally, so different coloured dyes are added to create a variety of coloured glass. A small piece of Cassava twig from a local shrub is placed in each hole within the mould and cut to lie flush with the mould surface. When in the kiln the twig burns away leaving a channel of dust, which becomes the hole in the bead. Depending on the pattern they are trying to achieve they build up the layers of powdered glass within each hole in the mould. A feather is used to remove the excess powder, and it is then placed into the mud kiln, having been warmed first, for about an hour. The kiln is fuelled by local wood that is collected regularly. When the beads have a dull appearance, they are ready to be removed from the kiln. Once cooled, the ends are smoothed on a grinder or with sandpaper, then threaded onto some wire and constantly rubbed and rotated against a large stone with some sand and water to polish until smooth, much the same technique as the bauxite beads. When dry, a mixture of cooking oil and glycerine are rubbed over them to give a shiny finish. We were given the opportunity of making our own powdered glass beads, which were then



Open kiln for brass beads



Scraping away the dung mix after firing to expose the brass beads.....



.....leaving the metal beads on the feed sprue

fired, for us - what a lovely keepsake to take home. While Michael and his team polished our beads, we spent quite a while shopping and admiring their wonderful display of beautifully coloured beads. Adof, one of Michael's sons, joined us as we travelled to our next destination where we learnt the art of brass bead making in Kurofofrom!

### Brass beads

The hollow brass beads are individually hand-made using the traditional and ancient 'lost wax' casting process. To create the basic bead shape, they first make a 'former' (the inside shape of the hollow bead) out of cow dung, clay and charcoal. They then roll out beeswax into thin strips, which are expertly wrapped around the dung former. The pattern of beeswax will eventually be replicated in the finished brass bead, so great skill is required to create the level of detail at this stage. The cow dung and beeswax 'bead' is then encased in an external mould, made from layers of clay, water and charcoal. Next they make a hollow-bottomed crucible out of a mixture of palm fibre and clay. Once the crucible has thoroughly dried in the sun, old scrap brass is placed in it and the crucible is attached to the clay mould containing the wax 'beads' by building further layers of the clay mixture. The moulds and crucible are fired together for about four hours, during which time the beeswax melts and is displaced by molten brass running in. Once cool, the moulds are broken open to reveal the finished brass beads, which are then polished with lemon juice, water and an iron brush. Adof spent time talking to the brass bead makers, discussing how they can help support each other by displaying and promoting each other's beads. This was a new notion for all the craft workers and I felt fortunate to be a part of this conception. We were invited to visit their vast shop and yes, we spent more money!

### Toxic fumes

From Kurofofrom we travelled to Moshi Zongo to meet the Hausa women who make plastic beads from old containers. While I walked through the village of Moshi Zongo I got a real sense of being involved in yet another local community - it was a privilege to be allowed to see how these lovely warm hospitable people live. For some people in the villages we passed through, it was the first time they had met white people and four of us had white hair too! For one little girl it was too much - she ran screaming into her home. We were taken to the building where the Hausa women make the plastic beads. John had explained before we arrived that these people were working with toxic fumes without realising they were harmful, so he managed to secure a grant that paid for extractor fans to be installed to help alleviate the problems and provided masks to wear. The ladies melt the hard plastic, in a frying pan; once melted and

soft enough, they add three small 'stripes' of dye, place a long stick in the plastic and skilfully rotate it; moving along the stick and ending up with a stick full of beads! They look fantastic and the colours are so vibrant! So much so, yes....we shopped and we shopped some more, like beads were going out of fashion!!

### Cloth weaving

Not only did we learn about bead making we were also given the chance to experience Kente cloth weaving. We travelled to Adanwomase, the royal weaving village for the Ashanti kingdom, to learn about this brilliantly colourful fabric entirely hand-woven by Ghanaian weavers. Kente cloth is usually worn for ceremonies, festivals and other sacred occasions. Designs have specific names and meanings that reflect cultural values and historical events. There are more than three hundred different patterns of Kente cloth, all of which are woven in



Finished polished brass



Having a go!

strips, and the strips are then sewn together to make the cloth. Women wear the cloth in two pieces and men wear the cloth like a toga as worn by the ancient Greeks. All profits earned through tourism in Adanwomase benefit the whole community. We were shown an area where there were at least ten looms,



Melting the recycled plastic 'goo'. Imagine the smell!



Need caption



Bundles of finished plastic beads on sticks

one of which I was allowed to 'have a go' on! I seemed to attract some attention and amusement, once again, as I very slowly attempted to coordinate both feet and hands. It makes you appreciate how skilled these people are at their crafts.

While in this area we were taught about Adinkra cloth, which involves hand printing or stamping patterns onto fabric. Adinkra traditionally means farewell or goodbye. When somebody dies or moves away, people wear this cloth, the colours worn representing the occasion; black; and red for funerals and brighter colours for happier ceremonies, but it is also worn everyday too. The stamps are carved out of a calabash shell (a type of gourd or hard shelled fruit) into a variety of symbols which are part of a rich tradition and can be traced back to the 17th century, each one having a specific meaning. The number of symbols continues to grow. The stamps are dipped into a dye, which has been made from the bark of a tree found in north Ghana. The bark is broken into small pieces, soaked in water for about twenty-four hours until it becomes soft, then pounded and boiled for about five days. The more it is boiled the darker and thicker the dye becomes. Once the stamping is complete the cloth is placed in the sun to dry.

### Bead market

Our travels then took us to Koforidua to meet Oklah Tetteh, another bead maker. He makes opaque and transparent beads and his workshop just happens to be down the road from an amazing weekly

bead market where many locals travel and set up their stalls starting early in the morning to avoid the main heat of the day – what a sight to behold! So many stalls full of so many beads – old ones, new ones, every type imaginable, it was a truly memorable experience.

Our next and sadly final visit, took us to an ancestral bead making village called Obawale, where we were shown their glass bead making techniques, which bear a resemblance to the previous villages, however once their beads have been fired they dexterously paint tiny patterns on them and return them to the kiln to be re-fired. We then climbed a mountainous path that provided us with spectacular stunning views to an area named Tsyebite. After we arrived and sat under a shaded area that had been specially prepared for us. All the locals, including the Bead Chief, gathered to greet us with the usual formal introductions, singing and dancing. We felt honoured and very welcomed. People seemed to appear from every corner as we were then invited to look at their beads they had proudly displayed, just for us. Yes ...out came the purses once again!

I feel a certain attachment to Ghana, the people are genuine, happy, warm and so welcoming. This was a significant visit for me as not only did I get to meet and work with the local residents, getting a feel for their way of life, I learnt too how resourceful they are, but I did it in the knowledge that our trip was supporting and encouraging the local artisans and feel we truly learnt from each other. ♦



One of many market stalls at Koforidua bead market