Rock of Ages

Ghana's Ancient Bauxite Beads

Robert Irwin

In the bead world, the old way is often the best way. In the bead making village of Abompe in the bauxite laden hills near Koforidua, Ghana, the old way is virtually the only way.

Up a rutted dirt track, we find a ramshackle wooden shed. Afternoon sunlight slants through the gaps between the timbers, illuminating the swirling cloud of fine red dust that hangs permanently in the air.

An old man – Asanti Amishadi – bends over an ancient slab of sawn off tree trunk. Its surface is pitted with tiny holes anywhere from 5mm to 10mm in diameter and about 5mm deep. Near to hand are the old man's tools: a short metal cutting blade – 'from an old cutlass,' Asanti says in Twe; a 30cm chunk of iron pipe – 'my hammer,' explains Asanti; a few bits of rusty metal – 'for drilling,' and a small, hand-hewn bow drill. ➜ *continued on page 22*

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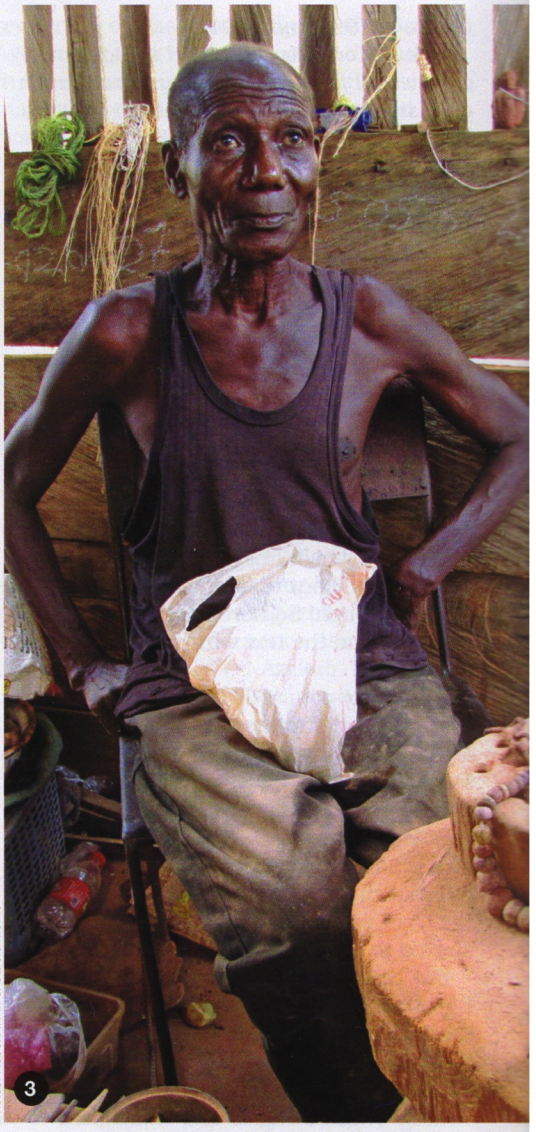

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Photos: Robert Irwin & Carole Morris

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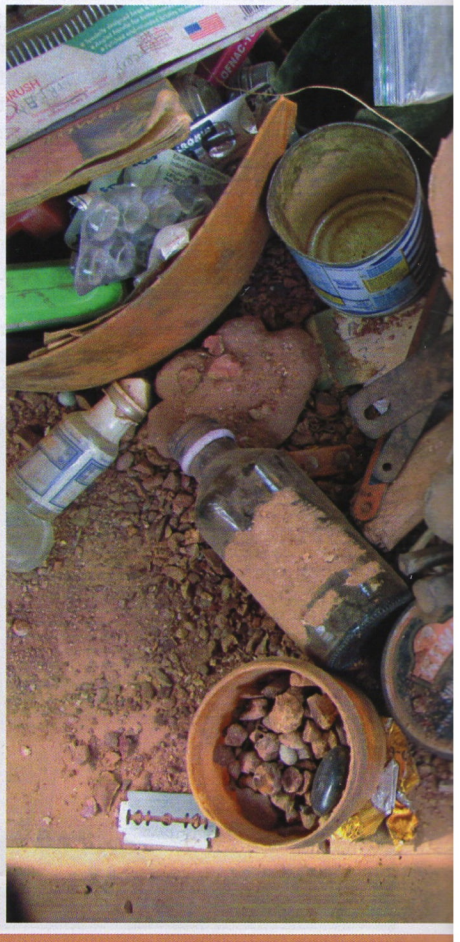


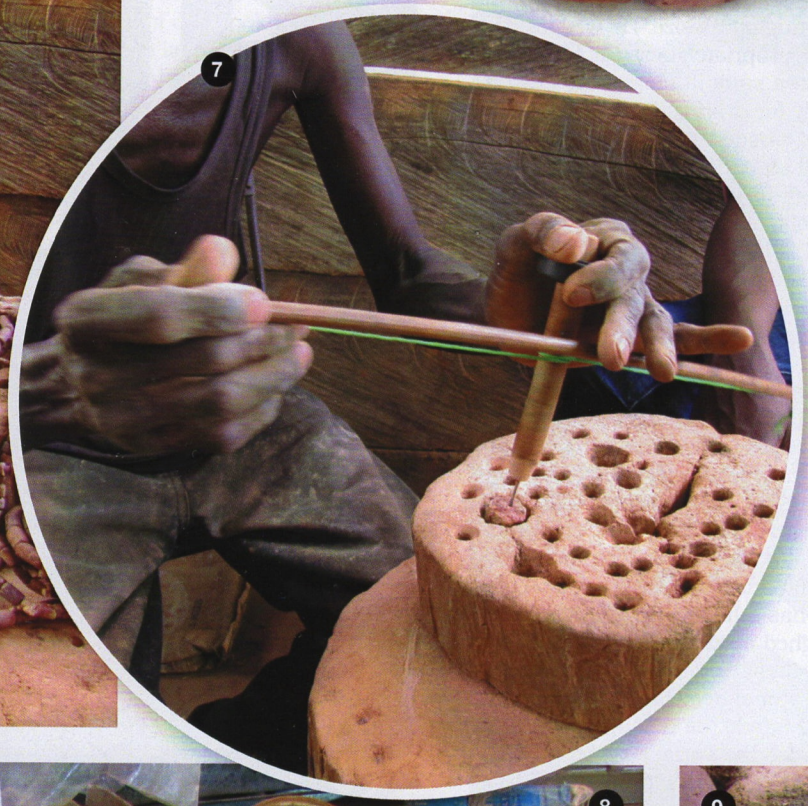


Fig 1 Small cylindrical bauxite beads approximately 6mm diameter.

Fig 2 Medium sized cylindrical bauxite beads approximately 10mm diameter.

Fig 3 Asanti Amishadi in his workshop.

Fig 4 The ancient slab of sawn off tree trunk pitted with various sized holes and showing various strings and sizes of bauxite beads.

Fig 5 ROunded rectangular bauxite beads made into a bracelet (Magie Relph Collection).

Fig 6 Cylindrical bauxite beads (Carole Morris Collection).

Fig 7 Asanti Amishadi using a bow drill to drill holes in pieces of bauxite.

Fig 8 Various items, tools, raw material and waste in Asanti Amishadi's workshop.

Fig 9 Bracelets made from large cylindrical bauxite beads whose ends have been chamfered to help them lie in a circular arrangement.

Fig 10 (p. 22) Asanti Amishadi and some of his beads.

Fig 11 (p.22) Asanti Amishadi's workshop shed.

These few simple, homemade tools are all Asanti needs to chop, shape, drill and polish his daily output of work: a few strings of Abompe's traditional bauxite stone beads.

Historians have documented evidence that local Abompe artisans like Asanti have been making bauxite beads using the same primitive tools and time consuming process as far back as the 1830's. However, archeologists have traced similar, rudimentary stone bead making in Ghana back even further to 2000 BC.

From the bead mad perspective of the western collector, strings of African bauxite beads were pretty much unheard of until the 1960's. In this context – then as now – itinerant and market traders across West Africa often combine bauxite with other African beads, such as ostrich eggshell and clamshell, which are shaped and drilled in a similar manner.

All of which matters little to Asanti. He is not a bead collector and not even a bead trader. He is – he would probably say 'merely' – a hunched and wizened bead maker, plain and simple. He has no electric tools because he has no electricity. Aside from charging his mobile phone, what use would it be to him?

From our western point of view, surely powered saws, drills and polishers would speed up the process, boosting both productivity and profit. For Asanti, the power of Bosch would be overkill: the proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut. Anything bigger and faster than his traditional hand tools would shatter the bauxite stone into useless, unsellable red dust.

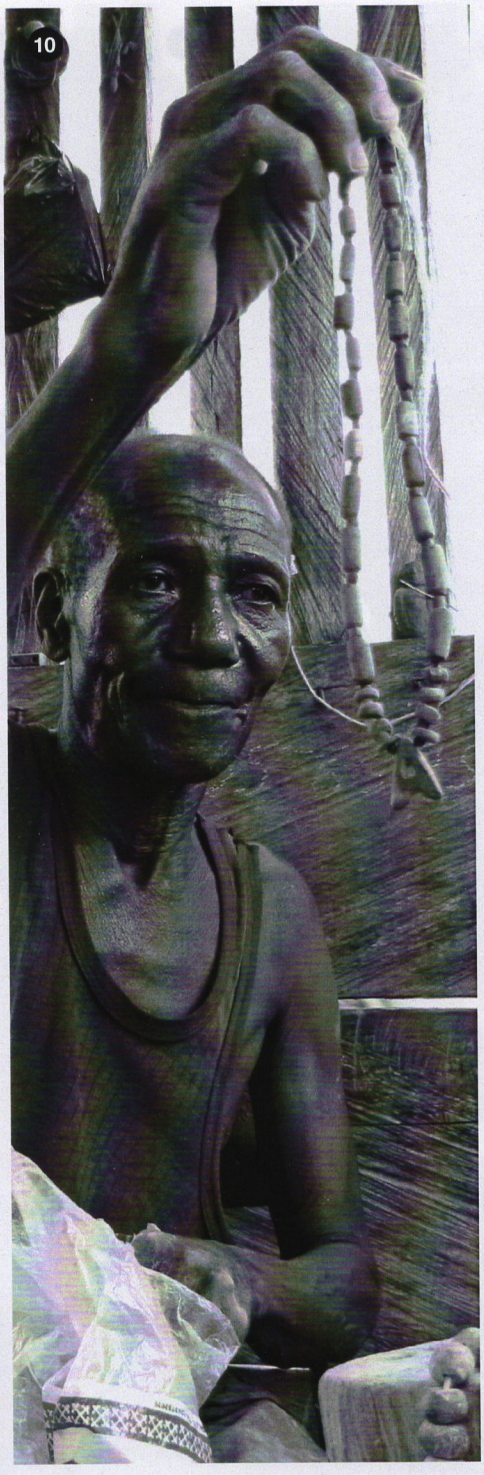
Asanti picks up a tangerine sized lump of reddish brown stone. 'Abo,' he says, meaning bauxite, the ore required to manufacture aluminium. Bauxite is an important export product for the Ghanaian economy: so important that in the 1960's Ghana built the Akosombo dam and created the world's largest man made lake – Lake Volta – mainly to generate power for smelting its bauxite ore.

Deftly deploying his cutlass, Asanti chops off a rough chunk, then hacks into it further, sectioning off smaller pieces which he sorts into size groupings. Slowly, painstakingly, he trims each piece of stone into a small, round, disc-shaped bead, ready for drilling.

He selects and examines a bead - expertly gauging its size. He wedges it into the appropriately-sized hole in his tree trunk: a snug fit means the bead is held firmly for drilling. Into one end of a pre-drilled wooden stick, he inserts a thin metal drill bit. Onto the other end, he slips a scrap ball-bearing assembly, probably from a motorbike. Finally, he twists the string of his bow around his drilling stick. He presses down on the end of the stick and slides his bow from side to side. The drilling stick rotates in the bearing assembly. He exerts increased pressure and continues his drilling motion. Small puffs of dust become airborne, then coat the surfaces of his workbench and tools. It doesn't take long – maybe 30 seconds – and he stops. His bead is drilled and he starts again: chop, chip, sort, clamp, drill.

And so it goes until he has enough beads to fill a bicycle wheel spoke. Later, when he has a handfull of spokes filled with roughed out stone beads, he begins polishing them. Into the concave dish of a polishing stone, he splashes some water. With both hands, he rolls the spokes of beads across the surface of the stone, smoothing and polishing his beads.

Finally, with the sun low in the sky, the dust settles. Asanti's work is finished. His beads are ready for a local trader to take to Koforidua's Thursday bead market, where a diverse range of bead treasures awaits the discerning buyer, both local and visitor alike.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Finished and polished beads – often oiled to enhance their reddish hue – are traditionally strung onto raffia palm threads and worn for adornment around the waist, primarily by women and children. They play a ceremonial role at weddings, naming ceremonies and funerals. Also, pregnant women wear bauxite beads for protection: evil words about her will be reflected back to the speaker by the power of the beads.

For Asanti Amishadi and the bead makers of Abombe, all of this is a good thing. It means they have a market. It means their ancient craft endures.

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