

# THE BEADS OF CAMEROON

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Translated by Howard Opper

*Glass beads have long played an important role in the art and culture of Cameroon, a country situated on the east side of the Gulf of Guinea in West Central Africa. This article reviews the different kinds of drawn and wound glass beads that have found broad acceptance in west-central Cameroon and discusses their diverse applications. Beads of other materials, as well as cowries and buttons, are also dealt with.*

## EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

A version of this article first appeared in 1981 under the title "Les perles de verre au Cameroun" in *Arts d'Afrique Noire* (no. 40, pp. 6-22). It was initially intended that Mr. Harter produce an expanded and updated version for *Beads* but he died before this could be accomplished. As Mr. Harter's article provides much useful information not generally available to English-speaking researchers, it was subsequently decided to publish a translation of it.

The text presented here is essentially as it appeared in the original article, although passages dealing with the manufacture of European glass beads have been deleted since the technology is now generally known. In addition, a few errors of fact have been corrected and reference citations have been inserted in the text where possible. Mr. José Harter of Louveciennes, France, was able to provide many of the photographs that appeared in the original article. Replacements for the missing illustrations were obtained from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, and the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin, both of which hold sizeable collections of the art of Cameroon.

Dr. Christraud M. Geary of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, is thanked for reviewing the translation and providing elucidative comments.

## INTRODUCTION

Following the discovery of the Bight of Biafra and the Camarões River by Portuguese navigators Fernão do Po and Fernão Gomes, commercial exchange with the indigenous population of the coast of what is now Cameroon was instituted in 1472, and lasted for almost 150 years. The Dutch subsequently took over until the middle of the 18th century. Commercial supremacy was next conquered by the French and, especially, the English. Finally, beginning in 1868, with the establishment of the Woermann trading firm of Hamburg at what is now the town of Douala, German influence became more and more important, leading to the exclusive commercial treaty of 1884 between the Douala King Bell and King Akwa.

Intensive trading, sometimes direct but mostly through intermediaries, existed with northern Arab populations well before the first contact with Europeans. This trade included the importation of very diverse items, notably precious red coral from the Mediterranean and, already at this time, glass beads. It equally affected an important inter-African traffic, including a bluish coral (*Allopora subviolcea*) that was gathered from the rocky bottom of the Biafran coast. This coral was ground into bead forms by local African populations and then traded to neighboring countries.

Within this vast commercial movement, the first European navigators found themselves as competitors with their fabrics, metal goods and glasswares. The Europeans were often surprised to find their trade beads refused, the local population preferring bead styles that were already in their possession. European glass manufacturers, therefore, began to copy the existing specimens which were then replicated for

centuries; certain of these beads are still being produced today. In the beginning, artisans from Murano in Venice were the exclusive producers, followed by new suppliers in Bohemia and Holland, notably in Amsterdam. Workshops were later created in England, Germany and France as well.

## BEADS UTILIZED IN WEST-CENTRAL CAMEROON

Two principal types of glass beads can be distinguished in Cameroon according to their method of manufacture: drawn and wound. The rare molded beads that may be encountered are recent and do not have a place in the traditional nomenclature.

### Drawn Undecorated Tubular Beads

Known as *tomenda* (Bafang), *fa* (Bali) or “pipe beads,” these were made from a hollow gather of glass that was drawn to a length shorter than that for seed beads. The beads exist primarily in two colors: blue and red. Tamara Northern (1975: 136) believes that the red beads are much rarer than the blue ones because one of the red buffalo heads decorating the seat of a post-1855 statue from Afo-A-Kom was repaired using blue beads. However, others seem to consider the blue beads as being the rarer of the two.

These are probably the most ancient beads known in Africa and, without doubt, replaced precious coral beads over the centuries.

### Blue Tubular Beads

These were replacement beads, but opinions vary on the identity of the beads that they replaced. According to Monod (n.d.), they may have replaced Phoenician or Carthaginian glass that was originally made to imitate lapis lazuli which was formerly found in Armenia and the Sinai. In fact, tubular azure-blue beads, more or less translucent and called *nana*, have been found for a long time by the Ado (the Yoruba of the Republic of Bénin) in small antique funerary jars in tumuli in the region. According to Commander F. Forbes (1858: 28), these precious beads could be purchased in 1850 for half their weight in gold dust. Africans would not accept comparable larger versions

of this bead (15-30 mm instead of 8-12 mm) proposed by European importers since the 17th century, the best of which permitted observation of the perforation through the glass. Furthermore, the Arab geographer Yakut already mentions blue glass beads in Africa at the beginning of the 13th century.

Concerning Cameroon, it would appear that these beads were replacements for bluish-coral beads manufactured in Benin and traded throughout West Africa. Pax (1928: 30-36) assumed that they correspond to *Allopora subviolacea*, gathered along the rocky coast of the former British Cameroon. This coral, when made into small cylindrical beads, had a bluish-violet color and took on a greenish tint through transparency.

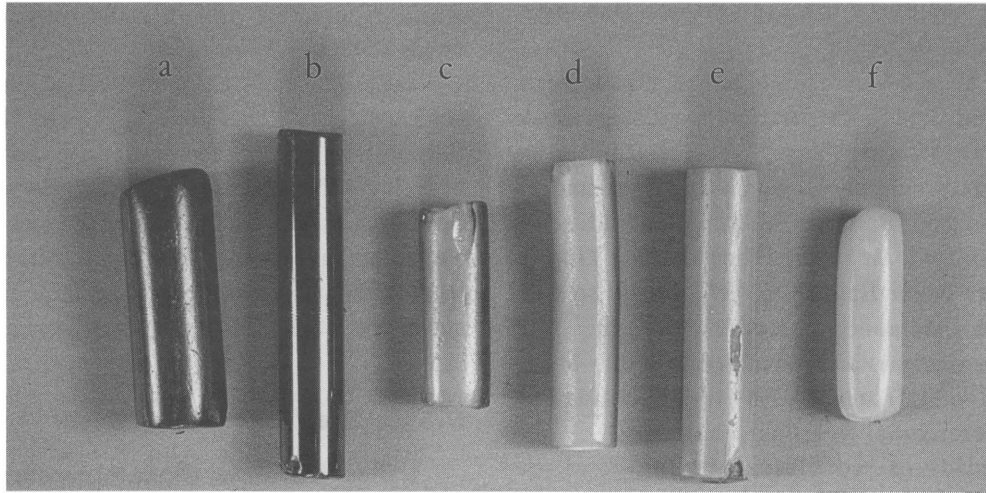
Unfortunately, no known examples of these precious beads exist today. A few fragments of this coral were collected in 1886, by the German K. Greeff in the Gulf of Guinea near the island of São Tomé. Exhibited for 40 years in daylight at the Hamburgisches Museum für Völkerkunde, they lost their tint, making them unrecognizable today. Neither R. Mauny nor T. Monod were successful in obtaining even one example of this coral in either Nigeria or Cameroon. Nevertheless, there is much historical evidence for the existence of these beads.

A. Talbot (1926) indicated that this coral was being gathered in riverbeds (actually, the ocean) already in the 13th century during the time of Oba Ewuare, a king of Benin.

In 1554, the navigator Ramusio (1554: 126) alluded to these small, thin tubes of “blue stone,” called *corili*, that blacks put in the fire to differentiate them from glass beads that could not withstand this test.

The Englishman Richard Hakluyt (1589: 333) spoke of “blue stones like beads” worn by the indigenous population during the late 16th century. Several years later, P. de Marees (1602) observed “blue-green and black stones from which beads are made by polishing them” in the Forcados River on the Gulf of Guinea.

In 1617, S. Braun (1625) described small stones, called *accarin*, offered by the local coastal population near Mount Cameroon where the stones were found in the ocean along the reefs and cliffs, just like coral. Seen from afar, they appeared to have a brilliant sky-blue color but, examined closely, they were transparent with a greenish hue.



**Figure 1.** Drawn tubular beads from Cameroon: a-b, blue; c-f, red.

In 1668, O. Dapper (1686) reported that this blue coral or *akoril* was pulled from the rocky bottoms of riverbeds by divers, and ground into oval beads in the same manner as branch coral. It was transported by the Dutch from its place of origin (the area from the Rio del Rei to the Camarões River) to Lahou on the Côte d'Ivoire and all along the Gold Coast.

John Barbot (1732) also mentioned *akory* or "blue coral" in 1682. Finally, in 1708, W. Bosmann of Hamburg once again mentioned blue coral as a precious trade article in West Africa, sold for its weight in gold if it attained a certain size.

Then, as indicated by Mauny (1949: 33-36), references to this famous material ended in the 18th century as if its exploitation had finally caused the disappearance of this kind of coral. The last recollection was that of T. Hutchinson (1858) who reported seeing this same false coral strung in the form of beads on the forehead and atop the head of King Akwa of Douala.

It is certain that European glass factories copied these beads in abundance, but it is probable that they were preceded by other imports, possibly Arab; Snelgrave, who traded in Cameroon in 1704, noted beads of value coming from the interior.

Many types of blue beads of different origins can be found together on the same object. Some are blue-black with a clear blue translucency, and 10-27 mm long by 5-8 mm in diameter (Fig. 1,a). They undoubtedly correspond to *nfwaya* beads, attributed to and reserved for chiefs as E.M. Chilver (1961)

observed at Nso, a kingdom in the northern part of the Cameroon Grassfields. These beads were used to purchase slaves at the rate of three necklaces or a hundred beads for one slave.

Another type is translucent blue-gray (10-27 mm long by 3-6 mm in diameter). A third, of an attractive translucent blue-green color, is much smaller (10-15 mm long by 3 mm in diameter). A fourth type (Fig. 1,b), with a deep blue-black color, a purplish translucence and with more brilliance than the preceding beads, is perfectly straight and regular (30 mm long by 5.5 mm in diameter). The perforation is well formed, and the bead is probably more recent than the others. Finally, there are very small, transparent aquamarine examples (4.5 mm long by 3.5 mm in diameter). They are often found mixed with blue seed beads on Bamiléké objects, such as those from Bansa. I have never seen the long, straight, tubular, opaque pale-blue beads called *nsomnom* which were observed at Nso by E.M. Chilver (1961).

### **Red Tubular Beads**

Here, also, opinions vary regarding the nature of the beads that the red glass tubes replaced. Small jars from the necropoli at Ados contained red tubular beads called *lankan* (16-22 mm long by 10-14 mm in diameter). They were perfectly polished, with a bright vermilion color imitating red coral. Monod (n.d.) thinks they are Phoenician, based on the Semiticopunic word *kouara* which signifies "city,"

and is also the name of a town in northern Dahomey, now the Republic of Bénin.

Beads of true Mediterranean red coral were, nevertheless, polished in the artisanal workshops of the Benin Kingdom in present-day Nigeria. Examples we can cite include a ceremonial coral fly whisk and an agate headdress from Benin in the Pitt-Rivers Museum collection in Oxford, England. When the last king of Benin submitted to the English in 1897, he did so with grand pomp, covered almost completely in coral.

I have personally examined several tubular beads of real coral (Fig. 1,f) mixed with glass imitations on the seat of a ceremonial Bamiléké chair .

Tubular beads of red glass imitating coral are probably the trade beads that were imported in the greatest quantities. W.G.N. van der Sleen (1973) indicates that they were found in large numbers at all Arab and pre-Portuguese sites in East Africa (e.g., Zanzibar and Mapungubwe). According to him, tubular beads of red glass from Venice did not appear until the end of the 18th century.

Again, different types of red beads with different origins can be found on the same object. Some beads are translucent red with an opaque white core, and measure 10-20 mm in length by 4-7 mm in diameter. Several of these beads have been found mixed with coral beads in ancient traditional necklaces from North Africa (Fig. 1,c). Others are almost identical, but the red color is clearer (6-20 mm long by 3-5 mm in diameter) (Fig. 1,d). Yet another type has a thin, dull outer layer of opaque Indian red glass covering an opaque black core (10-18 mm long by 3.5-6.5 mm in diameter) (Fig. 1,e). Its perforation and form are more irregular than that of the other two types. Similar beads that are shorter and have a larger diameter are shown as no. 132 on a 1909 sample card of the Società Veneziana per la Industria delle Conterie at the Pitt-Rivers Museum. This particular type exists in full necklaces in Mali, but is rare along the Atlantic coast.

At Nso, E.M. Chilver (1961) examined dull-red tubular beads called *mban-a-cecer* and used as spacers. They are, therefore, less valuable than the blue-black tubular beads reserved for chiefs.

#### **Other Tubular Beads**

I have been able to examine much rarer undecorated tubular beads that are somber green or

white. The latter probably correspond to the *kiyon* beads seen by Chilver (1961) at Nso.

Tubular beads are not well suited for adorning sculpted forms. This is possibly why the Bamiléké in the southern part of the country use mostly seed beads, utilizing tubular beads only for the seats of stools because of their strength. They are sewn in concentric rings, the tubes being fixed by a stitch between each bead in the same row. The Bamum people use them to adorn the fabric necklaces worn by warriors.

#### **Drawn "Seed" or "Pound" Beads**

Called *futomtcha* (Bamiléké), these small semi-spherical beads with a uniform color are especially common in the southern part of the Grassfields, particularly among the Bamiléké. Old beads of this form, being handmade, vary greatly in size and in the form of their perforation, whereas modern beads are often smaller and much more uniform (2.0 mm by 1.5 mm) because they are mechanically produced.

Other than a few rare exceptions (objects decorated or repaired relatively recently), seed beads from western Cameroon are of opaque glass, most often red, white or black. On the contrary, those found in Nigeria, especially on Yoruba objects, are often transparent with more varied colors. Local chromatic symbolism is responsible for the particular success of these three colors and the lesser interest in other hues. Black, symbol of the night, evokes the great mystery of relations with and sometimes conflicts between the dead and the living, materialized by burnt wood and black smoke. White, the symbol of the dead and the color of their bones, is used to repel evil spells, to protect against diverse misfortunes; medical rites found universally in Africa were symbolized by using the white of kaolin.

Red is the color of blood and the symbol of life. Pregnant women are painted with this color. Red is an attribute of power with which the royal heir or *menkam* in the Bamiléké kingdoms is anointed during his succession, and the king or *fon*, after his death, has always been represented by a powdered paste of *peh* (camwood).

The red beads (*pepan*) are of particular interest because they allow one to formulate certain hypotheses regarding the origins of the interest shown by Africans in these beads which were demanded from

European traders. Older beads have two superimposed layers, the inner one being ordinary transparent glass which appears blackish, while the external layer is a very pretty, opaque Indian red. Their size seems to be larger in the Bamiléké area (3.5 mm by 1.5 mm) than in the Ndop plain, near Bamenda in the northwestern Grassfields (2.0 mm by 1.0 mm). It would appear that their fabrication ceased a long time ago as I have noticed that many older objects exhibiting these beads have since been repaired using slightly larger beads with an opaque white core covered by a transparent bright red layer. Called *katsuki* by the Fulbe, they are found throughout Africa for a long period of time up to the beginning of this century. The Indian red seed beads were manufactured in Europe into the first half of the 19th century. They are definitely not included in the 61 colors of seed beads in the 1909 sample card of the Società Veneziana per la Industria delle Conterie where opaque white and black beads are represented, as well as those that are red with a white core (no. 98).

I believe that the Indian red seed beads were replacement beads, meant to provide copies of similar red beads, probably of Indian origin [ed.], dating to the Middle Ages. In fact, in 1941, E. Vernier and P. Gaudebout examined small Indian red glass beads from semi-Arab tombs (Arab sites were all destroyed upon the arrival of the first Portuguese) of pre-16th-century origin along the northwest coast of Madagascar. These ancient beads were monochrome and much more irregular in size. They were of tubular, annular and spherical form (Musée de l'Homme, no. 61.60.142), and duller than those of Venetian or Dutch origin. Other colors included amber yellow, transparent lemon yellow, jade green, jade white and transparent mint green. Van der Sleen (1973) observed that these beads were also found at other pre-Portuguese sites in East Africa (Mapungubwe and Zimbabwe), as well as in the Transvaal.

The link that can serve to connect these two types of Indian red beads is found at the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire in Dakar, Senegal, where they are juxtaposed in the same strand of beads (no. 49.253). It was found by Q. Brouin in Niger at the old site of Ksar de Djado.

It is more difficult to evaluate the age of the white beads (*fofo*, *atogotshe*) and the black ones (*manu*) —

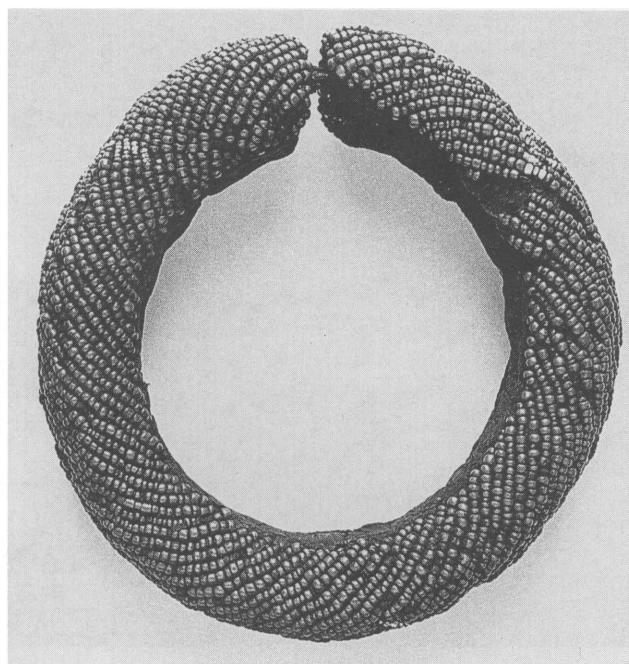


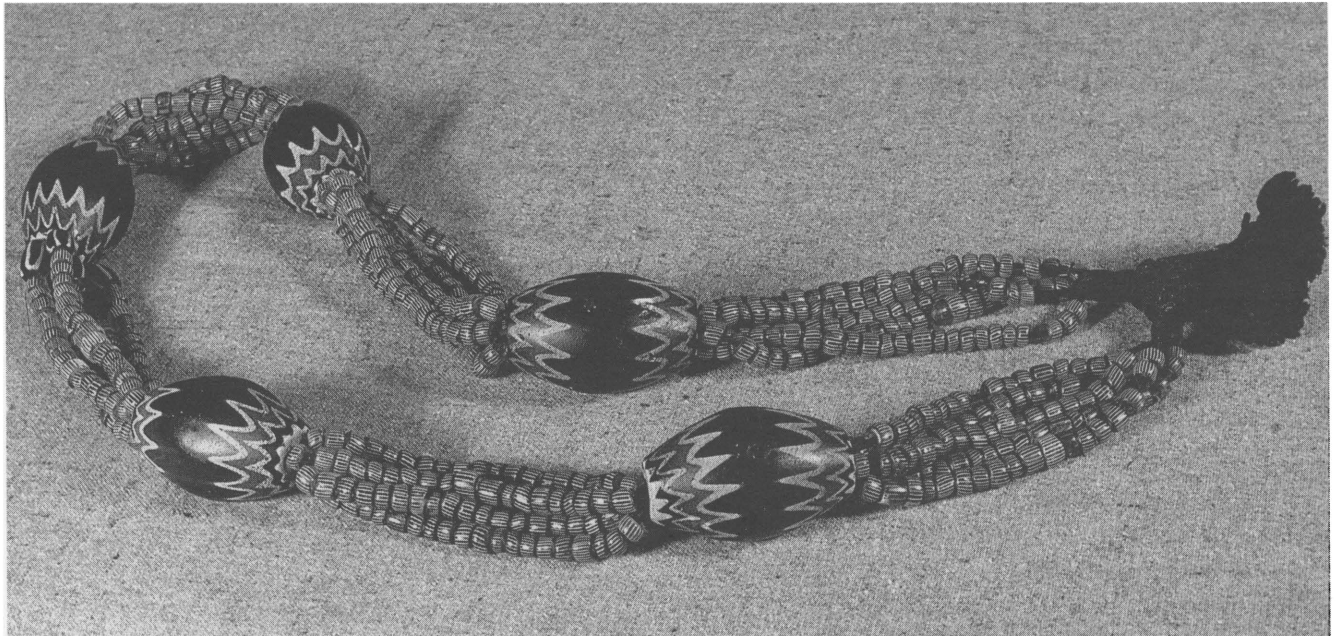
Figure 2. Bamiléké warrior's necklace.

both handmade — because they seem to have been continuously made until recent times.

White, black and Indian red were the colors most employed in western Cameroon. However, other rarer colors were sometimes used in certain territories: dark blue (Bafut), royal blue (Bamum), sky blue (Banka), mauve (Bafut), and, even more exceptional, clear green, rose, chrome yellow, bright red, etc. These are undoubtedly of more recent manufacture.

Less valuable than all the others, seed beads were still valued at approximately one teaspoon of beads for a full-day's work at the end of the last century.

Other than in Bamiléké country where they decorated a special type of warrior necklace, seed beads were used strictly for the adornment of sacks, leopard skins, ritual calabashes, belts, scabbards, certain masks and, especially, carved wooden objects such as ceremonial stools, commemorative statues, ceremonial staffs and footrests. The small size of the beads allowed them to conform to the delicate contours of a sculpture, and also facilitated the production of various fine designs better than any other bead form. Seed beads were threaded in long rows, fixed by a stitch every 4-5 cm to a piece of fabric that was stretched on the underlying wood and held in place by tiny pegs. The rows were then sewn side by



**Figure 3.** A royal Bamiléké necklace of chevron and *tosi* beads.

side. By simply changing the direction of the rows, even when using the same color beads, it was possible to depict certain details (e.g., breasts, shoulder joints and necklines)(Pl. IA).

Bamiléké warrior necklaces of the Dschang region were formed of a flat iron ring whose ends overlapped, permitting a certain amount of play in the object. The ring was spirally wrapped in leather to a diameter of about 35 mm except at the ends. The leather was covered obliquely with strings of seed beads, almost always Indian red in color (Fig. 2).

### Decorated Drawn Beads

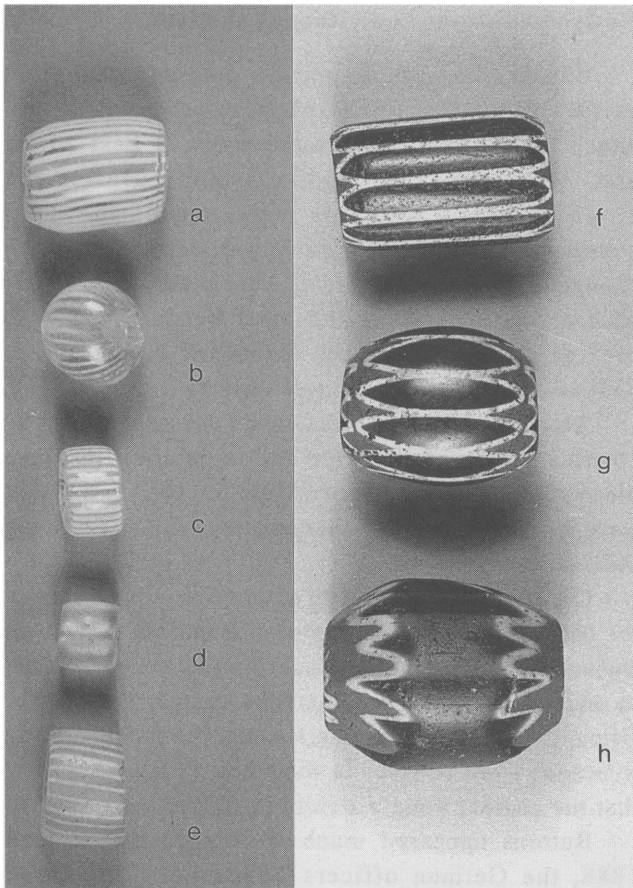
Distinctive beads with colorless bodies decorated with 20-30 thin white stripes are called *tosi* (Bafang), *ketcha* (Bangangte), *tokcheu* (Dschang) or *sakinci* (Nso). They are fairly small, varying from 5.5 to 9.0 mm in diameter and 3 to 13 mm in length. I once examined an entire necklace of this kind of bead in the northern savannah region of Bafut, where the glass was not colorless, but transparent pink. This necklace encircled the neck of a cult statue of a pregnant queen.

These are the most precious beads in the Grass-fields; wearing them is strictly reserved for chiefs and

dignitaries authorized by the chiefs (*fonte*, *mafo*, etc.) who wear them only during public events. Chiefs wear these beads at all times in multi-strand necklaces, or alternating with other beads, usually chevrons (Fig. 3). Their value is incredibly high, each strand said to be equivalent to two slaves or one wife. Chilver (1961) indicates a value of 20 beads for one male slave at Nso.

When asked about their provenience, people from Nso say that they come from the northeast, from Ntem or Banyo in the area of the Islamic Fulbé. The Bamiléké also indicate a northern origin. I found a few of them mixed in with other beads in a *keakea* necklace from Nigeria. Very close copies can still be purchased at markets in Mali from Bamako to Gao. However, the glass of Cameroonian *tosi* is perfectly clear and radiant (undoubtedly caused by the addition of lead which explains their higher specific gravity) (Fig. 4,a-c), whereas the beads from Mali are more ordinary and less clear with a faint bottle-green tint (Fig. 4,d-e). People from Cameroon, when shown these beads, can easily distinguish them from their own.

Similar clear beads are present on the 1909 Venetian sample card mentioned previously, but there are two times fewer stripes.



**Figure 4.** Decorated drawn beads: a-e, colorless beads with white stripes (*tosi*); f-h, chevron beads.

### Drawn Chevron Beads

Somewhat less valuable than the preceding ones, chevron beads are known as *ngassossock* or *mantu zeu* (Bafang), *siban* (Nso) or *bufo* (Bamunka). They are worn not only by monarchs for whom the largest examples are reserved, being alternated with one or several strands of *tosi*, but also by all uncommon people (the parents of twins, *Ngaka*, etc.).

The beads were made from drawn glass canes formed of six concentric layers in the form of twelve-pointed stars, except for the outer layer. Going inward from the exterior, the colors are blue, opaque white, Indian red, white, blue and white (Fig. 4,f-g). There is a seventh layer of ordinary transparent glass at the core of older examples (Fig. 4,h). The tapered ends exhibit six ground facets, giving the beads a barrel shape.

These beads, called *perla rosetta*, were made in Venice for centuries. Large quantities can be found

throughout West Africa, whereas their presence in East Africa is exceptional. The largest can reach a size measuring 7 cm in length by 5 cm in diameter, and can be seen especially in Cameroon, Gabon and Zaire, where they are all very high in the bead hierarchy.

### Striped Spherical Wound Beads

Known as *mbapi* or *ngapui* (Bafang), these are large opaque Indian red beads about 20 mm in diameter with slightly flattened ends, sometimes with a slight comma-shaped "tail" at the perforation. The beads are decorated with four longitudinal black-on-red-on-white stripes (Pl. IB,a).

These are essentially medicinal beads, reserved exclusively for members of the *kungan* society, being attached to the hair of their masks. They are also utilized in medicinal necklaces, *ngaka*, where they alternate between four to six cowries, chevron beads, blue beads (*mba mantu*) and perforated flints or *louk-sie* (Pl. IC).

Some examples of these beads appear to be very old, with an unknown origin. It is curious that they do not appear in the southern part of the country, and never in the Bamenda region. At the Treichville market in Abidjan, Moussa Cissé sells similar beads, but they are smaller, more flattened at the ends, and blue stripes almost always replace the black (Pl. IB,b). He says he imports them from Ghana. Venetian glassmakers manufactured the latter type up until the last World War, exporting them to Africa through German and Dutch intermediaries.

Yet another striped example has an Indian red core and an opaque white exterior decorated with alternating red and blue stripes [ed.]. Such beads effectively adorn the base of a striking leopard-crest headdress from Bamum (Pl. IIA).

### Wound Beads with Combed Decoration

Made one by one, these beads have translucent carnelian-colored bodies decorated with combed feather designs of opaque white glass with a blue-gray interior (Pl. IB,c). The beads are 16-22 mm in length and 8-9 mm in diameter. They are used uniquely in women's necklaces and can still be found attached to braids of hair on the masks of the *kungan* society of the Bamiléké.

This type of bead was already being made during the first centuries B.C. and A.D. in Alexandria. However, these were larger (20-40 mm long by 12-15 mm in diameter), and made of opaque black or maroon glass. Those found in great quantity throughout Africa are typically Venetian, being manufactured and exported until the end of the 19th century. An example is no. 620 in the 19th-century Venetian bead book at the British Museum (Karklins 1985: 75).

### Wound Beads with Spiral Decoration

Certain oblong beads of carnelian-colored glass exhibit a spiral stripe of clear glass with two entwined white filaments at its center (Pl. IB,d). Others, made of opaque black glass, exhibit a white spiral that protrudes slightly from the surface (Pl. IB,e), whereas the spiral stripe in the preceding variety is impressed in the bead. In the Grassfields, these beads are used in the same manner as those described previously.

### Wound Beads with Arabesques

In the shape of a date pit, these oblong beads are composed of opaque white glass decorated with four blue longitudinally oriented floral-like appliquéés (Pl. IB,f). A bead of this type is shown in the 19th-century Venetian bead book as no. 504 (Karklins 1985: 65), though the blue of these specimens is more inclined toward ultramarine than those found in western Cameroon. This leaves one to wonder at the number of workshops that must have manufactured the same bead styles. This is the type of bead that Stanley carried with him when he set out to find Livingstone.

### Monochrome Spherical Wound Beads

Very different from the four preceding beads, these are larger, semi-spherical (13 mm by 18 mm), and made of transparent blue opaline glass. There are slight circular protrusions or depressions in the glass at the edge of the perforation.

Merchants in Amsterdam were already trading these beads in the 17th century [ed.], but local inhabitants say that they are recent and from Germany. Called *mba mantu*, they are used only in necklaces, particularly those of diviners. They are also placed in the hair of *kungan* masks.

### Cowries, Buttons and Other Ornaments

Before the appearance of glass beads, there existed a trade in cowrie shells, or *mbuun* (Bagam), which were imported from the coast of East Africa and, especially, the Maldive Islands. During the colonial period, cowries were one of the most commonly used items of exchange, serving as small change and having less value than other trade goods such as brass manillas and other beads. They were used as gaming pieces and objects of divination, as well as beads used to decorate objects.

After grinding off their convex dorsal surface, the cowries were applied end to end in parallel lines to a piece of cloth so that the two "lips" on the ventral side were visible. A knot at either corner of the lips secured the shell to the cloth.

Objects ornamented with cowries have been seen in the past few years in the center of Bamiléké country at Baham, Bazou and Bafoussam. Cowries were sewn end to end in order to form Bamiléké crowns for queens. Often chosen from among prisoners, the great servants (*tchinda*) wore cowries in their hair in the same way that the ancient Fang warriors in Gabon wore them.

Buttons appeared much more recently. Around 1888, the German officers Tappenbeck and Kund noted the desire of Bassa women of southeastern Cameroon for porcelain or mother-of-pearl shirt buttons. The Germans imported 12 cases of them, but the market was quickly saturated and, by 1891, their successor, named Zenker, could no longer find any takers. These are the buttons that decorated the *tukum* of the Banka chiefdom.

Objects worn as pendants included leopard teeth (Fontem mothers of twins), small tortoise shells (Chief Njiki II of Bangangté), and beads made of perforated brass (A. Diehl, 1911, Linden Museum, Stuttgart, no. 75.108).

### OBJECTS DECORATED WITH BEADS

Less celebrated than sculptors, and more easily forgotten, bead artisans have, nonetheless, contributed greatly by giving certain objects their strongly expressionistic allure. The only artist mentioned in the literature is Fon Yonga II, the king of Bali, who was seen at work by the German colonial officer Hirtler in 1891.

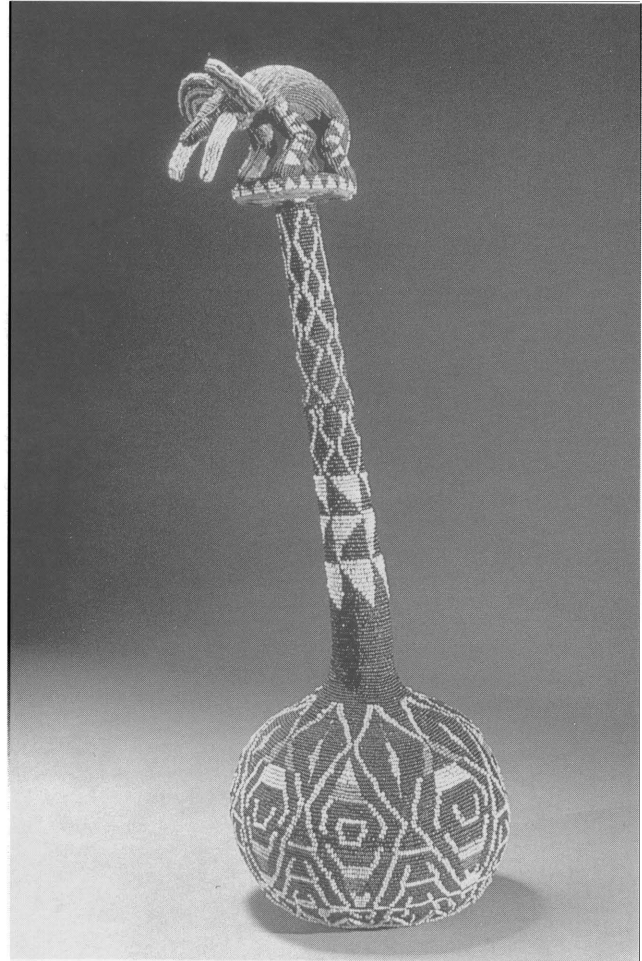


The most widely known Cameroonian objects to be decorated with beads are, without doubt, the ritual calabashes (cover; Pl. ID): *n'tu*, *m'ba* and *koko* (Bafoussam), *mimbo* (Bamenda) and *ugi fa* (Bali). In the past, when skulls eroded from the royal graves, some of the debris was appropriated from the site and placed in a beaded calabash. This replaced the missing skull and decorated the receptacle of the sculpted bowl which was carried during ceremonies commemorating the dead king. In fact, these calabashes are empty today and play only a minor role as royal attributes. In the case of full-blown formal ceremonies, queens aligned themselves behind the seated *fon*, each one carrying her calabash on her shoulder or in front of her chest. The long necks of the objects, formed from several juxtaposed calabash necks, were not waterproof, and thus were evidently not used as bottles for raffia wine.

A cloth generally decorated with *futomtcha* beads covers the entire calabash, imparting geometric polychrome designs to its neck, body and base. The designs include chevrons, lozenges and checker patterns (Bana, Bamesso, Bangou, Banyangam, Batouffam, etc.). The body is sometimes decorated with round areas containing swirled decorations (Bakassa, Baméka, Bandoumja, etc.). Further north, calabashes have a more barrel-shaped body (Bafut, Kom, etc.) than those from the Bamiléké region, and are ornamented with designs reminiscent of a spider's web.

The stoppers are made of wood covered with beaded cloth, often in the shape of the male sex organ. They also take the form of symbolic animals (e.g., the turaco bird, lizards, elephants [Fig. 5] and chameleons), all being linked with the legend of divine choice between man's eternity and his mortality.

Much rarer are beaded leopard skins called *guop n'gwi koko* (Bafoussam). Bernhard Ankermann described the first ones in Bali in 1907, and F. Christol photographed beaded skins from Bandjoun in 1925. I only saw one once, in 1957, at Bana. Unfortunately, it has since disappeared, having burned with other treasures in the great fire of 1961. This skin belonged to Mafo Mbialeu, the wife of Fon Tchokonjeu who reigned during the mid-19th century. It was certainly the most extraordinary of all known examples. Worn during dances, the gyrations of its blue, red and white form were enhanced by the rhythmic whirling of its enormous stylized rear claws and the symbolic lizards



**Figure 5.** Beaded calabash with elephant stopper, 19th century; 50 cm high; Grassfields, Bamiléké: Bamentum (courtesy Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago; neg. no. A109103c).

on the front paws, evoking their mortal power. The geometric form of the head, its strange oblique eyes and triangular whiskers added to the disquieting aspect of the beast. The two specimens from Bandjoun do not have this surrealistic allure, but are simply decorated with beaded chevron and lozenge-shaped designs.

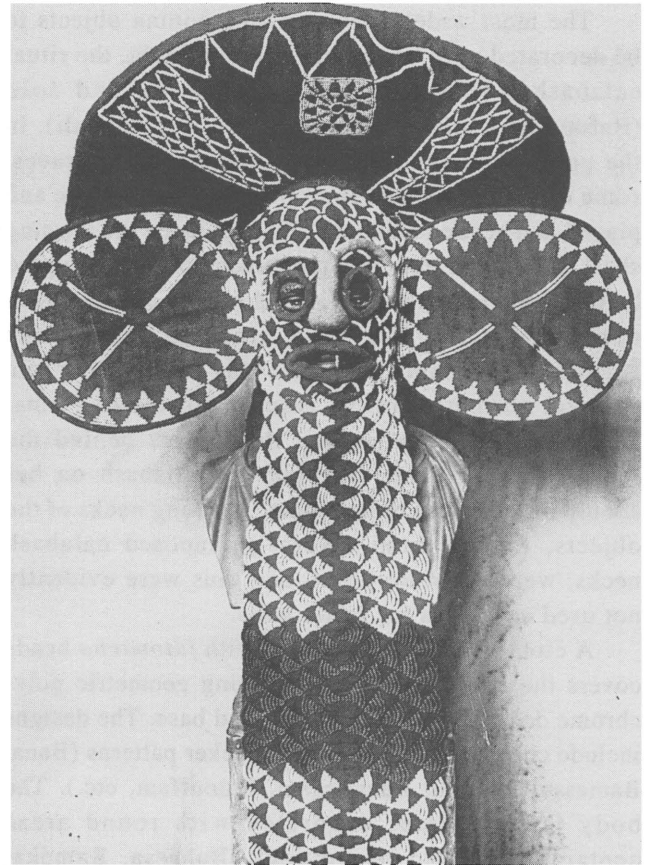
Even more exceptional are the beaded wooden skulls or *atwonzen* (Dschang), of which I know only four examples. They are held between the hands of the king during the slow victory dance called *nzen*.

Wooden or cloth masks are often adorned with beads. Without doubt, the most spectacular are the cloth elephant masks (Fig. 6; Pl. IIB): *tu pum* (Bafang), *beumtok* (Batouni), and *tchom m'bam n'tan*



**Figure 6.** Elephant mask (*tu pum*).

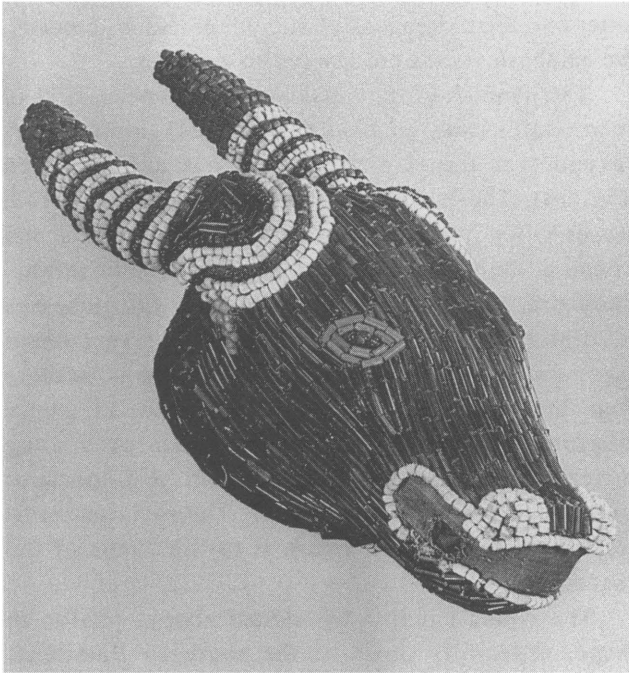
(Bana). These are very strange, formerly constructed of bark or fiber cloth made of raffia grass. The exterior is lined with an indigo cotton fabric and hemmed with red imitation felt, or with a simple red cotton fabric if they are more recent. The masks are pierced by two circular eyes edged with red imitation felt reinforced with plantain fibers. The nose and, especially, the mouth are indicated only by beads, if they appear at all. Large circular or semi-circular ears are sewn onto each side of the mask and made rigid with a tightly sewn design of small *futomtcha* beads. A long flap 40-120 cm in length, often weighted at the extremities by a row of large beads or cowries, hangs down both in front and behind. Certain masks lack the rear flap, and the front flap takes the form of a tube which is reminiscent of an elephant's trunk. The chief sometimes wears a cloth disk 40-70 cm in width (Fig. 7). The whole thing is entirely



**Figure 7.** Disc-topped elephant mask; Grassfields, Bamiléké: Bangwa (courtesy Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde).

decorated with beads arranged in chevrons, isosceles triangles, circles and, sometimes, stylized lizards.

These cloth masks are widespread in the Bamiléké country, whereas they are rarely found in the northern areas. At both Bandjoun and Bafoussam they are worn only by members of the *mkem* (A. Albert). Further east (Bana, Bakong, etc.), they are attributed to the *kuosi* societies whose members dance each week at death celebrations and at their biennial public celebrations and dances (M. Littlewood). In the west, it is again different: the masks are connected with the *aka* society of wealthy men from the Fontem basin. Robert Brain reveals that in Bangwa they were previously retained by the *manjong* society which is equivalent to the eastern *kuosi*. By consequence, they were different from those of the Bangwa *manjong* society.



**Figure 8.** Buffalo mask covered with tubular blue beads and trimmed with Indian red and white specimens; Grassfields, Batibo near Bali (photo by Steinkopf; courtesy Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Museum für Völkerkunde).

The *kuosi* dancers are clothed in vests or shirts of red imitation felt adorned with beads and cowries. Several indigo batik loincloths are wound around their waists. Heavily laden with these opulent clothes, each participant moves with slow, mysterious, undulating movements, turning in circles while flourishing their dancing whisks. According to their status, dignitaries additionally wear one or more leopard skins attached to their necks. If it is a *fon*, *fonte*, *mafo* or a highly titled person, a high, flat, folded headdress or prestige cap spiked with red parrot feathers or the feathers of a goatsucker (*tu nzen*) is worn under the cowl.

The *tu pum* can be compared to the *tu kum* of the *kungan* society of Banka which are covered with buttons and cowries. At Bandjoun, these same masks were worn by the *ma ku*, a kind of policeman and executioner in the service of the *fon* (A. Albert).

The *fé* (Bangan-Fokam) is a headdress in the form of a toque crowned with an animal that may be made of carved wood, but is most often made of cloth

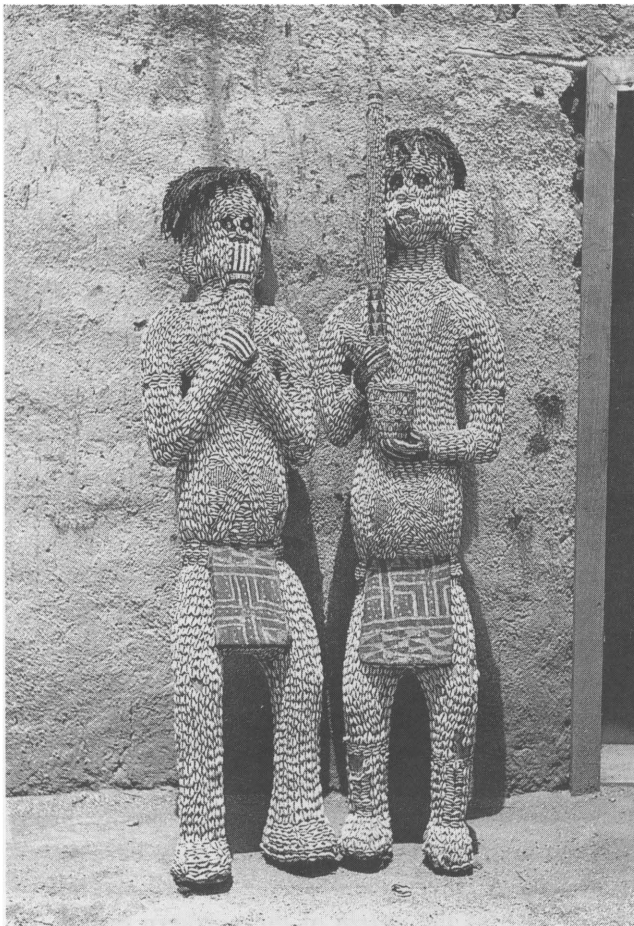
reinforced and stuffed with fiber. In all cases, the object is enveloped in a cloth garnished with multicolored beads. The headdress is worn alone, or in combination with a *tu kum* mask, thus combining two types of animals on the same dancer. The animal may be a bird, two dogs side by side, a snake, a chameleon or, above all, a leopard. It is possible that the dogs, despite their pointed heads, and the chameleons, with their large salient eyes, are merely representative of leopards, with their repetitive designs of diamonds, checkerboards or isosceles triangles representing leopard spots. The *fé* is worn only by members of the royal family on the occasion of various dances (*nzé* at Batchingou, *nzeu* at Bangan-Fokam, and *mambang* at Mankon).

Particular to the Bamiléké country, if not just to its northern border (Bagam), wooden masks entirely adorned with beads are normally found in the northern kingdoms. As a general rule, they are unique items used by royalty.

Large bovine masks covered with blue tubular beads of the *tomenda* type or cowrie shells exist in most territories (Fig. 8). Certain other masks, aside from the royal ones made of wood, may be covered with beads or cowries and belong to the societies of princes such as the *ngirih* of the northern region, or the exceptional *kam* or *akam* masks of the masked societies owned by important families having royal origins. These are flat anthropomorphic masks of which only the beard and hair are decorated.

I have already mentioned that commemorative statues from the northern region of the Grassfields are mostly decorated with tubular beads which do not permit the reproduction of fine detail and imbue a somewhat rigid aspect overall. Figures of servants entirely covered with sewn cowries can be found in both Bandjoun and Baham (Fig. 9). Statues covered with beads are rare in the Bamiléké country, but when they are so adorned, it is with small *futomtcha* beads which imbue a more precise decorative effect (Pl. IA).

Most ceremonial chairs are covered with beads, particularly when the seat and base are flat. While many of the chairs are undecorated, a good number exhibit rows of perforations which were used to attach decorative cloth. A royal Baleng chair (Fig. 10) is a very good example. It represents a standing triumphant *fon* whose legs merge with the caryatid hind legs



**Figure 9.** *Tchinda* statues decorated with cowries, Baham region.

of the elephant that supports the seat. With its small concave face, its high asymmetrically decorated convex forehead and its round cap, a skull held in the left hand is reminiscent of cubist art. The headdress of this war trophy suggests that it is the head of a chief and not a common warrior. The diverse symbols (sun, star, crescent moon, cross and other geometric designs) displayed on the body are not without interest and doubtless correspond to recent conceptions.

Small backless stools are found in all the territories, including the poorest. These consist of a simple seat supported by a caryatid animal — leopard (Pl. IIC), elephant (Figs. 11-12) or hyena, in order of frequency — or a human figure.

Sculptures of stands for supporting calabashes have a flatter receptacle than those for pots of *peh*, a type of maize porridge, or cola-nut bowls. While the

latter two are only occasionally decorated with beads, the calabash stands are always so adorned.

The handles of fly whisks used in dances, *sé leng koko* (Bafoussam) or *beuka* (Bamenda), are made of carved wood to which horse tails are attached (Fig. 13). These are veritable war trophies cut from horses killed in battles against the Bamum, Fulbe and Chamba. Only they know the usage of this trophy. They are royal attributes, and each *fon* possesses several examples. The *fon* can authorize certain dignitaries or warriors to use them as long as no more than three individuals use the same one. Elegantly manipulated by dancers of the *kuosi* or *nekan* societies, they are sometimes thrown at a spectator whom the dancers wish to honor. The recipient must pick it up, kiss it, and return it to the hands of the dancer.

The whisk handles are almost always phallic in shape, especially those of the southern Bamiléké. *Futomtcha* beads, generally in a chevron pattern, cover the surface. Other, more complex, handle forms are sometimes encountered including double animal horns (Banka, Foreke), and representations of a monkey (Batie), elephant (Dschang, Bamendou), bird, or one (Bamum) or two (Babouantou) persons.

Less-important objects were sometimes also embroidered with beads: the handles of drinking horns and battle swords, bracelets, pipe stems, the staffs of rank of queens or *tcheu-tcha* (Bamendou), and certain horned *nekan* dancing helmets (Batouni, Bangangfokam).

Other bead-decorated articles include ceremonial bags such as those that Senbum II of Bansa offered to the German officer van Houben. They were accompanied by two beaded royal belts representing entwined double-headed serpents, each with a pendant shaped like a triangular bag. One was decorated with a chameleon, the other with a large spider. These belts are attached by means of beaded straps in the form of protective serpents which Bamiléké kings sometimes wear around their necks during periods of mourning.

Peg-shaped ear ornaments also exist, measuring 6-7 cm in length and garnished with chevron patterns (R. Widmaier, Bali, 1912). Also from Bali, A. Diehl brought back a number of *cache-sexe* decorated with beads in 1911. Finally, there are large rectangular sword scabbards with two lateral handles decorated with chevron or lozenge-shaped designs (Fig. 14).



**Figure 10.** Royal Baleng chair representing a triumphant *fon* or king holding the head of an enemy chief.



Figure 11. Royal stool with elephant caryatid (Bamiléké).



Figure 12. Royal stool with double-headed elephant caryatid, 19th century; 40 cm high; Grassfields, Bamiléké: unspecified (courtesy Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago; neg. no. A109102c).



Figure 13. Dongmo, the next to the last *fon* of Bamendou, holding two dancing fly whisks.

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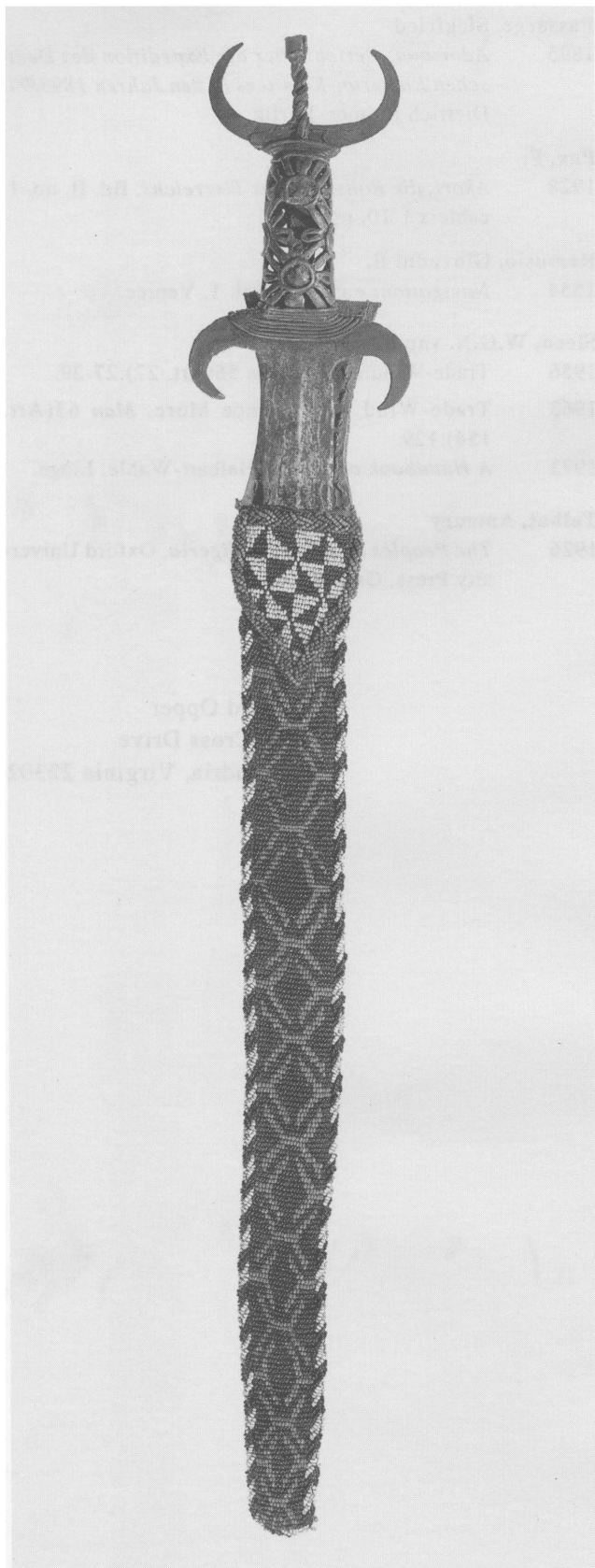
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**Figure 14.** Prestige sword with beaded sheath, 19th century; 51 cm high; Grassfields, Bamum: Fumban (courtesy Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, neg. no. A109153).

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