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Igbo Bead-Making: *Unveiling the Craftsmanship of Igbo Ukwu*

By Chuka Odike

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FEATURE
IMAGE

About 1,100-year-old glass beads, used as anklets or armlets for an elite, were found in a burial chamber at Richard Anozie's family compound in Igbo Ukwu, Anambra State, Nigeria.

Article image · caption retained from the published Ozikoro article

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In Igbo Ukwu, Anambra State, Nigeria, where skilled artisans crafted intricate glass beads thousands of years ago, their vibrant hues of blue, yellow, and green shimmering in the sunlight. Between the 7th and 11th centuries, this Igbo settlement thrived as a hub of craftsmanship and trade, as evidenced by the 165,000 beads excavated from the compounds of Isaiah, Richard, and Jonah Anozie, now preserved in the British Museum. These beads, alongside cornelian ones, reveal a sophisticated society that not only imported materials via the trans-Saharan trade but also produced beads locally, blending global influences with indigenous artistry. Let's explore the Igbo Ukwu bead-making legacy, its trade connections, and the cultural significance of these ancient treasures.

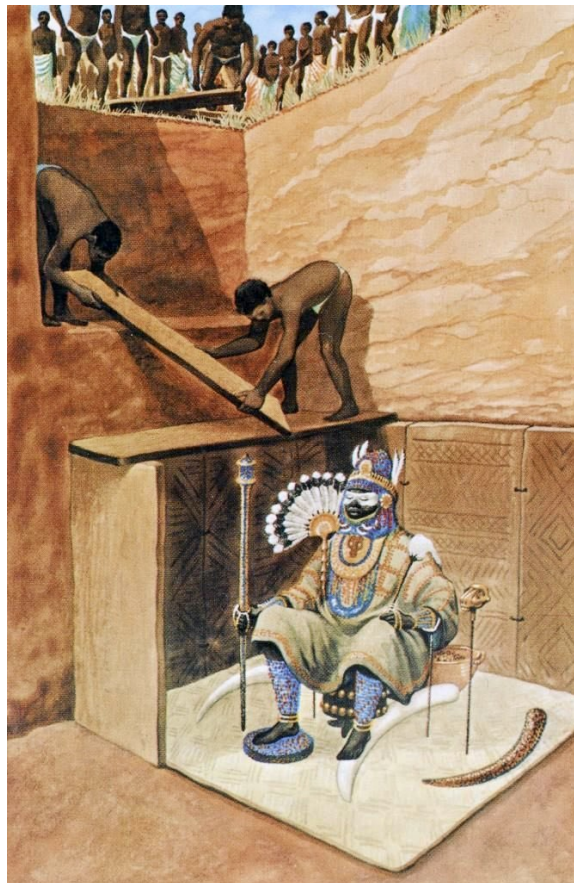
01

The Discovery of Igbo Ukwu Beads: A Window into Ancient Craftsmanship

In 1938, Isaiah Anozie stumbled upon an extraordinary find while digging a cistern in his compound in Igbo Ukwu—bronze artifacts and beads that would later captivate archaeologists. Subsequent excavations in 1959–1964 by Thurstan Shaw, alongside finds in the compounds of Richard and Jonah Anozie, uncovered 165,000 glass and cornelian beads dating between the 8th and 11th centuries. These beads were found in three key contexts: a burial chamber of a prominent person, a cache possibly for storage, and what may have

been a shrine, indicating their ceremonial and economic value.

The beads, in striking colors of blue, yellow, and green, were part of a rich regalia, suggesting the high status of the buried individual, likely a priest-king or noble. Similar beads were later discovered in nearby Amichi and as far as Gao in Mali, pointing to extensive trade networks that connected Igbo Ukwu to distant regions.



Recreation of a 9th-century Igbo-Ukwu burial chamber by Caroline Sassoon. This image illustrates profound respect for tradition, showcasing an Ozo who was buried seated on an Ozo stool, signifying a powerful connection to heritage.

02

Bead-Making in Igbo Ukwu: A Blend of Local and Global

While many of the glass beads were initially assumed to have been imported via the trans-Saharan trade—possibly from Egypt, where

they were either made or repackaged from sources like India or Venice—archaeological evidence confirms that bead-making was a local craft in Igbo Ukwu. Excavations revealed crucibles with glass slag, tools, and debris, indicating that artisans melted and reshaped glass to create beads on-site. Chemical analysis of the beads shows a unique composition, distinct from Egyptian or Indian glass, suggesting the use of local materials like sand and plant ash alongside imported glass.



Glass beads in blue, yellow, and green, along with carnelian beads—part of the 165,000 artifacts dating from the 8th to 11th centuries—were excavated from the compounds of Isaiah, Richard, and Jonah Anozie in Igbo-Ukwu, present-day Anambra State. Now housed in the British Museum.

Cornelian beads, made from a reddish-brown chalcedony stone, were also crafted locally, likely sourced from regional deposits. The process involved heating, shaping, and polishing the stones into beads, a skill that highlighted the Igbo's advanced technological knowledge. This dual practice of importing and producing beads underscores Igbo Ukwu's role as a cultural crossroads, blending trans-Saharan trade influences with indigenous innovation.

Cultural and Economic Significance



The glass beads in orange.

The sheer volume of beads—165,000 in total—points to their importance in Igbo Ukwu society. In the burial chamber, thousands adorned the regalia of a prominent figure, symbolizing wealth, status, and spiritual power. The cache suggests beads were stored as a form of currency or trade goods, while their presence in a possible shrine indicates a ritualistic role, perhaps as offerings or protective charms. The similarity of beads found in Amichi and Gao highlights Igbo Ukwu's integration into broader trade networks, connecting West Africa to North Africa and beyond.



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The Igbo Ukwu beads challenge earlier assumptions about pre-colonial African societies, revealing a civilization with advanced metallurgy, artistry, and trade connections as early as the 9th century—centuries before European contact. Some scholars debate the extent of local production versus imports, but the evidence of on-site bead-making tools confirms the Igbo’s active role in crafting these treasures.

04

A Legacy Preserved in Time

As of today, the Igbo Ukwu beads remain a testament to the ingenuity of ancient Igbo artisans. Housed in the British Museum, they continue to captivate researchers and visitors, offering a glimpse into a

sophisticated society that thrived over a millennium ago. The beads of Igbo Ukwu are more than artifacts—they are symbols of a vibrant culture that bridged continents through trade and artistry, a legacy that continues to inspire pride in Igbo and beyond.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chuka Odike

I'm a dedicated civil engineer with a passion for infrastructure development and community empowerment. With a strong background in engineering, my work focuses on creating sustainable solutions for urban and rural development projects. Outside of my professional career, I'm deeply interested in Igbo history and culture. I actively explore ways to impact society by using historical lessons to inspire and educate others about the rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people, aiming to bridge tradition and modern development.



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