

Was glass the classical currency of the Yoruba?

Seun Ayoade

BSc (Hons) Physiology

*Corresponding author

Mr. Seun Ayoade, BSc (Hons) Physiology, Independent Researcher. Alumnus, College of Medicine University of Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria. Winner, 2004 NIIT Scholarship (Grade A++).

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“The findings from the archaeological excavations at Ile-Ife include several pits that appeared to be furnace ruins, over 20,000 glass beads, 1,500 crucible fragments (ceramic vessels used in glass production), and several kilograms of glass waste. Results of the analysis show that Ile-Ife glass is chemically distinctive. It is now referred to as high lime high alumina (HLHA) glass — Not Known from Anywhere Else in The World” [1].

When the British added The Yoruba to their empire in the late 1800s the Yoruba utilized shell money as currency. However, cowries are not indigenous to West Africa and must have been introduced from foreign shores during the era of the transatlantic trade. So, apart from barter, what were the Yoruba using for currency before cowries were introduced? To be precise what did the Yoruba use for currency during the middle ages, say around the year 1100 AD? This was before the Yoruba had contact with the outside world—an era known for the famous Ife brass, copper and bronze busts and effigies? My guess is glass [2].

Here’s why—brass, bronze, copper and gold casting dating to the Middle Ages have been exhumed at Ile Ife but not in the form of tiny objects like rings etc. People could hardly have paid for goods with smelted heads! They are too bulky for a means of exchange. It is assumed only royalty had their effigies made because most bronze figurines have crowns on them. There is another material that appears in large quantities in excavations however— glass! And the portable size of the glass exhumed shows it could easily

have been used, singly or stringed together. Most of the glass pieces excavated have perforations in them. So far, the pieces of glass found are coloured yellow, black, whitish, red, blue with red stripes and black with yellow stripes. Some are shaped into tubes while others are circular and coin-like in shape. They are stunning to behold. Did the colour variations and shapes denote the denomination? More research and excavation needs to be done to explore this hypothesis. “There was a considerable glass industry. The waste from the glassmaking process and some of the equipment for making the glass have been discovered during archaeological excavations at Ife” [3, 5].

References

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4. *Encyclopaedia Americana*, 2001 edition, Volume 29, page 690.
5. *Ibid* Volume 20 pp 337-338.

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