

their own fantastic universe

CEREMONIAL CACHE-SEXES OF THE BANA GUILI KIRDI

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Women and girls from villages in northern Cameroon and adjacent regions in eastern Nigeria, southern Chad, and Niger wear colourful, graphically powerful, beaded pubic aprons for dances, ceremonies, and rites of passage.



All beadwork photos Ralph Koch



IN THE MANDARA MOUNTAINS of northern Cameroon,

women and girls from villages around Bourrah and Mokoko wear vibrantly colourful beaded pubic coverings – known as Dibul Kouana – for dances, ancestral ceremonies, harvest festivities and rites of passage such as nuptial celebrations and puberty rituals. Related Kirdi groups in eastern Nigeria, southern Chad and Niger make similar bead adornments, all of which are fed by extensive market in glass beads and bead aprons across the region.

Traditionally, only mature initiated Bana Guili Kirdi¹ women could display the hip-wide bead rectangle cache-sexe; the tiny triangular *tanga* appear to have been made for very young girls. Different styles identify the woman's village or ethnic affiliation, her age and marital status, while the number of cowries strung along the bottom edge is said to proclaim her social position, as corroborated by a striking Irving Penn photograph of the wife of a young Kirdi chief, whose cache-sexe features a thick ruff of shells. According to Angela Fisher, the bead skirts were often slit on one side on a woman's wedding night to symbolise the consummation of the marriage.²

The universal tradition and cultural significance of women's aprons and pubic coverings is of great antiquity. The earliest known textiles – or proto-weavings – were string skirts composed of strands of plaited and twisted fibre slung from the waist at the back or front of the body. Elizabeth Barber has recognised such rudimentary skirts rendered on Palaeolithic female 'Venus' figures from 20,000 years ago. Similarly, beads wrought from stone, shell, seeds, bone, teeth, and other organic materials are one of the earliest forms of human craftsmanship and personal adornment. The first beads in the African archaeological record date from 10,000 BC,³ while around 3700 BC, a Predynastic Egyptian bone votive carving of a woman accentuates her pubic area with a pattern of incised circles that stretches low across her hips and is strongly evocative of the structure of a bead apron – surely among the most ancient references to the type on the African continent.⁴

This elemental combination of filament and bead is one of the most continuously used forms of human attire and artistic expression. Indeed, as Lois Sherr Dubin observes in her encyclopaedic history of the art form, beads are "among the earliest evidence of abstract thinking," having been invested with symbolic meaning and embedded in ritual practice from prehistoric times. Barber makes note, too, of the string apron's association with child-bearing⁵ – a fundamental theme that is also implicit among the Bana Guili, given the cache-sexe's role in puberty and marriage ceremonies and the inclusion of cowrie shells, which are here,



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as elsewhere, evocative of fertility and spiritual protection.

Beaded ornaments, including necklaces, headbands, belts, amulets, and skirts with multicoloured geometric and figurative patterns are found throughout Africa. Many societies, such as the Zulu and Ndebele of South Africa, are renowned for the beauty and creative range of their bead art. But Bana Guili beadwork stands out for an extremely playful and improvisatory abstract aesthetic that explores and exploits eye-dazzling arrangements of colour, texture, line and pattern on both the large and small scale.

While the majority of Bana Guili cache-sexes collected over the past decade are quite regular, even static, in surface design, a considerable number display a remarkable stylistic freedom that pursues the asymmetric, the off-beat and the unexpected. Generated from stacks, clusters, grids and rows of triangles, lozenges, chevrons, diamonds, zig-zags, squares and stripes, such compositions are dynamic, intricate, and constantly in flux.

Bead artists of exceptional skill and inventiveness manipulate this pattern language, discovering a multiplicity of visual permutations and variations in shape and colour. They create pulsating changes and optical shifts, inserting minute details, erratic wedges, and stray tendrils or scatterings of dots of different colour and size into the configuration. Diamond grids go askew, checkerboards melt and elongate, lines oscillate and weave together. Some patterns are composed entirely of a thousand points of colour, twinkling with light like the night sky. These 'pointillist' designs suggest an innate and sophisticated understanding of the mechanics of visual perception and colour value.



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There is another dimension to the cache-sexe that cannot be conveyed in the abstract. The beads and pendant shells (and coins on the larger panels) swish and jingle when the body is in motion, while the more translucent beads (notably greens and blues) glint and flash as they catch the light. Such sensory properties of animation, sound, luminosity, and nubby texture subtly enhance the aesthetic appeal of the skirts, teasingly drawing attention to the vitality of the Bana Guili women and girls who wear them. The act of simultaneously concealing and revealing is a core idea in African culture. The cache-sexe is conspicuous by intent.

European and Indian glass beads were essential commodities in the trans-African trade network for over four hundred years.⁶ Some of the beads obtained by the Kirdi in exchange for millet and other crops may actually be of West African origin, such as those fashioned in the Nupe bead-making centre of Bida in northern Nigeria. But it is equally likely that the tiny seed-beads were imported from Venice, Bavaria or Bohemia and were circulated through Cameroon in the hands of Hausa and Fulani traders. Over time beads were constantly recycled as well. After independence in 1961, the Cameroon Government outlawed the open display of cache-sexes by women of all ethnic groups, but the tradition – especially among the more remote and animist Kirdi – appears to have been maintained since then.

Documentation of the symbolic function and ceremonial context of Kirdi bead art is scant. Although the Bana Guili material has become known outside the region fairly recently, an early Swiss missionary photograph from 1912 portraying Kirdi women wearing the cache-sexe **4**, corroborates the history of the style. Similarly, a girl's *tanga*, donated in 1966 to the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles as part of the Wellcome Collection, counters suspicion that these pieces represent latter-day ingenuity or that they were created solely for the tourist or export trade.

Perhaps the most surprising source of information is an article produced for *Vogue* Magazine in 1969 which presents a series of stunning, obviously posed, portraits of Kapsiki, Podokwo, and Fali women (neighbours of the Bana Guili) also taken by Irving Penn. Although dated in tone and commentary, the accompanying text by Mary Roblee Henry offers an invaluable account of the adornment, talismans and ochre body paint of “the little girls in beaded belts and fringed bikinis” and women “wild and wondrous....living in their own fantastic universe!”⁷

Her description of the region's spectacular mountain topography, which had so captivated André Gide in 1925 during his journey from the Congo to Chad, is vividly conveyed by Angela Fisher's photographs of Kirdi women and villages in *Africa Adorned*. With its weathered volcanic cones and towering rock pinnacles, the stark, rugged landscape of the Mandara Mountains provides a dramatic foil and backdrop to the blaze of colours in Kirdi beadwork. These miniature masterpieces of bead art truly merit greater recognition and investigation.

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NOTES

- 1 'Bana' is both the name of a Kirdi ethnic group, one of the many indigenous tribes in this northernmost region of Cameroon, and of a more widely spoken language, of which Guili or Gili is a dialect spoken by some 5,000 people. The term 'Kirdi', meaning pagan or non-believer, was originally bestowed pejoratively on these animistic societies by the Muslim Fulani who enslaved and then increasingly dominated them in the 19th century. It has since been reclaimed as a source of ethnic pride and unity (see www.ethnologue.com; www.mandaras.info; www.absoluteastronomy.com).
- 2 Angela Fisher, *Africa Adorned*, New York 1984, cited in Lois Sherr

Dubin, *The History of Beads from 30,000 BC to the Present*, New York 1987, pp.146-147.

3 Dubin, op.cit., p.25.

4 British Museum, no.EA 32141; see *10,000 Years of Art*, London 2009, p.14.

5. Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Woman's Work: The First 20,000 Years*, New York 1994, pp.59, 69.

6 John Pemberton III, *African Beaded Art: Power and Adornment*, Northampton, MA 2008, pp.2-7.

7 Mary Roblee Henry, 'Kirdis of Cameroon', in *Vogue*, vol.154, no.10, December 1969, pp.174-181, 237. I am indebted to Dr Kathleen Bickford-Berzock for providing me with both the *Vogue* and Basel Mission references.

7-8 Bana Guili Kirdi beaded cache-sexe, northern Cameroon, early 20th century. Courtesy: **7** Andrew Moraga, Berkeley; **8** Clive Lovell, London

