

Kati Torda: Life, Beads & Stories

Robert Irwin

Landing in Africa is for most people a powerful and memorable moment. Every sensation seems assaulted!

The heat hits like a hammer. The humidity presses down like a soggy blanket. The light is intense, disorienting, dizzying. Unfamiliar cacophonies, bright colours and strange odours engulf you.

Now, imagine it's 1979. You're a 20-year-old newlywed from Hungary. You've come with your Ghanaian engineer husband Ben Dagadu to make a life in his country, among his people. Oh, and you speak no English.

So began a life in beads for an extraordinary artist, creative spirit and storyteller – Kati Torda.

Akwatia: first beads

On arriving in her husband's village near Akwatia, Kati's in-laws welcomed her with the traditional gift.

'Family members each brought a bead,' recalls Kati.

'My sister-in-law strung them, each bead on a string. And those strings were put together as a bracelet. During the ceremony when it was given to me, people greeted me: This bead is from me to you. Welcome.'

This was Kati's introduction to the symbolic importance of the bead in Ghana. When Ben landed a teaching job, his

salary was boosted by a school bungalow. The young couple now had some money and their first home.

Next, Kati needed something productive to do. In Hungary, she'd taken up macramé, the latest craft trend. She'd sent her materials – cord and wooden balls – to Ghana.

'Once in Ghana, I wanted to relate where I live to my macramé,' says Kati. 'I wanted to integrate something from my new environment. When I went to the market, I saw traders selling beads.'

'I thought: The traders are men – interesting. And they quickly assessed me. They could see that beads were something new to me and that I had little money. So they showed me the beads I could afford, not the old and valuable trade beads.'

So Kati bought her first beads. Some worked, but many had holes too small for her macrame cords. From a Hausa leather worker she bought thin strips of leather which she used for stringing her first necklaces.

Gradually Kati started learning about the beads – absorbing their stories – and making beaded jewellery.

Accra: exhibitions, revelations and rights of passage

After a couple of years, Kati moved to the capital Accra. By now, she was raising

her two children. Her skill, creativity and reputation grew. She was offered her first exhibition at one of Accra's main cultural venues – the Goethe Institut. She exhibited earrings, bracelets and beads with their local names and meanings. More exhibitions followed.

All the time, Kati was learning more about the beads.

'I would go to the bead market to buy and to learn. Some traders might be important, with status in the community, so you must follow the protocols. For example: I made an appointment with one woman trader – a dignified queen mother – so I brought the traditional offering of schnapps.'

'It's about rites of passage: how beads are used from the cradle to the grave,' she realised. 'And all these stages call for specific beads. Because of the value, but also the material and colour.'

For example: naming. One week after you are born, when your name is whispered in your ear, you receive your first tiny strings of beads – usually blue and white – for your wrist, ankle and waist. Later, they will be carefully restrung as you grow.

Twins have special status, so they are distinguished at naming by seed and bone beads, usually in black or brown with white.

For girls reaching puberty, the Dipo

BELOW The Nourisher Amazon: Cores of horn tips cleaned and polished, filled with reconstituted turquoise beads, lined up to suggest the title. A choker on a string of small reconstituted turquoise beads with an Ashanti disk symbolises the mother as a rank. (See also p. 29)



Photos: Robert Irwin



ABOVE The Defender Amazon: Biscuit-shaped horn pendants layered as protection for a fierce Amazon. The choker protecting the neck is made up of white reconstituted magnezit beads. Brass pineapple designed by Afro d'Or.

ceremony marks their transition to womanhood. Waist beads play an important role as an intimate and erotic adornment.

Beads are used to celebrate achievements and milestones like marriage and birth, but also overcoming an obstacle like an exam, accident or operation. The beads make the event tangible and memorable, adding it to the calendar of your life.

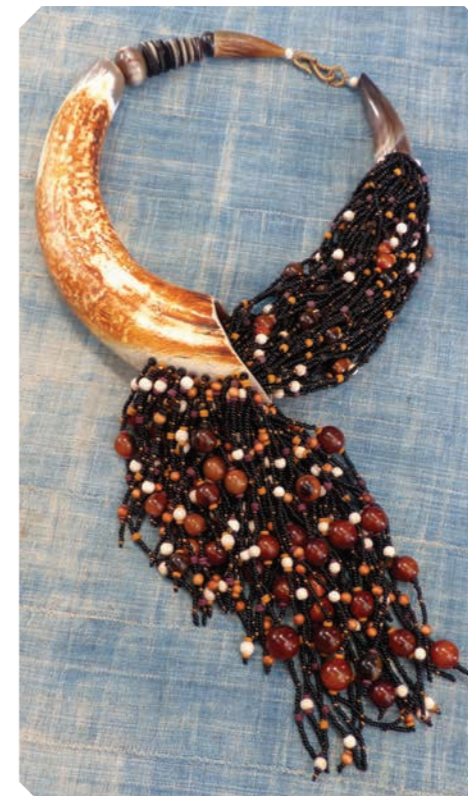
Beads signify status, wealth and power: gold and lost wax brass, for example. A queen mother wears white for purity. Natural beads like cowrie, bone and elephant teeth ally you with the traditional priest.

And finally, funerals. When you die, you join your ancestors. The beads can be black signifying mourning or white celebrating a long and fulfilled life. Red-brown bauxite beads express the profound loss of someone close.

The birth of Suntrade

In 1996 Kati's humble workshop, studio and selling space was 'in the garage with a screen door and ceiling fan' in the distant Accra suburb of Achimota.

Meanwhile, SOS Children's Villages, a worldwide NGO devoted to supporting children without parental care, was establishing a headquarters in Asylum Down, in central Accra. They had a



ABOVE The Guard I: Zebu (humped bull) horn, cleaned, cut, drilled and polished to accommodate multiple strings of seed beads, horn and bone beads. With slices of horn disks and finely polished horn tip cups. Brass S hooks designed by Afro d'Or. (See also p. 29)

storeroom which they wanted to rent out for income. Despite having almost no resources, Kati went out on a limb. Her bid was accepted.

'Alone, I did not have the confidence or know-how to run a shop,' Kati recalls.

BELOW The Guard II: Large zebu (humped bull) horn dressed with large brass bracelet over soft leather skirt, connected to a smaller horn for the back. With strings of brass beads smaller horn tips, balanced with chameleon pendant and weighted with brass and horn bracelets all spaced and bunched with raffia bows to complete a fierce look for the guard.



But with help from Hungarian friends Kata and Gabor, they installed shelving, lighting and locally made furniture and presto: an inspiring new shop and bead emporium called Suntrade was born. Designing jewellery and establishing a

BELOW Power: Dogon pendant held by a string of red 'Dutch' beads, spaced with local black glass disks and white heart seed beads. Counterbalanced with similar beads at the back to deep necklace on the shoulders.



ABOVE White Necklace: Cascades of natural white bone beads determine the use: a festive occasion. Held together by a highly polished black horn tip on one side, and doubled up the joints with akoso, golden amber and light horn tip and brass cup to complete the arrangement into a necklace.



ABOVE Footprint: An antique brass anklet turned pendant and filled in with remodelled trade bead fragments, a faceted Bohemian glass tube, a bell (traditionally used on the feet), Tuareg wooden beads, modern brass pipes and carnellians. Sienablemiler beads round it into a wearable necklace.

Kati and 'Auntie Dei Dei': Ghana's iconic doll

Ghana has many home-grown products. It exports gold and cocoa. It produces traditional beads and finely woven Kente cloth. But there's one iconic Ghanaian product you've probably never heard of.

Meet Auntie Dei Dei – Ghana's iconic plastic doll – often referred to as a clonette doll.

She was born in Ghana in the early 1950's and you'll still find her on market stalls all over Ghana and West Africa. Her father was an Indian industrialist who had surplus capacity in his Ghanaian plastic injection moulding factory.

She stands about 24cm (or 10") high and comes in a rainbow of colours. She wears a knee-length frock and shoes with ankle socks. Her hair is coiffed western-style and she has a rabbit tucked in the crook of her arm. When you squeeze her, she squeaks. She has a little brother called African Champion who wears a school uniform and holds a football.



Clonette dolls: Auntie Dei Dei and her brother African Champion



Clonette doll necklace by Kati Torda

Kati takes up the story. 'Auntie Dei Dei was Africa's first mass-produced toy. She was affordable. And the child didn't have to hold the doll carefully. Like in Europe, you know, you get a doll and yes it's yours, but don't play with it, don't spoil it. This one, if you spoil it, I can buy another. You can even fill it with water like a water pistol.'

Kati has a real soft spot for Auntie Dei Dei, incorporating her into numerous beaded necklace designs as well as her latest innovative works which she calls beadscapes.



Clonette dolls decorated by Kati Torda

Photos: Robert Irwin

shop was a big job for one person. Kati needed someone enthusiastic who could grow with her and contribute to every aspect of her young enterprise.

She turned to someone she already knew well and totally trusted – Vivian Gbortsu.

'Vivian's family could not afford education, so she worked as our home-helper to pay for her O-level studies,' says Kati.

'I asked her to join me in the shop and she accepted. First as an employee, then as a director. Vivian has been a big part of Suntrade since day one.'

So, Kati's jewellery designs had a showcase. Also, selling work from other local designers, plus traditional Ghana-made beads, Suntrade became a go-to arts and crafts destinations for both Ghanaian and international shoppers.

Going international: the Smithsonian

Kati has exhibited internationally as well, most notably twice at the National Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington. The then director, African-American anthropologist Johnetta Betsch Cole, invited Kati to hold a trunk show and lecture.

Somewhat intimidated, Kati protested, 'Academics and curators will ask me questions. I don't have an academic answer to these.'

'She just said: Kati, you have a story to tell. You will tell us your story.'

Which is just what Kati continues to do to this day.

'My mission is to learn and to teach,' she explains. 'Because as the aunts and grandmothers fade away, the custodians of the bead traditions disappear.'

The Ghana Bead Society

That thinking is what inspired Kati to throw herself into the Ghana Bead Society.

'Three of us kept meeting and always talking about beads. Bonnie Brown, wife of the then US ambassador to Ghana. Nene Tetteh Odorkor Tumeh II, a Krobo chief with a keen interest in matters of tradition. And me.'

'Why beads,' you wonder. 'Because beads literally permeate life in Ghana. Women, men and children all wear beads and practice bead culture. Bead designs, colours, traditions, significance and ceremonies – they all matter.'

Kati casts her mind back to 1993.

'Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher were with us, visiting Ghana to photograph Dipo ceremonies. They suggested we should form a Ghana Bead Society.'

'Bead makers, traders, designers and academics joined and the society enjoyed over 20 active years with exhibitions, bazaars, lectures, workshops and regular meetings. Members contributed their labour and knowledge to catalogue the extensive bead collection at the University of Ghana. For many years, the society had an office and shop in a family house, courtesy of member Christa Dagadu and her doctor husband.'

But eventually, faced with the twin problems of money and staffing, 'we had to become dormant,' says Kati. It just goes to show you: volunteer-run organisations are up against the same pressures, wherever they are.

Flash forward: Jewellery Art Show, March 2022

It's a sizzling hot night in Accra and a long way from Kati's garage studio.

Take eleven Ghanaian artists including celebrated bead maker Cedi Djaba, Jill Quarcoopome and Kati Torda. Add textiles and leather. Metal and horn. Plus lots and lots of beads.

Now crank up the decibels and the spotlights. It's showtime. Sultry models sway down the catwalk. It's spectacle. Utterly dazzling, in-your-face, mind-blowing. An explosion of boundless creative energy.

And still, one thing endures: the beads.

RIGHT **The Guard I** (see page 27) ushers in Kati's collection at the Jewellery Art Show 2022 in Accra.



Kati Torda on stage at the Jewellery Art Show 2022 in Accra



TOP LEFT
Ashanti Royal: An original lost wax brass bead necklace. The hollow pendant is stuffed with soft red cloth to enhance the design. A trader brought it to us to sell his old collection.

TOP RIGHT
The Sorcerer Amazon: Three necklaces assembled to mark the office of the sorcerer among my Amazons. Bamboo corals, a flat brass disk, an old brass bell, cowries and modern local square black beads mark a fearsome office holder.

BOTTOM LEFT
Like a fine hat: Like a fine hat, this necklace fits a fine occasion. Golden man-made amber, some with fashionable repair design, highly polished horn beads, pre-independence coins, black glass powder disks, Ashanti brass double fan and European trade beads.

BOTTOM RIGHT
Medley from Ghana: A fine assembly of old and new beads from Kati's table. Tuareg silver, man-made amber, bodum and akoso beads from Krobo region. Large white agate calls for attention.

Photos: Robert Irwin



Kati Torda and Vivian Gbortsu



Sun Trade Beads temporary shop during 2022 renovations

Photos: Robert Irwin

Surviving COVID: the future

Unlike the UK, USA and Europe, Ghana seems to have handled the pandemic reasonably well, with comparatively low case numbers and deaths. However, the enforced national lockdown of shops, businesses and markets was a big hit on an economy where many people eke out their living day-to-day.

During lockdown, Kati and Vivian were far from idle. They took stock, looked to the future and made some fundamental changes in how they do things.

Turning 60 and now a Ghanaian citizen, Kati decided it was time for a change. She stepped down as a director.

Today, Vivian is the sole owner of the shop, now rebranded as Sun Trade Beads. Kati is still around on the fringes as a consultant. She contributes ideas and expertise when required, but most of her energy now goes into 'telling the stories'.

Beadscapes: telling the stories

Pushing the boundaries even further, Kati's story telling has evolved into a new form – which she calls her beadscapes.

'Before, I was telling only the story of the beads. Now I'm using the beads to tell my stories.'

She combines a variety of

materials including African fabrics into a framed pictorial representation – with beads always at the heart of the work.

'Sometimes, the beads almost assemble themselves,' Kati explains. Look at Old Man Reflecting, her beadscape portrait of a dear old friend, a man of almost 90 (below).

'He's very successful. He's so fond of talking about his past achievements and adventures. So I say: OK, I'll give you a

medal.' She points to the beads forming a medal in the upper left corner of the picture.

'And whenever I ask about his daily wellbeing, it's always about his bowel movements.' Kati laughs. So she's unzipped his body to reveal his heart and below it the beaded tangle of his intestines.'

'And when we get friendly, he says: 'You know, darling, the magic is still there!' So below his intestines, two cowrie shells and a long red bead represent his manhood.

Referring to the seven coloured beads on the right side of the zipper, Kati continues: 'And you can see him over the years... with every drop of blood, sweat, semen, urine, his strength is ebbing away.'

'And now he's saying: OK, when you bury me, you do this, you sing that.'

Finally, touching the red triangle bead, Kati interprets, 'Red is our colour of mourning. And here are his two eyes, closed forever.'

'You see,' she reminds us, 'in Ghana, it can all be said in beads.'

Text and photographs © Robert Irwin, 2022



Old Man Reflecting: beadscape by Kati Torda

Sun Trade Beads Instagram:

https://www.instagram.com/suntrade_beads/

Magie Relph and Bob Irwin have travelled the length and breadth of Africa for over 30 years, searching out fabulous textiles, beads and baskets for their fair trade business The African Fabric Shop: www.africanfabric.co.uk

Find them at a World Textile Day near you: www.worldtextileday.co.uk

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