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Behind the Bead: The Art and Story of Ghana's Krobo Glass Beads

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Introduction

In the lush and rolling hills of Ghana's Eastern Region, the art of Krobo glass bead-making pulses at the heart of community life, echoing centuries of creativity and resilience. Here, beads are not only ornaments but living symbols that connect the past, present, and future. Worn during rites of passage, traded in bustling markets, and crafted with patience in open-sided workshops, these small jewels embody the spirit and ingenuity of the people who make and cherish them.

Krobo glass beads stand as much more than adornment—they are storytellers in glass. Their colors, shapes, and patterns form a language understood by generations, whispering messages of identity, prosperity, and hope. From the ceremonial waist beads of a newborn to the proud necklaces of a new bride or the treasured heirlooms passed down through families, beads mark the milestones and mysteries of life. Each one is shaped by hands that have learned from the wisdom of elders and that pulse with new ideas for tomorrow.

This book invites you on an immersive journey into Krobo beading: a world where discarded bottles transform into treasures and where artistic heritage is preserved even as innovation pushes its boundaries. Drawing on in-depth cultural research, artisan interviews, and historical context, we'll explore how this centuries-old craft has evolved—surviving the tides of trade and the pressures of globalization. You'll meet master beadmakers, witness their meticulous processes, and gain insight into both the triumphs and the challenges faced by today's Krobo artisans.

But the story of Krobo beads is not static. It is continually written anew in marketplaces like Koforidua, during the vibrant festivities of bead festivals, and in studios where local traditions meet global fashion trends. The creation and commerce of these beads support families, sustain local economies, and increasingly catch the eye of international collectors and designers. As markets and tastes shift, Krobo beadmakers are finding fresh ways to innovate while staying rooted in tradition.

What you will discover in these pages is a living craft shaped by history and humanity. Each chapter weaves together voices from the Krobo community, alongside stories from collectors, wearers, and contemporary artists. Hands-on guides will encourage both newcomers and enthusiasts to appreciate and even try aspects of the craft, responsibly and respectfully. Striking visuals—whether in photographs or in your own mind's eye—will help illuminate not only the finished bead, but the dignity and culture of those who create them.

Whether you are a traveler seeking to understand Ghana's cultural riches, a collector

fascinated by artisanal beauty, or a curious reader eager for stories that transcend the ordinary, *Behind the Bead* is your invitation. Join us at the crossroads of art, tradition, and change—and discover how tiny glass beads help tell the extraordinary story of West Africa's beading heartland.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land of Beads: Introducing Ghana's Krobo Region

Nestled in the Eastern Region of Ghana, where the Accra Plains gently meet the Akuapem Mountains and the Afram Basin, lies the ancestral home of the Krobo people. It's a land of undulating topography, with elevations ranging from 50 to 600 meters above sea level, offering a diverse landscape that has shaped their history and their remarkable craft. This region, particularly the areas around Odumase-Krobo and Somanya, is famously known as the heartland of glass bead production in West Africa.

The Krobo people are the largest of the seven Dangme ethnic groups, who together form part of the larger Ga-Adangbe ethnolinguistic group in southeastern Ghana. Their history is rich with tales of migration, resilience, and a deep connection to their land. Though the precise origins are debated among scholars, with some tracing their roots to Eastern Nigeria or Dahomey (Benin), oral traditions suggest a journey from the Chad area of Sudan, through the bend of the River Niger, before crossing the Volta River and settling at the Tagologo Plains, or Lolovor, in the Accra Plains around the fourteenth century. This name, "Lolovor," an Ewe term, poignantly signifies "love is finished/ended," alluding to community quarrels among early immigrants over farming land.

From these plains, the Krobo people continued their westward movement until they discovered a formidable mountain, approximately 338 meters high, divided by a gorge into two distinct sections. This mountain, aptly named "Klo yo," meaning "town of rock/mountain dwellers" in Akan, became their initial settlement after separating from other Dangme groups. It served as both a physical stronghold and a spiritual sanctuary for over four centuries, providing natural protection against invading tribes. The Krobo would famously defend themselves by sending boulders tumbling down the mountainside, effectively thwarting their enemies' advance.

Life on Krobo Mountain fostered a unique architectural style, with impressive stone houses, some boasting multiple stories and as many as 20 to 30 rooms. Early missionaries who visited the mountain were astounded by this unprecedented architecture in their experience in Africa. As the population grew, many Krobo people began to work on farms in the surrounding lowlands, but the mountain remained their sacred cultural center, where all significant rituals, including the renowned Dipo ceremony, took place. The priests, known as Djemli, were traditionally forbidden to leave the mountain overnight, underscoring its spiritual importance, and ancestors were often buried within family homes on the mountain, further solidifying its role as an ancestral home.

The Krobo people are divided into two main administrative and traditional areas: Manya Krobo and Yilo Krobo. While the exact date of this division remains uncertain, historical accounts suggest the Krobo were largely united until at least 1858. In earlier government records, Manya Krobo was referred to as Eastern Krobo, and Yilo Krobo as Western Krobo. The names themselves hold cultural meaning: "Manya" is derived from "maonya," meaning "keep your mouth shut," reflecting the proverb "one does not need to talk about everything one sees." "Yilo" comes from "wa yilo," meaning "we don't eat this," a reference to an oral tradition where the Yilo, upon returning from Krobo Denkyera, had to relearn Krobo dietary customs and frequently inquired about taboo foods.

The Krobo are primarily an agrarian society, with agriculture forming the backbone of their economy. Over half of the population in districts like Yilo Krobo is engaged in farming, cultivating staple crops such as maize, cassava, yam, cocoyam, and plantain. Vegetables like tomatoes, garden eggs, pepper, and okra are also widely grown, often on small-scale farms. The famed "Huza" farming system, where land is acquired by cooperative groups, has been central to their agricultural success, enabling the Krobo to cultivate substantial areas of cash crops like mango, cocoa, and oil palm, even beyond their immediate region. Beyond farming, the Krobo are also known for their expertise in general trading and, of course, artisanal works, most notably bead-making.

This industrious spirit and deep cultural heritage are beautifully exemplified in the various ceremonies and festivals that punctuate the Krobo calendar. The Dipo ceremony, a pivotal rite of passage for young girls, is perhaps the most well-known. Held annually, typically in April or May, it marks a girl's transition from adolescence to womanhood, signifying her readiness for marriage and the responsibilities that come with it. During this time, girls undergo a period of seclusion, receiving instruction in essential life skills, cultural traditions, and even sexual health. They are adorned with exquisite beads, symbolizing their transformation and new status within the community. The culmination often involves a public procession where the newly initiated women, known as "Dipo-yo," perform the traditional Klama dance, showcasing their elegance and preparedness for adulthood.

Another significant cultural event is the Ngmayem festival, celebrated annually at the end of October, primarily in Odumase Krobo. This festival is a vibrant celebration of the harvest, originally focused on millet (ngma), which was a dietary staple centuries ago. Though maize and cassava have largely replaced millet as primary food sources, the name and spirit of thanksgiving remain. The Ngmayem festival is a week-long period of socialization, family reunions, and a grand display of Krobo culture, complete with music, dancing, and feasting. It is a time when local kings and chiefs, adorned in elaborate robes and the famous glass beads, gather for durbars, or public gatherings, to discuss community issues and receive blessings from priests.

The vibrant life of the Krobo region is further accentuated by its bustling markets, which serve as crucial hubs for commerce and cultural exchange. The Agormanya market in Odumase-Krobo is particularly renowned for its bead markets, which take place every Wednesday and Saturday. Here, beadmakers and traders converge, offering a kaleidoscope of glass beads to local buyers and international enthusiasts alike. This economic activity, alongside other small-scale industries like agro-processing and handicrafts, contributes significantly to the livelihoods of thousands of artisans and to the broader Ghanaian economy.

The Krobo region, then, is more than just a geographical location in Ghana. It is a vibrant tapestry woven with rich history, deep-rooted cultural practices, and a thriving economy, all intrinsically linked to the artistry of its people. It is a land where ancient traditions continue to inspire new generations, and where the rhythmic clinking of glass beads tells a story of enduring creativity and identity.

Try It: Locate Krobo on a Map

Grab a map of Ghana, or pull one up online. See if you can pinpoint the Eastern Region. Within this region, look for towns like Odumase-Krobo and Somanya. Notice their proximity to the Akuapem Mountains and the Volta River. This geographical context will help you visualize the landscape that has nurtured the Krobo people and their unique beadmaking traditions for centuries.

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