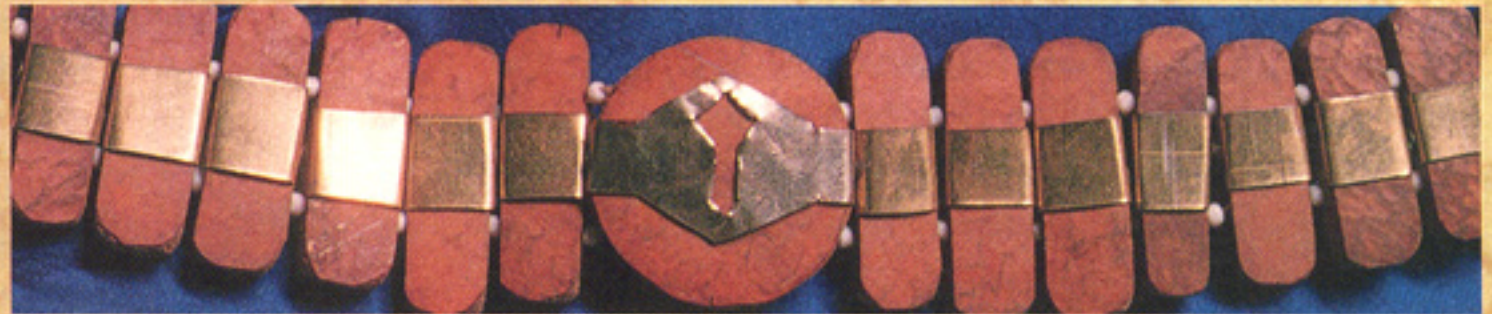


The Language of Beads

Janet Goldner



Kandioura Coulibaly is an exceptional artist who makes jewelry and costumes for Malian cinema and theater as well as for private clients. He is also a member of the Groupe Bogolan Kasobane, a pioneer collective of six contemporary artists who have been working together for twenty-five years.

Kandioura has been collecting and working with the stones and beads of Mali since the early 1970s as a way of preserving one symbol of beauty that makes up the culture of the Malian people. He is concerned with preserving the traditions of Mali which are in danger of being lost because of the cultural disruption and erasure that resulted from colonialism. The symbolism—the ancestral heritage—is almost forgotten and many people no longer know the uses and meanings of the traditional ways. Kandioura is a fervent advocate for a society profoundly inspired by local values and knowledge, an ardent defender of the preservation of the originality of Malian and African cultures within contemporary social modernization.

Kandioura and I discussed how and why he began collecting beads and making jewelry, the meaning and importance of beads in Malian culture, the changes that have taken place

over time, and his dream to use his collection to open a bead museum in Bamako, the capitol of Mali in west Africa. The discussions took place in August and September 2001 at Kandioura's house in Bamako, and also included Manon Ouellet, who is working with Kandioura on the classification of his bead collection.

WHY ARE BEADS IMPORTANT?

I started the collection as a child, since I could distinguish my left hand from my right. The first bead I remember was the one I found around my neck. It was put there by my mother. I saw it on other children where I was born, on me, on my brothers, and on my mother. All the children had a cord of beads around their waist, chest, and neck.

Beads were important. Each stage of life had its jewels, its beads. You see beads around the waist of young girls. Young boys have a bead around their necks. You read the stages of life through the beads. I remember the adults at times of work without jewelry but for ceremonies and holidays I always saw them with lots of jewelry. My mother worked hard but for the celebrations after the harvests she wore beads. And then the work started again, and she took off all the big jewels and beads.

For a baby, first they put beads around the waist. They are pretty and at the same time protect the baby. They have a magic and protective role. The beads also massage the baby's waist. They turn around the body of the baby so the blood flow goes where it should. The beads focus the form of the baby

