

Ileke - Conta -Guia - Bead



One of the most noted customs of Orisha worship, both in the Yoruba homeland in Africa as well as throughout the diaspora into the Americas, is our wearing of sacred beads. Around the necks of almost everyone involved in traditions of Orisha worship our beads hang emblematic, the most public face of our path. There is so much to say about the beads, but where to begin and where to end? With so many bits and pieces of information and whole systems of meaning and purpose wound into them, the beads loop endlessly about us, apparently without beginning or end. We can explore their symbolic language within the vast panoply of material things used in our traditions to give embodiment to spiritual power and presence while also looking at the historical and pragmatic aspects of their manufacture, acquisition and stringing-up by *olorisha*, or Orisha devotees. We can look as well at the beading of those who follow traditions of the Kongo...the *paleros* or *nganguleros* of Cuba, and Brazilian *Nação Casanje*, Kongo or *Angola*, and by Brazilian *Umbandistas*...and let ourselves

wonder at their own unique, ingenious working of beads into a vast array of liturgical jewelry and talismans, also hanging on millennial spiritual insight and tradition. The fascination is endless.

I could write of the ancient forms and rules which guide the use of beads in our traditions or of the constant, brilliant innovations and creativity of our bead-workers. In great lengths, I could elaborate an endless strand of verbiage. Here, however, I will be brief and try to be a bit choosy, like a beader myself, picking through an overflowing tin of remaindered, unsorted, and loose beads to pick out and arrange, in this tiny assemblage, a string of words which can, like any piece of Orisha beadwork, allow us to perhaps *see what is otherwise unseen*, to *value what is otherwise unvalued* and join us together, hold us *who are many as One* with the Spirit. Spirit, which runs through us all like an unseen thread, it moves and engages all things to be other and more than just themselves, to become rarified. Beautiful creation.

I write here about the use of beads in the two Brazilian African derived traditions into which I've been initiated. Ancient, yet living traditions that have caught me like a lost bead myself and carried me into a glorious new life. *Candomblé de Ketu*, originally from the state of Bahia, and the *Umbanda* of Rio de Janeiro, both taught to me in the matrix of my spiritual family in Rio over the course of the last three decades. I started learning these traditions when I was nineteen years old on my first trip to Brazil in 1984, and later, when I was initiated as an *olorixá* in Candomblé in early June of 1993. I learned most of what I know about Umbanda with Iyá Marinete beginning on that first trip to Rio and continuing through the years. Even up to now, while also having 25 years living "made" in Candomblé tradition, I'm still learning bits and pieces, more at every turn. My teachers have been many, but most important among them have been Iyá Marinete Martins de Souza, my *iyalorixá* at Barao de Ubá, Iyá Niluaiyê, *minha mãe pequena*, "my little mother," and Ogan Jorge Alabê of Miguel Couto, whose lessons and personal mentoring have been most invaluable. I've also learned much from Vinicius of Inlé (now passed on) at Barão de Ubá and Marcelo Menezes de Souza, current *Axogun* of Barão de Ubá. As always, I must give homage and thanks to the "roots" of the traditions I have received, whose lives of dedication to Orisha have made this gift possible, two elders now passed on ahead, first, Iyá Areonites Chagas, Mãe Nitinha of Casa Branca, who brought its *axé*, sacred force, to Miguel Couto, Rio de Janeiro, and secondly, Pai Jerônimo de Souza, founder of Tenda Espírita Pai Jerônimo at Barão de Ubá, Rio de Janeiro. It was, in truth, the vision of lavish beads on the necks of these two elders that bound me in a singular trance which persists to this day. *Iba xê iyá ati baba mi. Mojubá*



Because I'm writing just about these two traditions from Brazil, for the rest of this essay I shall use Brazilian spellings and renderings of African words, as that my focus is on the Brazilian preservation and elaboration of the original African cultures. Most terms common to the entire Diaspora should be easily recognizable to anyone familiar to this field of study. I also provide English translations for most terms.

O Fio - The String

While hidden and unseen, the string that holds the beads together into *uma conta*, "a bead," (as we call a necklace dedicated to a spiritual purpose,) is, in truth, its most spiritually potent element. The string represents the "bind" or "tether" of the Spirit which holds us into relationship with a deeper, unseen power in our lives. While the body may grow weak, and while the mind may wander off, the Spirit is always strong, unbreakable, held and holding present. The string is always made of natural fibers which can absorb the medicinal essences of the blood and leaves that are released through rituals through which the bead will be consecrated. Thus the bead comes to "hold" the power of the rituals which conjured the spiritual virtue that the bead and our practice will keep constant in our lives. Even though we may sojourn to work and play in the world, the bead goes with us, connecting and reconnecting us to something singular, one, constant, and which never lets go even as the many things we grasp at in life, and which grasp at us, entangling passions which may come and go, various, inconstant, and so often unreliable, pull and tug at us. The embrace

of the bead is unrelenting, even if the material beads were to break or get lost, or even thrown away, it's hold continues. Spirit is like this.

Plain, white cotton or unprocessed raffia are the old traditional favorites for the thread, although linen threads are also used. In Candomblé de Ketu the string is, before any beads are strung onto it, lightly coated with pure beeswax. This custom probably originated pragmatically to assist the beader in stiffening the thread so it would pass more easily through the beads being strung upon it. Needles were, and are not, traditionally used to string beads for spiritual purposes. Nowadays, with the use of much smaller beads than in the past, a needle becomes requisite to string beads and so its use has become commonplace despite old injunctions against it. The traditions of beads continue regardless of whatever breaks or novelties may end up marking their use.

So strings break, just as our attention and dedication also sometimes lapse, and so when a bead breaks it is taken as a sign that reparative rituals and treatments need to be given to both the bead and its wearer. Many will tell you that when your bead breaks its because it "took the blow" from some evil coming at you in the world. Could be some witchcraft, some Evil Eye or blighting resentment thrown at you from an envious hater on the other side of the room, could be something dead and forgotten, something cruel and unrelenting and having lost all perspective and constraint, it comes at you across the bounds of the normal, everyday order of things. The bead, *like all of our protective medicinal rituals which constitute Candomblé*, is designed to thwart such invisible, unpredictable and uncontrollable calamity from hitting you, coming at you broadside or sneaking into the back of your skull, *to prevent its insidious taking hold in body or soul*. The haters are out there. Life is a struggle. Love is a battlefield. The bead takes the blow. While this may be true, the reality is that we are always "under siege" in the course of daily living and so, what is important isn't that you're under "psychic attack" at such times you feel it, but that your own internal integrity is coming undone and needs strengthening. *Simba Simbi*. "Uphold what upholds you." Feed what feeds you. Pick up what you can of your scattered broken beads and come home and we will get you back together. *As voltas do mundo são grande, mas seus poderes são bem maior*. "The ups and downs of the world are great, but your powers are greater still."



As Cores - The Colors

The next element of beads used in our traditions to consider are the colors chosen to adorn the invisible, colorless, power of the string. The beads make seen what is unseen and their colors reflect and make readable the quality of Spirit infusing any given strand of consecrated beads.

In the old kingdoms of West Africa, as in much of the world, beads showed privilege and power, wealth that imputed possibilities, possibilities material, social, aesthetic and spiritual. Beads confer royal powers and responsibilities; Yoruba crowns are still covered in beads, myriad possibilities. Similarly, each Orixá regally endows its children certain possibilities in accordance with its own deeper, mysterious nature. The colors of the beads encode the specific energies and powers of the various Orixás which move through the world and ourselves like the shifting hues of a rainbow. Each of us a singular flash of light displaying a unique spectrum of choices, passions, preferences, and particularities. So emblazoned, like the colors of medieval European heraldry, in Candomblé we carry our colors forth into the world to declare *outwardly* what *inwardly* is carrying us into the world—*Ancestors, Orixá, Eledá, Olodumarê*.

There are two ancient codes of color used in most of the African traditions found in the Americas today, both are very similar, yet with some marked differences. Each attempts to make apparent invisible aspects of Spirit's manifestation in the world as well as affirm the particular connection of the

wearer of the bead to such manifestation. The first, and probably most widespread system in Brazil today is that inherited from the Nagô, or Yoruba people from what is now Nigeria and Benin, as preserved in the Candomblés of Bahia, while the second, and yet older, is that coming down to us from the Bantu speaking peoples of what are now Angola and Kongo. In Brazil we see the Congo colors used mostly in the Candomblé de Angola, the *Nação Cassanje*, and in the various Umbanda traditions.

Nagô Colors

Traditionally, the Nagô see three primary colors: *funfun*, white, *pupo*, red, and *dudu*, black. All other colors are seen as flowing from or to these three base colors. Each color has a quality or personality. All beings are seen as having their own particular color or color combinations, each its own modulation of the underlying matrix of divine Light illuminating and shining through all things. What we call Olodumarê, "God," is Light pure and simple, yet also its absence: entropic and potentiating darkness. While Orixá, the "bright" or manifesting, imminent side of Olodumarê, is found in the visible spectrum and holds all the shimmering variations of the rainbow, Olodumarê, in Its vast entirety, is both the rainbow and, also, the sky in which it appears, as well as the invisible darkness hiding in the eye which beholds, recognizes and rejoices in its brilliant colors.

The old Nagô people saw the primordial world, before "creation" as we know it, as a ripe, swelling calabash dangling from the Divine root and expanding into infinite, waiting space. This original "Calabash of Creation" was split apart (some say) by the breaking one of Olodumarê's taboos by human, ego-centric action, which resulted in the separation of one half of the Calabash, the *orum*, "the Heavens," the spiritual dimension, from the other, the *aiyê*, the material world which we perceive through our physical senses. The rituals and ministrations of Candomblé seek to heal the result of this "things fall apart" situation in which we live...where all things must, in their time, suffer lack, *aito*, loss, *ofô*, illness, *arun*, struggles, *ijá*, infirmity, *ailera*, and ultimately death, *iku*, and where we only with great difficulty come to know our other, heavenly half, our *egbe*. Our source, *iponri*, or Creator, *Eledá*, even our own inner "head" or self, our *Ori*, appear supernatural and unknowable over here. The rainbow colors which allow us to envision our Orixás hang forever out of reach, appearing ephemerally only for moments in the sky or in the mists of waterfalls. Our beads are one way that we seek to put things back together, to reconnect, to grab hold of or join again in the eternal growth of Olodumarê's wholeness, the *igbaxê*, the eternal Calabash of Manifestation.

Olodumarê is both sides of the calabash of the sky and thus holds day and night, this world and the otherworld, being and becoming. In the chart below I will give some of the common attributes of the three primary colors through which Orixá makes itself visible, split up into the many Orixás we commonly know, as well as indicating their “shade,” the individual colors of the visible spectrum, the flavors of life.



Nagô Colors

Color:	Funfun (White)	Pupo (Red)	Dudu (Black)
Visible Colors:	white, transparent	red, orange, yellow, pink, terra cotta, brown, maroon, purple	black, indigo, blue, turquoise, green, purple
Energy:	cool	hot	neutral or hot/cold
Principle:	potential/conception	action/manifestation	entropy/negation

Qualities:	patience, reflection, conscious, empathy, passivity, <i>avoidance</i> , <i>intransigence</i> , <i>vanity</i>	passion, anger, vitality, will power, pleasure, <i>violence</i> , <i>arrogance</i> , <i>impulsivity</i>	wisdom, determination, stalwart, abiding, <i>guilt</i> , <i>shame</i> , <i>judgment</i>
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Kongo Colors:

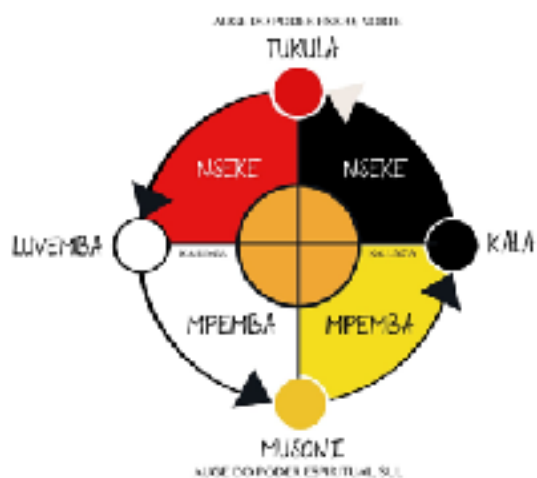
The schema for color coding beads in the Kongo traditions has much more variation from tradition to tradition, place to place, than what we see in the Nagô derived traditions. A rough guide can be made however and I present it in the following chart. The sacred number four, derived from the Kongo Cosmogram, the Kongo cross, called *Dikenga dia Kongo* or *Tendwa kia nza-n'Kongo*, informs the schema. The *Dikenga Kongo* depicts the movement of the Sun through the Sky, over and under the earth, through the course of a day and reflects not only the rhythmic manifestation of all beings, but of the journey of human consciousness in particular; the colors follow along.

Kongo Colors

Color:	Black	Red	White	Yellow
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Sun:	<i>Sunrise</i> Predawn till Late Morning	<i>Noon</i> Late Morning to Early Afternoon	<i>Sunset</i> Late Afternoon till Early Evening	<i>Midnight</i> Late Evening to Predawn
Visible colors:	Black, green, blue, dark shades, variegated colors	Red, all bright colors	White, translucent	Yellow, pale and pastel shades of colors
Energy:	Kala , cool	Tukula , hot	Luvèmba , cool	Musoni , hot
Principle:	Birth, growth, infancy and initiation	Maturity, work, mastery	Age, death, passing memory and passion on to others, teaching	Gestation and rebirth, transcendence, spiritual evolution
Umbanda guides:	Mabassa, Crianças, Nntoto or the Earth	Encantados, Caboclos, Povo da Rua	Pretos Velhos, Santos, Linha do Oriente, 'Calungueiras'	Seréias, 'Calungueiras,' Santos, Jurema

TEMPO CÔSMICO BAKONGO (Tandu Kiyalangana)



Materials Used for Spirit Beads

The materials from which the beads are made also gives us information about the type of spirit the bead is carrying, as well as the maturity, status and powers of its wearer. These differences of status are more pronounced in Candomblé than in Umbanda. I will not dwell too much on them here.

Beads made from opaque substances, such as porcelain, are generally used for “male” or “young” Orixás or entities, while translucent glass and crystal beads are used for female Orixá or entities, or for spirits associated with the water element. Larger *firma*, or signature, beads are used to mark the cyphers and number patterns of different Orixás, Odus or Entities into a bead. Generally, older practitioners will have more elaborated beads with more firma beads, and sometimes multiple strands composing the bead and also with more complex patterns of alternations of colors. Beads and status go hand in hand, especially in Candomblé. Be wary of becoming vain about beads, conceited about status. People know the head-trip and will read you fast on it.

Each Orixá, ancestor, entity or guide, or any being for that matter, has its own particular colors, its personality and tastes. The attributions of these colors to a given spirit varies somewhat from one tradition to another and even within a given tradition, say Candomblé de Ketu, we see marked differences from one lineage or house to another. There are multiple variations in which color or type of beads are used for any given Orixá or spirit. Many are the arguments, debates and ensuing attitudes as to which are correct. Yet for the most popular and well-known spirits the bead colors and patterns are remarkably standardized. I give those most used in my lineage of Candomblé de Ketu and then for Umbanda in the charts below.

Beads for Orixá (Candomblé de Ketu)

In the parlance of Candomblé a necklace of beads for an Orixá is generally called an *ileke* in Yoruba or a *conta*, the word “bead” in Portuguese. The beads are usually long enough to hang below the navel to about the waistline, just above the pubis. Most community members’ beads will be a simple, unmarked strand of beads in the colors of the patron Orixá of their house or of the Orixá considered the “*dono da sua cabeça*,” the owner of their head. Most members will usually be given just one to three strands of beads. Generally, one strand for the Orixá to whom their house is dedicated, one for the Orixá of their babalorixá or iyalorixá, and one for the Orixá who “owns” their own head. Those community members who have “their heads done” and are thus consecrated in the service of an Orixá “as priests” (as we say up here in the United States)(called

iyâô, olorixá, or adôxu) will have each strand of their beads closed with one larger bead, called a *firma* or “signature,” and will also be given more strands of beads.

Iyaôs will also be given, during their initiations, the *iyân* and *mocã*. The *iyân* is a bead of nine strands, each made in the colors of the principle Orixás of the Ketu Nation and closed off together with some larger *firma* beads in the colors of the *iyâô*'s patron Orixá. The *mocã* is a braid of raffia marked with two tassels, also made of raffia, which represents the umbilicus of the rebirth implied in the initiation process; it is also sometimes used as a yoke or tether to constrain the Orixá when it manifests in trance. During their initiation rituals *iyâôs* will wear the *quelê*, a very sacred bead of multiple strands that fits close around the neck, like a choker; it is only worn during the rituals of initiation and during the time of *preceito*, the days directly following the initiation. Also adorning *adôxu* are the *dilogun*, beads of sixteen strands made in the colors of the *adôxu*'s Orixá which are also worn during rituals of *fundamento*, profound ritual importance, or otherwise kept on the shrine of the Orixá. Finally, those *adôxu* who have completed the seven year cycle of initiation, the *odun meje*, or who have been given a title or post in the community, wear strands including multiple, larger beads marking the bead pattern, these often made of semi-precious stones, antique trade beads, or bone and coral. Older *adôxu*, called *ebônmi*, will also, while performing the obligations of their seven years, usually receive a bead called *runjeve*, which is considered by some as a particular Orixá in and of itself. In Ketu, the *runjeve* consists of a single strand of terra cotta beads marked with coral beads and one periwinkle blue *segi* bead closing the bead.

Few today adhere to the many old rules and traditions guiding the making and wearing of beads in Ketu tradition. One sees uninitiated folks wearing *firma* beads, as well as *adôxu* who've not completed their “seven years” sporting elaborate beads and semiprecious stones, implying maturity and power they've yet to achieve in the community. While old-timers scoff at such vanities they have, in large, simply given up on the whole subject of maintaining the old ways as younger generations use the beads to affirm status and personal importance rather than as a reflections of their place within the larger matrix of community. While a general lack of knowledge regarding the traditions of beads can be seen as the primary reason for the old traditions suffering current novelty and misuse, one senses that there has been a shift, beneath the surface...like a string is slowly coming unravelled. Gone nowadays is the sense that we are each beads, *joined together*, on the uplifting thread of the Spirit. Now, as each of us seeks to shine as a stellar individual, bejeweled as we can afford, the simple rigor of tradition becomes undone, scattered across the floor in all directions. Many in the tradition have never even learned the old rules about beads. One elder of mine, Jorge Alabê, while discussing individualism, pretentiousness and self-

centeredness in the practice of contemporary Candomblé touched on the topic, “I don’t worry about it too much. It’s just beads. People think Orixá is about them and their problems, about their need to be somebody, but it’s not just that...Orixá is what comes after us, the continuity, what keeps rolling on.” Beads will break, get stolen or lost, and so shall we. “But what was received from your mother? That can’t be faked” affirms my elder. The invisible string is what matters, what binds, what holds and connects, what goes on and on through each of us.

Ileke for Orixá in Nagô (Nação Ketu)

Orixá:	Bead color:	Bead Type:	Pattern/Number:
Exu	Red and black, or black and white, or red, black, white	Porcelain	Alternating or 3, 7, 17, or 21
Ogun	Green, sometimes indigo blue	Porcelain	Solid, 7
Oxossi (Odé)	Turquoise blue	Porcelain	Solid, 7, 16
Obaluaiyê (Shoponon)	White and black, or white, red, black	Porcelain	17, 14, 7
Omolu (Shoponon)	White and black	Porcelain	14, 7
Jagun (Shoponon)	White, maroon, black	Striped porcelain	14, 7
Oxumarê	Yellow and black	Striped porcelain	7, 14
Ossanyin	White and green	Striped porcelain	7, 14
Logun Edé (Odé)	Amber and turquoise blue	Glass and porcelain	alternating; 7, 16
Inlé (Erinle, Odé)	Turquoise blue	Glass	7, 16
Xangô	Terra cotta and white	Porcelain	6, 12
Airá (Ara, Arira)	Red and white	Glass and porcelain	Alternating; 6, 12
Irokô	Brown and green, or brown and grey (?)	Striped porcelain, or alternating	12
Oxum	Amber, yellow	Glass, rarely porcelain	5, 16
Yemonjá	Translucent, aquamarine green	Glass	7

Iyansã/Oyá	Terra cotta	Porcelain	9
Obá	Brick red	Porcelain	?
Euá (Iyewa)	Wine red (?)	Glass	?
Nanã Buruku	White and indigo blue	Porcelain	14
Oxaguian (Obatala)	White and periwinkle blue	Porcelain	8, 16
Oxalufon (Obatala)	White	Porcelain	8, 16
Ifá	Yellow and green	Porcelain, alternating	16
Ibeji	Orange, terra cotta and turquoise; or multi-color beads strung randomly	Porcelain, alternating	2, 7

Beads in Umbanda

A bead made for the spirits working in Umbanda is called a *guia*, Portuguese for *guide*. Thus the beads used in Umbanda are to guide a person with the aid of the spiritual force of the spirit for which it is made. Umbanda guias are shorter than Orixá beads, they fall somewhere between the sternum and the navel. Also, with Umbanda beads we see much more innovation, elaboration and differentiation than we do with Orixá beads, which are made following stricter, time honored and community sanctioned rules. Umbanda beads vary due to the direct communication with our guides who will often give individualized directions for making a bead dedicated to them while present through the trance. Nonetheless, the colors and patterns I give here are the most common and well-recognized.

We often see small charms and other emblems from both African and non-African sources incorporated into Umbanda beads, especially from the cultures surrounding the Mediterranean sea. Common symbols include the Latin cross, star of David, hand of Fatima, *figa*, *cornio*, little swords, moons, heart shapes, arrows, axes, pitchforks, etc. For Caboclo spirits beads made of bone and seeds, animal claws and teeth, and other beads reflecting an indigenous American origin are frequently used.

While originally separate traditions the contemporary practice of Candomblé and Umbanda frequently cross over each other in the lives of those who practice them, just as Catholicism and other forms of Christianity are also woven into the lives of those

who practice these originally very separate, distinct African traditions today in Brazil. In the day-to-day there are different opinions as how to maintain the purity of practice, not “mixing” the traditions while still also maintaining one’s multiple obligations to a variety of sources for spiritual sustenance. As to the beads, some will wear beads for both traditions at the same time while others would never think to do so. However, during rituals for one tradition beads for another are not worn. During daily life, outside of the sphere of ritual activity, many wear the beads for different traditions in combination while others do not. It’s your neck, your head. Let your guia be your guide.

Guias for Entities in Umbanda

Guia, “Guide”	Bead color:	Bead type:	Symbols:
Exu <i>Povo da Rua, “Street People”</i>	Red and black, or Black, red, and white	Porcelain, alternating, or in 3’s, 7’s, 17’s	Pitchfork 3, 7, 17
Pombagira <i>Maria Padilha, Ciganas, “Gypsies”</i>	Red and black, or black and amber	Glass, alternating or in 3, 7, or 9	Pitchfork with curved tines; 3, 7, 9
Caboclos <i>Native Americans, “Boiadeiros,” Cowboys</i>	Brick-red, forest green and white	Porcelain	Bones, teeth, bow and arrow, etc.
Pretos Velhos <i>“As Almas,” the Dead, specifically, the souls of African and Creole slaves and freedmen</i>	White and black	Porcelain, alternating or by 7’s	Figa, star of David, crosses and crucifixes, cross of Caravaca, patuá, rosary
Mabassa, <i>“As Crianças,” Ibeijada, the Children spirits, Twin spirits</i>	Bright multi-color variegated beads, sometimes in pastels	Porcelain	2, 3, 7
Linha do Oriente <i>Asian Spirits, including Hindu and Buddhist gods and saints, Muslim saints</i>		Porcelain, glass, sometimes semi- precious stones	Hindu, Buddhist and Islamic rosaries or malas; charms, hand of Fatima; 3, 7 and 9

Santos <i>Jesus, Biblical Prophets, Christian Saints and Martyrs; "Simiromba," Holy People</i>		Porcelain, glass, metal	Crosses, rosaries and saint medallions
Senhoras <i>"Ladies," Virgin Mary, female saints, "Seréias," Mermaids, "Mãe-da-Agua," Water Mothers</i>	Pale blue, pink, yellow	Porcelain, glass, metal	Crescent moons, hearts, sea shells; 7, 5
Guerreiros <i>Soldier saints and spirits, fabled and enchanted knights</i>	Red, royal blue, white	Porcelain, metal chains	Swords, arrows, axes, conch shell, crosses; 7

Umbanda originated in the state of Rio de Janeiro and evolved out of older traditions, such as *Cabula*, *Kongo*, *Omolocô*, and *Malé*, prevalent there before the 20th century. Most of these older traditions have died out or have fused with Umbanda, which began officially in 1916 by the proclamation of the Caboclo das Sete Encruzilhadas in a Spiritist session in the city of Niterói, across the bay from downtown Rio. Umbanda also inherited customs and traditions for serving Nagô or Yoruba Orixás from the older tradition of Omolocô. For historical value I give the beading schema used "back in the day" before the "take over" of now more popular Candomblé traditions from the state of Bahia in the early 20th century. This older schema has now largely been replaced by the Bahian traditions of Candomblé de Ketu.

Beads for Orixá in Omolocô (Umbanda)

Orixá:	Colors:	Type of bead:	Number and Symbol:
Oxalá <i>Line One</i>	White	Porcelain	8, 16 Cross
Yemanjá <i>Line Two</i>	Light blue or translucent	Porcelain or glass	7 Star, anchor
Oxossi <i>Line Three</i>	Turquoise or green	Porcelain	7 Bow and arrow
Ossanyin <i>Line Three</i>	Green, green and white	Porcelain, striped or solid alternating	7, 14 Leaf or tree

Oxum <i>Line Four</i>	Pale blue, yellow, pink	Porcelain or glass	5 Heart
Ogum <i>Line Five</i>	White and red	Porcelain, alternating	7 Sword
Xangô <i>Line Six</i>	Terra cotta brown	Porcelain, solid	12 Key
Iyansã/Oyá <i>Line Six</i>	Wine red, yellow or orange	Porcelain or glass	9 Lightening bolt, Castle, Communion chalice
Omolu <i>Line Seven</i>	White and black	Porcelain	17 Candle, lance
Nanã Buruku <i>Line Seven</i>	lilac	Porcelain	14

Lavagem de Contas - Washing the Beads

In both traditions, Candomblé and Umbanda, beads gain their power not from the quality of beads used or the pattern in which they are strung but from ritual actions which infuse them with *axé*, the “can do” or spiritual force which flows to and from the Orixá. These rituals usually involve some form of “washing” where the beads are sunk into an herbal mixture that articulates the flow of a particular spirit or Orixá’s own flavor of *axé*. The rituals for this vary and often the bead “catches” the *axé* simply by being worn by its owner through the course of other rituals. Learning the rituals which empower and consecrate beads comes with time in the traditions.

Some houses give the beads in a ritual dedicated to that purpose, *Lavagem de Contas*, while others confer beads during the course of other rituals, such as *ibori*, the “feeding of the head.” Rituals for the *Lavagem de Contas* usually include washing the beads and person receiving the beads in a bath of *omierô*, a cooling, sanctifying infusion of herbs in water. Sometimes this ritual is elaborated to include rituals of purification and preparation, offerings to specific Orixás, or not, depending upon the traditions of the house. Among those who practice Candomblé beads are also sometimes given as gifts from one person to another, usually an elder to a junior, especially on the advent of ceremonial or festive occasions; this is in contrast to many other African derived traditions prevalent in the United States today, where the beads are only acquired through specific initiation ceremonies. Some Candomblé elders approve of such gifts, others not.

As that the rituals which infuse a bead with the Orixá's power necessarily involve the physical person of the bead's owner the bead thus does not have any power for another person. The bead can thus be seen as a contract, a covenant, made between the Orixá, the person or house making the bead, and the person the bead is made for or given to. The bead strings together all three in a new relationship. With the receiving of a bead we begin to share the respect and love we have for the Orixá with those who made and gave the bead to us; by asking blessings and showing deference to these people, we reveal our unity both with our Candomblé community as well as with the Orixá, and the juice or sap of the Orixá flows into us. (So, if the bead were stolen or found by another person, it does not have the same power or value it does as for the person for whom it was made or consecrated or given to as a gift.) Just as the beads and their colors reflect the unseen power held tight in the string, so too do the beads reflect the power given us during the rituals of their consecration...and thus, so to do *we ourselves* reflect the power of the Spirit from which we arise, which flows through us. While universal, it is also particular; this power of the Spirit is a gift given just to you, through the specific hands of those who made it for you, it is singular, unique. Keep it close to your skin.

Wearing Your Beads

Wear your beads when you want to feel connected to your Orixá or guides. Don't wear them when you know that your attention will be necessarily drawn away from your Orixá, or when the bead could be damaged or dirtied. Some people like to wear their beads when they know they're going to meet challenging circumstances, others for times of recollection and meditation; some like to wear them all the time, others hardly ever. Worn or not, the beads you receive from Orixá never let you go.

The rules: Beads are not worn while lying down to sleep, while defecating or while dealing with human blood. Old traditions stipulate that beads should not be worn in romantic or sexual situations, during surgical procedures, going to funerals or cemeteries, or while bathing, especially in the ocean.¹ The traditions also say that women should not wear sacred beads while menstruating as that during such time the body is purifying itself and, with the presence of human blood, is thus thought to also "push off" the power of the bead.² We also wash our bead and ourselves in *omiero* if we are involved in or witness a violent event or tragedy while wearing the beads,

¹ There are exceptions to these injections, depending upon certain beads for particular Orixá. A bead for Oxum, for example, could be worn while bathing in a natural spring or river, a bead for Iansã could (and should) be worn to a funeral, and a bead for Yemanjá could be worn in the ocean. Ogum's bead can be worn in times of struggle, conflict and fighting to overcome, Xangô's when seeking justice.

² I'm a man, so I don't know about this. I'm just passing along what I've heard from the elders.

especially if it involves the shedding of human blood. Injunctions also state that one should bathe before putting on a bead, that one's body should be clean and "cool." We should not put beads on when our body is "hot," carrying the intensity of violence, sexual activity, or hassled, confused or agitated states. We are obliged, however, to wear our beads whenever going to an Umbanda or Candomblé house to work or participate as a member of the rituals as emblems of our integration and collaboration with the healing and redemptive spirit of such endeavors. As a guest to a ceremony or to someone else's house, however, one need not necessarily wear one's beads. At home, in the *terreiro* or temple to which one belongs, a bead should be worn at almost all times. We generally, when not active in a ritual, wear our beads close to the skin, so they don't catch on things and become annoying. We also try not to boast them, dangling them out for all to see, vainly parading what we have for appreciation from others. During rituals and celebrations, however, we wear them out, proud to be of service.

Many men, as well as women initiated to male Orixás, will wear their beads to one side of their neck and falling across their chest and behind their back. Most women, as well as men initiated with female Orixás, will wear their beads around their neck, hanging directly to the front. People with Oxalá generally wear their beads in the "female" fashion, whether they're male or female. *Ogans* generally wear their beads in the male fashion, regardless of whether their Orixá is male or female; *ekejis* wear theirs in the female way. Ekejis and organs generally wear fewer beads than olorixá or adôxu.

While not being worn beads are best left hung up in a clean place, separate from other "profane" necklaces or jewelry. You can also leave them laying down on a plain white cloth, or left upon a shrine or spirit's image. One should never leave them tangled or placed under another object. One should take care to not let others handle them or wear them. If a bead breaks, gather up what you can and come on over. We'll string it back together; it's a good time to reconnect.

These are the "shoulds" and "shouldn'ts" of wearing beads. The rules are designed to protect and build the powers conferred to the bead during its consecration. Yet rules are not power, and power isn't everything. Let your spirit be your guide with using your beads. In truth, the bead embodies and helps maintain a relationship between you and the Spirit. Hang with it, resplendent coral upon the ebony neck of the dancing Goddess! Talisman of supreme power and grace!

While a bead gets its start being strung together by an elder and then washed in the empowering herbs of the Orixá for which it's being made, that is just the beginning. A bead gains its real power from being worn. Each day you wear your bead is like a bead itself being strung onto a new spirit, a sacred path in life threading its way into the Universe, weaving a whole new dream of reality. Whenever you sweat into your bead, it is washed with your power and beauty, your struggle and grace, infused with your

own, particular axé. A bead holds you to the Spirit, adorns you as you adorn the Spirit, confers power and protection as you yourself make yourself in the world and protect what you love. I can only repeat, again and again: each of us is a singular, precious bead upon the unending length of the Spirit. Each of us precious and beautiful unto ourselves yet even more beautiful when crafted together, washed as one and given over to this Purpose. Each of us is also a fiber of the mysterious, unseen thread of Spirit weaving its way through all the myriad, infinite things in the world, gathering them up like so many beads from only a meaningless explosion of matter and energy into space and time to become an even more beautiful world of life and death, being and bliss, meaningful, sacred. Wear your colors with pride and guard what is holy in humility, for your bead is a true guide.