

Stringing Together Cultural Symbols- One Bead at a Time

By Cynthia M. Long

Scientists have had their say about the Big Bang theory and the dawn of a new culture for years, but until recently symbols like sacred beads, or *prayer beads*, have generally been omitted in such discussions despite the fact most of the world's inhabitants—nearly two-thirds of the planet's population—pray with beads, which some scholars have theorized naturally evolved from the abacus, the Chinese counting instrument that also used beads. (*Spirituality on a String*, Maggie Oman Shannon and Eleanor Wiley). However, archeologist Richard Klien, a Stanford University professor, takes the dawn-of-a-new-culture discussion in an exciting new direction. In a *Stanford Magazine* article last year, Klien disagreed that upheavals like the Russian and French Revolutions, or the construction of the first cities, or even the introduction of the internal-combustion engine effected the greatest social changes. Klien contends the most influential revolution occurred in East Africa roughly 45,000 years ago. He suggests that if beads were among humanity's first symbols, they represent one of the most important revolutions in our species career—the dawning of modern behavior:

...Once symbols appeared we know we're dealing with people with advanced cognitive skills who could not only invent sophisticated tools, weapons and develop complex social networks for mutual security but could also marvel at the intricacies of nature and their place in it, people who were self-aware. ... ["Suddenly Smarter," Mitchell Leslie, *Stanford Magazine*, July-Aug. 2002]

What does history reveal about ancient sacred beads?

In his book, *The Dawn of The Human Culture*, archeologist Randall White of New York University, who specializes in the study of upper-Paleolithic art (earth embedded), believes that beads, perforated shells, pierced animal teeth, and other ornaments were remarkably symbolic and sacred to the ancients. White's research indicated over 30,000 years ago the intricacy of beads required extraordinary time and effort, implying notable profound symbolic meaning. White's experiments illustrate a single bead typically required one to three hours to craft. In Sungir, Russia, occupied 29,000 years ago, ancient Sungars who had to invest substantial time finding food and keeping warm, in addition to other challenging circumstances, still managed to produce 13,000 beads. Three thousand beads were discovered in an adult male grave; the remaining 10,000 beads were divided between two children's graves. (Recalling a single bead required as much as three hours to craft, such a collection of beads could easily have taken as much as 39,000 hours to generate, or *five years!*) The abundance of beads could have easily signified that the children buried in the graves occupied a special position or status in their respective society.

What significance and/or purpose did the ancient beads symbolize?

A handful of fragile ostrich eggshell beads were excavated from a Kenyan site called *Enkapune Ya Mato*, or Twilight Cave, established 40,000 years ago. Sediment found in the cave reveals a record of important cultural changes during the past few thousand years. According to writer Mitchell Leslie, "...they appeared to be the earliest known jewelry. But some anthropologists think they are much more. The people of the Twilight Cave may have exchanged them as ritual gifts or tokens making the Cheerio-like object the oldest known example of symbolism. ..." (Mitchell, July-Aug.

2002) Of particular interest is the commonality and widespread application of beads as symbols across many different cultures due to the inherent value the symbol(s) provide:

... In addition to helping keep one's place in structured prayers, prayer beads also symbolize the commitment to spiritual life. With their circular form, a string represents the interconnectedness of all who pray. Each bead counted is an individual prayer or mantra, and the rote repetition of prayers and mantras is meant to facilitate a sole focus on the prayer or mantra itself. ... [Maggie Oman Shannon and Eleanor, Wiley in *A String and a Prayer*]

Based on Shannon and Wiley's observations, it's of little surprise that the use of prayer beads—or similar customs involving symbols—in also evident in non-Christian practices across a far-reaching cultural, religious, and spiritual spectrum: the ancient Egyptians used beads, perhaps as a means of bringing luck, dating back to 3,200 B.C.; Native American beadwork honors their spiritual ancestors; African history reveals beads were used as a form of communication and in rituals evoking the power of gods; Hindus used prayer beads for counting breaths and repeating mantras; Buddhist bead practices served to attain enlightenment; Islamic bead practices helped Muslims praise Allah; and even within Judaism—long considering “prayer beads” as a form of paganism—a prayer shawl, known as a *tallit*, features craftsmanship that is based on a number of specified knots, quite similar to prayer beads.

Did the ancients project “intention” onto these sacred beads?

In her *Book of Intentions*, Dianne Martin writes about ‘intention.’ Our whole world changes with intention. The collision and interactions of intentions profoundly affects our behavior, our environment, our communities, our world, the universe, and therefore *ourselves*. Did the ancients know this? A Beliefnet interview with Wayne Dyer, discussing his book *The Power of Intention*, features a significant quote by Carlos Castaneda: “There’s an immeasurable indescribable force, which shamans called ‘intent’ and absolutely everything that exists in the entire cosmos is connected to it... an invisible source that ‘intends’ everything into the universe.”

Discovering how our ancestors around the world gave purpose and meaning to their beads helps provide remarkable insights into many of our present-day religious and spiritual customs, be they ceremonial, spiritual, in celebration, as currency, as part of healing rituals, as a form of status (power and wealth). Yet it is within the act of prayer itself that we can most recognize the symbolic and far-reaching significance of beads.

It has been said, portraits of Jesus Christ as a child include coral beads. Why?

Author Melody describes in her book *Love Is in the Earth: A Kaleidoscope of Crystals* how coral vibrates to the astrological sign of Pisces. According to Melody's findings that suggest the coral/Pisces relationship assists imagination, visualization, intuition, and brings peace within. It helps one to both understand the qualities of the mystic and to bring one into communication with the past spiritual masters of this world. Such a process can expedite and accelerate the transfer of knowledge. (*Also, in reviewing the significance of minerals in history, crystals alone are mentioned in the Bible more than 200 times!*)

Witnessing the dawn of this new spiritual era unfold is intriguing from all angles, especially if the use of beads and other precious resources becomes as significant and sacred as it was 45,000 years ago. Ultimately symbols such as beads unite us both spiritually as well as *universally* (as one people

living on the same planet). Think about it: In how many other ways does evidence exist of such far-reaching human unification? In our modern attempts to use highly evolved technology to “unite” humankind, perhaps we’re overlooking an existing, totally simplistic and fully attainable method of universal connectedness that lies in a “simple” string of beads?

In keeping with examining our history in order to learn about our future, perhaps such a powerfully symbolic and purposeful symbol as beads—one that is embedded with sacred intentions—can in fact influence a shift toward spiritual unification and make this journey of living a more peaceful existence for all.

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