

Chief's Slippers (Bata Ileke)

Date

1920s

Primary Maker

Yoruba

Medium

Leather and glass beads

Description

Among the Yoruba and other cultures of West Africa, beadwork tended to be reserved for the adornment of the clothing and accessories used by the ruling class. These shoes would have been worn by a Yoruba oba, or chief, and their motifs impress the legitimacy of their reign. Both beads and the practice of beading within Africa have ancient origins. The oldest dated beads globally were made about 72,000 years ago from shell, bones, and other natural materials. Jumping ahead about 71 millennia, beads made in the Middle East and Southern Asia first started appearing in South Africa by around the 7th century of the common era, brought by Arab and Swahili traders. As major bead-making centers were created in Europe, trade beads began to come to Africa by way of Portuguese and Dutch traders. Since the 16th century, there has been a steady trade of glass beads from Europe, with most today now being imported from countries like the Czech Republic.

Dimensions

Each: 2 1/2 × 5 × 11 1/2 in. (6.4 × 12.7 × 29.2 cm)