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ETHNOGRAPHIC CURRENCIES OF AUSTRALIA AND THE PACIFIC

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In Australia and the Pacific the study of Ethnographic Currencies can be divided into three phases:

1. Pre-white influence; covering forty of fifty thousand years. During this phase Ethnographic Currencies operated within many thousands of cultures in many thousands of different ways. We know almost nothing about the subject for this era.
2. Phase of European exploration; covering some two hundred years of gradual but increasingly wide European influence and modification of traditional lifestyles. Most western knowledge of both phase 1 and phase 2 is derived from misunderstandings, simplistic interpretation, or fanciful imaginings of the normally arrogant and often destructive explorers.
3. Phase of permanent white settlement; covering another two hundred years. Early in this phase obliteration of traditional lifestyles was attempted, sometimes deliberately - by simply killing the natives, sometimes more subtly by forcing them, for their own good, to live in western ways. Towards the end of phase 3 some independence has been granted and modern western currencies have been introduced. Often the newly independent countries have named their new currencies after their Ethnographic Currencies. Nowhere in the region today, am I aware of Ethnographic Currencies or of the societies from which they originated operating in their traditional form.

Although not operating in their traditional societies however, the people from these cultures do still exist. They have a key role, indeed, in the case of the Museum of Victoria we adhere to the principle that:

ABORIGINAL AND OTHER INDIGENOUS PEOPLE ARE THE RIGHTFUL OWNERS OF THEIR HERITAGE

We should consider the term Ethnographic Currencies at this time. Ethnographic currency is a term introduced to replace the old form Primitive Money. It reflects western acceptance in the late twentieth century that the earlier term was both simplistic and offensive. The term primitive describes neither the people nor the sophistication of their exchange traditions. The term money implied functions characteristic of European economics but ignores functions which this class of objects held within traditional culture. I have sought a better term but suspect that it does not occur in English any more than the attitudes and roles we are trying to describe are British.

The Ethnographic Currencies of the Australian and Pacific region belong in an entirely different social context to that of Europe. I would like to suggest that the taxonomic approach to research and display which is

characteristic of numismatics, is more likely to confuse than clarify both the roles of Ethnographic Currencies in society and the nature of the objects themselves.

In our region, Anthropologists concerned with exchange theory analyse exchange systems as models for kinship relations as often as a component in the economics of production. Exchange objects and the ritual events associated with exchange are recognised as representations of underlying social structures.

Modern numismatics, an historical science based largely on European currency concepts, has made significant contributions to historical analysis through the development of a series of taxonomic tools.

Through die analysis and distributions of weight standards for instance, we can reconstruct patterns of production and distribution. Collecting, studying and displaying coins in isolation from society can sometimes be justified because this approach has produced excellent results.

However, for historians to use the specialist information of numismatists they must re-integrate numismatic learning with other areas of study. If they wished to consider coins as art or as historical documents, they must be considered in the context of other art forms and historical learning.

The many cultures of Oceania existed for tens of thousands of years. The evidence of archaeological discoveries in the few excavated sites that have contained non-perishable material has shown that there were instances of goods traded from a distance and of specialist production and trade before European incursions. Where reliable information has been obtained, through discussion with people who, for reasons of geography, have been relatively free of western influence, we have come to see that trade often incorporated complex social links which could be more important than the simple exchange of goods.

Sadly we have few reliable links with the phase when Ethnographic Currencies were in use without western interference. The modern phase of Oceanic societies began with the destructive arrival of European explorers, traders and eventually settlers. Significantly, the European expansion into the South West Pacific from the mid-eighteenth century coincides with two other developments in Europe: the origins of the science of anthropology; and of the museum as a scientific institution as opposed to a storehouse of curiosities.

Explorers, scientific expeditions and traders collected ethnographic materials, some of which they could use to trade for food, drink and physical pleasures with the subjects of their ethnographic studies. The phase of transition from the traditional culture to the modern westernised life style in the region is reported to us by these people in their journals, reports and travel books. We like to think of their reports as reliable because we like to think the people writing them were just like us, but of course, they were not.

The explorers and their nineteenth century successors began the phase of

collecting Primitive Money. These were a new class of objects to place in their new scientific museums. A tradition of considering ethnographic currencies to be like western currencies developed and was encouraged by such representations as Yap Island stone money being carried around on a branch held up by natives. Such illustrations provided an answer to the significant Primitive Money question "How did you fit it into your pocket?"

These primitive people with their primitive cultures, tools and religions were also widely reported as thieves. James Cook, one of the more enlightened expedition leaders in terms of attitude towards the natives, saw little wrong with his crew shooting a Tahitian in the back as he ran down the beach waving a stolen object above his head - Cook's only concern was that the killing might slow down trading, but this negative aspect of the incident was well balanced by the need to teach the natives not to steal.

Our informants could not see that the natives did not share with them the concept of personal ownership. The explorers' attitudes to the cultures they were examining were simplistic and aimed at explaining them in European terms - including currency.

Most trading between early explorers and original occupiers were for end products. It was a barter system with the westerners not understanding the reasons some objects were sought and imagining they were local money. Possession of particular coloured feathers, stones, teeth or shells were actually matters of personal honour, magic and adornment or were defined as having political and or religious roles in relationships with kin and other tribes.

One should also realise, that the success of explorations was measured in terms of miles mapped and collections formed. An expedition returning with fifty new ethnographic costumes, weapons or currencies would be deemed more successful than one with only forty. This was an encouragement to collect. The natives were not stupid, they soon realised, and have not forgotten, that variety and good stories was a key to trade with white men.

Oceanic Societies did not cease to exist although as noted above, in most cases every effort was expended to achieve that result. A result of this destruction could be that what the West believes to have been the traditional practice will become fact among the isolated successors of those original societies.

As an example, the kina, once a mother of pearl shell crescent with a role in marriage recently became the Papua New Guinea denomination equivalent to the dollar. This western monetary form of the kina is now replacing the other traditional kina roles in society. Today this gives the impression of buying a wife for money, whereas the traditional exchanges of specified gifts including kina, linked the clans in a permanent and meaningful way which went far beyond most western people's beliefs of the role of money.

T.G. Harding, in introducing the papers delivered at the 1978 conference

on Trade and Exchange in Oceania and the Pacific, noted that "...exchange is a cultural invention, panhuman in its distribution, highly variable in its forms and in its relationships to other cultural phenomena which include... production, leadership, ranking, myth, art forms, ritual, marriage, warfare, intracommunity conflict and the socio-political order itself".

The participants at this conference were all anthropologists and most were practising archaeologists - no numismatists were invited.

Museum collections today are seen by anthropological researchers as a dubious reference source, its older collections and interpretations being considered of little value until confirmed by field work. The museum traditions of collecting are generally held to be impaired by acceptance of dilettante holdings of curiosities purporting to have come from this or that region, and probably misinterpreted when collected.

At the Museum of Victoria, anthropologists will now only collect where the material has a solid archaeological or social context. This generally stops any collecting at all, as each nation now rightly claims its own heritage.

Ethnographic Currencies (if that is what they should be called) are not like coins and paper money, they originate in smaller more compact yet complex communities with non-European attitudes to ownership and trade. Removed from their cultural context, they become the curiosities that were primitive money. In context, they are part of a window on the societies from which they have grown.

The role of museums in collecting, conserving, studying, displaying and publishing must reflect this understanding of the objects. We are trying to use objects to better understand people and their societies. Isolation of Ethnographic Currencies from their societal contexts will destroy them.