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TRADITIONAL MONEY AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY: THE CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN THE USE OF "PRIMITIVE" MONEY IN THE PACIFIC REGION

By Thomas Lautz

Museum of History of Money, Koeln, Germany

Introduction: Our museum in Cologne

As you maybe know, I work for a museum of the history of money, integrated in a public savings bank. Besides two big exhibitions each year, we have about twenty showcases with all sorts of coins. There is a big one with money scales - Cologne has been one of the big centres of scale making for Europe from the 16th to the 18th century - another one with purses, and some with money-boxes or banks. But my main interest is in the so-called "primitive" or "traditional" money. We have four big showcases with money from Africa, Indonesia and Oceania. This is not because I like to travel to these regions.

Traditional Money in other museums

Traditional Money - I prefer this nomenclature instead of "Primitive Money" - is not represented in many coin exhibitions, and if it is, as I have seen in the Smithsonian Institution, this is as "pre-monetary and curious objects", not as an important part of the entire collection like coins, medals and bank notes. The exhibition of the Traditional Money in the Smithsonian Institution is very nice, no doubt, but I am sorry to say that the few items that have not been exhibited but remained in the collection itself, are in an absolutely desolate state, they look disliked. I am sure the curators would buy a piece of Traditional Money only if they have space to show it. But of course, they would care about and

buy a penny if its year is not yet present in the coin tray.

Many traditional numismatists, especially working for coin cabinets with a long tradition, have the opinion that traditional forms of money have nothing to do with their job. They believe that these things are something which is underdeveloped, that they are not real coins (which is true, of course, but it is the same with a banknote), and that there is no space for them in a coin cabinet at all. There is no real catalogue about them, and how can they know about their use as money? Is it not the task of an ethnographic museum to show this kind of stuff?

Of course, they are right, if they interpret their collection exclusively as a coin cabinet, and not a money collection. Other museums or cabinets have changed their mind, often in the last decades.

Two weeks ago, I went to London to see the newly installed exhibition about money. It is really an exhibition about all kinds of money, not only of coins. Maybe the curators have noticed in the meantime that coins are rather difficult to present to the non-numismatist - for a normal visitor, a traditional coin exhibition shows a lot of boring small black round disks, normally shown with a piece of paper to read which is much larger than the disk itself. But, if you present them a copper bracelet from Africa or stone money from Yap, they get much more interested and curious. Funnily enough, for the

visitor it seems to be more difficult to compare with his own money the meaning of a medieval or ancient coin than a piece of Traditional Money.

Problems with Traditional Money for a Numismatic Museum

To work with Traditional Money, is not so easy. There will pop up questions we have to answer, sometimes just for ourselves, which we never have to ask when working with coins. The most difficult questions will be:

- What is money?
- For what is an item used?
- Who used it as money, and who didn't?

What is Money?

Everybody thinks they know the answer, but to be serious, nobody can really answer this question. Philosophically speaking, it is even wrong to say "this is money." Nothing is really money. An object gets to be money first when it is used as money. Even a coin or a bank note is not money just by itself. It must be issued to become, and to serve as, money. A pattern coin or even a proof coin is not money. And a withdrawn coin was money, but it isn't any more. This makes it maybe a bit easier to understand the problems of Traditional Money, where relatively few things used as money were invented and made only for that purpose. Many objects serving as money could also be used as tools, as weapons or as food, like salt, or smoked, like tobacco and even the famous cigarette currency of the post-war period in Germany.

Different Functions of Money

Money as we know it, as coins and bank notes, covers a broad spectrum of roles, like treasury, payment,

measurement of value, symbol of wealth. In the more traditional societies, we have objects which are used for some aspects of our money, but for other purposes cannot serve that function. Some objects can be used to pay for foodstuffs at the market, but not for compensation or for taxes.

Of course we have to ask: Where is the border between "money" and "not money"? An example, which I like very much is that: In our society, in Germany, if you are invited, you will bring a bottle of wine or a bunch of flowers for the host. It sounds curious, but this is a compensation for the meal or invitation. To come without this "present", would be impolite, but to bring a bank note instead, that means, to replace this "traditional payment" by "western" money, would be absolutely ridiculous. And the use as symbolic payment will be even clearer if the host doesn't like any wine, but will use the same bottle when he is invited the next time. Is this bottle of Mosel money or not? As mentioned, there is no real definition for the word money, and after looking for one for a long time, I decided that I must myself be responsible for deciding whether I will say "For me, this is money", or not. And it makes it harder when the use of objects has changed within the societies.

Objects which covered a broad spectrum of our word money in the past, are today maybe still suitable to buy land, but nothing else. Often it is necessary for people to have and to use their Traditional Money still and only during the most traditional occasions and festivities. This is one of the reasons why I prefer to call this money not primitive, but traditional. I have noticed during my studies that especially in the Pacific Area very often the use of a special

kind of Traditional Money, which was formerly used in a broad sense as payment for many things, today is nearly completely replaced by Western Money, like dollar bills. Time after time, it became no longer possible to pay with Traditional Money, but with the western kind of money. In many traditional societies, the very last occasion where - until now - it is not possible to replace the Traditional Money by western money, is the bride price. But I will give you some examples.

Example 1: Eastern New Britain

As far as I know the only place in the world where Traditional Money really covers most aspects of our word money, is the area around Rabaul, at the eastern part of the island of New Britain, Papua New Guinea. This kind of money is called *Divarra*: On a stiff stick made of Rotang, small Nassa shells are strung with a small intersection between each one. To get change, you only have to break a piece of the Rotang with a certain amount of shells on it. A stick with 12 shells was the equivalent of 10 Toea, about 10 US-cents. Today, or some years ago, when I visited this area, you could pay at the daily market with this *Divarra*. It was used in the same way as, and together or in parallel with, the coins of the government. Normally people bought bunches of peanuts with it, or lime for their most important business, the chewing of Betel nuts. The price for a small plastic bag of lime or a bunch of peanuts was 10 Toea or a stick with 12 Nassa Shells.

Only the Tolai people are using *Divarra*. That means that it was not possible to buy native tobacco on the market, because only the Baining people grow tobacco there, but they don't accept this kind of money. By the way, the bus driver refused to

take *Divarra* as payment, too. He told me that it was not possible to get gasoline for *Divarra*.

Much more important is the use of *Divarra* in bigger quantities. It is handled in bunches of 10 or more meters, and occasionally tied along a rounded bamboo-stick forming a wheel or better a tyre-like ring, called lolo. To do this, you will need from maybe 25 fathoms (about 40m) to 100 or more fathoms, which are 30,000 Nassa-shells or US\$ 250. These rings normally were not used for payments, but as a store of wealth. If the owner dies, the ring will be opened and the shell money given to the guests, in amounts depending on their rank and relationship to the deceased.

Another occasion to use the ring is for the local secret league of Dukduk. To become a member, which is essential for every man who wants to be successful, or to rise through the ranks of this organisation, you have to pay *Divarra* in big quantities. If you don't have any, you can buy them in a special bank at nearby Rabaul, founded by a former member of parliament, as far as I know. At my last visit, this bank was buying a fathom of *Divarra* for about 2 Kina and selling it for 4 Kina. You could even get a loan, paying enormous interest. At my visit, the shelves were nearly empty, the bank was in big demand for shell money. The rings are so important for the Tolai, that it was not possible for me to buy - or better change - one of the rings for the collection. A man who had the job to collect loans given by a mortgagee promised me to get a ring: some of his clients would pay with it. After a week or so, he told me that the men went to jail because they were not able to pay back their loans, but they refused to give away their lolos as payment. In

the end we went to the police station. They had 8 beer bottles filled with Nassa shells. Recently, they got - and of course accepted - these bottles (which form a standardised measurement for this kind of shells) as payment for a fine. They sold them - no, they changed them - with me for cash-Kinas, and I got a ring made.

Papua New Guinea is not a very safe place. No wonder that people do not want to keep their money at home. In the village, there are special bank houses to keep the money. A "banker" has the key and a book where he writes the accounts. Every ring and every bunch of *Divarra* gets its paper label.

To speak about changes: The importance of this kind of money rose because of the need for the Dukduk league. Today, even people of regions which traditionally didn't use *Divarra*, like the southern part of New Ireland (where people traditionally used Birok, another kind of shell-bead money) adopted the use of *Divarra* in recent years. Birok is out of circulation there.

Example 2: Malaita

Another area where Traditional Money is still used is Malaita, one of the Solomon Islands. The 10-stranded *tafuli'ae*, all in all about 25 meters of small shell beads, are today solely used as bride price. But for this, the *tafuli'ae* are essential. The average bride price that the family of the bridegroom has to pay is 10 of these *tafuli'ae*, together with 1,000 Dolphin teeth. To give more than pre-arranged means that you will earn reputation.

It is not known whether this special form of shell money was ever used for other payments than that of bride

price. It is still produced in the langa-langa-lagoon of Malaita, and distributed on the markets. The price there is about US\$ 150, quite a lot for someone who wants to marry and has not enough traditional money in his family. The custom to ask for a bride price is very old. Maybe it should prevent young men from marrying too early before they can afford it.

Example 3: Santa Cruz

Let's go further south, to the remote Island of Santa Cruz. From here, we know one of the most prominent and well known types of money, the red feather money. It is a thick band of vegetable fibre, 9m long, covered by red feathers from *myzomela cardinalis* and forming a double coil. From around 1900, we have old photographs showing rolls which are much smaller than we know them today. One double roll forms a unit and is never cut or divided. Nobody knows where the islanders got the idea to use this strange shape of money. To use red feathers, is certainly an influence of the Polynesian culture of the neighbouring islands. There was a special way in which this money circulated: the money was made by specialists on the main island, Ndende. Ndende is a "high island" with dense forest. At a good distance, there are a few reef islands belonging to Santa Cruz. These reef islands were populated by people who were very good sailors. Maybe this was the reason why the reef islands "exported" a surplus of women to Ndende, being paid with feather money as bride price. The average price was a stack of 10 coils, in gradation of quality from 1 to 10. The bridegroom could borrow coils from his relatives, if he did not have enough.

Besides women, the people from Ndende used their feather money to buy products like turtle from the reef islanders. The reef islanders had a big demand for logs for use in building their huge canoes. On the reef islands they had only coconut trees which were not suitable. Therefore, they used their feather money to buy logs on Ndende, and sometimes pigs. The money had to be stored above a fireplace in the smoke to prevent it from being eaten by bugs and other insects. It was well wrapped in leaves and old textiles and protected by a magic wooden symbol on top. This circulation worked quite well.

A few of the coils went out of the country for museums or collectors, while others were destroyed by climate and handling. On the other hand, new ones were produced. The last man who was able to make this kind of money died around 1980. Since then, the importance of this money decreased. In 1991, when I visited the island, the *teau* was not used anymore, and there were only a few coils left in the village. The fire was not burning any more, and the few coils which were shown to me, were in a very deteriorated condition. Holes were eaten through the whole by insects. After a few years, the owner certainly will throw the coils into the sea, as many people have already done. For it became worthless because it is forbidden to sell it out of the island: It is "protected" as "National Heritage."

But what happened with the custom of paying Bride Price on Santa Cruz? Today, the father of the bride asks for Dollar notes. Because the feather money was very valuable, the bride price which is asked today is also very high. In 1991, it was on average between US\$ 500 and 700. This causes big problems on the island where it is nearly impossible to earn money. The money is no longer circulating except in a small area for very special payments.

Today's money can be used on the open market. The family of the bride will spend the money for cigarettes, a trip to the capital Honiara, and a transistor radio with the need for batteries in the future. They will not think about the son or nephew who wants to marry in some years and urgently would need the money as bride price himself. It was not possible just to replace the circle formed by the traditional feather money with our western-type Dollar notes.