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SOCIAL LIFE OF CURRENCIES FROM NEAR OCEANIA: TYPES OF CURRENCIES AND ITS USE

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ABSTRACT: The objective of the paper is to provide an overview of currencies used by natives of Near Oceania in relation to three principal ways of its use. The author explains three main functions of currencies from Near Oceania on selected examples. The three main functions are as follows: standardized medium of exchange, bride-price, and sociopolitical exchange. These functions are demonstrated on selected types of currencies from East Sepik, Massim, Western Highlands, and West Papua. The author provides, in addition to the description of artefacts, interpretation of social and cultural context of its use.

KEY WORDS: currency – Near Oceania – artefacts – economic anthropology

Introduction

The objective of the paper is to provide an overview of currencies used by natives of Near Oceania[2] in relation to the three main ways of its use. There is broad biological, cultural, and language diversity in Near Oceania. In regards to artefacts, many regional styles existed which make it possible to clearly distinguish between them. An extensive exploration of this diversity of Near Oceania by Europeans began to take place after colonisation of the region by Germans, Brits, and Dutchmen. Naturalists, linguists, anthropologists, and, of course, missionaries, began to study the diversity of Near Oceania at the end of the 19th century. Specifically, traders, travellers, ethnographers, and missionaries collected an immense amount of New Guinean artefacts which are part of museums and private collections nowadays. The variety of materials which natives of Near Oceania used for the production of different types of currencies includes,

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[2] Near Oceania is a geographical term; it principally covers New Guinea, Bismarck Archipelago, and the Solomon Islands (see Pawley *at al* 2005).

among others, shells, snail shells, stones, feathers, teeth, and rattan. To sum up, there are many regional styles of crafting, and an impressive variety of types of artefacts and diversity of materials used for the production of artefacts which ethnographers catalogued and analysed.

The natives of Near Oceania used currencies for a number of purposes. One of them was trading, which is why some theorists call this type of artifact "money"; however, one has to pose the question if the term "money" is pertinent regarding the traditional cultures of Near Oceania. The natives used these currencies in exchange, but that does not mean that the exchange was, in every instance, in economic nature, i.e., impersonal transfer of goods and services for money. A capitalistic economy is money-centered, in which people commonly purchase the goods and services from strangers. Compared to that, currencies in Melanesian communities fulfilled a number of non-economic ends. It was often a sociopolitical exchange which is a "public event performed according to conventions, and carrying with it social or religious obligations" (Sillitoe 1998: 80). It is therefore necessary to bear in mind that the systems of exchange within the communities of Near Oceania were not – with few exceptions – comparable with economic transaction as Europeans understand it. The situation changed after the arrival of Europeans, who started the economic transformation and introduced a monetary system. As we will see later, the modern monetary system of Papua New Guinea draws its symbols from customary currencies from the pre-contact period. It is worth noting that there is a lot of comparative literature about the form of "primitive money" (see specifically Quiggin 1949; Einzig 1966), however, the authors approached the topic descriptively without any contextualisation of the usage of the currencies in particular cultural frameworks. Theoretically informed publications about the Melanesian currencies are rather absent. The paper is focused just on selected examples of the currencies due to limited space available within the paper, as well as the enormous diversity of types of currencies which is not possible to address in a single paper.

Exchange networks of Near Oceania

In Near Oceania, many networks and cycles of exchange worked. Archeological excavations revealed that the Melanesians had been exchanging at least 5,000 years ago. A hypothesis is that local exchange systems existed before the Lapita people colonised Melanesia from Southeast Asia (probably from Taiwan), but Lapita migrants expanded the scope of the exchange cycles considerably (Moore 2000: 37). It does not mean that Near Oceania was not, as a whole, isolated from other regions; this applies specifically to the western part of New Guinea, whose population was in contact with traders from Southeast Asia. It is evidenced by Dong Son that bronzes have been uncovered in the northwestern part of the island. Ethnographers also documented imported green and blue beads used as currency in Sentani (Swadlung 1996). However, it seems that the population from that part of the island was not in regular contact with the people of Southeast Asia. However, particular communities of Near Oceania were closely connected together via trade routes.

Ethnographic studies proved that networks covering the island of New Guinea and connecting it with the adjacent archipelagos existed. It follows that the items and commodities could be exchanged over long distances. This is the reason why European goods and materials, therefore, reached the hinterland of the island long before the

Europeans penetrated its interior (overview in Hughes 1977). For example, Alleta Biersack (1995) demonstrated the interconnectedness of the Huli, Duna, and Ilipili people long before the first contact with Europeans. The Western Highlands region was interwoven by a dense network of trade paths. People exchanged shells, salt, kundu drums, highly praised feathers, or stones for blades of ceremonial axes. These stone axes are a suitable example of a complexity of exchanges in the Western Highlands. A stone of green or grey colour for a blade was polished and perfectly housed in the wooden handle; in the contraposition of a blade, a piece of wood was mounted because of balance. The axe was fastened with woven fibers and decorated with fur (see Chinnery 1944) [Pl. 1]. The manufacturing of ceremonial axes demonstrates a complexity of the intergroup relations. Highlanders mined the stones in the sites around the current city of Mount Hagen and they traded them in long distance across the Wahgi and Jimi valleys. Big ceremonial axes were useless as a working tool; they were displayed in ceremonies and were a sign of wealth, but highlanders mainly used the ceremonial axes as bride-wealth. In short, exchange networks covered the Near Oceania, so the natives of local communities – very often hostile to each other – were able to exchange treasured goods from very distant places of origin.

Functions of the currencies from Near Oceania

No currency exists in a social vacuum. As Paul Einzig put it; "it is not lifeless object, but social institution" (Einzig 1966: 15). Money in a capitalistic economy has a single role – to be a standardised medium of payment for goods and services. Einzig argues (Einzig 1966: 428) that in comparison with the capitalistic economy "primitive money" usually performed only one monetary function. Einzig called it a separation of functions. In other words, he argued that an object adopted as a currency was usually used just for one function. But, as I will demonstrate on the case of the Dani display-stone, Einzing's statement is not absolute. However, it is possible to reduce the functions of the currencies to three main domains. So, the currencies from Near Oceania performed three main functions: a standardised medium of exchange, bride-price, and sociopolitical exchange. The currencies used by natives in Near Oceania did not usually have a standardised value in the vast majority of cases, so Melanesians used the currencies for pure economic transaction only in few instances. I will illustrate this point later with the ethnic groups Kapauku and Tolai. In a majority of ethnic groups of Near Oceania a bride-price was customary; besides piles of food and herds of pigs, a collection of artefacts was part of the bride-price. In the table below, I provide examples of this with the Dani and Boiken people. The last function is related to social status. In many regions of Near Oceania, cycles of sociopolitical exchange took place. The participants of the cycle endeavored to expand their own influence on other people and to achieve power in a community. The examples come from the Massim area and the Enga people. However, it is necessary to note that the currencies performed a number of other roles. For example, the natives used war casualties or damaged gardens by owner's pigs as a means of compensation. Though, these and other functions are not the subject of the paper. It needs to be mentioned that the particular type of currency usually circulated in only one local system of sociopolitical or economic exchange, but exceptions existed. Specifically, in the hinterland of New Guinea, some types of artefacts crossed cultural boundaries of ethnic groups. For example, this can be demonstrated with a case of *kina* shell.

Table 1 An overview of the currencies from Near Oceania and its principal function

Native term	Cultural group / area	Principal material	Function
Tabu	Tolai	Shell	Standardized medium of exchange
Bomoje	Kapauku	Cowrie and nassarius shells	Standardized medium of exchange
Je	Dani	Stone	Bride-price
Talipoon	Boiken	Snail shell and rattan	Bride-price
Kina	Enga	Pearl shell	Sociopolitical exchange
Mwali and *soulava*	Massim area	Shell	Sociopolitical exchange

The currencies as standardized medium of exchange

Bartering was a principal way of acquiring consumable commodities in Melanesian communities. That means that no monetary system or a formal type of currency was needed for its running. For example, a trade called hiri was running on the south coast of New Guinea. Natives of the Motu group annually organized one-hundred kilometer-long expeditions to natives living in the northwestern area of the Papuan Gulf. They traded clay cooking pots called *uro* for sago with the people of Papuan Gulf (Skelly – David 2017). However, there was even a formal market economy in a few instances before Europeans colonized Near Oceania. Still, these were exceptions. For example Leopold Pospisil (1963a, 1963b) argues that the Kapauku people, who he studied, developed a simple form of capitalism. They used a monetary system consisting of cowrie and cowrielike shells (genus *Nassarius*). Kapauku also applied small glass beads of different colors into their economy. Shells and beads were possible to use as money because of the scarcity in the Kapauku customary homeland, which was located a considerable distance from coastal area. They distinguished two types of cowrie shells which they named *dege bomoje* and *buna bomoje*. *Dege bomoje* is divided to 15 *kawana* and *buna bomoje* is divided to 20 *kawane*. The value of a shell was derived from its shape, color, and size. Kapauku were able to calculate a price because their monetary system operated as standardized measure of value; therefore, it was possible to pay for garden work or services as a magical cure or breeding of pigs (Pospisil 1963a: 22–23).

Another type of true money of Melanesia was described by Armstrong (1928) and restudied by Liep (2009). The Rossel islanders used different species of shells in their monetary system which consisted of "coins" called *ndap* and *nkö*. As in the case of Kapuku, that particular momentary system was a standardized measurement of value. The last example of monetary economy based on native currency comes from East New Britain. Tolai people have used a *tambu* shell as "cash"; it consists of a series of cowrie with the backs broken out of them and mounted onto a cane strip. The Tolais made big circles consisting of hundreds of strings of *tambu* shell. It is worth noting that Tolai people are probably the only PNG ethnic group which operates their economy on a dual currency system because they still use *tambu* shell money for some economic transactions within the communities; there is even a rate between *tambu* and *kina.*

The currencies for bride-price

The second major function of a native currency from Near Oceania is linked to a compensation for a bride, called bride-price (overview in Mantovani 1992). It is still a highly prevailing custom in Melanesia that relatives of a bridegroom provide compensation to the relatives of bride. The main reason is that the kin of the bride lose workforce and the bride's natural ability to deliver a baby is transmitted to a new lineage. A customary marriage ceremony normally included giving food, pigs, and various valuables to the kin of bride. Transfer of bride-wealth, as the custom is sometimes called, is a highly elaborated ceremony. Orators of both sides usually deliver laudatory speeches and food is distributed among the participating people. Bride-price is frequently provided in cash nowadays, but customary Papuans observed a transmission of a different type of valuables as *je* stone or *talipoon*, for example.

Je stone was produced by the Dani people of Western Papua (Western part of New Guinea under Indonesia control). The transfer of bride-wealth included a wide range of objects: bands of cowrie shells, loose cowrie shells, and ceremonial nets among others. An integral part of a bride-price was also a herd of pigs presented to the bride relatives. The most universally transferred objects at marriage ceremonies were display-stones called *je* (or *jao*) (Hampton 1999: 122–123). The adornment of the *je* stone [Pl. 2][3] refers to the Dani woman fashion. A cord from orchid fiber is fixed in the central part of the stone and it imitates a Dani wedding skirt (*jogal*). An adornment usually also included bark strand cloth skirt, which again, refers to women clothing. Je stones were used not only as bride-wealth; stones were distributed in funerals, used as a compensation for war casualties, and Dani also used them as a means of economic transactions (see Hampton 1999). A *talipoon* is a currency made from snail of the green turban (*Turbo marmoratus*), which apex was removed [Pl. 3]. The snails were traded from beach areas to Boiken, Abelam, Iatmul and Arapesh. It was customary, especially among the Boiken people, who crafted the *talipoon*, consisting of the snail and coiled woven mask mounted on it. They mostly used it for compensation of a bride. But Margaret Mead (1935) argued that Tchambuli (Chambri) people used *talipoon*[4] in a wide variety of occasions; they especially used *talipoons* as a medium of exchange. It was also used by Iatmul people during an initiation cycle; novices wore a plaited mask separated from a snail (Greub 1985). Both cases indicate that the same type of currency either performed multiple functions (*je* stone) or crossed the cultural boundaries and fulfilled different functions in distinct cultural environments.

The currencies for sociopolitical exchange

The third way of using the currencies in Near Oceania was in sociopolitical exchange cycles such as the kula of Massim area or tee of Western Highlands. Paul Sillitoe (1998) argues that we should strictly differentiate economic exchange from a sociopolitical one. A purpose of the first one is to acquire consumable or practical goods in exchange. An ambition of participants involved in the second type of exchange is to strengthen social relations (kula) or to gain political and social influence (tee). The classic example

[3] The shorter display-stones were usually without decoration. The value of the display-stone depends on its length.

[4] She spelled it talibun.

of the sociopolitical type of exchange is the mentioned kula. Malinowski (1922) is the first scholar who complexly described the kula; this phenomenon was subsequently restudied by many other researches, so an extensive amount of literature on kula is available (bibliography in MacIntyre 1983; see also Leach 1983). A principle of kula is the exchange of a necklace called *soulava* for an armband named *mwali*. A soulava is moving between the holders in a clockwise direction from one island to other and a *mwali* is changing the holders in the opposite direction; that said a rule is that a *mwali* is never exchanged for a *mwali* and a *soulava* for a *soulava*. An armband, *mwali*, was made from a conus shell (*Conus leopardus*) which is richly decorated with banana seeds and glass beads [Pl. 4]. A necklace, *soulava*, consisted of a number of red shell-discs made from *Chama imbricata*. On one end, a highly decorated pearl shell is often mounted, and on the opposite end, one egg cowrie (*Ovula ovum*) is attached [Pl. 5]. The natives of the Massim area organized annual expeditions to the adjacent islands in order to exchange kula. The aim of the kula was to achieve social prestige. Successful participants of the kula owned many *mwali* and *soulava*; they held them for some time and then exchanged them again. Armbands and necklaces never stopped circulating. Some of these artefacts are actually hundreds of years old (Malnic 1998: 16). It is worth noting that the kula did not include an exchange of consumable or practical goods. Kula participants never mixed an economic transaction with a kula exchange. It was not possible to exchange these artefacts outside the kula, so it is in accordance with Einzig's statement. To surmise, highly decorated artefacts were very useless for practical matters, but they symbolized the social status of the owner.

The Enga people engaged in a highly competitive type of exchange called tee. It is the second example by which I would like to demonstrate using the currency in a sociopolitical exchange. The tee is an extremely complex ceremonial exchange which involved giving hundreds of pigs and many *kina* shells. These big exchanges involved tens of thousands of people. Tee consisted of chains of partners along the route of the exchange cycle. The pigs, *kina* shells, stone axes, salt, and many other commodities passed through the route of the tee. During the festivals, leaders competed for the success; everyone observed who gave the most pigs and *kina* shells. Some leaders were able to provide more than three hundred pigs (Strathern 1979; Tumu *et al*. 1989). As mentioned, an important part of the tee exchange was *kina* shell pectoral, which was widely used in the hinterland of the island across many communities. A limited number of pearl shells or of its polished fragments circulated amongst natives before Australians penetrated the mountainous interior. Pearl shells (*Pinctada maxima*) were traded from coastal areas a hundred kilometers into the Highlands. Collectors met with a wide diversity of types of *kina*; experts can classify *kinas* after sharp regional differences. The natives always removed a joint of a shell and polished the edge, which was a common feature of the *kinas*. *Kina* shells from Western Highlands were typically mounted on a hardened and colored plaque made from resin. But many *kina* shells that originated in the Western Highlands province were just colored with ochre and they hung on a woven fiber belt also smeared with ochre [Pl. 6]. A Chimbu style was characterized by incised dots and was uncolored [Pl. 7]. Also, its usage was different in a neighboring cultural group. It was used as bride-price among Chimbu people, whereas Enga people had used it as a ceremonial exchange tee as described above, but they also used it as a part of bride-price. When the Leahy brothers started an exploration of the Highlands in searching for gold, they realized the natives' hunger for the gold lips of pearl shells. The

natives willingly worked for the prospectors who paid them with gold lips. The ultimate effect of this was a decreasing of the value of the currency because too many *kina* shells began to circulate amongst natives (see Conolly – Anderson 1988; Fowke 1995; Leahy 1991).

Conclusion: customary currencies and the currency of Papua New Guinea

Kina is still important for people of Papua New Guinea, but in a different way. *Kina* is a symbol of connecting the different and often unfriendly groups to each other in past times. *Kina* was, to that extent, so important that it was selected as the name of the currency of Papua New Guinea. The kina (PGK) was introduced in 1975. But it is necessary to note that the term *kina* does not come from any Highlands languages; it is borrowed from the Tolai language (Kuanua). Tolai people also used pearl shells for trading. One kina is divided into 100 toea. The term toea is borrowed from the Motu language; Motu people valued the toea shells and used them in trading and as bride-price. The banknotes of values 2, 5, and 20 [Pl. 8] bear drawings of customary currencies. On the back of the K2 banknote there is a reproduced ceremonial stone axe from Western Highlands; the K5 banknote has, on its back, a drawing of *talipoon*, *kina* shell, and *mis* shell from New Ireland. The K20 banknote depicts, among other objects, *mwali*. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the kina unified diversity of customary currencies of Near Oceania. While the natives may no longer use the customary currencies for economic transactions, bride-price, or in cycles of sociopolitical exchanges, the objects still circulate among them on the banknotes.

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Pl. 1 The ceremonial axe from Western Highlands. A private collection
(Photo: Marek Smejkal)

Pl. 2 The *je* display-stone. A private collection (Photo: Marek Smejkal)

Pl. 3 The *talipoon*. A private collection (Photo: Marek Smejkal)

Pl. 4 The *mwali* (Photo: Martin Soukup)

Pl. 5 The *soulava*. A private collection (Photo: Marek Smejkal)

Pl. 6 The *kina* shell from Southern Highlands. A private collection (Photo: Marek Smejkal)

Pl. 7 The *kina* shell from Chimbu. A private collection (Photo: Marek Smejkal)

Pl. 8 Specimens of the banknotes of values K2 and K5