Primitive and Nonmetallic Money

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Abstract

Feathers, beads, shells, copper bracelets, and giant stones – objects that Western observers have assumed serve the functions of money in so-called simple societies and other non-Western contexts – come in all shapes and sizes. This chapter reviews the literature on "primitive" currencies, from early ethnology to contemporary anthropology and archeology. Showing how analysts frequently misunderstood the use of such objects in context, it hones in on the social relationships and political systems those objects operated within and reflects back on the limitations of the Western imagination of currency revealed by what collectors call "odd and curious money." It also takes up the question of whether and how standards determine value and expands the social scientific vocabulary for the diversity of forms of political authority that constitute money.

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Introduction

The archeological, ethnographic, and numismatic literature is replete with instances of objects of all sorts serving some or all of the classic functions of money – shells, feathers, beads, animal parts (or entire beasts sometimes), tobacco, bits of cloth, giant stones, tiny metal axes, or other miniature replicas of everyday tools, belts, bands, copper bracelets, metal crosses, bars of salt, and teeth (human, dog, whale). The list could go on and on. Indeed, listing the items that collectors group under the heading, "odd and curious money," begs the question of whether and why such items should count as money at all. And counting, in fact, may be key, but not in the way most analysts have assumed. There are more ways to count than through the decontextualization and abstraction critics have associated with modern, capitalist money and even within capitalism itself.

In this chapter I argue that the veritable wonder cabinet of odd and curious moneys opens up important questions about the nature and meaning of money and the limitations of economic and other social scientific theories of money linked to a context and consciousness formed by coin. This context and consciousness are also bound by a temporal horizon, the period between the origins of minting coin to the contemporary digitization of money. The current global use of standardized, flat, round bits of metal or pieces of paper passed hand to hand to transfer claims to value, which has shaped so much of Western thinking on the nature of money, is seen better as a brief historical interregnum. The much broader historical and geographic reach of non-coin, non-paper "oddities and curiosities" should lead us to reflect back on what is truly odd in the first place. It may be, this chapter argues, that the very moniker odd and curious is actually useful insofar as it calls attention to the misrecognition of the ubiquity of social relationships, hierarchy, and interpersonal and intergenerational ties in value formation and transfer. Coin consciousness has so limited the imagination that these social relationships are what seem "odd," rather than the apparent fixing or freezing of such relationships in tiny bits of metal that then come to be understood as having value in themselves. Ironically, physical money's heralded disappearance due to its digitization is helping open up the conversation about the true source of money's value in society at large. Indeed, one of the most interesting things about the cryptocurrency phenomenon of the late 2010s, epitomized by Bitcoin, has been its reigniting of the public debate over the true source of money's value: in fictions, in trust, in relationships, and in collective imaginings. The era of coin consciousness may be ending, even if coin and cash themselves endure.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it reviews the history of numismatic and theoretical engagement with the colorful entries in the compendium of "primitive" money. It reviews classic understandings of these objects as well as more recent critical interventions seeking to situate them in light of the history of credit and debt and sociopolitical hierarchy and inequality. Second, it corrects the record on the use of some of the archetypal non-coin, non-paper objects in value transactions, by delineating the differences among exchange, understood in traditional economic terms, and substitution, drawn from the literature on the gift in anthropology. Third, it advances the academic conversation about the relationship between the stuff of money and standardization, introducing questions having to do with political authority, gender, and social complexity. Finally, it concludes by returning to the question, what counts as money, this time querying the operation of counting and its relationship to scales of value and social transformation.

Collecting the Odd and Curious

> The indexes are well done; although such curious misprints, as ‘bat’ for ‘bar,’ sends the reader off on the vain quest of a primitive people using bats for money. If dead rats are current on Easter Island, why not bats or mice? (Michell 1949, p. 255)

In 1949 two books with nearly the same title appeared in print: Alison Hingston Quiggin’s *A Survey of Primitive Money* and Paul Einzig’s *Primitive Money: In its Ethnological, Historical and Economic Aspects*. Their pages explode with examples of the things people around the world have used to mark or effectuate transactions with one another. Each struggled with the question of definition: what to include and what not to include; and are these items “money” or not?

Before getting into the question of classification and definition, however, consider the initial description of one such object, the so-called feather money of the Santa Cruz Islands, the southeastern-most part of the Solomon Islands, to the east of Papua New Guinea. I take this object as an archetype of the sorts of curious things that exercised early chroniclers of the so-called primitive money (Fig. 1). The passages come from Einzig, Quiggin, and Charles Opitz, a twentieth-century collector and authority on “odd and curious” money:

> The feather money of Santa Cruz islands, which was still in use in the late fifties, is regarded by ethnologists as one of the outstanding characteristics of that group. . . . this feather money consists of strip-like coils of fibre about 15 ft long and up to 2–3 ft wide, completely covered on the outer side with overlapping rows of red feathers. . . . Feather money is used to a very large extent as a store of value. It is carefully guarded and stored in a dry, warm place to preserve the colour and elasticity of the coils. Rich men sometimes build special huts for their feather money. As the feathers wear off, the coils depreciate in value. Archey claims that the feather coils are actually used as a medium of exchange. Four coils of good quality would purchase an ocean-going canoe, and a bride would cost 10 coils or more according to her looks and reputed industry. (Einzig 1949 [1966], p. 52)

> The red-feather-money coils tan, ta or tavan . . . of Santa Crux are among the more sensational of the ‘curiosities of currency’ in the South Seas . . . An average coil made of about 1,800 overlapping scales (lendu) is about 30 feet (10 m.) long, wound in double spirals of 6 turns each . . . on to circular drums of bark. The little honey-bird manga (*Myzomela*

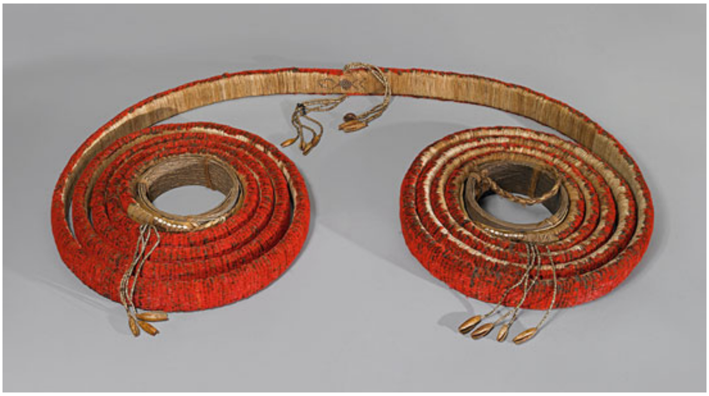

Fig. 1 Feather-money "tevau" of red feathers bound to a fiber backing, coiled on a bark core and with pendant strings of seeds. (Collected by Dorota C. Starzecka, Assistant Keeper, British Museum Department of Ethnography, Santa Cruz Island, Solomon Islands, acquired 1976. © The British Museum)

> *cardinalis*) which supplies the red feathers is the size of a sparrow . . . Although this feather-money is prominent throughout the group of islands and beyond, and the whole life of the natives is centred in it, it is used more for prestige and for ostentation than for trading. . . . coils are too valuable to be expended save in transactions of high importance such as the purchase of large ocean-going canoes (in earlier days), marriage payments, and fines for fornication. On Vanikoro a good wife was worth as much as a small canoe, that is 10 coils, possibly not all of first-rate quality, but among outlying islands the price would drop to perhaps half this. (Quiggin 1949, p. 135–6)

> Each coil is two inches wide and about 30 feet long with red feathers only on one side. A considerable part of the 30 feet consists of two bark rings and twine connecting the rings with the feather strip. A coil takes about one year's labor by three specialists to make. [. . .] Until prohibited by law in the 1930s, wealthy men or groups of men on Ndendo (Santa Cruz) would pay more than 100 coils to buy concubines from the Reef Islands. The price was more than 10 times the price of a wife. The difference between the two was that all family ties were cut with the concubine, while the bride payment sealed new family relationships. (Opitz 2000, p. 142)

The writing in each passage is itself a curiosity. With a mix of encyclopedic precision, zoological detail, and cultural speculation, each also contains provocative tidbits of sociological information – in each case, too, information about gender relations and in somewhat salacious detail (with Einzig being the most prudish). This blending of natural history and the European colonial gaze is not just a reflex of imperial nostalgia, I would argue. Despite the incredible diversity of objects catalogued either by our scholars or our collector, tales of fickle or jilted lovers, blood money, and bride price recur regularly enough throughout the compendium of "primitive money" to suggest that something other than imperial pornography is in play here. Yet our authors barely grasp this (Einzig, I think, hardly at all). The stunning variability of objects simply dazzles them. Quiggin, on the very last page of her book, comes to the conclusion that the customs of "bride price" and wergild provide opportunities for people to begin to standardize or make "conventional" their practices of payment and identifies this as the "first steps . . . in the evolution of money" (Quiggin 1949, p. 322). I shall return to this point further below.

But it is that profusion of objects used in relations Euro-American observers could see as payment that motivates these collections. Quiggin opens her book noting the narrowness of the term, "money," when defined as the Oxford English Dictionary had done as "current coin" but then worrying whether other schemes introduced to define the "heterogeneous mass of material" accumulating in museums and collections around the world were sufficient to the task (Quiggin 1949, p. 1). Einzig, similarly daunted by the "infinite variety of systems" (Einzig 1949, p. 4) encountered in the archive of "primitive money," at first defers definition due to that variety: some of the objects he discusses had a standard weight or measure, others did not; some had a standard or definite units, others did not; some were valuable items, some worthless except in their enlistment in exchanges; and some fulfilled some but not all of the classic functions of money, some of the time if not all of the time. That variability itself, to Einzig, is evidence of the contradictory and variable human nature:

> Many of our facts lend themselves to classification into conventional categories. They fit into the rules of well established monetary theories. Others defy all the known rules. Instead of supporting each other's evidence, they often tend to cancel each other out. If we are honest in presenting our material of evidence without any attempt at selecting our facts to fit certain preconceived theories, the result is apt to be a mass of apparently contradictory conclusions. (Einzig 1949, p. 6)

What follows, then, is a book structured as a series of lists. One list is organized by geographic region. So we have chapters like, "Cocoa Bean Currency of Mexico," "Coconut Standard on the Nicobars," and "Debts in Dogs' Teeth in the Admiralty Islands." The second list is organized in terms of historical periods – Ancient, Medieval, Modern – again by region, but this time limited to what he would have understood as the "great civilizations" of Greece, Rome, and the European West, China and Japan, and India. So we have both "Rings and Weighed Metal Currencies of the British Isles" in the Medieval period as well as "Rice Money of Japan" in the Modern. Quiggin and Opitz's books are much the same – lists and more lists, object and example after object and example, seemingly limitless variety.

Definitions and Discoveries

Einzig's writing is cantankerous and argumentative; yet also one can sense his own frustration – with the economists he imagined would be his main readers, with anthropologists whom by the time the 1966 edition of his book was published, he knew had rejected his cross-cultural, cross-historical approach and with the material itself. Nothing would fit into neat categories or definitions. It takes him hundreds of examples from different regions and historical periods, and over 300 pages later, to arrive at one.

> a unit or an object conforming to a reasonable degree to some standard of uniformity, which is employed for reckoning or for making a large proportion of the payments customary in the community concerned, and which is accepted in payment largely with the intention of employing it for making payments. (p. 317, entire passage in italics in original)

Not "absolute" uniformity, he advises, only "reasonable." Not always with the intention of making payments, only "largely" or customarily. Dogmatically criticizing economists' and other ethnologists' definitions as unable to contain within them this or that particular case, Einzig opted for what he called a "broad and elastic" one and advised, further, that it never be "applied too literally" (p. 317).

Not surprisingly, then, reviewers of the book were dissatisfied. H. Michell's review expressed the frustration of readers confronted with the "bewildering array" (1949, p. 253) of examples of money units, objects, and usages across time and cultures. What we have, complained Michell, was a "mere catalogue" and one not of "sufficient importance to be taken as proving or disproving anything in particular" (Michell 1949, p. 254).

Although she covered much the same terrain as Einzig, Quiggin was less exercised than he over the question of definition. Although similar in form – a vast catalogue – Quiggin's book was written in active dialogue with the ethnographers, collectors, and curators returning from journeys abroad and in the colonies with curious objects they took to be money. She began with the collection of material artifacts at the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Cambridge University, and she had as a mentor A.C. Haddon. Haddon had led the Cambridge Torres Straight Islands expedition of 1898, accompanied by W.H.R. Rivers, C.G. Seligman, and Sidney Ray. The expedition included the appropriation of hundreds of objects, some of them deemed to be primitive money. In his preface to Quiggin's book, Haddon (1949) refers to this experience of Cambridge's "field-ethnologists" who observed currency objects in use first hand and in many cases collected specimens for the university's collections. Quiggin thus had direct access to the objects, as well as the contextual information collected around them by these "field-ethnologists." Quiggin makes a point of noting that other treatments of the topic of primitive money were based on literary sources, and not the material artifacts themselves. This gives her book a different character.

Haddon (1949) recounted his intellectual and artifact exchanges with Sir William Ridgeway, whose 1892 *Origin of Metallic Currency*, though focused on the development of coinage, contains a lengthy and heavily illustrated ▶ Chap. 4, "Primitive and Nonmetallic Money". Woodpecker scalps, beaver pelts, and other items from North America; silver bullet money from Southeast Asia; and cowries, cattle, and more all appear in this Ridgeway's compendium. Ridgeway was keen to develop a comparative approach and an inductive method that would allow him to speculate on metal money's origins. Rather than define in ways an economist might appreciate – in terms of the money supply or the price mechanism, as Einzig had done – Quiggin sought to explain money forms in terms of evolutionary history, implicitly correcting some elements of Ridgeway's account.

Ridgeway found that in almost every instance, he was able to devise tables of standard weights or measures for the objects considered money. From here, he surmised systems of value based on this or that money object, proving for him the origins of money in barter, as a medium for the commensuration of diverse values. The great diversity of forms of currency objects he then arranged in "strata" akin to geological strata: shells at the lowest layer, and in regions where the "Nature lavishly supplies plenteous stores of fruits and vegetables" (Ridgeway 1892, p. 12), leading people to value not items of necessity like furs in the far north but pretty things like shells and other adornments. Ridgeway's thesis was that when societies domesticate animals, then those animals serve as a sort of livestock standard that becomes the basis for the rise of metallic currency pegged to units of cattle. So, he writes that if Native Americans had domesticated the buffalo before the arrival of Europeans, it would surely have served as "the most general unit" of exchange in use (p. 17).

Quiggin expresses skepticism of Ridgeway's position. For one thing, she states at least twice (1949, p. 188, 322) that cattle are not money, though they may be a form of wealth, a standard, or a store of value. But they are not money because no matter what you do with them (except kill them!), they retain their status as useful objects (she borrows the term *Nutzgeld* from the German ethnologist Georg Thilenius) regardless of their enlistment as wealth, standard, or store. This then poses the problem of the dividing line between an object useful in itself or having a use value and "money." For Quiggin, the object's "social significance" has to be brought into the picture. Social significance is different from, more than, the use value of the thing in itself.

> But 'social significance' is a vague term, and in sorting out material in a museum it is difficult to discover a dividing line between the two classes. Shells are merely shells on one island, but are used in trade exchange with another, where they form the currency. Mats are used in barter, but some, acquiring dignity with age, or prestige with travel or special use, develop into a recognized currency. (p. 3)

One could attempt to define items that are easily divisible and transportable as money (and Quiggin does this, p. 188, in arguing against the idea of cattle as currency). But then one has to contend with contexts of use: "Is a string of shell-money no longer currency when you wear it round your neck? Is a sovereign no longer money when dangled on your watchchain?" (p. 3). The way collectors and curators have labeled objects in the museum did not help matters (p. 114). And, furthermore, there are the interpretations and relations between transacting parties: "the two parties in a transaction may themselves stand in different categories. The trader may consider that he is paying current money when he buys a fowl for ten lengths of brass wire; while the seller regards the exchange as 'mere barter'" (p. 2).

Quiggin's criticism of Ridgeway pointed her toward a way out of the classificatory conundrum. She did not linger over her observation that "Women were appropriately doctored for payments estimated in values of cows, mares and she-camels according to the position of their husbands" (p. 187) until the final pages of her book. But there she made clear the signal importance of bridewealth and wergild in what she calls the evolution of money. "It is not without significance," she wrote, "that in any collection of primitive currency the majority of the items are described as 'used in bride-price'" (p. 322). Bridewealth and blood money introduce a standard, and one conventionalized in terms of a token (Thilenius's (1921) *Zeichengeld*), to measure the "price" of a person and her or his capacities (at least in Quiggin's understanding). Furthermore, Quiggin says the token must have four "essential" qualities (portability, divisibility, durability, recognizability), but it's difficult to understand why any or all of these is actually necessary: all that is needed is a conventionalized mechanism for recording debt – a debt of a human kind, that is: a debt incurred through the appropriation of an irreplaceable and unique human person.

I am intimating here that there is a very small step from Quiggin's realization of the role of bridewealth and wergild in the so-called primitive money and David Graeber's position in *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (Graeber 2011). Like Quiggin, Graeber challenges the idea that money is developed out of barter, to solve the problem of the double coincidence of wants. Quiggin simply states, "the inconveniences of barter do not disturb simple societies" (p. 321). Like Quiggin, Graeber pays attention to the standards apparent in payments for injuries and death, which he shows were used not to establish value per se from an abstracted human being or its agencies (the price of a lost limb or an accidental death, say) but to repair social relations. Thus for Graeber "social currencies" – his term for most of the items covered by the numismatist's "odd and curious" umbrella category – help people create, maintain, sunder, and reorganize the web of social relationships that sustain them. Bridewealth and wergild (and mortuary payments, for that matter) are instances where such maintenance really matters, marking moments where there is the potential for decay or destruction of relationships. That so many social currencies are also objects of adornment, made to be seen, makes sense in this context, insofar as they mark and make memorable the contexts of the relations they de- and re-stitch together (see Graeber 1996).

Quiggin's book ends on the development of coin. Graeber pivots around it: the standardization of value in a wholly abstract token, and a token whose value and thus whose power could be hidden rather than displayed (like coins in a sack, or palmed in the hand), represents a violent separation of value from context. It permitted the total abstraction of person from context, too, in the form of slavery, which became a model for marriage. Goodbye bridewealth and beautiful and weird social currencies; hello cash nexus, patriarchy, and the violent abstractions of coined money: "marriage came more and more to resemble a simple cash transaction" (Graeber 2011, p. 180; see Maurer 2013, p. 87), and the person became just another "generic value capable of being added and subtracted and used as a means to measure debt" (Graeber 2011, p. 159).

Just to wrap Graeber's story back around to the contexts of the "discovery" of social currencies, Eagleton and Williams (2007, p. 200) note the role of Portuguese traders in providing to the West the first accounts of non-coin-based economies.

Duarte Lopez's 1541 travel account of his journey through the Congo explained the use of small shells as money. It also was the first account of the shell money that would form the basis of the slave trade.

Standards, States, and Power

> [I]f one asks what is 'primitive' about a particular money, one may come away with two answers: the money-stuff – woodpecker scalps, sea shells, goats, dog teeth – is primitive (i.e., different from our own); and the uses to which the money-stuff is sometimes put – mortuary payments, bloodwealth, bridewealth – are primitive (i.e., different from our own). (Dalton 1965, p. 44)

By the time modern anthropology got to the odd and curious collection, the actual use of social currencies in many of the contexts described by Quiggin and Einzig was going out of fashion. Colonialism and capitalist expansion had altered the terrain. Returning to our feather coils, Opitz writes that in 1962, when he visited, there were only five men who possessed the knowledge to make the object (Opitz 2000, p. 143). Yet the anthropological debate went into full force. Pitting formalists who thought the concepts and tools of economics adequate for small-scale societies just as well as for capitalist states, against the substantivists who held onto cultural particularity and diversity, the irony of the debate was that it was taking place just as the raw material for it was alternately disappearing, going underground, or creating complex syncretisms – sometimes out of temporal synch with capitalist money relations – that it took the field as a whole several decades to come to terms with. So, Paul Bohannan's (1959) classic article on the impact of Western, capitalist money on the Nigerian Tiv economy was authored just as the latter was apparently falling apart, brass rods and special cloth giving way to the pound sterling and uniscalar valuation. Yet Jane Guyer (2004) was able to show years later that the "traditional" Tiv economy could only be understood in terms of wider regional flows. And those "traditional" objects of money, at least in sub-Saharan Africa, were themselves bound up in – and even produced by – European imperial forces.

Early anthropological forays into the so-called primitive money such as those of Bronislaw Malinowski (1921) and Raymond Firth (1929) argued against the idea that the strings of shells of the Trobrianders or Solomon Islanders were money. For Firth, only those objects that served to convert between one object or service and another and thereby formed a standard of value should be called "money" (Firth 1929, p. 881). Marcel Mauss (1925), in *The Gift*, had already taken this perspective to task, laying the ground for what would develop into the "substantivist" critique of economic anthropology. According to Mauss, Malinowski had so narrowly defined money that only modern, Western capitalist money would fall under the definition.

Yet as Keith Hart has argued (2005), anthropology pretty much ignored this insight and got stuck thereafter. The formalist/substantivist debate on both sides was wedded to a conception of the market as a site of depersonalization and abstraction. For the formalists like Cook (1966), this idea of the market was not a value judgment but simply meant that markets, pretty much the same everywhere, could be analyzed using the tools economists had applied to capitalist markets. To the substantivists, however, the capitalist market's depersonalization of relations meant that wherever the market touched, debasement and destruction were sure to follow. Thus Dalton argued that it was the capitalist market organization of Euro-American societies that determined money's uses as the classic means of exchange, measure of value, store of value, and unit of account. Other societies, organized according to other principles, have moneys not for commercial exchange but for the discharge of social obligations and debts, rituals of redistribution, or life cycle payments like bridewealth or mortuary payments. For Dalton, it is a category error to assume that primitive moneys must function like capitalist, commercial ones – each is created rather to serve different purposes. Dalton concludes, "money has no definable essence apart from the uses money objects serve, and these depend upon the transactional modes that characterize each economy" (1965, p. 62).

The substantivists' aversion to markets however led them away from Mauss's fundamental insight that money and markets are about the extension of human relationships, even if they are capitalist in nature. It also took attention away from the dynamic processes through which hierarchies of value vie with one another, intertwine, or diverge in specific contexts, most significantly for the purposes of this chapter, the colonial context.

Take the famous case of cowrie inflation. In an important paper, C.A. Gregory (1996) challenged the influential account of Hogendorn and Johnson (1986) of the cowrie shell bubble of the nineteenth century. Cowries circulated across a wide geographic range; they possess all the qualities Western observers often ascribe to money (durability, divisibility, and so on); and they are naturally occurring, non-manufactured objects – the perfect example of a nonmetallic, "primitive" money! However, these "traditional" currency objects were the subject of a substantial European trade. Europeans purchased shells from Indian merchants and used them in the West African slave trade – having learned something of how this trade could work from Duarte Lopez's travelogue, one might presume. Hogendorn and Johnson estimate that between 1700 and 1790, the equivalent of ten billion individual shells was shipped to West Africa (Gregory 1996, p. 198). After the abolition of slavery, palm oil became the commodity of choice in the cowrie trade. The bubble exploded in the middle of the nineteenth century, as the Maldivian cowrie (*Cypraea moneta*) was displaced by the Zanzibar cowrie (*C. annulus*), the money supply consequently increased faster than the number of transactions, and the price of cowries plummeted. People took what cowries they had and buried them in hoards, ready for excavation in case their value ever returned.

For Hogendorn and Johnson, this represents a classic case of the quantity theory of money and Gresham's Law. When the money supply expands faster than the quantity of transactions, prices rise (see Gregory 1996, p. 199). Further, following Gresham's Law, bad money drives out good – the cheaper Zanzibar shells crowded out the Maldivian ones. European mercantile traders, having introduced new sources of "traditional" moneys, flooded the market and created a bursting bubble. Something similar happened, they argue, with the trade in manilas (copper and brass

Fig. 2 Manillas, bronze. Made in Birmingham, UK; found in south east Nigeria. (From the collection of the Rev. J.H. Slater, acquired by the British Museum 1971. © The British Museum)

ring currencies of West Africa) and American wampum (see Gregory 1996, p. 200). In those instances, "primitive" moneys were mass produced by Euro-American capitalist commercial enterprise. Jane Guyer has related to me the vast collections of manilas in warehouses outside of Liverpool, amassed during the slave trade and manufactured in Birmingham (Fig. 2).

Gregory challenges Hogendorn and Johnson's account by noting the importance of the introduction of a new standard of value during European imperial conquest. There was not just a commercial, mercantile game taking place, with European traders seeking out new sources of "traditional" currencies in order to capture the market in slaves and palm oil. During the same period, European powers were assuming political control over vast territories and demanding payment of taxes in terms of their own token. As Gregory writes, "First comes the imperialist conquest of the kingdom. . . . New monetary standards follow. . . . [A]nd taxes are required to be paid in this new standard" (Gregory 1996, p. 208). As the state consolidates power, the old standard, the cowrie, loses value. Those seeking to purchase commodities like palm oil in the old standard had to offer more and more of it to purchase what they wanted. The rise of the level of cowrie-denominated prices thus did not occur because of a rise in the supply of cowries but a fall in demand due to the institution of a new standard (Ibid). The important corrective here is to add another variable into the story of shell money or any social currencies' inflation during the colonial period: colonial state power.

Modern money outside the colonial context, too, is a measure of state power. Gregory argues that the emphasis in other studies of money – "primitive" or otherwise – on weights and measures (e.g., as evidenced in Ridgeway or Einzig) is misplaced. It is the state the sets the standard. Therefore, the study of the transition from "primitive" currencies to "modern" ones demands a political analysis of contests over standard setting. Bohannan's Tiv history thus requires a political analysis of imperial rule, not just distinct spheres of exchange, together with an analysis of the intercultural interfaces shaping contests over value standards (Guyer 2004).

Back to Bridewealth

But then what about places where there is or was no state? Notwithstanding the wider regional and colonial relationships in which many of the societies where social currencies were collected by Europeans during that imperial encounter, we may take a broader lesson from Gregory's insight on power and money.

Jane Collier (1988) developed a typology for understanding inequality in stateless societies. To get around the problem of contact and change, she developed ideal-typic models from the ethnographic record. Now, I am well aware of the limitations of such model building. The result may be a series of just-so stories. But either we can see them as useful for actually grasping the nature and value of social currencies in their original contexts. Or, alternately, we can use them to provide fodder for Euro-American reflections on the specificity of our own world by giving us new resources for imagining, albeit in our terms, others'.

Collier models inequality in classless, stateless societies based on differences in marriage, the site of the making of new social relationships, of advancing claims over others, and of course exchanging goods. Inequality based on gender and generation is instituted and made manifest in marriage, but differently so, according to her different models. In her bride service model, there is a division of labor by sex; subsistence is via hunting and gathering. There is a sexual division of obligations, too, with women expected to feed men. A man with a wife, then, obtains status vis-a-vis other men. But he can appear to be obligated to no one in that he "earns" a wife through his prowess. The model is useful to explain hunting and gathering or hunter-horticulturalist societies. In Collier's equal bridewealth model, in contrast, people come into the world with preexisting obligations to their elders. Junior men are dependent on elder men for the things needed to assemble a marriage gift. Junior men need to earn the respect of their elders to get the gifts that then subsequently also confer respect. Politics consist in discussions over prior gifts, which assist in determining one's obligations. The model is useful to explain small-scale societies like the Tiv or the Trobrianders where marriage gifts seem to play such an important role in maintaining social cohesion and balance, and such gifts are often made up of the exotic items filling the "odd and curious" catalogue. In her unequal bridewealth model, in contrast, people are born into hereditary statuses but rank is always unstable; gifts help people assert rank. The model is useful to explain societies like the Kiowa where outside observers have reported that "high-ranking brides 'cost' more than low-ranking ones" and marriage gifts were made in horses (Collier 1988, p. 144). Collier also identifies different political idioms for each of her models. Where "bravery" is a dominant political idiom in bride service because a man has to demonstrate his strength in order or "earn" a wife and "respect" the prevailing idiom in equal bridewealth models because a man has to demonstrate his obligations to his elders to assemble an appropriate gift, in unequal bridewealth models, the organizing idiom is "rank."

Think back to Quiggin's discussion of bride-price setting the standard for "primitive money." She assumed that currency objects formed a kind of conventionalized standard for bridewealth. This presumed however that the people who produced such objects were all playing the same kind of game, a game of equilibrating values. Collier's models suggest not only that there might have been different games being played but that there might have been different values at stake, or different idioms, in each game. When a gift is about having earned the respect of one's elders and goods exchanged are based on mutual obligations, then it matters a great deal that the gifts can be seen by all, measured against one another, and displayed to function as memory devices about those prior obligations. Such is the case with equal bridewealth. The gift is not "exchanged for" the wife but stands in a system of relations in which the wife is embedded – "substituting" in that system (Strathern 1988, p. 183) for the person, not commensurating the value of the person according to a standard. When a gift is about asserting rank, as in unequal bridewealth, then a marriage associated with it is always unstable – gifts have to keep flowing, there needs to be a continuous circulation to keep asserting one's position in a game with others for status. Again, display matters – as a way to show rank. But this form of visibility is different in kind from that of equal bridewealth. To Western observers, however, it looks like a price is actually being set on a bride, one that goes up the higher the ranking of her family, and one at least in some contexts seemingly rendered in horses – hence Ridgeway's cattle standard.

Returning to Quiggin, echoed by Grierson and Graeber: once there is a standard for bridewealth, you start to see "money." But in bridewealth societies, gifts are not truly fungible. They are specific to specific sets of relationships. A pig is not just a pig, but *this* pig is in relation to *those* other relationships. The pig thus substitutes for the person – it is not exchanged for the person, such exchange requiring the imagination of an abstract standard "above" or outside those relations (Strathern 1988).

This is not a relativist gesture. It is not that what looks like a gift or a debt here or there has different "meanings." Rather, it is that it is produced through different practices unfolding over time, sometimes part of multiple contests over value, multiple and contending claims, and the inherent instability of relationships.

My perspective is broadly consistent with that offered by Marshall Sahlins, who argued that money-stuff tends to be found where what he called "balanced reciprocity" is taking place, that is, where there are lot of regular and regularized exchanges such as those involved in bridewealth. He does not find "primitive money" in subsistence-based bands (akin to Collier's bride service societies) nor in chiefdoms (where, he writes, "wealth tokens . . . tend to bear little exchange load" (Sahlins 1972, p. 227). This would make sense in terms of Collier's models: in what Sahlins calls bands, men would demonstrate their prowess through hunting, providing the wife's family with meat and skins (the pelts, perhaps, found in Einzig and Quiggin's catalogues of money). In chiefdoms the main problem people are trying to solve is how to pay tribute to their overlord; objects of wealth here take the form of prestige items associated with rulers – who demand tax in terms of their own standard – rather than tokens used to demonstrate a claim over another person or used to facilitate a market exchange.

Collier's models help show how the analytical focus on understanding social currencies in terms of a standard of value suffers from two failures of the imagination. First, pace Gregory, while states may make standards, there may be other ways standard gets set in stateless societies (modulo contact and conquest). Collier expands the horizon of the political, allowing us to reflect on other ways of setting standards. Second, pace Quiggin, Grierson, or Graeber, the focus on standards gets stuck on number or quantification. Gregory is on the mark when he states that it is not the metric that matters but the power relations. The numbers may matter less than the game being played. And there might not be a number at all, even if it looks like people are counting. Whether balancing relationships or jockeying for position in an unstable system of rank, social currencies that can be worn or seen permit the display of status as well as provoke the memory of obligation.

Counting on Currency

I opened this chapter noting that what I call coin consciousness has limited the analytical imagination with respect to the so-called primitive money. My discussion of the political games at play in the use of any currency, and the role of political processes in shaping the idioms in which people come to understand what counts as valuable, may shed some light on the perennial association of money with number and counting. Counting and quantification in capitalist societies serve to organize different values in terms of one standard of commensuration or equivalence. Because of how we "do" money, it makes sense for us to think in terms of the equilibration of things that are different in kind or in number: I can put a price in dollars on a diamond ring, an hour of labor, a bushel of potatoes, even love, a thought, or an idea. We can easily envision these prices being counted out in coin or paper banknote, the token here standing in for the invisible, mental standard set by, in our case, the state. The classical social theorists of the nineteenth century – Marx, Weber, Simmel, and even Freud – all saw in this ability to enumerate a form of abstraction and disassociation of things and relations from their contexts and, for Marx at least, a misrecognition of the bases of value itself in human activity and consciousness through its fetishization in money's commodity form.

One difficulty with this perspective is that it is hard to specify when counting and currency came together. Is it particular to industrial capitalism? And how even to approach historical conjunctures of counting and currency when we only see the latter through the lens of our own system? Thus the barter origin story for money essentially takes capitalist market society's way of rendering exchange value and projects it back in time or into other non-Western cultural contexts. For Karl Polanyi (1944) and the substantivist economic anthropologists, the difference was between socially embedded markets that were limited in their scope and their importance for the overall society, and the self-regulating market of capitalism which appears to its participants as socially disembedded, as following its own internal laws, and as central to the functioning of society. For Polanyi, quantification might have its place in a small-scale or tribute-based society, but it was a circumscribed place, not an overall structuring logic.

Evidence from ancient near eastern archeology helps provide another way to think about the relationship between counting and currency. And it nicely fits with the perspective offered here that the so-called primitive moneys index different political idioms – with "political" used in the expansive sense provided by Collier's analysis of marriage gifts and the relations of inequality behind them. Denise Schmandt-Besserat (1992) has provided a compelling account of the use of the small clay tokens found in great numbers in numerous sites across the ancient near east (Fig. 3). Dating from a wide range between 8000 and 3200 BCE, these tokens represented agricultural goods and livestock. They seem to have been initially passed by hand to manage agricultural production, serving as rudimentary record-keeping devices for the proto-bureaucratic organization that increasingly larger, denser settlements based on seasonal agriculture would have demanded. Later, by around 3000 BCE, tokens would be impressed on clay balls and then sealed up inside. Eventually, the tokens themselves were dispensed with, the impressions alone serving in their place. Schmandt-Besserat sees these tokens and the preliterate inscriptions people used them to produce as preliminary to both counting and writing and as "mnemonic device[s] by which to handle and store an unlimited quantity of data without risking the damages of memory failure" (Schmandt-Besserat 1995, p. 2100).

The problem the people who created these token systems were trying to solve was a memory problem and a memory problem tied to administration. Schmandt-

Fig. 3 Clay accounting tokens, Susa, Uruk period. The Louvre, Paris. Department of Oriental Antiquities, Richelieu, room 7, case 3, © Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons

Besserat thus reinforces Keith Hart's (2000) longstanding argument that money is a social memory device. It also is in accord with other archeological evidence that systems of accounting emerge in the development of ancient state formation for administrative not strictly speaking "economic" reasons nor for reasons tied to trade and exchange but rather tribute and redistribution (e.g., Hudson 2004). Systems of accounting in ancient Mesopotamia did not require a circulating token to represent value in exchange. Instead, they used cuneiform inscriptions – the technological descendents, so to speak, of Schmandt-Besserat's token impressions on clay balls – and a standard of denomination. Even where people recorded such standards in terms of precious metals, those measures did not actually need to be present in any given transaction. Thus Van de Mieroop writes that money emerges in "statements that something was in the possession of someone else" and that silver, copper, or bronze could be used as measures "without having to be present" (2014, p. 20). Records of price lists and loans existed even if most precious metal was immobilized in temples and palaces.

Counting is a good thing to have and to be able to transmit to others through material, durable, extra-cognitive systems when you have to deal with the temporal cycles associated with grain or goats (and it bears reminding a modern, non-agricultural audience that goats unlike cows are seasonal breeders). The anthropologist Claude Meillassoux (1975) argued that when land becomes an instrument of production rather than an all-giving subject – when it is a tool in the production process rather than a site for hunting and gathering – and that when we look in the ethnographic record at contexts of quasi-settled horticulture instead of migratory hunting and gathering, we find people developing systems of accounting between the full season and the fallow.

In a fascinating cross-cultural analysis, Basu et al. (2009) show that record keeping like that developed in ancient Mesopotamia is a necessary but not sufficient indicator of money and credit (p. 896). External memory devices like clay tablets with cuneiform writing, or, across the world and several centuries later, the Inkan knotted string khipu accounting devices (see, e.g., Urton 2012), permit the recording of completed or planned transactions to allow for complex social and administrative functions associated with larger-scale ancient societies. I include these examples in this discussion of nonmetallic money because they present means through which people could conduct some of the interactions associated with money without specific money objects. They also point out the central role of accounting in the figuring of money – and how accounting technologies obviate the need for any transacted object at all. They thus prefigure by millennia the digital accounting by which so much contemporary money is transacted.

Conclusion

From the ethnologists' wonder cabinet to anthropological studies of small-scale societies and the archeology of ancient states, the history of nonmetallic and so-called primitive money sheds light on several core conundrums in the study of money more generally. First, it decenters the classic focus on exchange, placing emphasis more on social payments like marriage gifts, tax, or tithe. Second, it introduces political variables – broadly defined as the processes through which people deploy power to institute and enforce inequality or hierarchy – in the creation of money and money-like institutions. Third, it demands an expansion of our vocabulary for such political processes. Whether we include terms like Sahlins' "balanced reciprocity" or Collier's "equal bridewealth," seeing these as political not just economic categories allows us to ask questions about how powerful people in any given society establish the standards through which value is configured and assessed. Fourth, it requires us to be cautious in assuming that evidence of counting or number necessarily means depersonalization, abstraction, or the kinds of equilibration we tend to assume whenever we see such quantification in our own capitalist, market societies.

This survey also reminds us to use caution in too neatly defining the boundaries of the system within which we locate such money objects. Quiggin notes that the parties to a transaction might not always understand the transaction in the same terms or be playing the same game. Guyer and Gregory spotlight the larger socio-political and economic systems within which such "primitive" moneys were used, as well as the larger zones of contact, intercultural exchange, and (mis)communication in which they assumed value. Such a caution may also lead us to reflect on our own money objects and systems, whether they are as straightforward as they generally seem in everyday use or whether they are in fact as "odd and curious" as the "primitive" moneys that so exercised the early ethnologists.

Cross-References

► Gresham's Law
► Money, Law, and Institutions
► The Role of Money in the Economies of Ancient Greece and Rome

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