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# Ethnographic Currency: Exotic and Unconventional Forms of Money

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The early anthropologist, A Hingston Quiggin, opens her book, *A Survey of Primitive Money*, with the sentence:

*Everyone, except an economist, knows what 'money' means, and even an economist can describe it in the course of a chapter or so, but it is impossible to define with rigid outlines.*<sup>1</sup>

I suspect that Quiggin was having a dig at Paul Einzig, a distinguished though rather long-winded economist who published *Primitive Money: In its Ethnological, Historical and Economic Aspects*, also in 1949.<sup>2</sup> Both these books are now classics and have long been standard works on the subject.

A more recent book by Charles J Opitz, *An Ethnographic Study of Traditional Money*, published in 2000, provides us with a very well illustrated encyclopaedic catalogue of most forms of traditional money (another term employed for ethnographic money).<sup>3</sup> These three books together give a good introduction to the subject, and the bibliographies will be of help to those who wish to go deeper into different aspects of ethnographic money.

There is also a substantial body of literature on the subject of ethnographic or primitive money—as it used to be called—but most of this is in less accessible journals and catalogues.

This paper seeks to give a brief overview of the wide range of ethnographic monies and selects a few types that are of particular interest. It also discusses certain key issues that require attention.

## What is money?

Money affects all aspects of our lives and activities. Without it, modern society could not function. We use money in our purchases; we use it to value our goods, our services and our property.

Ethnographic money has similarly been employed for all these purposes. In addition, however, ethnographic money used to, and in some isolated areas still does, play a valuable social, ritual or ceremonial role, being used for specific transactions such as bride-wealth payments or compensation for a killing, for helping to reinforce social or ritual bonds and for achieving status in the society. Indeed, we find that in some cases important transactions such as bride payments had to be paid in specific forms such as cattle or goats. This social or ceremonial role of ethnographic money is something I will return to later.

When we think of modern money we envisage disks of patterned metal (or pieces of paper or these days, plastic). Ethnographic money too can be of metal but it can also be shells, glass beads, odd-shaped

ingots of metal, feathers, and sometimes stone. It does not even have to be of durable materials but can be consumable. Examples are salt and tea bricks, baskets of grain, cattle, goats and other livestock or parts thereof such as pig tusks, bird skins or dog teeth.

It is commonly accepted that originally trade took the form of barter: the direct exchange of foods, raw materials or tools for other items that people needed. When somebody wished to acquire something, for example an axe, but did not have the particular goods that the owner wanted in exchange, a separate exchange with a third party who owned those desired goods would have become necessary. This would have led gradually to the emergence of recognised exchange media that were in fact symbolic items. In other words it led to the emergence of money as we know it. Money is, after all, merely symbols with particular values that we all recognise and accept.

Until the emergence of metal disk money, shells, commodities etc. would have served as money—really a form of proto-money. One can see how blurred would have been the line between barter and transactions using such proto-money. The shift to the latter would have been gradual and barter would have continued to exist, just as it does today.

Obviously, where one is dealing in consumables such as tea or raw materials that could be turned into artefacts, there would often have been a shift in the status of the consumable from transaction medium to consumable commodity. A tea brick, initially a form of money, might in the end have been consumed. The intent of the vendor and purchaser would have been the key factor.

This may seem vague but we do see similar situations with modern coins, particularly during the early periods when gold and silver coins could be clipped or melted down because of the intrinsic value of the metal. The line between ethnographic or traditional money and modern coins would have been similarly blurred.

In the past, some purist writers have argued that traditional money is not money because it is not of durable metal disks. The advent of paper and now plastic banknotes destroyed this argument. The shift to electronic money and credit cards reinforces the point: that modern money cannot be defined in such a narrow way.

Personally, I see modern coins as being the official currency of a society, supported by a central authority, a bank or government, marked or stamped in some way to demonstrate this status, and able to be exchanged for similar monies, for example of other countries, at accepted rates of exchange.

Until recent decades ‘primitive money’ was the term most commonly in use. While technologically it correctly describes early forms of money, its use is no longer acceptable, for it tends to be seen as a pejorative term describing the society concerned rather than the money itself. One African authority on traditional money used the term ‘pre-coinage’ currency.<sup>4</sup>, p.17 ‘Traditional money’ is probably the most acceptable term today for most people. I prefer to use the term ‘ethnographic money’ to distinguish this form of traditional money from archaeological and early historical forms. It more correctly describes my own interest in the traditional monies of the living or recent cultures with which I have worked. But we need to think carefully

what this covers. All too often we find in sale catalogues, ethnographic artefacts that, while interesting, were never used as money. Here is a blurring that needs to be unravelled.

### **Anthropology and numismatics**

Anthropologists are sometimes criticised for concentrating too much on a single society and ignoring the broad picture. There is some truth in this but anthropology *has* made two significant contributions to research relevant to ethnographic money. It has demonstrated the importance of systematic thorough field research that gives a more rounded picture of the relationship of ethnographic money to the host society. It has also demonstrated very clearly the importance of primary sources of information, the result of systematic field observation and the unreliability of some secondary sources which regurgitate, sometimes incorrectly, the reports of others.

### **My own introduction to numismatics**

I was first drawn to numismatics as an anthropologist and museum curator working in south-central Africa during the late 1950s and the 1960s. My work involved studying the technology and material culture of different peoples in Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) and collecting for the National Museum there.

My first major field project was focussed on the semi-isolated Valley Tonga people who inhabited the middle Zambezi valley, due to be flooded with the construction of the Kariba Dam downstream.<sup>5</sup> I learned, in a very practical way, the place of barter and ethnographic money in my work. I quickly found that modern money was of limited value in purchasing objects (baskets, weapons, pottery, tools,

ornaments etc) from local villagers and accordingly began to use trade goods.

I was, in fact, following in very distinguished footsteps. For example, in the 19th century, Henry Stanley began his search for David Livingstone accompanied by porters carrying a load of some 60 tons of cloth, beads and wire brought for the purpose of trading. On a much more modest level, I would stock up in Livingstone, my home town, with quantities of cowry shells, packets of small glass beads made in Czechoslovakia, sacks of salt and less often sugar, fish-hooks, and even old car springs which would be made into axe heads by blacksmiths in the Tonga villages.

I soon learned that some glass bead colours (white and especially red) were very acceptable; others (green and blue) were not. Multi-coloured beads were totally rejected. Women in particular were happy to exchange their bead ornaments for strings of beads or quantities of cowry shells. Similar trading was involved in the exchange of fish-hooks, pen-knives, car springs etc. for essentially male-produced goods.

Although the Valley Tonga had some access to salt pans and to salt bearing grasses, imported salt was extremely popular and we would exchange this for baskets and similar items on the basis of so many pint mugs of salt per object. The accounting for the benefit of the Museum at the end of a field trip proved always to be a challenge. I did try on my first field trip to account in mugs of salt, bead strings, even sweets, but was promptly chastened and told what the auditor would think of such nonsense!

To give some idea of relative values at the time, the local trade store in the valley would normally charge one shilling for about a fifth of a pint of salt. By contrast,

we gave a pint mug of salt a nominal value of 6d, ten per cent of the local store price.

I found that a one-hundredweight bag, costing 26 shillings in town, would produce 42 shillings worth of artefacts, in mugs of salt. One can understand therefore why people were more interested in receiving salt and other goods for their artefacts rather than cash—the purchasing power of cash at the local store was comparatively lower.

Incidentally, the local daily wage of a labourer at that time was just two shillings, and paid work was hard to find. Modern money was therefore not very common throughout the villages and trading using goods was the norm.

A few years later I worked among the Kwandu people on the Zambia-Angola border, again in a semi-isolated valley. The Kwandu had no interest in beads and shells and were geared much more to modern money, for many of the men had worked as migrant labourers on the mines down in South Africa. However, when itinerant fishermen brought their catch for sale, men would strip off the copper or brass wire bands they wore just below the knee and use these in trade. This was a very common practice.

From these experiences I came to realise that in addition to barter, ethnographic money still played a part in village life alongside the official currency. It had become a sub-currency, especially for small transactions below the values of official coins.

Selected ethnographic money continues to play a valuable part in social, ritual and ceremonial transactions. The Kula rings of the Pacific, the Yap stones of Micronesia, the large coppers of the Pacific Coast Indians of Canada, and the bride-wealth payments of the cattle-keeping peoples of East Africa

all are well-documented examples of such transactions.

### **Selected examples of ethnographic money**

The range of what is normally seen as ethnographic money is very wide and varied and it is possible to give here only a few actual examples of different groups. Unless indicated otherwise, these examples are drawn mainly from the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries

*Consumables:* Foods, alcohol and other consumables have long been employed as mediums of exchange. Tobacco has been used in many parts of the world. Plaited sticks of tobacco, perhaps 150mm or more in length, were common as payments between traders or employers and local people in New Guinea and other parts of the Pacific. As late as 1979 tobacco sticks formed part of the bride-wealth payments at marriages in New Guinea.

Similarly, pressed tea bricks were traded in Tibet and neighbouring countries. Tea bricks were first made by the Chinese, and their manufacture was an imperial monopoly, but in the mid-19th century the Russians and later other foreigners moved into the industry. Bricks were traded widely in China, Tibet, Mongolia and elsewhere. In 1889, ten to thirteen million bricks were carried annually to Tibet by some 400 porters. There were different grades of tea bricks, only some of which were used as money. At one stage, a horse was worth 20 tea bricks.<sup>1</sup>, pp.222ff

As late as 1935, tea bricks were still legal tender in remote communities in China and were preferred to dollars. After 1949 Communist China continued the making of tea bricks (Fig 1). Just prior to their invasion of Tibet the Chinese apparently bought up



Figure 1. Tea brick. This example is from communist China, post-1949.

all the brick tea available in order to disrupt Tibet's foreign trade.<sup>3</sup>, pp.337-42

One can see how the shift of emphasis in transactions involving consumables, from money to something to be consumed by the purchaser, would have occurred; in other words a shift from ethnographic money to barter.

*Ornaments:* A blurring occurs where personal ornaments, notably beads, often served as money but at some point changed function and became an ornament such as a decorative armband or a necklace. Small glass 'seed' beads, imported into Africa from Europe, are still extremely popular as body ornaments among both men and women, especially in South Africa. Such beads I was using for trade purposes in the 1950s and 60s.

Among the Xhosa of South Africa, glass beads were initially high in value but

this dropped as substantial imports flooded the market. Today there is a bewildering array of bead ornaments worn or produced for the tourist market.<sup>6</sup>

Other beads have also long been popular, especially in West Africa. I can still recall seeing stalls in a market in Nigeria in the 1960s devoted solely to beads of many varieties. Notable is the multi-coloured aggrey glass bead known to have been used as early as the 17th century in Nigeria and neighbouring regions. The term aggrey is, however, used very loosely to cover a range of glass beads.

Beads are not confined to Africa and can be found in Asia, America and the Pacific. They can be made not only of glass or ceramic but of materials such as brass, wood, seed, shell, stone, bauxite, iron and copper, although use of these materials was confined mainly to ornaments rather than money.

Cowry shells (*Cypraea*) were widely used as ethnographic money in many parts of the world ranging from India and China, to Africa and the Pacific. They formed a common currency throughout this vast trading world and are known to have been used in Ancient Egypt and early China.<sup>1</sup>, pp.25ff Many other types of shells have also been used but the cowry was the most important and the most widely accepted. Although they are popular even today as personal ornaments in the form of necklaces, as hair ornaments, or sewn onto garments, their use as money was confined mainly to central and northern Africa (Fig 2).

There are many types of cowry shells but only a few were actually used as currency. At one stage a single cowry had a high purchasing power in East Africa. However, the huge quantities often imported

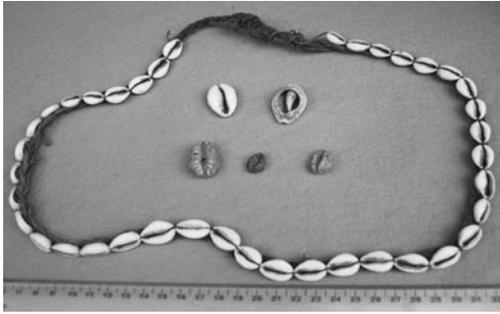


Figure 2. Cowries. The small cowries in the centre of the figure are metal copies.

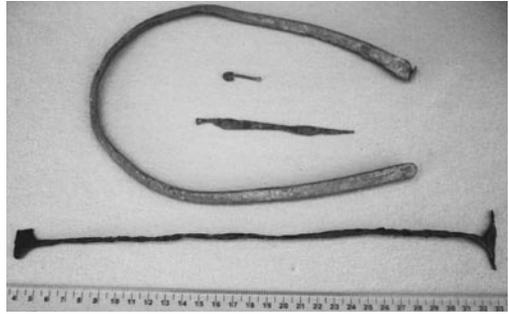


Figure 3. African metal monies. From top down: a curved tin ingot from the Transvaal, needle money, *mimba* and a Kissi penny.

by the ton as ballast by European traders had a disastrous impact on exchange rates.

Slave trading in Africa was often transacted with cowries. However, cowry values rapidly declined. Opitz notes that a slave sold for 6,000 cowries in 1520 and 160,000 by the 1770s.<sup>3</sup>, p.120 In practice, shells in these quantities were sold in packets and not counted individually. In Nigeria, bride prices increased from 36,000 cowries in 1939 to 720,000 in 1949. This shows us not only the rate of inflation but that cowries were still used as money until the middle of the twentieth century.

*Tools and raw materials:* In the Marshall Islands tools such as shell fish-hooks were used also as money. In West Africa narrow strips of woven cloth served as money. In the Solomon Islands lengths of plaited sennet cord, similar to that used for fishing lines, were used as money, though their use may have been solely for ceremonial purposes. Ingots or fragments of metal such as iron, tin, or copper served as money, especially in Africa, though again many such items were probably intended only for ceremonial purposes and were not reworked.

Iron strips, some 300 mm. in length, were traded in West Africa. Known as Kissi

pennies these were made initially in 1900 in Guinea and remained the only form of money in the area until the 1920s. In 1918 thirty or forty bundles, each of 20 strips, would buy a cow. One explanation for the strange shape of the Kissi penny is that the two shaped and flattened ends represent a fish tail and a bird's wings, to help the money to circulate. The name Kissi comes from the people of that name and is not a romantic designation (Fig 3).

Small pieces of iron, perhaps 25mm in length, were traded in Ethiopia where they were known as needle money. Apparently, in the 14th century one cow was worth 5,000 needles. Needle money was also used in Nigeria and was considered valuable. The Gabon people of West Africa used as money, bundles of fragments of iron (*mimba* or *mimboss*) resembling rough arrowheads. I have also seen these described as nomad money though have found nothing to support this term.

Tin and copper were also used in southern and central Africa. Thin cast tin ingots were used as money in the Transvaal in South Africa. Copper crosses, either in the form of the St. Andrew's cross or an H-shape, were formed by pouring molten



Figure 4. Copper crosses.

copper into moulds made in wet sand. Later, crosses were cast from a type of bronze made by adding tin to the copper (Fig 4).

Copper crosses are known from as early as the 12th century and their distribution ranged from Katanga province in the southern Congo southward through Zambia to Zimbabwe. This had been a region of large empires—the Luba, Lunda and Zimbabwe peoples—of which only the first two empires survived into the 20th century. Crosses were used as money and also for ceremonial purposes, as well as being raw material for conversion into other artefacts. Tiny versions of crosses also existed in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Ingots of copper could be very large. One ingot in the National Museum of Zambia is 1170 mm in length, 100 mm thick, weighs 32 kilos and is 98% pure copper. Zambia and Katanga were prime copper producing regions and ingots cast from this copper were valued as tribute from subordinate tribes to the paramount chiefs of the Lunda and other empires.

A most unusually shaped copper ingot from the Transvaal is known as *musuku*. Although recorded by early writers as a form of money it is now valued locally

as a ritual or ceremonial object. It is the product of copper casting. Stems of grass were probably pushed downwards into wet sand, and molten copper poured onto them. In the process it burned away the grass stems and replaced them with wands or rods of congealing metal. The flat section is the puddle that would have formed on the surface of the sand. The rods of copper would have been broken or cut off for use such as the making of copper wire<sup>7</sup> (Fig 5).

Manillas were a popular form of money in Nigeria and neighbouring regions until the mid 20th century. The word is thought to mean bracelet and there are similarities to European Bronze Age torque bracelets. One view is that manillas may have originated from the bolts taken from ships wrecked off the Slave Coast of West Africa, though the first manillas are believed to have been of copper. Whatever the truth may be, they were certainly associated with the slave trade. Their earliest use is thought to be from the early 1400s (Fig 6).

Manillas were manufactured in Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium and Holland and exported in vast quantities to West Africa where they became widely accepted for trade purposes. In 1902 Nigeria prohibited their import and in 1911 manillas ceased to be legal tender. However, their use as money continued until 1948, when the Government called them in and exchanged them for modern Nigerian money. Many, however, stayed in circulation though no longer as official money. In French West Africa they remained in use as money until the 1950s and were never officially withdrawn.

Manillas were made of copper, brass and other metals. Shapes varied slightly and designs ranged from plain to ornate. The different types are known by names

Figure 5. Copper ingot or *Musuku*.

Figure 6. Manillas.

such as King Manillas, Queen Manillas or Prince Manillas. Their history, both in Africa and in Europe where they were eventually mass-produced, forms a rich ground for further research.<sup>1</sup>, pp.49ff; 3, pp.209–15; 4, pp.61–3

Asia is rich in its variety of ethno-graphic monies. Burma, Thailand and neighbouring areas offer excellent examples, each with its own name, value and distribution. Most are of copper or silver but other metals were also used. There are ornamented silver ingots known as tiger's tongues or *lat*; copper canoe money, the ends of which are raised and the body hollowed out just like a canoe; and decorated silver ingots known as leech money or *sycee* which came to dominate trade currency by the 13th century. They come from Laos and are stamped. The three forms date from the 14th to the 19th centuries. Copper *tok* money, cast as round flattish mounds, were in use in northern Thailand and Burma from the 11th to the 18th centuries (Fig 7).

Some of the ingots are very attractive

and have been given imaginative names such as saddle money and shoe money; both are from China. These were essentially silver ingots stamped with information on their provenance. *Ka'kim* coins (also known as *tamlung*) are again from Thailand. These were of silver or lead and were stamped initially as flat rings then cut at the back and bent, apparently to form the shape of a woman's pelvis. Each piece bears a number of stamps which distinguishes its denomination, city of manufacture and issue.

All these are symbolic moneys, though being ingots, they could be melted down for re-use.

An unusual form of ethnographic money is the cannon money from Western Borneo, the Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak, and neighbouring Brunei. Modelled on early Portuguese cannons and cast in brass, copper, iron or other metals, these well decorated objects, about 300 mm in length, were used in bride-price and earlier in the purchase of slaves (Fig 8).

One of the strangest forms of money



Figure 7. Asian silver and copper monies. These include saddle, canoe, *sycee*, *tok* and tiger's tongue monies.



Figure 8. Bronze cannon money (mounted).

comes from the island of Yap in Micronesia. Yap stones are of quarried aragonite and resemble mill stones. Most were shipped over to Yap from an island in the Pelew group, some 650 kilometres away. They are of different qualities and sizes and are traded up for better larger stones in the quest for status. The stones are often displayed lining one or both sides of paths into the village that owns them, though the largest ones are difficult to move and are left *in situ*, even when their ownership changes.

Quiggin recounts how one enormous stone was lost when the raft on which it was being towed sank in a storm.<sup>1, pp.144-7</sup> The family concerned is still considered to be the owner of the stone and its purchasing power has not been impaired. Stones were used and appear still to be used in bride-wealth payments, to pay compensation for an offence, or to buy the support of another tribe during a war. Small stones were owned by individuals and used to buy pigs, fish and other commodities. Larger stones were owned by communities. Opitz recounts how he paid a fascinating visit to Yap in 2003.<sup>8</sup>

Feather coil money from Santa Cruz in the Solomon Islands is 'among the more

sensational of the "curiosities of currency" in the South Seas'.<sup>1, p.135</sup> It is usually some 50 mm. wide and 9 or 10 metres in length and consists of a bark or fibre core onto which are glued the brilliant red feathers from the head and breast of the scarlet honey eater (*Myzomela Cardinalis*). Some 400 to 600 birds are needed to supply enough feathers for one coil and the coil takes a year to make. The art is highly skilled and is passed down from father to son (Fig 9).

Opitz, drawing on writers since Quiggin, records that feathers were traded from other islands, such as Tikopia, and that the coils are graded in value according to quality and signs of wear on a scale of 1 down to 10.<sup>3, pp.142-3</sup> Coils decline in value as the feathers are lost and the coils blacken. Small fragments of a coil could be used for minor transactions and the feathers themselves were traded.

Feather coil money was traditionally used in bride-wealth payments, purchase of large ocean-going canoes and similar transactions. Quiggin records that a small canoe or a 'good wife' might cost 10 coils, though not of the best quality. Opitz notes that a concubine could cost ten times this

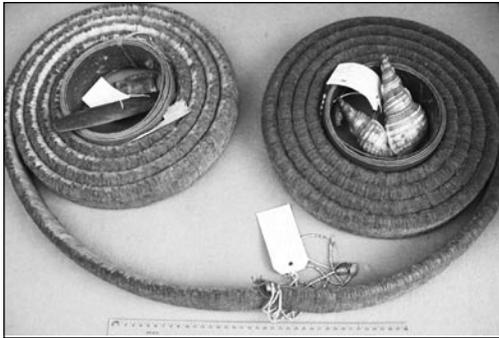


Figure 9. Feather Coil Money.

figure, reflecting the fact that bride-wealth for a wife sealed new family relationships and commitments whereas the purchase of a concubine avoided such family links.

### Discussion

It can be seen that the range of ethnographic monies is considerable. I have only touched on a few in the course of this brief overview.

The importance of the social, ritual and ceremonial aspects of ethnographic money comes through again and again; these aspects are perhaps what particularly attract anthropologists to their study. As has been indicated, there are numerous examples in Africa and the Pacific.

The copper plaques or shields of the Pacific Coast Indians of Canada are also an example of specialist money used for achieving social status. In this case the coppers, which can be over a metre in height, are broken up by their owner and the fragments given away together with all his other wealth at a 'potlatch' feast. In doing so he beggars himself but achieves enormous public respect and a greatly enhanced social status.<sup>1</sup>, pp.301–2

It can also be seen that the lines between barter and ethnographic money are not

hard and fast and much careful research is needed to clarify these. The border between modern and ethnographic money is also sometimes blurred. Modern coinage is purpose made by a central authority and clearly recognisable by its material, shape and identifying marks. But this description also applies to the stamped silver money from Asia, such as the Laotian sycee or the Chinese saddle money, the only difference being that these ingots are not in disc coin form. They are therefore classified as ethnographic money even though they meet the definition of modern money.

Finally I suggest there needs to be a clearer distinction between ethnographic money and ethnographic artefacts designated for uses other than monetary transactions. This is an area that is sometimes confused because of the occasional use of some objects in trade, on a one-off basis. It is also confused by the social/ritual/ceremonial aspects of ethnographic monetary transactions.

Yet this is a problem not limited to the field of ethnographic money. To give an example from medieval European history: in the eleventh century AD, under a commercial treaty between the Kings of England and of Lombardy, English merchants were given the right to trade in the important centre of Pavia, free of tolls and transaction taxes, provided they paid a collective levy every three years. The levy consisted of fifty pounds of pure silver, two fine greyhounds, with gilded and embossed collars, two shields, two swords, and two lances. There was a subsidiary payment to the Pavian official in charge of the market of two fur coats and two pounds of silver.<sup>9</sup>, p.91 To what extent were these items money? In an ethnographic context they could easily be seen to be, but is this

so?

The border between ethnographic money and other ethnographic artefacts (and also other forms of traditional money and non-monetary artefacts) is indeed confused and in need of clarification. But all this depends on a firm definition of money. Without it, any unravelling is difficult to achieve.

### The study of ethnographic money

As we have seen, the study of ethnographic money is not straightforward and presents problems for the researcher: there is the particular importance of the social/ritual/ceremonial dimension of such money; there is often a lack of uniformity of shape and size because of the nature of the materials and the fact that the money is normally handcrafted making each a unique piece; usually we lack details of quantities produced and where the items were made; fakes occur but there are also legitimate contemporary copies, for example the manillas and other objects made in Europe for use in traditional societies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. On a mundane practical level, few ethnographic monies, because of their size and materials, lend themselves to storage in neat little plastic envelopes—each presents its own requirement on how it should be stored.

Nevertheless, whatever the problems, ethnographic numismatics is a most satisfying field in which to work and one I would commend to anybody interested in the study of these exotic and unconventional forms of money.

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### Note

This is a slightly amended version of the plenary paper delivered at the 2005 conference. Because of space limitations, only a selection of the examples used to illustrate the paper are included here.

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