

Stone Money

John Tharngan, historical preservation officer of Yap, Federated states of Micronesia explains about his culture's unique currency.



Q: How did stone money originally come to Yap?

Yapese stone money originally came from the neighbouring island of Palau [250 miles away]. Several hundred years ago, some people from Yap went on a fishing trip and got lost and arrived accidentally in Palau. They saw the limestone structures that occur naturally on that island and thought they looked great. They broke off a piece of stone and did a bit of carving on it with shell tools. They brought home a stone that was shaped like a whale, which is called "rai" in Yapese and that is where the word comes from.

Tharngan: Stone money is the pride of the people

Q: Why did the Yapese take to this new kind of money?

It was a time when the chiefs on Yap were struggling for power. In those days all sorts of commodities were being used as valuables, including shells and turmeric and so the concept of bringing something in from outside, that didn't exist on Yap, was very attractive. So when they brought this piece home and called it money, it encouraged other people to make the journey and bring stones back. So they went and brought more, this time in the shape of a full moon with a hole in the middle, for ease of transportation, like the ones you can see here on Yap.

Q : What determines the value of a piece of stone money?

There are several factors which determine the value of stone money. The first is the number of human lives that were lost on the journey to bring the stone home. The second is the kind of workmanship. Some of the more modern stones look highly polished, which has been achieved with the help of modern metal tools but they are less valuable than the ones that look less highly polished. This is because the earlier stones were finished with shell tools, which makes them more valuable. Another factor is whether the stone was dedicated to the chief who sponsored the trip to Palau. Size is also a factor, but in some cases a small stone can be more valuable than a larger stone.



Carrying Yap stone money can be tricky

Q: Was it very dangerous fetching the stones? Was there much loss of life?

Most certainly. In the old days many lives were sacrificed during the expeditions because it was a dangerous voyage. Also, at the time, there was always a lot of rivalry between the chiefs and they imagined they had power over other people, strong power, and were always trying to harm their nemesis, their rivals. So there was certainly loss of life.

Q: Why did people want stone money?

By getting more money the chief has more wealth and can manoeuvre things around. He can control a number of things. Even buying lands, buying alliances, and so stone money is one of the valuables here in Yap, although there are others. In the old days, and to some extent today, stone money was used to buy land, to tender apologies, to buy friends, and even to buy wives and almost everything in between.

Q: When did these voyages cease?

They stopped during the German administration of these islands, shortly after the turn of the last century. The process began with the arrival on Yap of David Dean O'Keefe, also known as Captain O'Keefe. He was an American of Irish extraction who was shipwrecked off Yap and was washed ashore. He recovered from his ordeal and befriended the officials during the Spanish Occupation of the islands and later the Germans who bought the islands in 1898 after the Spanish American war.



The Yapese know who owns each stone

David O'Keefe became very powerful and was even given a small island.

He gained his influence by helping the Yapese to obtain their stone money more easily. He imported foreign metal tools from Hong Kong and other parts of the East so the stones could be quarried and finished more easily. And in exchange for copra which the local people sold him, he provided big ships which could transport the stones from Palau and Guam more easily. But the problem was that this ease of transportation caused the stones to be inflated and the people to reconsider whether it was valuable and whether it was important to keep bringing it to Yap. So in the end it was stopped, during the German administration.

Q: What has been impact on Yap of foreign currencies, particularly the US dollar?

The introduction of outside currencies, particularly the dollar, and imported foreign goods have seriously affected the Yapese way of life. The effects can't really be measured and we don't look as closely as we should at how it is affecting us. But both stone money and shell money is still being used, however the younger folks do not value it as much as the older folks.

Q: Will it fall out of use completely in the future?

I doubt that stone money would cease to be used altogether because of the ability of local people to cling to their customs and traditions. As long as we practise our customs and traditions it won't go away.

Q: How important is stone money today?

Stone money is very important in the sense that it is not easily removable. It stays in places like traditional dancing grounds or ceremonial grounds, and ownership of each piece may be from different villages far away. People have pride in owning a piece that resides in another village. Shell money, on the other hand stays in the house, like other kinds of money that you can hide. Stone money is the pride of the people, a commemoration of the hardships endured by our forbears bringing it in.

Q: So it changes hands without being moved?

Each village would like to possess more wealth and they try to do something that will entitle them to earn it- certain feats that should be compensated, but the stone is not removed. Stealing between villages has not happened, although there has been stealing to outside museums and institutes. Stealing is very bad and people don't dare: if the owning village learned about it you would be punished in unimaginable ways and you would have to return 3 or 4 times the value of that piece. So stealing is forbidden.

Q How do you know who owns which piece?

There's no problem in knowing who owns which piece because all the pieces next to a dwelling tend to belong to that house. All those which are found on dancing grounds - their ownership does shift from time to time, but the shift is always done publicly in front of chiefs or elders, so everyone remembers what belongs to whom.

Q Is it allowed to sell the stone money for foreign currency?

As far as buying and selling is concerned, some people have sold their money to outsiders. These tend to be younger Yapese who do not appreciate the real value of the stone money and are not well versed in our traditions. Selling locally is not done. There's a lot of pressure from clans and extended families to stop people doing that.

Q: How would stone money compare with modern currency?

If you compare the value of stone money with modern currency, the value of modern currency is linked to commodities, and is useful in buying kerosene, petrol, foodstuffs and all the necessities of daily life. But stone money deals with rights, customs and remains with the people as part of their traditions, so each system has a place in our society.

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