





Shell money

The ocean is life. It provides the world with food, jobs and the oxygen we breathe. For the Tolai people in Papua new Guinea, it also provides their currency.

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In Papua New Guinea, money is not as plentiful as sand, but it is found near the sea. Here, shell money is the official means of payment. The currency has some advantages over the euro and the dollar: it is counterfeit-proof, stable against inflation and, above all, it is peace-making.

Time has not stood still in Papua New Guinea. Bank cards, mobile phones and the internet are the great successes in modern times on the island of New Britain, which was part of a German colony in the eastern part of what is now Papua New Guinea from 1884 to 1914. But shell money is not a relic from a bygone era. Appearances are deceptive, but the shell never is. And even more: while capitalism divides many supposedly progressive societies, shell money is the cement in society for the Tolai people in Papua New Guinea.

Strictly speaking, the shell money of the Tolai is not shell money at all, but snail money, because the local currency is made from the shells of a small species of sea snail, the nassa snail (*Nassarius arcularius*). But the term 'shell money' has caught on, both in English and in German (German: Muschelgeld).

The locals thread the snail shells onto plant fibres. The whole family often helps to make the strings, some of which are metres long. Arm lengths serve as units: from hand to elbow, from hand to shoulder, from hand to opposite shoulder and from hand to opposite hand. A pokono, for example, also called a fathom after the nautical length measurement, corresponds to the distance from fingertip to fingertip along the outstretched arms of an adult. It contains about 320 mollusc shells.

The money, which the locals call *tambu* or *tabu*, has probably been in use for centuries. The Tolai, an ethnic group of about 120,000 people who migrated from the neighbouring island of New Ireland to the Gazelle Peninsula in eastern New Britain in the mid-18th century, still pay for fruit, vegetables, eggs, fish, meat and betel nuts with shell money at the markets. They also use it to pay bride prices and make amends. Strings of shell money accumulated over the lifetime of the deceased are distributed at their funerals.

"*Tabu* is a means of payment or exchange and a gift at the same time," according to the German ethnologist Sigrun Preissing. In 2009, she published the book *Exchange, give, money? Economic and social counter-designs*. She is still working on alternative forms of economy today. A sweet potato, an egg or a fish can have different prices in the markets of Kokopo and Rabaul, the two largest settlements on the Gazelle Peninsula, despite being the same size, weight and quality – depending on who sells them and who buys them.

"For the Tolai, it is not a matter of exchanging conclusively, equivalently, but of making an exchange of unequal things possible in the first place and cultivating



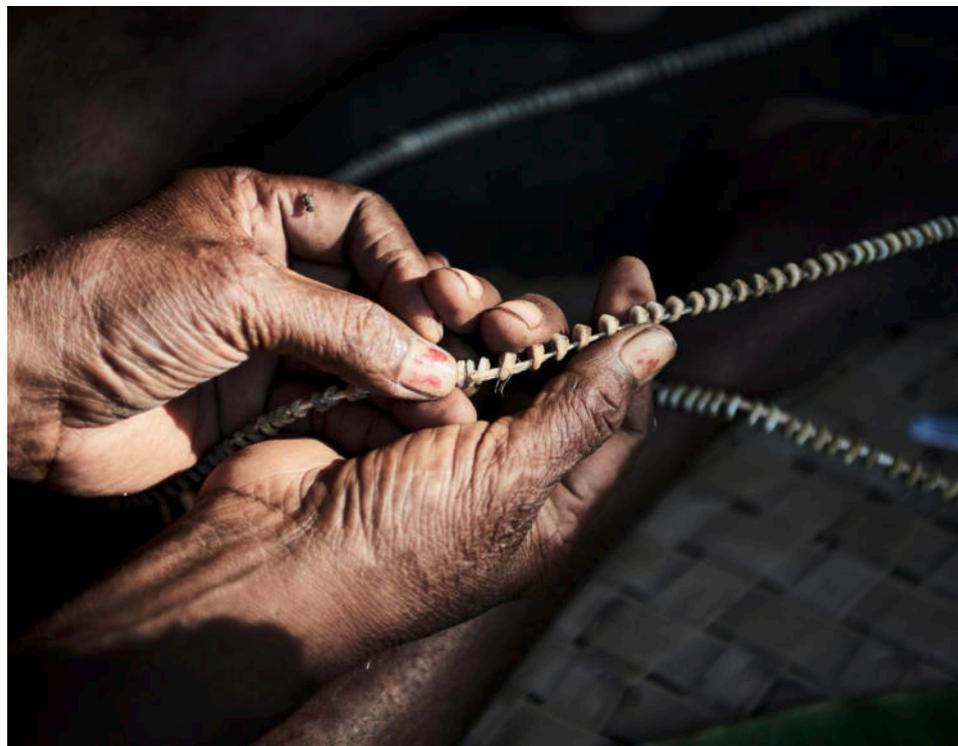
| PREVIOUS: A nassa snail, its tip cut off so it can be strung with others.
 | RIGHT: Women sell food and drink at an all-day funeral, collecting shell money for their own funerals.



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- | MAIN IMAGE: At a village funeral, the deceased's shell money arrives.
- | TOP: Nassa shells being spread out to dry.
- | MIDDLE: Shells being threaded.
- | BOTTOM: Pandanus leaves are wrapped around the strings of shells to protect and preserve them.



relationships at the same time”, says Preissing. “When we buy a loaf of bread at the bakery in this country, there is an unspoken agreement that the bread is worth three euros. Everyone who has enough money gets it for the same price. By putting three euros on the counter and receiving the bread in return, the exchange is complete. I never have to go to that baker again.” The barter situation at the Tolai market, on the other hand, is completely different, she says. “None of the participants have the idea that the amount of shell money and the items to be exchanged must have the same value.” Rather, it is an agreement, established by social rules, where the items can be exchanged by a certain person of a certain rank or role with another person.

Even more significant than the “liquidating” character of shell money is its “non-liquidating” character, for almost every Tolai ritual involves tabu, especially those that change a person’s status, such as birth, marriage or funerals. For example, as a bridal offering, the bride’s family is given 1,000 pokono strings, which have a value of between 3,000 and 5,000 kina, equivalent to between 750 and 1,300 euros, depending on the exchange rate. These become part of the bride’s father’s tabu stock. The aim is to strengthen old ties and forge new ones.

Tabu is virtually indispensable at funeral ceremonies. The aim of every Tolai is to accumulate as many Loloi rings as possible during their life. These are shell money wheels up to two metres in length, usually wrapped in leaves of the Pandanus tree for protection, which are then cut open at the funeral and distributed to the mourners as strings of shell money of varying lengths, depending on the status of the recipient. The reputation of the deceased either improves or deteriorates, depending on how much tabu is distributed. If a family does not distribute tabu at a funeral, the deceased is doomed to misery in the afterlife.

“Tabu is given to participants in many rituals. However, not as a form of payment, but to make relationships visible, to define, regenerate and strengthen them,” says Preissing. To this day, practically all Tolai around the villages of Kokopo and Rabaul are connected to every other Tolai through kinship. For the Tolai, tabu is essential to social order and community. Decades after the introduction of modern monetary systems, the people of eastern New Britain are still closely linked to their sea treasures. In contrast to the weak national currency, the kina, tabu has also proven to be crisis-proof. This is because the shells are hard to come by, as most of the sites in the region around Kokopo and Rabaul have been over-harvested; most of the new shell money is now imported from the Solomon Islands and the island of Bougainville. And also because the raw material is difficult to process: searching for the snails is hard work, after which the shells have to be washed, beaten and threaded. Not every Tolai is a master of this craft. This prevents devaluation.

To understand how tabu works, a look at colonial times is helpful. Around 1880, when the Tolai first had permanent contact with Europeans, it became clear that the Reichsmark, which the German colonial masters had brought with them from Europe, was not equal to the shell money because it was not capable of establishing lasting relationships. So, the Tolai kept their traditional money as a parallel currency. There is a comparable situation with the kina today. Since independence from Australia in 1975, corrupt governments have taken their turns in the capital, Port Moresby, while the locals benefit very little from their country’s wealth of resources.

While the kina lurches from crisis to crisis, tabu retains its value because it is independent of national and global developments. Since the 1970s, it has been possible to exchange shell money for kina in New Britain. In 1999, the local government officially recognised tabu as a complementary currency. So far, all attempts to establish an official shell money bank, where locals can exchange tabu and store it safely have failed. But exchange offices in Kokopo and Rabaul exist where locals can exchange shells for kina if they need cash, and vice versa. One pokono is equivalent to between three and five kina, or 0.75 to 1.30 euros, depending on the form of currency in the country.

Another reason the exchange system is booming is because there are more and more Tolai who want to participate in social life using tabu but no longer have the dexterity to make the shell money themselves. These are Tolai who live far from home – in the cities or abroad. Even among government agencies and the church, the acceptance of tabu has increased in recent years. Interest, hospital fees and school fees can be paid for with tabu, at least after exchanging it for kina.

It is also a fact that shell money is known in other parts of the world. The kauri money from Africa and China and the wampum money used by the Shinnecock and Pequot Indians in the east of the USA come to mind. In other provinces of Papua New Guinea, too, people still use shells in rituals. Hardly any currency, however, is as deeply rooted in society as tabu. Experts estimate that shell money worth eight million kina – more than two million euros – is in circulation on the Gazelle Peninsula. An estimated 60 million kina – more than 15 million euros – is stored as shell money wheels in private households, mainly for ritual purposes.

So, what can this teach us in times of credit cards and cryptocurrencies? The shell money of the Tolai may only be a tiny piece of the puzzle in the world economy, but it contributes significantly to the stability of society and protects it from the harmful effects of globalisation. Those who own tabu have more in their hands than just a few coins, a banknote or a credit card. Tabu ensures social peace. This money holds society together – much more than our money could ever do. **0**

| TOP: A woman exchanges shell money for Kina.

| BOTTOM: Tambuans - holy spirits.



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