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A NOTE ON COWRIES

"What we call money being arbitrary, and its nature and value depending on a tacit convention betwixt men, these (cowrie) shells, in several parts of Asia and Africa, are accounted current money, with a value assigned to them. This is established by a reciprocal consent, and those who are pleased to show a contempt of them don't reflect that shells are as fit for a common standard of pecuniary value as either gold or silver..."

So wrote an anonymous Dutchman in 1747; he was, unfortunately, exceptional -- "those who are pleased to show a contempt" of the cowrie , currencies have been in a majority, the few studies which have been made being generally under the heading of "primitive money" or some such designation.

Cowries were not a primitive currency, in the sense in which, for example, cattle in some communities provide a rough and inflexible measure of value in the absence of an organised exchange economy. Cowries in West Africa have been money in exactly the same sense as pesewas and cedis are money today; they were used as the medium of exchange in ordinary trading transactions, both large and small. Moreover, values were expressed in shillings (and to a large extent are still so expressed). Savings were made in cowries, which could be buried in the ground without deterioration, just as in more recent times they were made in silver coin.

Cowries have been in use in some part of West Africa since the eleventh century and very probably earlier; they are still in use in north-western Ghana. Their use extended at one time from Timbuctu to Accra and from the Upper Niger to Lake Chad. A serious study of this long-enduring and wide-ranging currency has therefore seemed essential.

The first cowries in West Africa came from the Maldive islands by way of Morocco; they were in use in mediaeval times in the trading cities of the Niger bend, apparently as small change for a gold or gold dust currency; they could be used for the purchase of local produce in quantities too small to be paid for in gold. It is possible that their use spread down the Niger to the delta before the coming of the Portuguese, but it is also possible that there was a different shell currency in use there which was replaced by cowries imported by the Portuguese. The latter may be correct, as cowries in the Niger delta and along the Guinea coast were always handled in strings, while the cowries of the Niger bend were never strung. This is a point where archaeological evidence could be conclusive, but none seems to be available at present.

Cowries were one of the mainstays of the Slave Coast trade in slaves during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though they usually formed only about one third of the price paid. Something like a million pounds weight of cowries, some 400,000,000 cowries, must have been imported at the peak period of the early eighteenth century. At this time the use of cowries extended, on a small scale, as far west as Accra and possibly Winneba, but not as far as Anumabu.

In the nineteenth century, though cowries continued to be used in the slave trade at Whydah, they also began to be used in large quantities in the palm oil trade, both on the Gold Coast and at Lagos. In the Fanti palm oil country behind Anumabu they were introduced as a currency, and they were in regular use in the Krobo and Aquapim palm-oil country. Imports to the Gold Coast reached 150 tons a year by 1850 (something like 130,000,000 cowries), As was only to be expected, their value suddenly collapsed -- in the middle of the Poll Tax crisis of 1853. At this point, therefore, the history of the cowrie currency impinges upon the political history of the Gold Coast.

In Lagos and on the Slave Coast, where imports were already even larger than on the Gold Coast, German and French firms began in the late 1840s and 1850s, to import very large cargoes of cowries from Zanzibar, (some 27,000 tons in 30 years). These were larger and heavier than the Maldives cowries, and therefore of lower value per hundred weight; they were, however, much cheaper. The effect was disastrous. The "head" of 2,000 cowries, which had been worth about 4/6 to 5/- at the beginning of the century, dropped to 1/6d by 1859, (when for a time none would accept cowries at all) and continued to fall until the value by the end of the century was only 6d per head. In 1904, when the damage was complete, the import of cowries was prohibited.

The great cowrie inflation led to many absurdities -- it became impossible to carry cowries for purposes of trade, as the carrier had to be paid more than the value of the cowries; irresponsible capitalism had wrecked a monetary system which had endured for centuries.

In the Niger bend cities, cowries continued to be current throughout the nineteenth century, becoming the sole currency as gold disappeared from circulation. Even before the cowrie inflation began to be apparent upon the coast, the value of cowries had begun to decline in Timbuctu, a consequence of the general decline of trade rather than of an increase in the number of cowries.

The area covered by cowrie currencies increased considerably in the course of the century; cowries were introduced to Bornu, together with the Maria Theresa dollar, as an act of state in about 1850; (according to the Kano Chronicle, they had reached Kano in the early eighteenth century); they were not then in use in Adamawa, but by the 1890s, they had reached Adamawa. On the west, cowries as currency never reached the coast in Senegal, Guinea or Sierra Leone, (other local currencies being in use). With the French advance, francs tended to replace cowries, though the latter remained in use generally until about 1914, and locally until much later.

Recent visitors to north-west Ghana, including Mrs. Humphreys and Mrs. Goody, have given most interesting accounts of the present-day use of cowries in that area, where the present value is between 10 and 20 to the penny, far above the nineteenth-century figures. The value seems to be maintained by the continued use of cowries in marriage payments.

More information about cowries will be greatly welcomed.

Marion Johnson

RESEARCH INTO THE FOSTERING OF CHILDREN BY KIN IN NORTHERN AND SOUTHERN GHANA

Over the past two years I have been engaged in a three-fold study of the traditional fostering of children in Ghana. During part of this time I was a Research Fellow of the Institute of African Studies whose active support has taken many forms. Two grants from the funds of the Child Development Research Unit of the Department of Education, Legon, and a grant-in-aid from the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research have made it possible to spend several months in the field and to employ skilled assistants without whose help this type of work is impossible.

Previous studies in Central Gonja, in the Northern Region, had showed how important and frequent was the sending of children to be raised and trained by relatives of one or the other parent. The research on fostering has been aimed at exploring three central questions. (1) How common is kinship fostering in Gonja, and in the rest of Ghana? Who fosters whose children and under what conditions? (2) Within a given society, Gonja, what are the functions of fostering for the individuals concerned, and how does it affect the social organization as a whole? Is fostering an isolated phenomenon or is it related to other institutions (marriage, kin groups, residence patterns, etc.) and if so how? (3) What