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BOOK REVIEW

David Akin and Joel Robbins (1999) (ed.), ***Money and Modernity: State and Local Currencies in Melanesia***. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh Pa. (Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania.) 283 pp; ISBN: 0-8229-4087-6, US$24.95

The term Melanesia refers to the vast geographic area covering parts of southeast Asia and the Pacific including eastern Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Bougainville, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands. Melanesian people are those who share a common ancestry, no matter what country they are now living in or what divisions between them they adhere to and maintain to this day.

Across the region, the Melanesians developed a wide variety of currencies to facilitate exchange between very distinct groups and across great distances. These networks of kinship and trade were documented in the early anthropological works of Malinowski (1922) and Mead (1930) which were important contributions to the early development of anthropological economic study. At that time, many anthropologists were predicting the decline and collapse of these cultures and the economic and monetary systems that were at their core.

Thus it is quite remarkable that traditional Melanesian economic and monetary systems have proven to be very resilient to western capitalist monetary expansion. In fact, many monetary systems have flourished as a result of the arrival of western money, rather than diminished. The flourishing of local currencies is the result of a successful dialogue with state currencies which clearly delineates their spheres of influence and areas of circulation.

In this ten-chapter book, David Akin and Joel Robbins, having written the Introduction and a chapter each, give space to a broad study of the foundations of the legitimacy of traditional currencies throughout the region but with a focus on the Melanesian heartlands in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. However, unfortunately they do not give sufficient space to the most successful Melanesian currencies from which stronger conclusions about the reasons behind the survival of these currencies could be drawn. Although the book provides many photographs to assist the reader in understanding the text, no map is provided to locate the community in the region.

In the Introduction, the authors lay the foundations for the book by opening a critique on both western concepts of money and on the shift in the study of economic anthropology to destabilize 'essentialist' constructions of objects such as commodities, gifts, value & money, instead focusing on the social relations between groups. The former mistakenly believes that money dissolves everything from social relationships to categories of exchange through to annihilating culture itself, while the latter misses out on the role that the objects of money play in the reproduction of value in Melanesian cultural life.

Melanesian societies had general purpose currencies and a well-developed concept of a broad range of financial actions using money long before the arrival of western money. Meanwhile, Melanesians have seen a procession of state currencies come and go through times of colonization, war and western economic instability. Money created and used by ancient societies is more than simply a marker of social relationships or memories of past exchange, but are themselves the objects of ritual in the society and one of the mechanisms used to maintain traditional society.

In Chapter One, “Magical Money”, author Mark S. Mosko presents a case study of the linkage between markets and customs, and the value transformations among money and commodities in North Mekeo. The possibilities of personal agency and the limitations imposed by traditional spheres of activity and economic exchange are presented.

In Chapter Two, “Meaning, Contingency and Colonialism”, author Doug Dalton presents a fascinating study of the historical contingency of meanings associated with shell money, and how a complex of beliefs about cycles of growth and decay, fertility and reproduction are interlinked through corporeal and cosmological symbolism. Here we see how one Melanesian group, those who speak the Rawa language, see shell money as a representative of sorrow and how this affects the meaning of exchange between them. This meaning is then framed in the context of the incursion of national currency and the capitalist economy, which exacerbates the contradictions between the sharing that takes place between community members, and the trade that takes place with outsiders, with the result of innovation in the production of new shell gifts and aesthetic displays of these gifts to highlight the boundaries between the two currencies.

In Chapter Three, “This is Our Money”, author Joel Robbins explores the relations between local and state money in a community in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and the myths and beliefs the people have about their money, and the money from outside, that serves to maintain a truce between the two forms of money.

In Chapter Four, “Cash and Shell Money in Kwaio, Solomon Islands” author David Akin presents a case study of a successful enclaving of a traditional currency, Kofu, also known as “Home Money” in the remote Kwaio Mountains, where all social-reproduction ceremonies, and many aspects of local market exchange, only use the local currency. This was achieved by clearly defining spheres of exchange for both the shell money and national currency. This concept has thus been extended to politics (local vs. State) and religion (pagan vs. Christian) etc.

Chapter Five, John Lieps article “Pecuniary Schismogenesis in the Massim” explores the concept of 'spheres of exchange' which control and limit the types of exchange that community members can perform, both for reasons of traditional local governance and control, as well as to limit the penetration and use of foreign money in local transactions. The concept of exchange spheres is useful but limited when compared with other concepts such as enclaving, commoditization, monetization and singularization. Also, to better understand the traditional economic system it is necessary to reduce the contrast with the western capitalist system, as this system, via its local agents in the marketplace, readily adjust to traditional economic situations throughout Melanesia.

Chapter Six, Karen Brison's “Money and the Morality of Exchange Among the Kwanga, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea” examines the impact of state money on local exchange systems, and how this money has caused changes to the indigenous morality of exchange. Rather than seeing money as something that dissolves and destroys culture, it can be seen as something that resonates with issues, problems and aspirations of the people in the traditional society.

In Chapter Seven, authors Andrew Strathern and Pamela J. Stewart explores the “Objects, Relationships and Meanings in Mt. Hagen” which takes an opposing view to that of Chapter Six, by mapping out the historical decline and eventual collapse of the exchange sphere system in Mt. Hagen as a result of the local circulation of state money. The power of the traditional currency as a symbol was displaced by state money, which then fell to the next levels of power upholding the traditional order, these being social relations between the community members and the quality of traditional leadership.

In Chapter Eight, “The Meaning of Money in the Age of Modernity”, author Edward LiPuma presents the 'skewed' image that Melanesians have of western money, and how this has led to the reification, a belief that something human-created has become real, of western money. Thus examples abound of the rapid end of the stone-age cultures in some areas, and the transition from stone axes and “stone” money to steel axes and steel money. What these Melanesians could not see was the construction of an ideology (reification) that masks its essential social form. To compare Melanesian traditional with Western capitalist societies fails ethnographically because the comparison is being made from different foundations and fails to account for economic and cultural differences between both Melanesian and western societies.

In Chapter Nine, “In God We Trust?”, author Robert J. Foster discusses the legitimacy of Melanesian currencies from the perspective of western 'monetary reform' theories. He refers to Keith Hart's (1986) description of the difference between token theories of money and commodity theories of money in discussing the different forms of value that people from the west and people from Melanesia empower their currencies with. This chapter also serves as a summary of the book, and establishing the position that the authors tend to align themselves more with the ideas of Hart, rather than of Bloch and Parry, signalling an advancement of the theory of economic anthropology towards a truly economic and social understanding, rather than a ethnographic description of the traditional economy.

In Chapter Ten, “Comparisons and Equivalencies in Africa and Melanesia” author Jane I. Guyer takes a bit of a different direction than the main theme of the book, and explores the key similarities and differences between traditional currencies in Africa and Melanesia, “in which the state is not the primary issuer, arbiter and guarantor of currency transactions." The difficulties that economic anthropologists were having in reading similar conclusions and understandings led to the necessity to increase their economic knowledge, and not just their cultural understanding.

To develop a broad understanding of modern western complementary currency systems requires an understanding of the ancient and traditional economic systems that make up a very important part of human society. The importance of the book for researchers and practitioners working with complementary currency systems is in developing the understanding of the ancient history of traditional currencies and how fortunate we are to have so many still thriving in remote parts of the world today.

There are few books like 'Money and Modernity' that fill this important void in the economic literature. The book's main weaknesses relate to what Jane I. Guyer presented in Chapter Ten when she raises the point that most economic anthropologists are really just anthropologists who happen to touch on economic matters in the course of their cultural research, and therefore are not adequately skilled to connect the two aspects together. In support of this claim, many parts of the book are purely cultural narratives that do not present a sufficiently clear understanding of the role that traditional currencies play in maintaining the strength of the culture, and how this is directly connected to the role that sub-national and complementary currencies play in achieving similar social goals in the west.

The main strength of the book is in identifying this lack of economic understanding, which runs through many of the articles. However, the book is redeemed by mention of the work of Keith Hart on token theories as opposed to commodity theories of money as the key to understanding the political economy of the society via its transactional relationships at times of uncertainty, and which in this reviewer's opinion presents the outline and goals to be achieved when conducting anthropological economic studies.

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