

From Currency to Agency: Shell Money in Contemporary Langalanga, Solomon Islands*

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Shell money composed of strings of shell beads have been widely used in island Melanesia as bride wealth, payment for compensation, medium for trade, and personal ornaments. Most production centers in the region abandoned their manufacture since the introduction of colonial currencies, and the Langalanga is the only group in the Solomon Islands today that continues to make shell money (*bata*) for regional circulation. This paper analyzes why Langalanga people persist in manufacturing shell money and widening its flow in the Solomon Islands today. How local currency is perceived and appropriated is highly related to the colonial/ state currencies in the area. This paper examines the entanglement between local currency and colonial/ state currency among the Langalanga, especially in comparison with the Kwaio in Malaita Province, Solomon Islands. According to David Akin's research, the local currency (*kofu*) in Kwaio becomes the symbol of cultural value and local agency against the penetration of the outside world. However, the Langalanga took a different path in constructing their relationships with the state. Instead of restricting its flow within their own territory, the Langalanga produce more shell money and expand its circulation to a wider region as a way to maintain their identity and agency by actively participating in the formulation of a

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new political and economic arena.¹

The Langalanga people, with a population of about 5,000 in 1997, reside in coastal settlements or small islets in the Langalanga Lagoon, which stretches for about 19 kilometers from Auki to Buma on the west coast of Malaita Island, Solomon Islands. Oral traditions in Langalanga point out that the emergence of the Langalanga was a result of multiple waves of migration. The majority first came down from the Kwara'ae and Kwaio mountains of Malaita Island to the Langalanga coast, and later moved to offshore islets and even built their own artificial islets in the lagoon (Guo 2004b). The new residence then attracted people from the mountains of Malaita and other islands in the Solomon Sea, including migrants from northern and southern Malaita, Nggela, Guadalcanal, and Santa Isabel. The Langalanga used to dwell on artificial or semi-artificial islets a few hundred meters away from the coast in the lagoon, but the majority has moved onshore in the past few decades (Guo 2001a).

The Langalanga are closely related to the neighboring Kwara'ae and Kwaio people in many respects, especially in terms of ancestry, practices of ancestral worship and gender relations. However, they are unique in terms of language, subsistence strategy, and several features in culture. Langalanga economy is largely based on subsistence agriculture, fishing and wage labor, and some persons are businessmen who own shops, buses, or ships. Nevertheless, for generations, the most characteristic and basic subsistence strategy has been the manufacture of shell money, which is used by many groups in the Solomon Islands for bride price, compensation, body decoration, and sometimes payment of land transactions. Limited by the shortage of space on tiny islets and the insufficient area of land for agricultural production or cash cropping, the Langalanga exchange fish and shell money with bush people for other food items, and travel to other

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places by sea to sell shell money for cash or to exchange shell money for large quantities of food for feasts (Guo 2001a).

Shell money (*bata*, lit. “money”) is a cultural symbol of the Langalanga.² Traditional currencies of various kinds are used in many areas of the Solomon Islands (e.g., clam shell ring in the Western Province, see Einzig 1948; feather money in Santa Cruz, see Davenport 1962; and cylindrical money in Choiseul, see Scheffler 1965). The kind the Langalanga make consists of strings of shell beads, threaded into different patterns according to local tastes. Similar types of shell money are also found throughout island Melanesia, and partly in Micronesia.³ In the Solomon Islands, it has also been found in archaeological sites in Nggela (and probably Guadalcanal; see Rukia 1980), and is now used in Bougainville, Guadalcanal, Malaita, Savo, Nggela, and elsewhere for bride price in general, and sometimes for the purpose of compensation or payment of land transactions. Before the introduction of European currency, small strings of *bata* were used in some areas to “purchase” agricultural products, pigs, etc., and large sets (such as *tafuliae*) were used in large transactions of goods. Shell beads are also made into ornaments (usually necklaces) and are popular among Solomon youth and foreign tourists (Guo 2002).

Despite the number of areas of use, there were only few production centers in island Melanesia in the nineteenth century (Connell 1977: 81). Most production centers abandoned their manufactures since the introduction of colonial currencies in the region, and the Langalanga is the only group in the Solomon Islands today that continues to make shell money (*bata*) for regional circulation. This article analyzes why contemporary Langalanga people persist in shell money manufacture. How local currency is perceived and appropriated is highly related to the colonial/ state

² Another cultural symbol is the particular settlement pattern on artificial islets in Langalanga (see Guo 2003, 2001b).

³ See, for example, Armstrong 1928; Lewis 1929; Ivens 1930; Powdermaker 1933; Thurnwald 1934; Todd 1934; Einzig 1948; Quiggin 1949; Williams, Cribb and Erringtons 1997.

currencies in the area. Based on data from three major sources – fieldwork in the Solomon Islands,⁴ archival research,⁵ and other ethnographic publications – this article examines the entanglement between local currency and colonial/ state currency among the Langalanga, especially in comparison with the Kwaio in Malaita Province.

First, I will illustrate the styles and manufacture of Langalanga shell money, and its importance in Langalanga and Malaita Island. I will then describe the introduction of colonial currencies and state currency into the Solomon Islands, and how local people reacted to them. The next section explores the interactions between local shell money and colonial and state currencies in Langalanga. In the end, I will compare the case of Langalanga with that of mountainous Kwaio, and discuss how local currencies were used by both Kwaio and Langalanga as a way to express their agency in the context of colonization and nation building. They do this in two different ways by appropriating shell money. The Langalanga, being producers of shell money for centuries, choose to expand its circulation and thus take on an active role in the construction of the postcolonial Solomon Islands.

Origins, Manufacture and Circulation of Shell Money

In this section I will examine several aspects of Langalanga shell money – its varieties, manufacture, origin and diffusion, and its trading network in the region. I will also analyze how Langalanga people make use of shell money as their economic strategy, and how it is appropriated by Solomon Islanders today.

The process of making Langalanga shell money includes several steps: diving and picking up shells (or purchasing them, as in contemporary practice), breaking shells into proper size (*u'ui*), drilling a hole in the middle

⁴ I conducted fieldwork in the Solomon Islands in 1995, 1997-98, 2002, 2003 and 2005.

⁵ This includes colonial reports and newspapers. The archival research was carried out in various institutions, including the Solomon Islands National Archives Office, Solomon Islands National Library, National Archives in Australia, Australian National Library, Australian National University Libraries, Mitchell Library in Sydney, British Library, SOAS Library, and UK National Archives.

of shell beads (*oga*), changing the color of beads by heating on hot stones, and polishing them with grinding stones to make them into equal size. Shell beads are then threaded (*alia*) into different patterns for different purposes, including various ornaments and shell money. Diving and polishing are men's work, and the tedious work of breaking shells and drilling holes is done by women.

There are several types of shell money made by the Langalanga. The most popular is *tafuliae*, a particular pattern composed of ten strings of shell beads, basically red (sometimes called "red money"), white and black. There is a fixed pattern of combining beads of different colors, and the length of the strings is usually seven or eight feet, with a pattern of straight lines (*fofolo abisi*, literally "straight") in the middle. Some strings, called *wai luma*, are about ten feet long with a net shape (*bata maefuo*; *maefuo* means net) in the center. *Tafuliae* has the characteristic decoration of a piece of red cloth on both ends of the string. Only *tafuliae* strings can satisfy the demand in blood compensation – the red cloth symbolizes blood, and the presentation of *tafuliae* represents the payment of blood. It is a popular bride price in most Malaitan societies, as well as Makira and Gela. Another popular style in the area is *safi*, a string about six feet long of small polished *safi* beads. People in southern Malaita and Bougainville prefer this type. The Langalanga themselves also use *isa galia* (ten strings of white *galia* beads without sharpening) in their bride price exchange (Guo 2002).

Oral tradition among the Langalanga indicates that shell money was introduced to the Langalanga at least twelve to fifteen generations ago.⁶ Matthew Cooper (1970) estimated that it had been in Langalanga for more than 300 years. According to my own interviews, shell money was first introduced to central Langalanga and then spread to the other parts in the lagoon.⁷ There are several versions of legends concerning the introduction of

⁶ Some informants even counted sixteen to eighteen generations ago.

⁷ People in the central Langalanga area are more familiar with the legends concerning the origin of shell money in Langalanga. In northern and southern Langalanga, however, even knowledgeable elders admitted that they did not know

shell money to the Langalanga. The most popular one refers to a woman who drifted to Langalanga and brought with her the knowledge of shell-money production (Guo 2002). In the legend, she came from the direction of Guadalcanal.

The Langalanga were good at trade and overseas expeditions. The environment of the Langalanga Lagoon lacks basic materials for subsistence; therefore, the people had to trade with other groups, and shell money was the medium of exchange in many occasions. There were frequent and regular markets starting generations ago between the bush people and the saltwater people of Langalanga, and the Langalanga went overseas to Nggela for exchange before and during colonial times. As the population grew, the Langalanga enlarged their trading area in order to sell more pieces of shell money to obtain large quantities of food, such as pigs, coconuts, and *pana*. Sometimes, they went to dive for *torques* shells and other shells as materials for shell money when the availability in their own area no longer sustained their needs (Guo 2002).

Basing on oral accounts and early reports in Langalanga and Siwai in the nineteenth century, Connell (1977: 82-83) notes that Langalanga shell money was traded to many places, including Isabel, Makira, Nggela, Guadalcanal, the Russell Islands, Choiseul, the Shortland Islands, and even Bougainville and New Ireland, and possibly also to New Britain and Samarai. Since the manufacturing of shell money in Siwai Bougainville died out around the end of the nineteenth century, the Langalanga products played an increasingly important role there. The Langalanga trading area was able to expand to Bougainville because *safi* was used there for bride price, land transactions, and compensations. Since the mining operation in Bougainville made the island relatively wealthy, many Langalanga collected shell money made by their neighbors and relatives, and took planes to Bougainville, where they then walked all over the large island to sell the shell money. Some of them accumulated a small fortune from this business.

the details.

Connell (1977) argued that the Bougainville connection was the reason why shell-money manufacture did not decrease in Langalanga once European currency came to be widely used in the Solomon Islands. My own research in Langalanga supports Cornell's opinion. Many people recalled that the economy reached its peak in the 1980s because of the Bougainville market⁸. However, since the rupture of violent conflict in Bougainville in the late 1980s, this trading route was disconnected for more than a decade. Recently, after the cease fire and peace agreement were implemented in Bougainville, some Langalanga men started to take up trading shell money there again. A man at Suu village already made the trip in 2003. However, few people followed yet because the devaluation of the kina (Papua New Guinea currency) made the overseas trade less profitable than expected.

Shell Money in Contemporary Solomon Islands

Shell money produced by Langalanga people is used widely in the Solomon Islands for various purposes. It is most often used in bride wealth exchange. The presentation of this "*kwatena*" (lit. gift)⁹ is called *folina* (lit. buy)¹⁰ in Langalanga. In their custom, no definite quantity is set: it all depends on a person's "willingness and ability" (*marabe* in Langalanga words). Usually the groom's parents gather shell money or funds from relatives and friends, and the bride's parents re-distribute what they receive to the relatives who helped them in the past for their son's bride wealth. The bride's side usually organizes a group to work for the groom's family and relatives (usually in the garden) to repay the shell money they received¹¹. In Langalanga, when *kwatena* is brought to the bride's side, the latter prepares

⁸ Comparing the price, a string of *safi* was about AUD\$10 in the Solomon Islands, while in Bougainville it was AUD\$25, so people were very attracted by the new trading link.

⁹ Cash and other goods such as Taiyo cans, bags of flour, sugar and rice are included today.

¹⁰ The Langalanga often emphasize that it is not a business transaction but a kind of "gift" for the friendship between two families (Guo 2004c).

¹¹ This is called "*galo geli funao*", lit. the work of female affines.

food for their guests. Shell money (*galia* and *tafuliae*) for *kwatena* is laid down on public ground (*labata*) in a long line. This is called “*tasia kwatena*”, lit. “throwing gifts”¹² (Guo 2001a: 52-53, 2004c).

Shell money, especially in the form of *tafuliae*, is important in reconciliation ceremonies and in compensation processes. In Langalanga, when violent behavior results in bloodshed or death, or in the case of elope, and serious insults, compensation (*firita*) has to be made in the form of a ceremony (*kwate fae liu*), in which both sides exchange shell money. Only *tafuliae*, with its red cloth that symbolizes blood, could be used to make peace and stop future feuding. After the ethnic tensions in the Solomon Islands, many efforts were made in order to settle matters among various groups. In the past few years, there were many large ceremonies of reconciliation. In each ceremony, *tafuliae* must be presented, especially by the group that was felt to be at fault. If both sides were responsible for what happened, they would both exchange shell money in the ceremony. For example, in a reconciliation ceremony between two tribes from North Malaita and five tribes from Guadalcanal, both sides “exchanged gifts of cash, shell money and food, including pigs” (SIBC/PINA Nius 2002.07.22).¹³

Tafuliae could also be used by the government to make an apology to another government, and to recover their friendships. The Solomon Islands Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare, for example, presented a *tafuliae* to the Foreign Minister of Taiwan, Tian Hong Mao, when the Foreign Minister of the Solomon Islands secretly visited China and thus damaged their relationships with Taiwan in 2002 (SIBC/PINA Nius 2002.11.02). *Tafuliae* is seen as a sign of apology in this instance. *Tafuliae* could also be used as gifts to other countries as a way to build and maintain their friendship. For

¹² A special ritual announcer counts the amount of shell money loudly in public. Then, there is *duuna*, a special practice only found in Langalanga. The groom’s side relatives pay double the price for what the bride’s relatives have done for them since the time of the engagement till that day (Guo 2004c).

¹³ “The Guadalcanal tribes gave Sol\$ 9,500 (US\$ 1,343), four pieces of red shell money, pigs and root crops. The Malaita groups gave two red shell money pieces, a pig and some food.” (SIBC/PINA Nius 2002.07.22).

example, the Solomon Islands government presented them to the Australian High Commission as gifts, and visiting ambassadors and Prime Ministers to the Solomon Islands often receive *tafuliae* as a welcoming gift. This could be done not only at the national level, but also at the provincial level. When the Malaita Shipping Company sealed an agreement with Vanuatu's Shefa Province to have their vessel, Ramos II, as a long-term charter to Shefa, the two parties exchanged traditional gifts of mats, pigs and shell money (SIBC/PINA Nius 2001.12.30). Thus, *tafuliae* becomes the symbol of the nation.

Shell money is also used traditionally for body decoration, and the Langalanga made various types of ornaments for this purpose (Guo 2004a). Shell necklaces of various types composed of Langalanga shell beads are very popular among young people in the Solomon Islands as well as foreign tourists. In beauty contests, many competitors made their own dresses and ornaments using shell money as an important material, and as a symbol of *kastom* (tradition).¹⁴

Colonial and State Currencies in the Solomon Islands

Since the nineteenth century, with increasing contacts with Europeans, European currencies were gradually adopted as mediums for exchange and trade in some parts of the Solomon Islands. Some of these currencies were brought home as wages by young laborers who had worked in the plantations in Queensland and Fiji. There are not many records of how local people reacted to the newly introduced pounds and shillings, however, it seems that in coastal areas and some ports, European currencies (especially British currency) circulated and were used in particular contexts, especially to purchase imported goods since the mid nineteenth century. However, the introduction of colonial currency into Langalanga is not seen as an important event, and is not memorized by many people. In the early stage of the encounters, tobacco sticks rather than European money played the role as a new type of currency in many parts of Oceania, including Malaita. After

¹⁴ See, for example, Solomon Airline inflight magazine issue 27, pages 11-12.

the establishment of the British Protectorate, British money was officialized, especially for head tax.¹⁵ Langalanga people often mentioned this as the reason why their ancestors needed to use White men's money in the first place. It is memorized that English pounds were used in the beginning for most transactions, but was replaced by Australian dollars later (one pound equaled two Australian dollars).

During the preparation of independence of the Solomon Islands, it was decided that the new country would issue its own national currency, the Solomon dollar, instead of using Australian currency. The design, completed in the end of 1975,¹⁶ was approved by the Government and Legislative Assembly. The Ministry of Finance set up the Monetary Authority in mid 1976 to issue and managed the national currency¹⁷, with the mission to "enhance the Solomon's identity and prestige and allow for more freedom in economic and financial matters"¹⁸. The new currency was set at the value of one SID (Solomon Islands dollar) equals one Australian dollar, and many people expected that "it is not likely to make any difference to the lives of Solomon Islanders".¹⁹

The Royal Mint in the United Kingdom, using materials supplied by the Solomon Monetary Authority, made the design of the new money, which included many local symbols such as an elderly woman making - with a traditional drill ²⁰ - shell money on the ten dollar note. Similar representations can be seen on the bank notes of the Papua New Guinea *kina* (Foster 1998). Despite some criticism, the new currency was brought into use on 24 October 1977, a few months before the country declared

¹⁵ For more discussions of the tax system (especially head tax) imposed on Solomon Islanders and its consequences, including the massacre of colonial officer Bell in 1927 and the penetrative attacks by the British afterwards among the mountain Kwaio in Malaita, see Keesing (1992) and Akin (1999a).

¹⁶ *Solomon News Drum* 1975.03.21, p.1. They were shown to the public in 1977 (*Solomon News Drum*, 1977.09.16, p.1 and 3).

¹⁷ *Solomon News Drum*, 1976.6.25, p.1.

¹⁸ *Solomon News Drum*, 1976.01.16, p.3.

¹⁹ *Solomon News Drum*, 1976.08.27, p.1.

²⁰ *Solomon News Drum*, 1977.09.16, p.1

independence²¹. Unfortunately, the value of Solomon dollar decreased because of the country's economic pitfall, and dropped dramatically after the ethnic tensions between 1998 and 2000. At present, the current exchange rate between the Solomon dollar and the Australian dollar is between 5.5:1 and 5:1. A similar devaluation occurred in some other currencies in the Pacific.

Generally speaking, not many people in Langalanga have particular memories about their national currency. It seems that the transition to a national currency did not affect their life too much in the beginning, but the devaluation of their national currency certainly did. Many Langalanga people remember the cost of European goods in the past to be paid in European money, and how the price has risen in consecutive decades. The price rises meant a harder life, and the exchange rate between shell money, shilling, Australian dollar and Solomon dollar in different periods of time is often used as a way to assess the value of colonial or state currencies on the one hand, and a way to evaluate the value of shell money on the other. For the colonial officers, the exchange rate between local and colonial currencies reflects the availability and amount of production of shell money, and has strong impacts on whether young people could get married.

The exchange rate changed dramatically in the past century. In 1997, a standard *tafuliae* is worth 550 to 600 Solomon dollars. In 2003, after years of ethnic tensions, the economic situation was at its worst, and the price of *tafuliae* climbed to a record high of 650 dollars. When the economy of the country is in such a bad state, there is not much cash available to spend in bride prices and, then, the Langalanga people invest even more time to make shell money, and many *tafuliae* are available on the market. However, the Langalanga people do not reduce the price of shell money, because the purchase power of the Solomon dollar devalued following the tensions, and the Langalanga people feel that shell money should maintain its value. When I went back to the field in 2002 and 2003, many women complained

²¹ The Solomon Islands declared independence on July 7, 1978.

that they continued their manufacture, but that there was no market for it. They were working on shell money as a way to save bride wealth for their sons, or as a way to accumulate stocks to be sold in the future when the economy in the country would recover.

Bata e Nana: “Shell Money is Hard”

Shell money is vital in Langalanga, and is not to be replaced by Solomon dollars, according to the people concerned. When Langalanga talk about shell money today, they always have a counter-part in their mind – the Solomon dollar, and they often make comparisons between the two. Many societies in Melanesia continued their regional exchange during the time of colonization, and the colonial currency might not enter certain spheres of ritual exchange, which is considered sacred. In some cases, colonial currency was applied in those spheres, but local people might conceptualize this according to their cultural context, and not see it as real currency, the medium of exchange. Healey (1985), for example, found that, in Highland New Guinea, traditional trade and exchange persisted after the introduction of Western currency, but the new currency had a dual character – it was currency, the medium of exchange on the one hand, and it obtained the nature of valuable on the other hand, and could thus be placed in the same category as pigs and shells. In particular, each paper note (instead of coins) was imbued with individuality. The owner’s name was written on the note, which was treated as a valuable. Nihill’s research (1989) shows that the Anganen people classified national currency into two groups: smaller bills or coins were a female category, while larger bills (20 *kina* notes) were viewed as male. The former could be obtained by selling coffee planted by women, and could therefore be used to acquire consumption goods; while the latter could be used in exchange, which is dominated by males, and is transferable with the traditional valuable (pearshell) in exchange activities. In some cases, people attributed moral values to different kinds of currency. The York islanders, for example, called their local shell money

“heavy” because it had a higher moral value, while the colonial and state currencies would be “light”, for they could create no longer social relationships in comparison with shell money, and thus had less moral value (Errington and Gewertz 1995).

In Langalanga, I find some similarities with these Melanesian cases elsewhere. Colonial currency and state currency are allowed to be used in customary exchanges, especially as bride price. However, cash should only constitute a small part of the bride price, and the majority of the “gift” (*kwatena*) should be in the form of shell money. It is the amount of shell money presented by the groom’s family to the bride’s family that counts and is remembered by many people. During the presentation of bride prices, a ritual expert is hired to count the amount, and the total is recited all over the area (for details, see Guo 2004c). The second part of the bride price exchange, the *duuna*, is now mostly done in cash. *Duuna* is a special practice only found in Langalanga in the area. The relatives of the groom’s side pay double the price for what the bride’s relatives have paid them since the time of the engagement until the wedding day. Exchanges are between individuals and, at this stage, payments are done by the relatives from the groom’s side (Guo 2004c). In *duuna*, the amount of money involved is usually very small and it is therefore more convenient to use Solomon dollars for the purpose. There is, however, also a cultural aspect to this difference. *Duuna* is a way to build connections between relatives of both sides, and the connections are seen as smaller relationships. However, the exchange between the bride’s family and the groom’s family involve a person (the bride), and the loss of a person for one group could only be compensated by blood revenge (as in the case of elopement and homicide), or by *tafuliae*, which symbolizes the exchange of blood and the bonding between two parties in the exchange.

Shell money is important to the Langalanga for a particular reason: the introduction of shell money technique occurred at about the same time when the Langalanga began to constitute themselves as a group. In the legend of the woman who brought in the shell money, it was she who

suggested the bush people to move downhill to the coastal area, and it was because of the attraction of this technique that many people from other places came to join them and thus agglomerated into a new group called "Langalanga." Many informants told me that "*saena i wala e saina i bata*" (lit. "the language of Langalanga is the language of shell money") (Guo 2004a). This means that first, shell money is the best representation of Langalanga culture, and second, the formation of a new language, the Langalanga language, was the result of the existence of shell money in the area, because it attracted people from various places to live together and form a new language. Colonial money and the Solomon dollar do not have such a quality, and Langalanga people view them differently. It is not clear whether shell money has a higher moral value than Solomon dollars in Langalanga. However, the Langalanga see them differently, and their perspective is unique and reflects their position as the manufacturers of shell currency. The best illustration of what shell money is in the opinion of the Langalanga people can be summarized in the following expression: "*bata e nana*", i.e. shell money is hard.

In making a comparison with Solomon dollars, the Langalanga people often say: "*bata e nana, ma seleni whaetmen e iko*", i.e. shell money is hard, but White men's money is not. In explaining why they make such a judgment, people always tell me that it took a lot of effort to make shell money - it took a lot of trouble to obtain shells suitable for shell money, and to make them into shell money. In particular, a woman has to sit down and endure the tedious job of breaking shells, and drilling holes. They then had to thread the beads into particular patterns. I was not able to understand its meaning in the beginning. I questioned that it is also very hard to make money by selling sweet potatoes and vegetables in the market. The farmers have to clear the land, plant the vines and take care of them before they can harvest and carry the heavy load of crops to the market. Why is making shell money particularly seen as "hard"? In David Akin's research, the Kwaio have a similar distinction between shell money and cash: "Shillings are easy. Shell

money is hard.” (Akin 1999b: 111).

Cash is “easy” because any man can go by himself to a plantation and earn it without any social investment. Even a social outcast may become cash wealthy. Shell money is “hard” because it is the medium of the prestige economy in which success depends upon ongoing investment in one’s community (ibid.).

Some Langalanga men agreed with the differentiation above. To accumulate shell money, you need to practice social investment for a long period of time by participating in exchanges, while it is possible to earn cash at a younger age. They found *seleni* (shilling, European money, and the Solomon dollar now) easier to come, but at the same time easier to “go”. A man may sell the fish caught in the morning on the market and receive a handful of cash. Often, however, he then purchases some sweet potatoes on the market, or some bottles of beer, pays the bus fare, and the money may be gone by the time he gets home.

However, for shell money, it’s not easy to get – you need to put a lot of efforts to make it. The technique is neither difficult nor secret, but only the Langalanga women had the patience and willingness to spend a lot of time making it. But then it’s in the form of *tafuliae* or *safi* and a person cannot sell it in the market everyday. There are a lot of women sitting in the Central Market in Honiara selling shell money and shell necklaces. You might be able to sell a necklace each day, but you don’t sell a *tafuliae* everyday. It’s not an easy thing. It’s hard.

Shell money is a way of saving – for a future payment of a bride price for one’s son or nephew, or for the school fees of one’s children. Some Langalanga work on shell money everyday and sell it when they have to pay school fees. In comparison with *seleni*, shell money is more likely to stay in the house and become wealth, but it takes a long time to make. However, there is also another aspect. In response to my question, a man explained that Langalanga people “*galo nana fala bata*”, i.e. work hard for shell money. He believes that, unlike the European money, the custom money is hard to

make (“*nana*”). The above interpretation by the Langalanga separates them from the Kwaio in a significant way - i.e., when the Langalanga talk about “shell money is hard”, they don’t just mean the heavy load of social investment to accumulate lots of shell money; rather, they emphasize *the heavy load of work in manufacturing shell money*. Although the Kwaio also make the shell money they use, this shell money is of limited amount and it circulates only within the Kwaio territory. For the Langalanga, making shell money is their economic strategy and is the prime means of obtaining cash. As the producers of shell money, their perspective is quite different from those who obtain it from others. Especially for women, who are the ones who make shall money, “*bata e nana*” is the best description of how they think about their relationship with it.

The explanation correlates to the Langalanga notion of things. Elsewhere (Guo 2004a, 2004b, 2004c), I argued that the Langalanga put a lot of emphasis on human actions, especially in the aspect of the impact of human bodies in the material world. Under this concept, shell money is understood as something made (*galo*) by human hands, and human efforts are particularly emphasized. The Langalanga also made the process of shell money making into a cultural performance for tourists, and emphasized that the process of manufacture is inalienable from the meaning of shell money in their society (for details, see Guo 2004a).

Shell Money as Currency and Agency: The Producers’ Perspective

Matthew Cooper in his 1971 article predicted that shell money in Langalanga will soon die out and be replaced by European money, as this happened in many other production centers in the Solomon Islands. Here, however, this did not happen. Connell (1977) attributed the continuity of shell money production in Langalanga to the Bougainville market, in which the Langalanga people made good profits in the mid 1970s. However, the Bougainville market was closed since the late 1980s for more than fifteen

years, and the Langalanga shell money is still vital today in Langalanga, and it even circulated in areas without direct trading relationships with the Langalanga. It has become part of the national symbols in the Solomon Islands, and some people even start to talk about making shell money their official currency in addition to the national currency of the Solomon dollar. Their idea is to have it accepted as legal tender in banks – i.e., people could open a bank account to save their shell money, and they are free to convert shell money into Solomon dollars and vice versa in the bank²². This calls for explanations.

A dual monetary system is already experimented elsewhere in Melanesia. The East New Britain Provincial government in Papua New Guinea started to put the Tolai traditional currency, shell money (*tabu* or *tambu*), as legal tender, and a Tabu Exchange/ Bank was opened in February, 2002²³. The issue has been under a lot of discussion since late 1990s, when some local leaders worried that the national currency, the *kina*, devalued rapidly on the global monetary market. They called on the Tolai people to rely on their traditional shell money, which might be their only means of survival²⁴. They argued that setting up a customary wealth bank would “assist in mobilizing, regulating and controlling tabu currency”. However, some people have reservations. The director of the National Cultural Commission, Dr Jacob Semit argues that “shell money has strong ceremonial

²² A similar idea was proposed in the early 1990s and a man even opened a “Custom bank’ in Auki to take shell money savings and convert them into Solomon dollars freely. However, it was not successful. The recent approach is to have their MP Mr. Ulufa’alu propose a bill in the Parliament to have the government recognize the status of shell money.

²³ The National/ PINA Nius 2002.02.13.

²⁴ Stewart and Strathern (2002) point out that the idea of searching for a second currency when the first one devalue in the Tolai case is similar to the Hagen when, in the 1970s, the Hageners abandoned shell valuables and adopted the Australian dollar for the same reason, only that the Tolai case is a reverse in terms of the currencies being abandoned and embraced.

and ritual value, and can't function as an alternative to the *kina*.”²⁵ The Tolai case parallels the Langalanga in terms of its attempts of legitimization, its institutionalization in a bank, and its way of applying traditional currency as a way to maintain identity and gaining control of their future. However, the Tolai experience is different from the Langalanga in two important respects. First, Tolai shell money has been preferred and used almost in all aspects of life (including tax payment, school fees, and purchasing goods) for decades (Gewertz and Errington 1995), while in Langalanga shell money is used only for limited purposes since the popularization of European money. Second, Tolai shell money is not locally made but imported (partly from the Solomon Islands), while Langalanga people are not only shell money users, but shell money producers as well.

Another comparison can be made with another group on Malaita Island – the mountain Kwaio. The Kwaio had been resistant and even in conflict with the outside power – the colonial and the national rule (Keesing 1992). They exclude national currency from bride-price payment and mortuary exchange, which are central in social reproduction. Instead, the traditional shell money, *kofu*, circulates in these exchanges. These two currencies are not exchangeable in a direct way. Cash earned by selling agricultural products or wage labor has to be transferred to goods (such as food cans, cigarettes, and batteries) and then sold for *kofu* when they return to their homeland. The inconvertibility of shell money shields the Kwaio from direct control by the nation-state. “Kwaio presents a classic case of a local currency becoming a prominent symbol of local agency and cultural values” (Akin 1999b: 103).

In the Langalanga case, we may come to the same conclusion through an opposite path. Langalanga shell money is not restricted to their territory; on the contrary it is made to be used outside. The Langalanga people think that the wider the shell money circulates, the wealthier and more powerful

²⁵ Radio Australia, 2002.02.27. For other discussions, see *The National* /PINA Nius 2002.02.13, *The Independent*, 2000.07.20, *Courier/ Abridged* 1999.11.26, 1999.11.06, 1998.11.03).

they are. Langalanga people often comment with pride that they are like the “central mint”, the “central bank” in the Solomon Islands because their shell money is used all over the nation. As a man put it:

Shell money is now all over the nation – in the past, it was not so widely used. Even when foreign ambassadors came to the Solomon Islands, the officials would present them with shell money. Last weekend, when the Lilisiana Catholic church celebrated its opening anniversary, the new priest was decorated with shell money.

In Langalanga, the local currency is also a prominent symbol of local agency. From the producers’ perspective²⁶, the Langalanga believe that as shell money is used all over the country, “it is like the Langalanga control the whole country”, “because they are used to pay bride prices, and the women would then give birth to children. Therefore, Langalanga shell money and [Langalanga] power is in their blood.”

The local currency (*kofu*) in Kwaio becomes the symbol of cultural value and local agency against the penetration of the outside world. However, the Langalanga took a different path in constructing their relationships with the state. Instead of restricting its flow within their own territory, the Langalanga produce more shell money and expand its circulation to a wider region as a way to maintain their identity and agency by actively participating in the formulation of a new political and economic arena. The Langalanga think of shell money making as a premium way of making a living and even developing the region. They organize corporate groups with women working together in the breaking and drilling process, and take loans to purchase bags of shell as an investment in their home “industry”. Some Langalanga people go to Honiara to sell these at the Central Market for a higher price. Some women bring their tools with them and keep *u’ui* while visiting relatives in the capital (Guo 2001a). Shell money is, according

²⁶ Most studies concerning the social aspect of shell money and their relationships with introduced currencies focus on the consumers. The Langalanga case is unique in this respect.

to their legends and historical narratives, the prime mover of why Langalanga Lagoon was populated and the Langalanga emerged as a unique people. Today, they continue to play the role of producers of shell money, and attempt to enlarge its circulation and application by making it a legal tender parallel to the national currency of the Solomon Islands.

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