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Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson
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THE SHELL MONEY OF THE SLAVE TRADE

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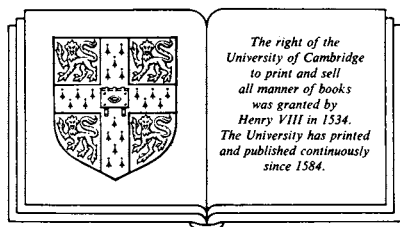
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

Cambridge University Press
0521541107 - The Shell Money of the Slave Trade
Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson
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[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1986
First paperback edition 2003

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress cataloguing in publication data

Hogendorn, Jan S.

The shell money of the slave trade.

(African studies series; 49)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Shell money. 2. Cowries. 3. Slave-trade – History.

4. Slave-trade – Africa. I. Johnson, Marion, 1914–

II. Title. III. Series.

GN450.5.H64 1986 380.1'44'096 85-25511

ISBN 0 521 32086 0 hardback

ISBN 0 521 54110 7 paperback

Cambridge University Press
0521541107 - The Shell Money of the Slave Trade
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It is very singular that . . . the contemptible shells of the Maldives prove the price of Mankind, and contribute to the vilest of traffic in negro lands; but so it is.

(Fragment attributed to L. A. Flori in the H. C. P. Bell
Collection,
Sri Lanka National Archives, 25.16.42C.)

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 shew a Contempt of them, don't reflect that shells are as fit for a common standard of pecuniary Value, as either Gold or Silver; they certainly forget that they themselves are obliged to do what they ridicule and take them for ready Money.

“Dutch Gentleman's” pamphlet (in the British Museum),
*Voyage to the Island of Ceylon on Board a Dutch Indiaman
in the Year 1747.*
London, 1754, pp. 19–20.

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Preface

Both Marion Johnson and Jan Hogendorn first became interested in the cowrie shell money of West Africa while living and working there, some 5,000 airline miles from where the shells had actually originated. Marion Johnson, trained in monetary economics at Oxford, was resident in the Gold Coast during 1937–39, but only began her inquiry into the cowrie currency much later, during a four-year stay from 1962 to 1966 in now-independent Ghana. While undertaking research on trade routes at the University of Ghana, Legon, she noted the frequent references by nineteenth-century travellers to the existence of a shell-money standard. Little specific attention had been directed to the cowrie currency since the ambitious German works of the turn of the century, so, with four notebooks filled with material on the subject, she wrote the articles published by the *Journal of African History* in 1970 that ten years later furnished the impetus for this volume.¹ Work on the cowrie required treatment of the Muslim gold *mithqal* and the “trade ounce,” the eighteenth-century standard of value with no circulating equivalent, used with such frequency along the West African coast. Two further articles resulted from this research.² Most of the writing was done at the Centre of West African Studies, University of Birmingham, where she has been for the past fifteen years.

In 1980 Jan Hogendorn took leave from the Department of Economics, Colby College, as Research Associate in the same center. Trained in development economics at Wesleyan University in the U.S.A. and at the London School of Economics, he had first encountered cowries in the great Kano market during the mid 1960s while carrying on the fieldwork for his Ph.D. dissertation on the Nigerian groundnut trade. He did not suspect how far these shells had travelled until he read Marion Johnson’s articles in the *Journal of African History*. By this time he was developing an interest in the relation between African indigenous moneys and the slave trade, reflected in an article, also in the *Journal of African History*, that appeared four years after Johnson’s essays on the cowrie.³ It was at Birmingham that the idea was conceived for a jointly authored book on the cowrie currency.

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That work of four years, involving field and archival work in Europe, Africa, and Asia, is now complete.

The authors could not have done it without help. Grants from both the U.S. and U.K. Social Science Research Councils, the Mellon Foundation, and the Colby Social Science Grants Committee allayed most of the financial worry. Several able student research assistants found employment on this project, their scepticism as to whether there really was a shell money overcome by the excitement of studying a trade so strange, so long-lasting, and geographically so wide-ranging.

In the Netherlands, Floris Klinkenberg of the University of Leiden served for a long period as Hogendorn's research assistant in the national archives at The Hague, and his careful work is gratefully acknowledged. Floris turned up much more material than is included in this volume, as can be seen in his subsequent master's thesis at Leiden,⁴ and he was chiefly responsible for the research effort in the Netherlands. Assistance was also rendered by J. Valkenberg at Leiden.

Lynn Garrett of the Centre of West African Studies, Birmingham, and Joanne Lynch of Colby College worked in Britain as researchers at the Public Record Office, Kew. Joanne Lynch concentrated on the European aspects of the cowrie trade, eventually becoming co-author of a recently published article.⁵

At Colby College in the U.S.A. the supply of student assistants was sufficiently liberal to allow for a division of labor. Kathy Dornish helped in translating German and transcribed the tapes from the fieldwork. Shellie Stoddard prepared the tables and diagrams. Virginia Bushell checked bibliographical references, travelled to Widener Library at Harvard when necessary, and in general managed the inter-library ordering of works not available at the college. Colby's Kelly McPhail checked details of the life and habitat of the cowrie in Australia and Hawaii. Jill Lord undertook the computer editing and printing of the original drafts. Proof-reading was assisted by Christie Emond, Kelly McPhail, and Faith Delaney, and Faith was in charge of the final production of the manuscript. Some of these students put in two years on these tasks.

In the academic and business communities, many individuals gave support and encouragement. Help of a personal nature came from more people than are named here, but the following must have special mention.

Australia: S. Arasaratnam of the University of New England.

Canada: Paul Lovejoy of York University.

Denmark: James Heimann of Copenhagen University, whose lengthy letters were full of interesting points, and whose own published research on the cowrie (from the perspective of an anthropologist) is cited frequently in this book; Kristof Glamann of the Carlsbergfondet.

Ghana: the late Thomas Hodgkin of the Institute of African Studies, Legon, who made facilities available to Marion Johnson at the time of her work there; and Ivor Wilks, who was generous with help and encourage-

Preface

ment. Jane Guyer was helpful, and Daniel McCall told us personally of his very recent encounters with the still-circulating cowrie currency in Ghana. A number of other Ghanaian informants provided assistance.

India: Om Prakash of the University of Delhi; Phirov Sukhadwala of Coin Shellcrafts House, Bombay.

Maldivé Islands: Mr. Hussein Haleem of the Maldivé Mission to the United Nations in New York City made the initial contacts in Male for Hogendorn. The Hon. Abdula Hameed, Minister of Provincial Affairs, made it possible to visit atolls that were ordinarily off-limits to foreigners, and the officials of his ministry were indispensable in making travel arrangements to areas where boats did not run to schedule. Mr. D. Abdul Hameed, Principal of the Majeediyya School in Male, supplied a student translator of Divehi, the local language, while the Director of Information and Broadcasting, Mr. Hassan Maniku, and his assistant, Mr. Ahmad Shahiku, helped to provide access to official customs records. In the merchant community, Mr. Abdullah Faiz of Kalegefanu Enterprises, Mr. I. M. Didi of the firm of that name, Mr. A. H. H. Maniku, Mr. Mohamed Ahmad, and Mr. Adam Shariff (the latter two helped with translations) gave of their time.

Netherlands: Pieter Emmer, Femme Gaastra, Robert Ross, Leonard Blussé, and George Winius of the Centre for the History of European Expansion, University of Leiden, made research in the Netherlands a pleasant experience. In particular Pieter Emmer made it possible for Hogendorn to obtain the services of Floris Klinkenberg as research assistant. Also at Leiden, P. van Emst volunteered useful information. Frank Perlin of Erasmus University, Rotterdam, was helpful with questions concerning Indian monetary history.

Nigeria: John Lavers of Abdullahi Bayero University, Kano.

Sri Lanka: the Director and staff of the Sri Lanka National Archives assisted in supplying materials from the Dutch colonial period and from the H. C. P. Bell Collection.

United Kingdom: the staff of the University of Birmingham's Centre of West African Studies, including especially the former director, John Fage, the present director, Douglas Rimmer, and A. G. Hopkins, were uniformly helpful and considerate. A number of colleagues and students at the centre have also shared information with us. W. F. Holmstrom of the Department of Zoology at Birmingham gave us our first introduction to the life and habitat of the living cowrie. Polly Hill of Cambridge University provided personal information.

United States: Ralph Austen of the University of Chicago, Philip D. Curtin at Johns Hopkins, Henry Gemery at Colby (co-author with Hogendorn of a number of articles on African moneys), Harvey Feinberg of Southern Connecticut State College, Patrick Manning of Northeastern University, John Richards of Duke University, and John Willis of Princeton University provided advice and encouragement. Joseph C. Miller of the

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University of Virginia was generous of his time in making available information about the Portuguese period, and also made it possible for Marion Johnson to do some of the writing in Charlottesville during 1984. Lore Ferguson of the Oak Grove-Coburn School helped with translations of nineteenth-century German works. We were well treated by the specialists on the cowrie in life, the malacologists on the staffs of the American Museum of Natural History, New York City, and the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia. In New York, Walter Sage went beyond courtesy, answering questions by phone or letter and once even driving nearly 400 miles for a critique of the manuscript. William Emerson, Curator of Molluscs at the American Museum, also lent his support. At the Academy in Philadelphia, Virginia Orr Maes answered questions which at the start must have seemed elementary to her; also at the Academy, Curator of Malacology Robert Robertson and Clyde Goulden of the Ecology Department gave assistance. G. Boss and Gary Rosenburg of the Mollusc Department, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University, also provided advice. William Dunkle, Data Librarian of the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute, assisted with information on Indian Ocean water temperatures. Finally, at Colby's Miller Library the inter-library loan department, especially Sonny Pomerleau, seldom failed to find a scarce item. The typing was done at Colby by Karen Bourassa.

Our thanks to the *Journal of African History*, *Slavery and Abolition*, and *Itinerario* for allowing portions of published material to be included.

ORTHOGRAPHIC NOTE

When a spelling appears often in quotations from earlier authors, we have sometimes adopted it for the sake of uniformity. Cases in point are Bornu, instead of the now much-used Borno, and Ashanti instead of Asante. Translations of quotations into English are sometimes provided without additional notice; this will be clear from the note references.

NOTE ON CURRENCIES OTHER THAN COWRIE

Where a value is quoted in British pounds sterling (£), shillings (s.), and pence (d.) we have often for the reader's convenience provided a decimal equivalent to the £ s. d. Before decimalization, there were 20 shillings to the pound, and 12 pence to the shilling. In the eighteenth century the troy ounce of gold was reckoned at £4, but in West Africa the official valuation in the nineteenth century was £3 12s. 0d. (72 shillings) to the troy ounce. The margin was supposed to allow for all expenses of transmission to England. Merchants and traders in West Africa considered £1 equivalent to four silver dollars, or five shillings each, but the official value of the silver dollar was only 4s. 2d. (50 pence); the French 5-franc piece was valued at about 3s. 9d. (45 pence). The German mark was equivalent to one shilling. There

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were 20 stuivers to the Dutch guilder; £1 equalled about 10 guilders.⁶ The Indian rupee's exchange rate with sterling was standardized by the East India Company at 2s. 6d. in 1660–1676, 2s. 3d. in 1677–1705, and again at 2s. 6d. in 1706–1760. The rupee sank in the nineteenth century. It was valued at 2s. down to about 1873, but after silver depreciated, it went as low as 1s. before stabilizing at 1s. 4d. in 1899.⁷