

**"Art and History in the Solomon Islands: Collections, Owners,
and Narratives"**

October 4-5th, British Museum and Goldsmiths College, University
of London

**Money or Craft? : the Circulation and Transformation of
Langalanga Shell Valuables in Melanesia**

Pei-yi Guo

Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan

langa@gate.sinica.edu.tw

Abstract

Shell valuables consisting of strings of shell beads have been popular in Melanesia as bridewealth, payment for compensation, a trade medium, and personal ornament. While many production centers in the region abandoned their manufacture after a period of colonial encounters and the introduction of Christianity and colonial currencies, there is one group that continues to make shell valuables for regional circulation: the Wala people in the Langalanga Lagoon along the west coast of Malaita, Solomon Islands. Originally as local medium of exchange and ritual objects, Langalanga shell valuables have continued to play significant roles in the sphere of social reproduction. At the same time, they have become partially transformed into commoditized crafts and ornaments in the regional and international market. This paper explores the economic as well as socio-cultural aspects of Langalanga shell valuables in the expanding region of its circulation, including their recent trade to other Melanesian countries. I first examine two aspects of the materiality of Langalanga shell valuables—the variety of materials and the divisibility of shell beads in its composition—and how they relate to the production and circulation. I will then discuss the duality of Langalanga shell valuables—as beads of adornment or craft in the market, and as ‘traditional money’ or local currency—and how they have transformed in different contexts. By examining historical and contemporary manufacture, circulation and meanings of a particular local artifact, I will illustrate how a small group of people like the Wala have formulated their cultural identity, and struggled for power in a modern nation-state, by producing and trading ‘traditional’ shell valuables.