

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 new political and economic arena.