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Why Things Still Matter: Examining Materialisation in Oceania

**The Making of Shell Money: Materialization and the Engaged Bodies
in Langalanga, Solomon Islands**

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Abstract

By studying the materialization of Langalanga shell money in the Solomon Islands, this paper examines the relations between process of production/work and human beings, bodies, and objects. Shell valuable consisting of strings of shell beads is popular in Melanesia as bridewealth, payment for compensation, a trade medium, and personal ornament. While almost all production centers in the region abandoned their manufacture after the introduction of colonial currencies, there is one group that continues to make shell money for regional circulation: the Langalanga.

The power and meanings of shell money for the Langalanga first arose out of the connection and interface between shells and bodily experiences. Shell money is the result of work (*galona*) done by the human body on shell materials. The process involves both strenuous and delicate bodily actions—diving, breaking, flattening, drilling, polishing and threading. I examine how local producers conceptualize object production in general and the manufacturing process in particular, especially in relation to body. For the Langalanga, shell money is made by human activity and attains importance through the economic and cultural value ascribed to the production process. This paper looks into the process of how the materiality of Langalanga shell money is constructed and transformed. I will explore how these producers of valuables conceptualize the circulation of materials, the practices of materialization, and how value and meanings are constructed in the process or bodily engagement.