

Filthy lucre: a preliminary history of African money

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Approaches to the history of money

- Histories of money are quite popular among a certain sort of right-wing historian. Their general tenor is so that the evolution and diffusion of monetary systems has enabled the worldwide growth of capitalism, a development they regard as an unalloyed positive trend. Some of the things they are said to say are so f..ing stupid it is hard to credit they have been taken seriously. For example;
- ‘Hunter-gatherers do not trade. They raid. Nor do they save, consuming their food as and when they find it. They therefore have no need of money.’

- (Niall Ferguson 2008: 19)

Approaches to the history of money

- Exchange and monetary systems have been the province of traditional ethnographers, and their analysis in traditional societies was the subject of much debate in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Malinowski (1920) first described the *kula* exchange systems of the Melanesian islands and emphasised the social and cultural value attached to them.
- The virtues of money, that it *is* both abstract and portable, allowing for easy comparison between disparate objects, clearly facilitates this type of exchange. But if disagreement shows anything it is that money is not a sharply characterised concept but rather one end of a cline from pure 'exchange' systems to true convertible currencies.
- Many types of African token were only valid in restricted areas of exchange

Approaches to the history of money

- ❖ If the scholars have left a gap, the dealers in 'primitive' art have leapt in. Almost no internet ethnographic shopfront site is complete without examples of non-European money, obviously emphasising the more durable currency types and often with no context or even wrong information.
- ❖ Despite this, such sites make available photographs of currencies which are unknown or barely recorded in typical reference books.
- ❖ The internet has now become a highly problematic source in this respect as many artefacts are described by sellers and amateurs as 'money', without references or explanation.

African monetary systems I

- ❖ By the period of European contact, systems of exchange using monetary tokens were widespread in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- ❖ But despite the extensive ethnographic material, archaeological records are few and far between and often uncertain in their interpretation
- ❖ This paper focuses on the definition and use of money in African culture, with a classification of the categories of physical token and the interpretation of archaeological finds claimed as money.
- ❖ It explores the categories of restricted spheres of exchange, divisibility, distance over which tokens were accepted and durability.

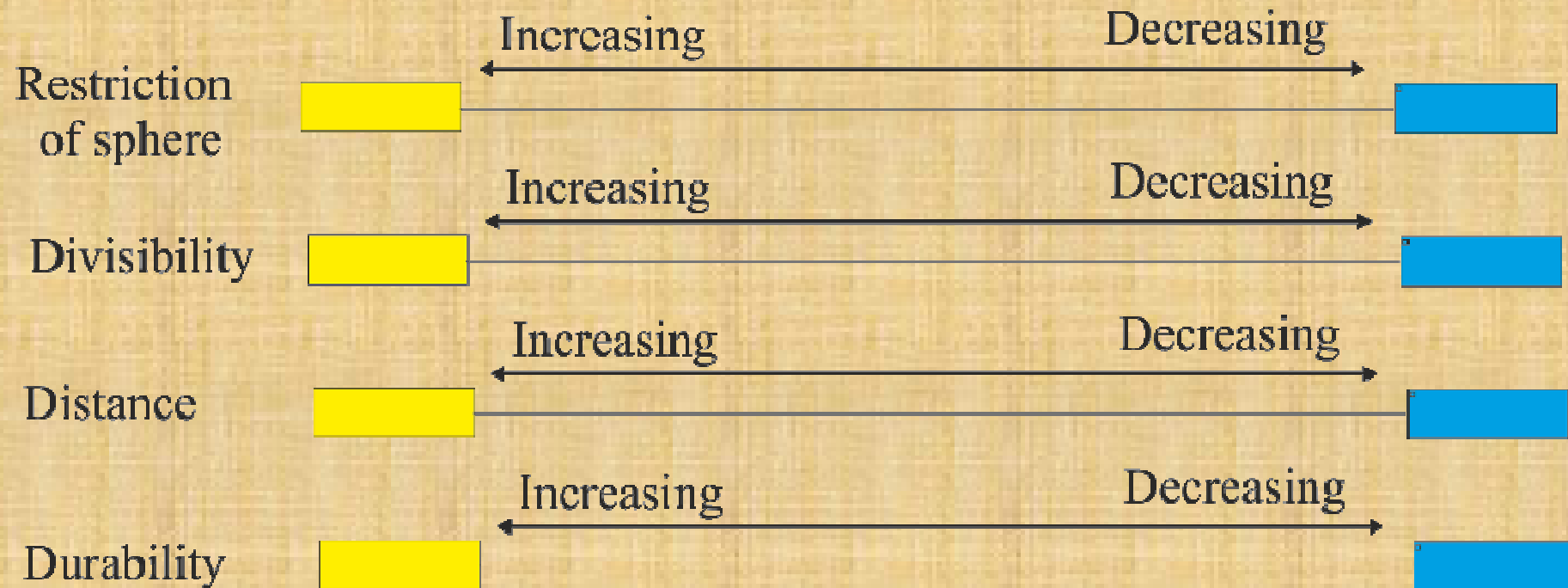
African monetary systems II

- ❖ Claims that many types of iron object in the ethnographic record were 'money' are treated with appropriate scepticism.
- ❖ Monetary tokens cannot be identified with certainty in archaeological investigations, but to date, reports of finds are few and far between and are mostly copper/bronze from Central Africa.
- ❖ The overall analysis explains when and why monetary tokens were introduced, what pressures permitted the spectacular explosion of physical types, why coinage (from North Africa and Ethiopia) made so little impact and the forces responsible for its demise.
- ❖ The cowry trade has been the subject of intensive research and will be discussed only in passing.

African monetary systems III

- ❖ An important and widespread exchange system is the movement of livestock in both pastoral and agropastoral societies. Can these be considered money?
- ❖ Livestock are 'restricted sphere' tokens, only in use for culturally specific purposes. In modern times they are sold to meet cash requirements, but this then passes through the monetary system
- ❖ They do not have fixed sizes and equivalences: larger, fatter animals of specific sexes are more valued, and particular colours may command a higher exchange.
- ❖ So livestock certainly constitute a valuable mental model that is a precursor to a monetary system. But they are too remote from the abstraction represented by money proper.

Parameters of African monetary systems



The archaeological record

- ❖ The main studies of copper ingots were conducted by Bisson (e.g. 1975) who described a series of forms dated to the eleventh century onwards in various sites in northwest Zambia
- ❖ De Maret reports similar ingots from the DRC.
- ❖ These are almost certainly the predecessors of the 'Katanga crosses' reported in use at the time of first European contact.
- ❖ Nikis et al. (2013) report surface finds of copper ingots at the site of Nkabi, in the Mindouli region west of Brazzaville.
- ❖ Lerale copper ingots have been found widely in the Transvaal and other regions of northern South Africa

Katanga Cross



Copper ingots, Nkabi



Lerale ingot, Transvaal



The archaeological record 2

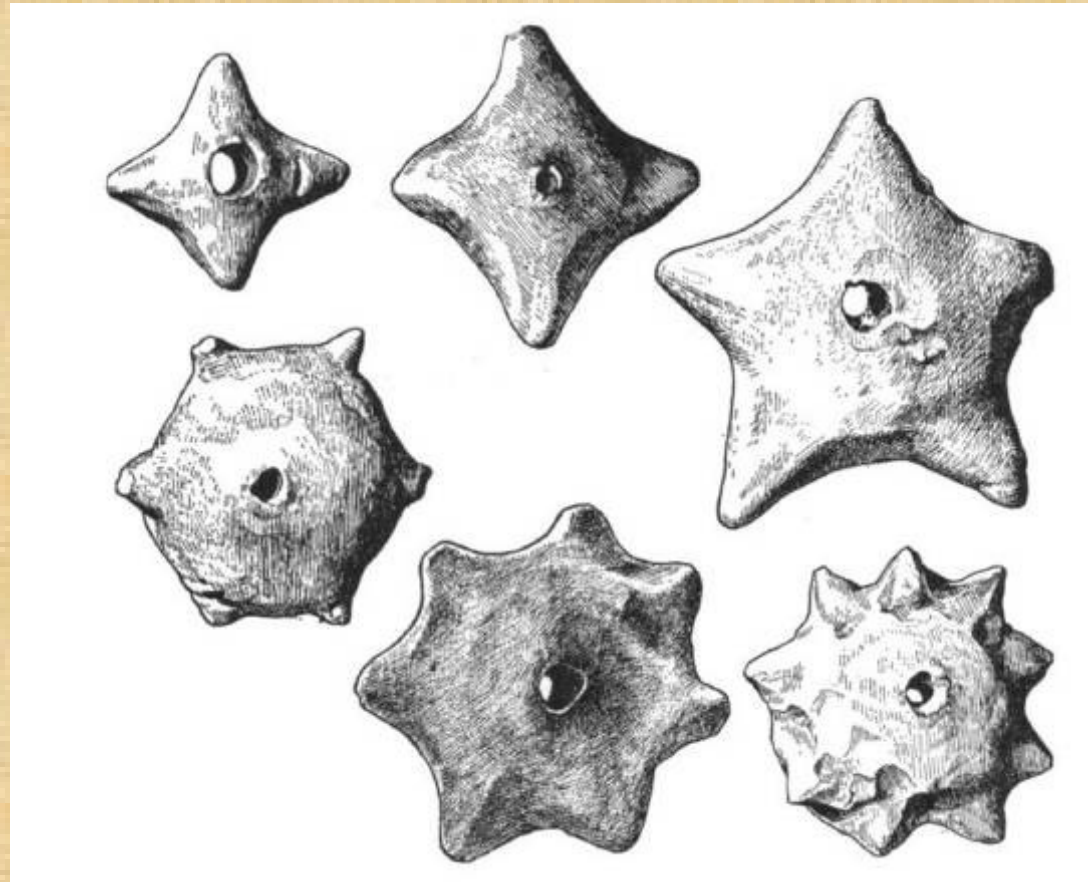
- ❖ At the same time approximately, there are few records for West Africa
- ❖ Monod (1969) reports on the finds of thousands of brass rods, all about 70 cm. long, in the Maʿden Ijafen, a caravan stop in the Mauretanian Adrar. Radiocarbon dates for the site indicate a date of the eleventh or twelfth century.
- ❖ The site also has a large ensemble of money cowries, *Cypraea moneta*, all of which point to money. Monod however, speculated that the brass rods were raw material for smiths.
- ❖ Ibn Battuta noted that in the mid-fourteenth century, thick and thin copper rods were used as currency in the upper Niger regions.
- ❖ Meat and firewood were purchased with the thin rods; millet, wheat, butter, and slaves with the thick.
- ❖ Both thick and thin rods were exchangeable for gold, and therefore could be exchanged for each other

The archaeological record 3

- ❖ Macdonald (p.c.) reports the find of large bundles of thin iron strips in the Dia area in Mali. These do not have flattened ends like the guinze, but could be related.
- ❖ There are no ethnographic records of such strips being used as currency in this area.

The archaeological record 3

- ❖ Lebeuf (1971) reported the finds of a large number of pierced terracotta stars in the region around Lake Chad
- ❖ These were known to the Kotoko people in this area as token of exchange although they were out of use by the colonial era



The archaeological record 4

- ❖ So their interpretation as some sort of token to facilitate exchange seems reasonable
- ❖ But... we have no trustworthy dates
- ❖ The picture shows a *mahaya*, another token from the same area



The ethnographic record 1

- ❖ However, this is a very reduced evidence base compared with the ethnographic record
- ❖ At the period of first European contact there were probably at least fifty different currencies in use of different durability and extension
- ❖ The table summarises the evidence and the images present some of the recorded tokens

African currency tokens

Material

Where found

Iron

Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria to the Congo, Ethiopia

Bronze/brass/copper

Congo, ? Mauretania, South Africa

Shell

As cowries, almost through much of West-Central and parts of East Africa

As *nzimbu*, Kongo kingdom

Cloth/raffia

Congo, Northern Cameroun/Nigeria

Feather

Jos Plateau, Nigeria

Salt

Lower Congo, Horn of Africa

Terracotta

Chad Basin

Dyestuffs

Congo

Basketry

Lower Congo

Beads

West African coast

Fali cotton reel money

- These were used in the Northern Cameroun Nigeria borderland
- Their origin may have been the long white strips sewn together to make shrouds
- Still in use for ritual exchanges in the 1970s



Iron tokens

- ❖ Of all the types of money found in Africa during the 16-20th centuries, iron tokens are by far the most abundant both in numbers and different shapes
- ❖ The core area for these currencies is the modern DRC, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon
- ❖ A second area is the Guinea-Western Cote d'Ivoire arc

Gabonese 'poison arrow' money



Nigeria/Cameroun iron bars



Gabonese knife money



Sengele marriage money, DRC



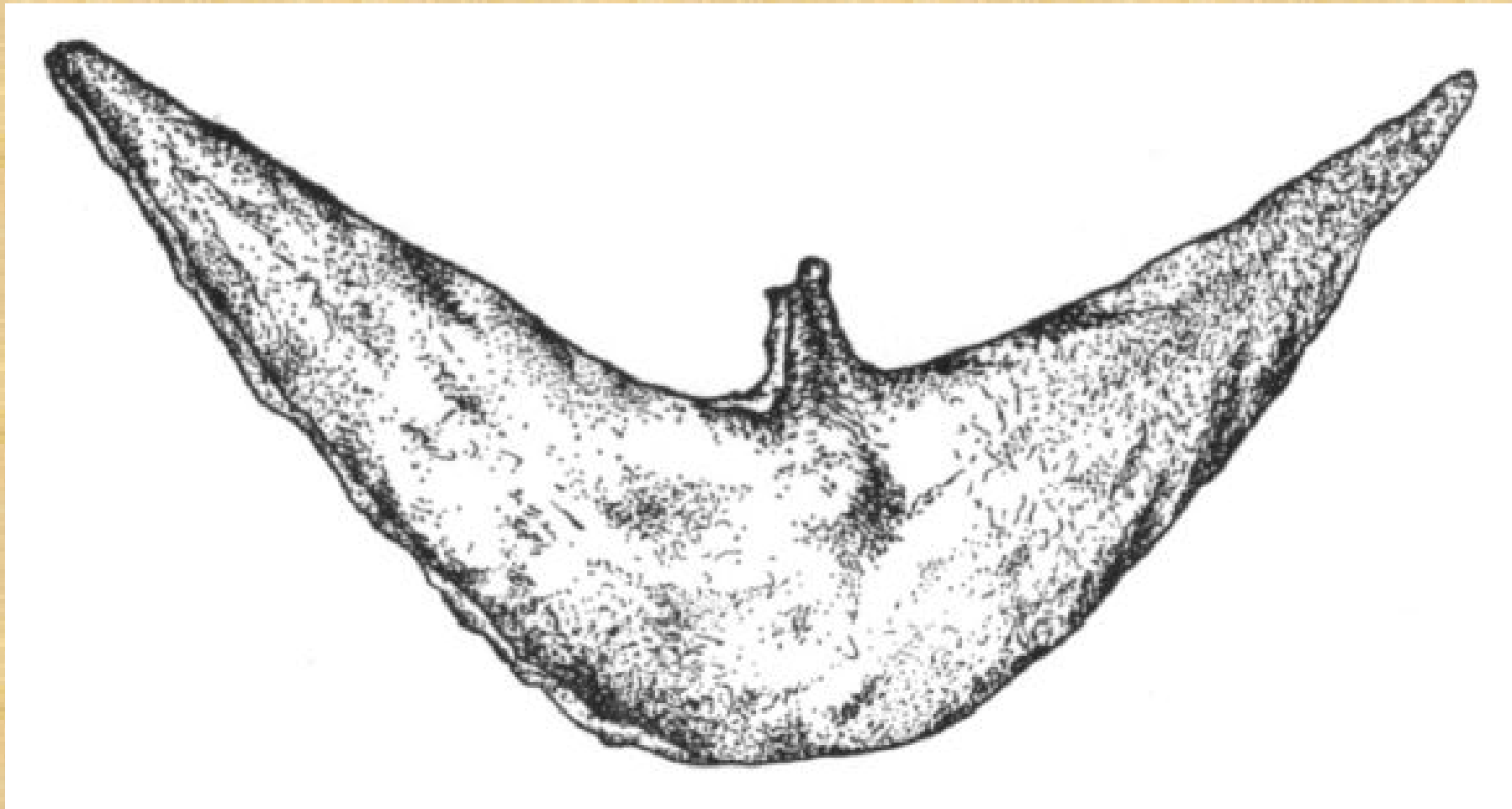
Kwele money, Congo-Brazzaville



Iron rods, Cross River and Southwards



Gula crescent money, Chad



West African 'Kissi pennies'

- An iron currency apparently disconnected from the Central African tradition are the 'Kissi pennies' of Liberia/Sierra Leone/Guinea, modern Ebola country
- Known as guinze in the Francophone literature
- Possibly an iron copy of the copper strips
- What is puzzling is why these were not more widespread
- A large version of these known as somepe found in western Cote d'Ivoire



Copper tokens

- ❖ The example of the copper tokens recorded by Ibn Battuta is paralleled in the Cross River described by Latham
- ❖ Heavy copper bars, okuk, could be split into wires, obubit okuk, 'black copper' and missionary and trader records show these could be used for the purchase of supplies in markets
- ❖ A similar divisibility recorded among the Ngombe in the DRC.
- ❖ The large number of copper wires unearthed at the Igbo-Ukwu excavations, dated to the tenth century, may also have formed a similar currency

Mongo marriage tokens



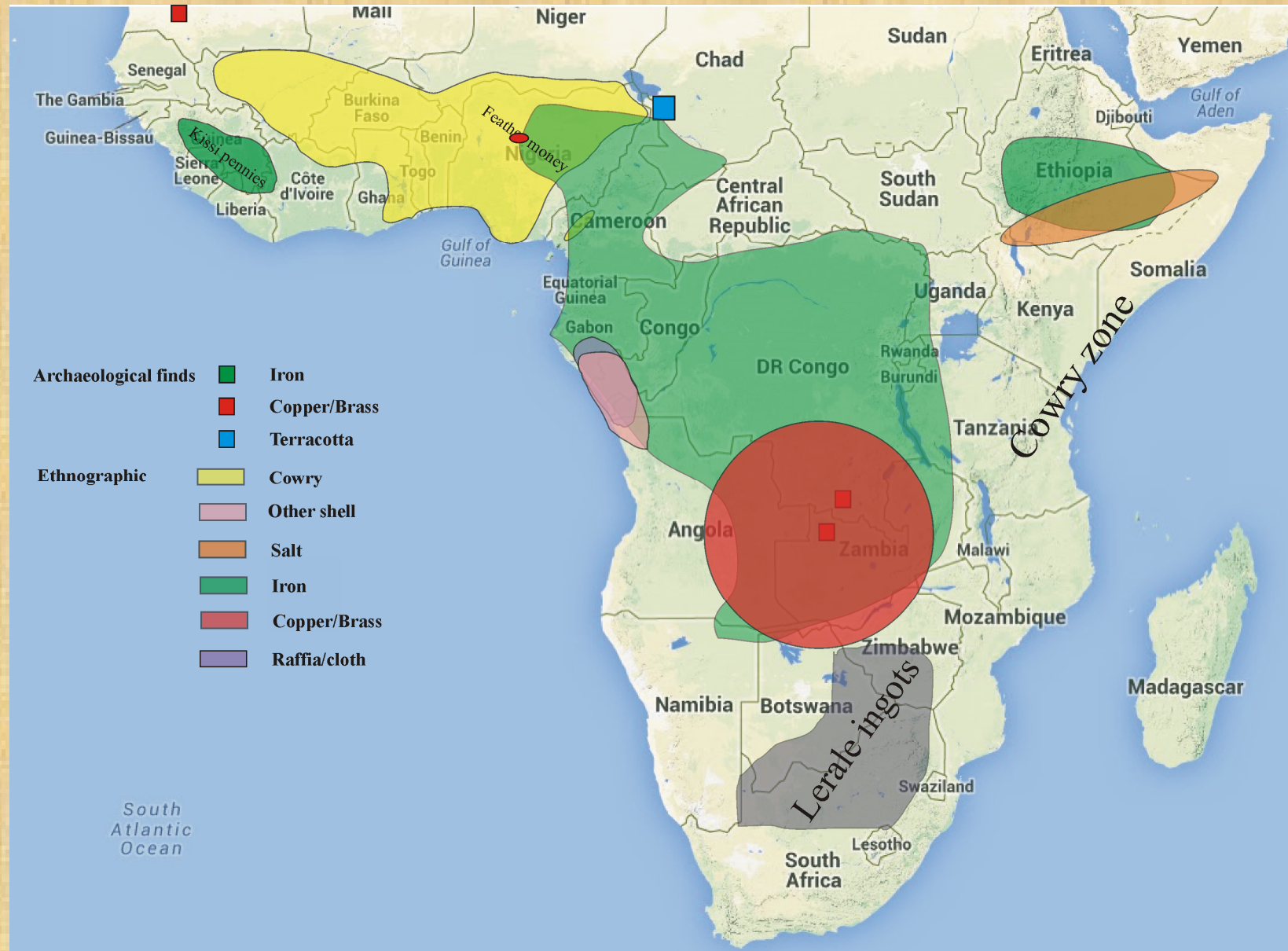
Ngombe bronze, large and medium



Ngombe bronze, small



African monetary systems overview



An approximate narrative I

- ❖ Although Africa has many specialised para-currencies, you would think true money must be connected with the rise of long-distance trade
- ❖ However, there is a disjunction here, since long-distance trade in Sub-Saharan Africa appears to be earlier than any of these currencies
- ❖ Evidence for trans-Saharan trade goes back to before 0 AD and classical authors point to trade inland from East Africa by the time of Pliny etc.
- ❖ Herodotos famously records 'silent trade' and myths/stories about this were noted with early European contact with West Africa (Jobson etc.)
- ❖ Perhaps these retain some element of truth
- ❖ The Incas suggest it is possible to run quite a large polity with no currency at all

An approximate narrative 2

- ❖ Cowries begin to spread across Africa by at least 0 AD, but we don't really know when they became perceived as a monetary token
- ❖ The terracotta currencies of Chad may be the oldest Sub-Saharan Africa money, but none are securely dated
- ❖ After this, and Katanga Cross in the DRC/Zambia area and ncopper strip monies in Mauretania and are clearly attested in the archaeological record from the eighth century onwards
- ❖ Many currencies, salt, dyestuffs, raffia, cloth will not leave identifiable traces in the archaeological record
- ❖ The other factor may be the 'monetisation' of marriage
- ❖ Traditional bride payments in many parts of Africa were through brideservice, but if this became less desirable it could be commuted through monetary payments, hence marriage monies

An approximate narrative 3

- ❖ By the time of European contact there are many currencies in use, noted in the records of early travellers
- ❖ We really only know about the coastal trading tokens in terms of use and possibly there was an expansion in the interior as a consequence of expanded trade
- ❖ Nonetheless, there are numerous types which remain virtually undocumented or only known through examples were collected for museums
- ❖ It is likley that the imports of cheap iron from the sixteenth century onwards caused not only inflation but also a flowering of shapes and configurations
- ❖ Typically, originally objects designed for use such as hoes were turned into enormous, unwieldy objects, while knives took on fantastical shapes
- ❖ As iron was often the material used, cheap imported iron had begun to devalue locally smelted iron

The demise of pre-colonial monetary systems

- ❖ Pre-colonial monetary systems began to falter before colonialism proper because of inflation
- ❖ Traders swamped the West African cowry trade with boatloads of cowries from the Indian Ocean
- ❖ Cheap iron devalued expensive iron artefacts
- ❖ When coins and banknotes were introduced, many specialized exchange monies retreated back to their symbolic roles
- ❖ African monetary systems were part of a continent-wide network of exchange
- ❖ Unfortunately little was done on the ethnographic side before they went out of use
- ❖ Picture is often blurred by careless ascription in objects offered by ethnographic art dealers

The demise of pre-colonial monetary systems

- ❖ Porteres (1960) describing the *guinze* system notes that these disappeared as currency tokens ca. 1950, but continued in an important ritual role.
- ❖ *Guinze* were used to make amulets to protect the field and were buried with important people, together with miniature copies of agricultural tools

Some theoretical questions

- ❖ Given its prevalence in the ethnographic record, why don't we find more in the archaeological record?
 - ❖ Preservation issues, e.g. for shells, and non-durables
 - ❖ Used, worn or damaged metal tokens melted down and repurposed
 - ❖ People didn't store tokens where archaeologists look
- ❖ Identification issues.
 - ❖ How do we know shells were currency not decoration? Lumps of copper stored for production? Iron hoes practical or marriage tokens?
- ❖ Context issues
- ❖ What currencies facilitated long-distance trade and which local interaction?
- ❖ Local interaction marked by immense, unwieldy items (giant hoes etc.)
- ❖ Why are some areas of Africa reportedly devoid of precolonial money?

The spread of coinage

- ❖ Coins were on the edges of Sub-Saharan Africa for a long period, both in the Sahara and East Africa
- ❖ They spread to Ethiopia in the early Middle Ages, but don't really displace other types of currency
- ❖ Even less so in East Africa although the introduction of the 'silver dollar', the Maria Theresa thaler seems to introduce a currency revolution there and in Madagascar
- ❖ Coinage is about trust, because it is largely a symbol for value, especially where gold and silver don't have agreed high prestige
- ❖ Whereas larger, heavier objects appear to embody visible value, especially iron and copper which can be used for other purposes
- ❖ The failure of coinage to spread was undoubtedly connected with the political structures of African states

Conclusions

- ❖ Currency tokens were a major feature of economic interaction in precolonial Africa
- ❖ Yet discussion and identification is largely in the hands of collectors and dealers, not ethnographers and archaeologists
- ❖ Sadly, we are too late for much ethnographic research, but more awareness among archaeologists is surely likely to lead to more identification of finds
- ❖ But, and I don't usually say this, we need more theory. What is money doing in Africa? How is it related to trade, politics, economy? What explains the curious lacunae in distribution

and in China?

- ❖ Interestingly, Chinese currency undergoes a very similar transition. Early tokens are redesigned knives and hoes, and later cowries



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Finally

- ❖ We assume that something like the Blombos pierced shells were purely decorative
- ❖ But we don't actually know this
- ❖ Should we also consider the possibility that these were early trading tokens
- ❖ Especially in the light of their broad distribution in Africa?



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