MAHIR ŞAUL

Money in Colonial Transition: Cowries and Francs in West Africa

ABSTRACT For about five decades, the French colonial government in the Volta region of West Africa failed in its repeated attempts to replace the local monetary form of cowry shells with its own monetary system of francs, largely because of local opposition. This article provides an account of these events and explores the reasons for the opposition and why the opposition was successful. Despite government prohibition, the cowries even acquired increased vitality as they became the main money in the emerging urban market. Government measures were partly motivated by practical difficulties that stemmed from the conflicts that the colonial system and monetary policy generated. The article ends with a critical discussion of how money and the colonial transition are treated in anthropology. [Keywords: money, colonialism, economic anthropology, Bobo, Jula]

FOR ABOUT FOUR DECADES following military defeat—a condition starting with occupation in 1897 and routinized around 1903 with incorporation into French West Africa—the population of the west Volta (now in Burkina Faso) successfully flouted the colonial policy of replacing the local money (the cowry) with the franc. Who among the colonial population were partisans of the cowry, why, and how did they manage to succeed? Why did the local administration want to eliminate the cowry? This article examines the complex overlay of confrontations and accommodations entailed in the history of colonialism as well as the implications of multiple and competing monetary systems. In conclusion, I consider the contributions anthropologists have made toward an understanding of money.

The rejection of colonial moneys in favor of older currencies was more common in the early decades of colonial Africa than anthropologists have acknowledged thus far. Besides contradicting people's habits and dispositions, the competing currencies had different implications for social relations and economic life, generating conflicting interests between different groups of the local population and contrasting attitudes toward the cowry and the franc. I start with an overview of the late-19th-century exchange economy of the Volta region prior to the establishment of the French colonial regime. Toward the end of the article, I discuss the social implications of money, and the factors that delayed the recognition of opposition to colonial policy in anthropology.[1]

COMMERCE IN THE VOLTA BEFORE THE FRENCH

In the 19th century, the Sudan region of West Africa possessed an extensive network of trade and markets that depended in part on professional merchants and a monetary system based on cowries and gold.[2] It spanned a gradient of ecological zones, from rain forest in the south to the fringes of the Sahara in the north. We are concerned here with the portion of this region situated between the Bani and the Muhun (Black Volta) Rivers. The lowest tier of the trader population, itinerant operators who carried their loads on their head or on donkeys, crisscrossed the paths leading from one merchant colony to another. The explorer Louis Gustave Binger (1892:357–358) described sympathetically the hardships these traders *(lamokho)* suffered traveling with their families, and the commercial risks leading them to warily inquire about price conditions in the places they planned to visit and to modify their itineraries when necessary to realize the hoped-for modest returns. Price changes followed seasonal variations in output, or fluctuated suddenly in response to shortages. In December 1887, Binger (1892:215) observed the doubling of grain prices within two weeks around Sikasso. The major transit commodities were kola nuts of the forest region, which were taken north, and desert salt bars and smoked fish from the Niger River, which were taken south. Caravans also moved cattle, sheep, shea oil, and the quality cotton cloth and iron of the Bobo-Dioulasso region towards the south.[3]

The highest value goods changed hands not in the market place but in the houses around them. In trade towns, prominent men served as brokers as well as hosts *(jatigi)* to the traveling merchants (Person 1968, vol 1:105–106). At the higher end of trading was the barter of horses, salt bars, or imported firearms for slaves. Important brokers or military men who possessed an available stock often sent couriers or letters to distant possible exchange partners. Specialized market towns also existed (such as Warkoy or Kari) where such large values were on almost permanent offer, with slaves often serving as the unit of account as well as the medium of exchange.[4] Their prices went down significantly in the late 19th century because of intense armed conflict. Gold dust was reserved for other higher values, and European silver coins also circulated for the same purpose.[5] But precious metals were scarce and although a measure of gold (*barafiri,* see Binger 1892:375) could serve as a unit of accounting, this was not necessary. For example, cattle could be directly exchanged against iron goods (Sundström 1974:70), guns against millet, horses against slaves or cattle, and slaves against salt bars (Diallo 1997:172–174).

Cowry shells were characteristic of lower values in the marketplaces where female traders generally sold food and male traders broke bulk to retail imported commodities. Still, the value of more expensive goods was also expressed in shell money: For example, enterprising villager gangs sold captives to Jula intermediaries for cowries (Héritier 1975). The price lists compiled by the explorers and early colonial records leave no doubt that in the Volta region, as in southern Nigeria, cowries were "the great converter of everything into everything else" (Peel 2000:32).

Imports from Europe occupied a small percentage of this trade. In 1888, Binger estimated that European goods accounted for a mere twelfth of the value of the trade between the towns of Kong and Bobo-Dioulasso (1892:375). The trans-Saharan caravan trade provided imported luxuries such as paper, Arabic manuscripts, fancy cloths, and other exotic goods, all of which could be financed with the sale of captives; supply, however, was sporadic.

When considered as a regional phenomenon, the distinctive feature of this economy was not the difficulty of converting goods between different categories (which I discuss further in my conclusion), but the patchy character of trade life. The web of commercial links spread over the entire zone but not evenly. The footpaths, busy with the traffic of trader caravans, bypassed many communities that seemed to be isolated from trade. Land was not sold or rented, wage labor was almost nonexistent, and the staple food grains did not become wholesale commodities (except in cities such as Timbuktu on the fringes of the Sahara, supplied with camel transport). Even people who participated in commerce significantly did so in ways we might not expect. Major military leaders with many dependents and soldiers to feed, or Muslim clerics with crowded households, ran basically self-provisioning households with large farms cultivated by captives. For example, because of the irregular spacing of the area's trade links, the explorer Parfait-Louis Monteil was unable to purchase food in the postharvest season of February 1891 on his way from Sikasso to Bobo-Dioulasso (1895:60). Although the West Volta produced fine textiles for export and served as a transit point for the wool blankets of Masina to its north, in their daily lives, most villagers either went naked or wore crude loin covers made of fresh leaves. Villagers did not consume the kola nuts, which passed in transit to supply the Muslim cities in the Sahel.

The farmers did engage in some exchange but much of it was conducted without money. For example, Bobo women exchanged the peanuts and earth peas they produced for cooking pots. In many villages, endogamous blacksmiths entered long-term, ritualized dependency relations with leading families: The blacksmiths supplied these families with iron tools that they had forged in return for bequests of food and grain. Thus, the provision of tools within the locality remained separate from the regional trade in iron. Village women most often bartered handfuls of grain or handmade craft items for dried fish or other condiments, rather than exchanging their products for money. Trading was the specialty of communities organized as diasporas, which now fall under the rubrics of Zara, Jula, Hausa, or Yarse. Zara women visited other villages to exchange such items as fish, shea oil, grains, firewood, and fermented locust beans. They engaged in multiple loops of barter to bulk the commodities that eventually ended up in the longer distance regional trade conducted with cowries. Bobo villages did not collect tolls from the caravans that had obtained safe passage from Watara warlords, although they harassed them with difficult-to-follow ritual interdictions in order to make them pay, when they could, fines for infraction.

Now, this separation of agriculturists and market people is only part of the story: Farmers were not as thoroughly insulated from trade as the brief sketch given so far implies. An "inner interface" existed between farm groups and translocal trade, consisting of an oligarchy of senior men and women. These elders were either the heads of large localized groups above the level of household—which local languages designate as "house" or "entrance"—or the heads of matrilineages, especially in the southern part of the Volta region where the latter existed as property-holding groups (see Şaul 1992). The senior people controlled currency and the goods with which it could be acquired, imposing a kind of communalism on their dependents. They also made sure that marriage was regulated through endogamy and delayed exchange, thereby eliminating the necessity of the exchange of wealth objects (Şaul 1989).

The elders organized the activities that led to sales, which brought the cowries. In southern Bobo country, the proceeds of common endeavors were kept in the funds of matrilineal descent groups (Şaul 1992). Village groups also participated in raids in alliance with military leaders of the region, receiving captives and animals in return, which also ended up as property of matrilineal groups. Because captives were largely employed in farm production, the strongest groups were the ones in possession of the most captives. Surplus grain was sold as beer. Matrons assisted by younger kinswomen brewed it in the large vessels purchased by the matrilineal elders. The proceeds were spent for funerals, divination, or the purchase of medicine. Senior men had also the privilege of spending in the market: Stories about the past depict them wearing a cloth hat with a long tip hanging down their shoulder that served as a pocket in which they would put a handful of cowries on their way to a drinking bout. But most of the cowry money was hoarded.

Senior men used the accumulated funds to purchase firearms and farm tools that they granted to their dependents for temporary use, livestock, and the special goods that filled the matrilineal treasure baskets (called *kuku,* pl. *kenken,* in the vicinity of Bobo-Dioulasso). Muskets became totally integrated in village life during the 19th century, transformed hunting and agriculture, and were given a central place in funeral commemorations for senior men. Although cloth was used minimally in daily life, elders purchased fabric for display on ceremonial occasions (Tauxier 1912:43–44). Very few of the early ethnographies of the Volta region reveal full awareness of the links between elder men and the market. In southern Bobo country, the matrilineal baskets included important quantities of blankets, wraparound cloths, and men's costumes. A joke circulated in colonial times that the Bobo went naked during their lives but got dressed when they died. A French missionary expressed his amazement before the mortuary rostrum:

> The [deceased] elder was seated his back against the wall of his room, dressed in magnificent fineries, hat, multicolored blankets, etc., a fly-whisk made of cowries placed on his shoulder. [Tounouma Mission diary, September 20, 1930]

Fly-whisks, elaborate belts, and necklaces, each incorporating hundreds of cowries, were treasured objects stored in the kenken of the descent group (Alfieri 1994). Françoise Héritier describes similarly lavish cowry adornments in Samo country, purchased by the elderly for the young men who joined the dancers' societies (1975:495).[6]

Senior men and women controlled cowry usage. This meant that the younger villagers were dependent on their elders for the cowries needed to pay for medicines, divination, and the fines imposed by the village on the members of junior age sets. The income that heads of household obtained pursuing personal activities, such as hunting or bee keeping, was siphoned off into the common funds by obligatory contributions. Thus, although farm communities participated in the regional trade—supplying some of the goods that sustained it and creating an insatiable demand for cowries—this participation was highly regulated in ways that constrained nonsenior individuals from engaging in exchange.

COWRIES AS MONEY

Cowry shells (mollusks of the species *Cypriaea moneta* and *annulus*) originated in the Indian Ocean and were brought to West Africa in European ships, often after passing through auctions in Amsterdam or London. Jon Hogendorn and M. Johnson (1986) provide a thorough account of this history explaining the large volume of shells brought to West Africa and the cycles of inflation that followed.[7] As they moved to the interior, the shells crossed several linguistic and cultural boundaries. In a vast zone the cowry coexisted not only with gold dust and imported silver coins but also with salt bars, brass in rods or in heavy horseshoe shapes referred to as *manillas,* locally produced iron and cloth currencies, beads, and other means of payment. Some areas did not accept the cowry currency, but in the 18th and 19th centuries it prevailed among merchants and peddlers who animated the interlocking trade roads of the western Sudan.

What kind of money was the cowry? Karl Polanyi argued that, in precolonial Dahomey, cowries were "centrally issued" (1966:187–189) currency because the state regulated its importation. This idea has since been discarded.[8] Whatever the case may have been for Dahomey, it is clear that controlling the volume of cowries by political means was impossible in the interior savanna. The cowry currency zone included distinct sociopolitical areas, and the western Volta basin in particular had a highly unstable pattern of strong men and village alliances (Şaul 1998). No evidence exists that anyone was even interested in controlling the volume of cowries. When a monetary instrument is transacted across a broad region outside the purview of a single political authority, the processes that regulate the value it communicates are difficult to explain.

A currency may be simply an IOU issued by a private party, but if the tokens indicating the debts are depersonalized during their circulation, the issuer obtains a permanent advantage and may be tempted to overproduce them. The danger is eliminated if the tokens have a high cost of production. When nothing else is regulating the volume of tokens/instruments brought to circulation (if, for example, they can be manufactured at multiple points, as were the iron currencies), frequent exchanges result in their cost of production coming close to the cost of the goods for which they are exchanged: Thus, they become "commodity money."[9] When a currency circulates at its commodity value, it no longer entails a credit relation as is the case for simple tokens or government money. It is a real asset and the transacting parties consummate an exchange of equivalents at each sale. This point is important to understand the resistance of the elders to the demonetization of the cowry.

The cowries were not manufactured, but they were brought to West Africa as commodity and their flow via commerce followed in part the logic of commodity moneys. Hogendorn and H. A. Gemery (1988) note that every single cowry shell unloaded in West Africa came in exchange for some export good and, thus, was fully paid for before it entered the region's trade circuits. In the interior, the heavy cost of transportation was added to that cost. Like the proverbial cigarettes that turned into money in prisoners' camps, the exchange value of cowries could become dissociated from their original cost and depend on the volume of goods they chased, but only under a ceiling defined by the cost of introducing new shells. What is special about the Volta case is that the demand for the cowry was mostly created by the desire to add to the house and descent group hoards and ostentatious objects. At the end of the 19th century, the cowries changing hands in sale transactions in the Volta region must have been like the tip of the iceberg as compared to the volumes that were piled away in the dark rooms of the compounds under the authority of senior men and women.

The cowry has religious uses in West Africa, as protective charm, medicine, payment for ritual services, fertility symbol, for divination, or to accompany the dead.[10] We can address here the relationship between these uses and the monetary function. It is reasonable to assume that some symbolic association made early on by some Africans accounts for the fact that the cowry and some other objects brought by foreign merchants were accepted for exchange, while other objects were not. Subsequently, however, the religious associations of the cowry varied in West Africa, whereas as money it remained identical in distant places. Ritual use did not cause the cowry to become money. Other ritual items, for example in Bobo country, iron objects, millet, some wild seeds, or carved artifacts were not used as money; in fact, people were reluctant to exchange them. Some funeral and ritual payment functions of the cowry clearly derive from its past monetary use and not the other way around. Also, in the distant past and during the colonial period, some of the most active promoters of the cowry currency were Muslim merchants for whom the shell's ritual significance was least pronounced. Finally cowries continued to be used in rituals, long after they stopped serving as money. Demonetization did not diminish their religious value; if anything it crystallized it, and, therefore, resistance to demonetization cannot be attributed to ritual reasons. Even if their possible use in ritual motivated the hoarding of the shells, far more shells were accumulated than were necessary for ritual obligations, and in the colonial period most elders did not hesitate to take out cowries to make tax payments, until they depleted their reserves. In summary, how the cowry acquired a monetary function in the western Sudan remains a historical puzzle, but the ritual significance of the shells does not shed much light on the problems of their colonial demonetization.

By forcing its money, the franc, upon the population, the colonial administration created a multiple currency situation to which West Africans were accustomed. What was new was the prohibition on transacting the shells as money, which meant giving up the resource value they contained. Elders resisted mainly for this reason. They did not include the new money in their hoards nor use it in ceremonies as substitute. People such as moneychangers benefited from the double money economy. Market women preferred to maintain capital stock in both kinds of money and other sectors of the population simply refused to use the francs because they considered the coins and notes a nuisance. Not all people in the emergent colonial society, however, could dismiss French money as an insignificant token to be confined to relations with the administration. The tension between these conflicting interests, as we will see, exerted pressure on the administrators.

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF COLONIAL INSTALLATION

In 1907, after a brief period of accommodation, the colonial government of French West Africa banned the importation of cowry shells as preamble to a general assault on their monetary use.[11] A stock of colonial money had started to form even before the new regime consolidated itself, as administration employees made expenditures and French firms opened stations to buy export produce and sell imported consumer goods.

The violent French conquest had caused much destruction and plundering that weakened the economy of the West Volta. A set of actors disappeared and a new one emerged. The number of nonproducers was probably not much higher after the colonial occupation, but they were of a different kind. Prior to the conquest the nonproducers were military leaders, men-in-arms, traders, Muslim clerics and some of their dependents, categories with some degree of overlap. They created a demand for imported fancy goods and supplied the means to pay for them. With the conquest this market vanished, and some of its agents became colonial employees. Expensive imports—the chinaware of Europe, the sophisticated outfits of the Islamic civilization, manuscripts and knotted carpets, and other pricey curiosities—dried up, a turn that the descendants of the old elite still think today as loss of splendor in their land.

The new people with purchasing power were the soldiers of the colonial army, guards, interpreters, clerks, teachers, and colonial chiefs, including some leaders of the previous epoch. European firms' outposts supplied the new luxury goods, mostly textiles and liquor.[12] This new elite was no longer self sufficient in terms of food. Even if canton chiefs could impose unofficial levies on the farmers, other salaried personnel depended largely on cash purchases. Colonial towns became nuclei of a wholesale food market and small-scale food industries such as sorghum beer, mead, and butchered meat, while some African merchants took up contraband across the border with the Gold Coast (Şaul 1986).

A major novelty of the colonial regime was the head tax. Despite its name this tax was never collected from individuals. It was levied on the basis of largely imaginary census figures on entire communities, which, in turn, apportioned it to their constituent units. The rate was 0.75 francs per adult in 1898, one franc in 1911, two francs in 1915, and 2.50 francs in 1920 (Şaul 1997).[13] In 1899 and 1900 the entire revenue was collected in kind. After 1902, as the war of conquest subsided, total revenue increased, as did the proportion of it paid in colonial currency. In 1903 half the taxes were paid in colonial currency and half in-kind. For the following three years, in-kind payments constituted about one third of total revenue. For the French, "in-kind" included payment in cowries. A decree in January 1907 prohibited local treasuries from accepting cowries to encourage the transition to colonial coins.[14]

The effect of taxation on the cowry economy, however, was intricate, both before and after the prohibition. As the government gained control of a larger expanse of territory and was able to impose on more and more villages, total revenue increased, and although the ratio of cowries in this revenue fluctuated, the local treasury invariably received larger and larger volumes of cowries.[15] The jump in total revenue in 1903, for example, resulted in three times as many cowries in the hands of the administration as compared to 1902. During the eight years of in-kind tax collection (1899–1907), 185,000 francs of revenue was collected as cowries in Bobo-Dioulasso. The situation was similar in the neighboring provinces.

Where were these cowries coming from? Essentially from the hoards managed by the senior men and women in the villages. The administration spent this "in-kind" revenue in the city to buy provisions, fuel wood, building materials, or to pay daily workers. Thus, through the portion of the tax collected in cowries, the administration affected the release of a large number of cowries from village hoards to the growing consumer market of the city.

The situation did not substantially change after 1907, although it is difficult to document it with as much precision. Starting in 1908, official book keeping recorded the revenue exclusively in francs, but this does not mean that all taxpayers actually paid it in that currency. Until the 1920s, tax collection was not a peaceful exercise. Intimidation and the use of force accounted for a good portion of it. During the dry season guards raided weaker communities to seize herds, flocks, or other goods of value and carry them away for sale. Once the value of the seized items could be converted into money, the amount was entered in the books as tax payment. Among the confiscated goods were large numbers of cowries. By this means new shells continued to be forced out into the market.

By more peaceful means, too, taxation motivated a flow of cowries to the urban market after 1907. Unable to find the coins to pay the taxes of a large group of dependents, elders took cowries from their treasure houses to moneychangers and converted them.[16] In the Dedougou province to the north, A. F. Hubbell (1997) found that villagers were often more able and willing to take out cowries to pay taxes than to sell grains or animals.[17] All these payments did not exhaust the cowry stocks until the 1940s, which gives an idea of the size of the treasures that had been constituted in the preceding two centuries.

Villagers preferred to change cowries instead of making sales, partly because during that period the French franc depreciated whereas the cowry preserved its value or appreciated. The prices of export crops, the alternatives to earn the tax money, did not keep up with this increase. Despite the threefold rise of the tax rate between 1900–20, the cowry equivalent of the rate was actually lower at the end of the period than in the beginning (Boutillier 1993).

A key figure of early colonial economic life thus came to prominence: the moneychanger. His profits came from the strong seasonal fluctuation in exchange rates (Hubbel 1997; Labouret 1931:363; Méniaud 1912, vol. 2:252). In January, tax payment time, colonial coins were at a premium and the cowries lost value; when tax payment was over the offer of cowries went down and their value back up.

The coincidence of two things proved providential to the cowry economy: (1) the emergence of a consumer market to satisfy the needs of colonial employees and (2) the abundant supply of shells to the market via taxation. Consider that in the early phase of the colonial period, colonial money was very scarce. Credit was also limited and, in the absence of negotiable paper, contributed little to money creation. The fledgling colonial market would have been stifled without the injection of substantial numbers of cowries. Their domain of transaction expanded and their velocity increased. The administrators combated "the cowry economy" partly because they thought it stood in the way of the progressive colonial economy that they wanted to create. Yet the very shell transactions they condemned were part of the real colonial economy that they were unwittingly bringing into existence.

The efflorescence of this colonial economy can be gauged in the fiscal records. In 1907, 45 women bought licenses to sell sorghum beer in Bobo-Dioulasso. They paid a total of 2,700 francs as market fees, a sum larger than all the fees paid by the registered African men merchants and the eight French companies in the city.[18] In 1919, a year of commercial crisis, the license fees of the women vendors of Bobo-Dioulasso had grown to a total 7,320 francs—more than three times what the French companies in the city paid.[19] In addition, we can imagine that ambulant women bartered produce in the villages and petty traders and farmers brought surplus grain to sell, none of which the treasury was able to record.

Colonial officials mostly blamed trader women for refusing to accept the coins and thus perpetuating the cowry economy. The traders had practical reasons for rejecting the colonial currency. It was unfamiliar and they could not manipulate it with the same confidence they did the older money.[20] Colonial coins also did not lend themselves to the conventions for counting and storage that had been developed for the shells. The centime piece, for example, was too light and it was easy to drop or misplace. The paper bills had these defects in a more exaggerated manner. Villagers did not accept them. In order to use colonial money as part of their working capital, traders had to maintain two separate accounts and use the services of moneychangers more frequently, which involved additional costs and the risks of exchange rate fluctuation.

Authors such as A. Félix Iroko (1987) have also pointed out that there was a direct political awareness in the stance of African populations that opposed the replacement of cowries with colonial money:

> The attachment to the cowry and the refusal to adopt the money of the White man was a way of defending the independence and sovereignty that they possessed before the [colonial] conquest. They felt that the demonetization of the cowries was a way to cut them off from a significant symbol of their past and of their culture, in favor of the franc, an anonymous money. [Iroko 1987:613]

Perhaps underlying this consciousness was the advantage that cowries gave to local consumers vis-à-vis people of the colonial establishment. Thus, a tug-of-war on money followed.

THE STRUGGLE OVER CURRENCY

Administrators reported in their monthly reports that colonial employees, especially the civilian ones who had to live within the limit of their salaries, complained vociferously against the market vendors' preference for cowries (see below). Food prices evolved differently in cowries and in colonial currency. Food was always expensive and its supply chronically unreliable. When the franc lost value precipitously because large amounts of colonial currency had entered the province, the difficulties of salary earners turned into a calamity. The administration failed to find a long-term remedy to this problem. It turned to the expedience of buying foodstuffs using its authority to partly provision the employees.

The evolution of the franc-to-cowry exchange rate is instructive to understand the difficulties the employees were experiencing. In the opening decade of the century, as the franc became more available, it first appreciated against the cowry. In 1888 Binger had estimated that in Bobo-Dioulasso the franc was worth about 550–600 cowries (1892:407). In 1899, the year after the conquest started, the five-franc piece exchanged for 4,000 cowries and in 1907 for 5,000 cowries (Iroko 1987:600). In 1908 the rate of the franc went up to 1,500 cowries, the highest it ever reached.[21] After World War I the trend was reversed and the franc started to fall. This early development seems to contradict the "quantity theory" of money (the introduction of massive new supplies of money is followed by inflation). Recent "search-and-bargaining" models give better account of what was happening. The arrival of larger supplies of a newly introduced money makes it more useful and therefore desirable to actors, leading first to appreciation rather than depreciation. Only at later stages, when a volume of saturation is reached, can further quantities lead to its depreciation.[22] This point of "excessive abundance" in colonial money was reached in 1918.

The major reason for the fall in the franc's value was that the soldiers who had been enlisted in the colonial army during WWI returned home. They came with their allotments, paid in paper notes, which the general population loathed more than the coins.

> The introduction of a large number of bank notes with the payment of the allotments had the effect of limiting even further the number of commercial operations. The Bobo farmer keeps his grains and does not bring to the market; thus he avoids being paid in paper money, for which he has great aversion, which time only will overcome. . . . The abundance of money has resulted in a large increase in the cost of living. The native employees have tremendous difficulties in buying what they need for their families. [commercial bulletin, 1919][23]

The inflation of food prices because of the release payments made to the discharged soldiers continued the following year. The administrators thought this money was not being spent and thus led to involuntary savings, because imported consumer goods that appealed to the population were scarce in the city. Only a small portion of it was used for tax payments, and the rest was pushing up food prices. But this rise was only in franc prices, not prices expressed in cowries. Administrators' concern with rising food prices in francs continued in 1923.

In the 1920s the situation was exacerbated by the steady loss of value of the French franc against the British pound. Cowries were accepted by the population in both British and French territories, and therefore easier to convert to the British currency used in the neighboring Gold Coast than francs. This motivated the traffic of European goods from across the border, which also helped the pound-to-franc rate directly affect the cowry-to-franc rate. From this multiple encounter, the cowry emerged as the steady currency of the region, preserving its value not only in terms of the price of locally grown food but also in terms of the price of imported commodities sold in the stores. Demand for the shells grew for savings. Money holders responded by keeping back the cowries and spending the francs, which made the downward movement of the franc in the colony even more precipitous than its international devaluation. In 1920, the value of the five-franc piece went down to 3,000 cowries (roughly equal to the rate calculated by Binger in 1888). The face value of silver coins fell below their metal value and they disappeared as they were converted into jewelry. The banknotes, if accepted at all, went at 50 percent their face value.[24] All of this increased the difficulties of those who received their income mainly in francs, such as guards, clerks, teachers, janitors, and other employees of the colonial administration.

The village population was largely insulated from the rise of grain prices expressed in francs, because they purchased little food in general, and none with coins. Those who sold grain to pay their taxes actually gained. The secular trend of the exchange rate was also favorable to villagers who converted cowries to pay the taxes (even if they suffered from the seasonal rate fluctuations).

It seems that market vendors also systematically charged higher prices (in terms of the nominal exchange rate) to administration employees, a discrimination achieved easily, even without collusion or oligopoly, when two categories of buyers can be clearly distinguished. The presence of two moneys facilitated the distinction. Salary earners found it nearly impossible to convert their income into cowries because the shells were hard to come by at advantageous rates, except by engaging in market trade. Administration employees incited the officials against vendor practices that maintained the franc–cowry duality. Reasoning from a distance, we can see that when the franc went down, salary earners lost real income. Hardship would have resulted even without price discrimination. Regardless, in such times colonial employees recriminated more bitterly against the cowry.

COLONIAL MOTIVES FOR FIGHTING THE COWRY

In the first years following occupation the French administrators accepted the cowries, even used them eagerly. For example, they shipped cowries for payment from the Volta to their posts in the Sahel (Dori, Zinder, Say), which showed a deficit. A commandant in 1902 argued against replacing the cowry with the franc on two grounds: (1) It would have a heavy cost for the administration and (2) the coins would quickly find their way to the coast for the purchase of imported goods instead of stimulating the local economy (Iroko 1987:581). Many Frenchmen in the colonies felt that the cowry would eventually die a quiet death; there was little point in trying to accelerate the process. When this expectation proved wrong, the partisans for forced substitution got the upper hand. The question is why.

The reasons offered for this change of heart can be grouped under two headings. First were the inconveniences of the cowries for the administrators. The heavy weight of the shells relative to their value made them expensive to transport, and their bulk created storage problems (Duperray 1984:162). Counting large numbers was difficult and also resulted in lack of precision (Boutillier 1993:250). French administrators also feared that with the demonetization of cowries in much of West Africa, the shells would come in a rush to flood the few areas that continued to use them (Boutillier 1993:251). The second group of reasons relates to commercial imperialism. Walter Ofonagoro (1979:640), for example, criticizes authors who put too much emphasis on the cowries' inconveniences and proposes that a deeper reason for British government opposition in southern Nigeria lay in the desire to open the indigenous economies by facilitating trade with Britain. In the same realm of ideas, the French authorities of the Volta wanted to divert the long established commerce with British Gold Coast—which had continued thanks to the prevalence of the cowry—to Côte d'Ivoire (ANCI 3 Mi 7, Monographie du Cercle de Bobo-Dioulasso).

Neither the inconveniences argument nor the broader pressures of commercial imperialism fully account for the energy of the opposition of the Volta region authorities to the cowry. The cowry disrupted the spread of the franc only in two small areas of the French colonial empire: northern Dahomey and the western Volta (including northern Côte d'Ivoire and the adjacent northern Gold Coast). While it is true that a universal monetary standard eased the collection of taxes and payment of public expenditures (Austen 1987:135), the difficulties the cowry caused in these few circles were not insurmountable, given that the provinces in the Volta region had small budgets and local expenditure could have absorbed the cowries that were collected with less effort than trying to suppress them. The plan to divert the Gold Coast trade in favor of Côte d'Ivoire also ran up against a more immediate problem: Baule armed resistance isolated the French coastal zone from the north. The link between north and south was established only after the suppression of the resistance in 1913, and especially after the completion in 1934 of the railroad linking Bobo-Dioulasso to Côte d'Ivoire.[25]

As to the broader pressures of commercial imperialism, we need to consider that, in the colonial territories of the interior, the interests of the civilian bureaucracy, military, and the expatriate traders were not identical. Administrators did voice the desire to see exports to France grow, but until the constitution of Upper Volta as a separate colony in 1919, few effective steps were taken in that direction. The commandants saw the representatives of French firms in their province as annoyances rather than as allies. Local administration remained opposed to issuing concessions for the establishment of commercial plantations in the territory and later were resistant to the idea of labor recruitment for the coastal plantations. The merchant houses, on their side, objected to the in-kind tax collection, but only because it deprived them of market share in export rubber. Accordingly, the pressure of the overseas commercial houses over the Ministry of Colonies in France probably did play a role in the suppression of in-kind tax collection in 1907.

European traders in the Volta region continued to do business with locals in cowries despite official pronouncements forbidding it. They had found, as their predecessors had centuries before, that they could more easily purchase export commodities and sell imported goods using a locally accepted currency than joining the fight against it. They were thus complicit with market women and the senior farmers who rejected the colonial currency. The colonial administrators felt sabotaged and betrayed.

> It is necessary that the [French] merchants choose to use this [colonial] money rather than the system of cowries, but unfortunately their goodwill runs up against the refusal of the natives who want any money, even the cowries, instead of the centimes. [Bobo-Dioulasso, 1908, 4th Quarter]

Austen (1987:135) has made the point that the administration encouraged spread of coinage in part to give "the peasants" greater control over their discretionary income by ending the need to barter for consumer goods at the stores of the Europeans. In any case, in Bobo-Dioulasso it was not the influence of local French commerce that inspired the administrators' measures against the cowry (for a parallel case of southern Nigeria, see Naanen 1993).[26] If there was an imperial rationale for promoting the use of the franc here, it concerned only the higher echelons of the colonial hierarchy.

I propose here that an important further reason for the anticowry attitude of the local administration was the conflict that emerged in the province between those who were to benefit and those who were to lose from the monetary substitution. The colonial employees' complaints of the high cost of living constituted a practical difficulty for the administration. It created an urgency that added considerably to the pressure of day-to-day administrative work. When commandants tried to address the problem by buying supplies directly, they found that they had to resort to coercion. In addition to already strained relationships with the local population, using administrative muscle in this way added to the political risks that could lead to insubordination and erode their already fragile authority.

An additional influence can be discerned in the administrators' reactions to the rejection of the franc. Reading the periodic reports of the province, one cannot avoid the impression that, for the administrators, the stubborn refusal of the local population to abandon the shells was an affront to their vision of the world, to their authority, and even to their male ego. For many second-generation administrators of colonial West Africa, the cowry was a symbol of a primitive life style. How could such an insignificant shell stand in the way of their desire to steer the "big children" under their care toward the course of better existence? The preference for the cowry was an unambiguous contradiction of their understanding of civilizing mission, which threatened the wished-for meaning of the colonial conquest. Finally French suspicion of gender insubordination may have also arisen. The fact that women vendors refused to accept in the marketplace the French coins brought by their subordinates to buy food may have wounded their pride as Frenchmen.

CREATING SUBSTITUTES FOR THE COWRY

The Government General of West Africa in Dakar had also decided to abolish in-kind tax collection in 1907 because there was a growing sense that the military control of the territories had now been achieved. What the government then proposed to replace the cowry were coins of small enough value to become direct substitutes. The centerpiece of the effort was a new copper coin worth one centime. This coin rarely used in metropolitan France had been introduced in 1898 for the colonies and was minted until 1920 (Krause and C. Mishler 1995). In late 1908 and in 1909, pushing the centimes sent by the government became a "constant preoccupation" for Bobo-Dioulasso administrators and overshadowed almost everything they did.[27] The topic was now reported in the politics section at the beginning of the periodic reports and not in the commerce section at the back as before. The centimes were included in all payments made to locals in order to unburden the treasury of its stock.

> The putting into circulation of the centimes continues at a very slow pace. Frequent meetings are held at every occasion, during the collection of taxes, when the natives come for a complaint, when employees and workers are paid, etc., to make people understand the advantages of the centimes over the cowries. In every payment made, to the employees of the cercle [province], to porters, to messengers, and to the guards of the native brigade, a few centimes are put into circulation.[28]

The administrator also lectured on the subject during the long tour he made in the northern, western, and southern part of his province during the dry season:

> I talked of replacing the cowries with the centimes; they listened to me on this topic, but they did not seem very convinced.[29]

The population found this piece and the similar two-centime piece too light. The centime pieces that had been distributed immediately returned, because the people of the province made all the payments to the administration in them, to rid themselves of the coins. In response, in 1908 the administration declared that it would not accept the centime coins back, except as a small proportion of payments that were made mostly with larger denomination coins.[30] Thus, the centime piece turned from being special-purpose money to having almost no purpose at all. Realizing that this economic policy did not inspire confidence, in 1909 the administration reversed its decision and declared that it would take all the centime pieces without limit.[31] This time it ended up quickly with a much larger number of centime pieces than it had issued.[32] It was discovered that traders were collecting the detested coins in the neighboring province of Sikasso and bringing them for redemption to Bobo-Dioulasso.[33] The effort of the commandant to coordinate his policy with that of neighboring provinces failed and the treasury was forced to stop its free acceptance policy. The attempt to replace the cowries with the centime pieces ended in recognition of complete failure.

After this, the government general introduced new coins worth five centimes *(sou)* and ten centimes *(kpomporo)*. They had a larger diameter and a hole in the middle so that they could be strung (in the Volta as in the rest of the western Sudan cowries were never strung, always stored and counted loose). Responding to the local appreciation for the British coins, these new French coins were made to look like them, and near the border with the Gold Coast traders mixed indiscriminately the coins of the two authorities. These coins met greater success than the centime. But contrary to the expectations of the administrators, higher value denominations were even more popular.

The 50-centime piece *(tanka)* and the one-franc piece *(tama)* were also accepted. Most appreciated of all was the five-franc piece *(dorome)* that had emerged in the early 1900s as the money of the wild rubber trade to become the best coin with which to pay the head tax, the supreme coupon of the colonial regime. Behind these idiosyncratic quirks of valuation lay the rejection of the administration's program of shifting the economy from cowries to francs. The colonial money was cornered between export sales, payment of head tax, and soldiers' allotments, leaving a large field exclusively to the cowry.

The modifications brought to the face value of the money by the local preference for some coins and not for others also created problems for the European commerce. Merchant houses were hindered in their purchases if they did not possess the right combination of coins. Administrators were led to desperation:

> The 5F piece is more and more appreciated. The 2F piece, on the other hand, is not desired; the natives always show repugnance to accept it. With the 1F piece they feel that they are cheated. They prefer the English piece of 2 shillings much better, because it is larger and in their mind is a closer equivalent of the value of two 1F pieces. The shilling and the double shilling is found in fairly large quantities in the hands of the natives. . . . Of course, our treasurers do not accept this money. The *sou* coins are accepted without difficulty, but the natives have a bent for immediately returning them to us each time they make a payment.[34]

The report continues, "The ideal would be to suppress the cowries completely. . . . How can we do it? I think we should proceed in a radical fashion, and for this we need the help of the [French] commerce." This help was not forthcoming and for many years the coins continued to be strictly tied to taxes. In 1908, 98 percent of the fiscal revenue in the province was paid in five-franc coins (126,290 francs out of 129,241 francs). The dorome (five-franc piece) remains to this day the basis of money accounting in Jula and all the other languages of the Volta region.

A drastic measure to undermine the cowry was undertaken in Bobo-Dioulasso in 1917. In that year the administration accepted cowries as tax payment, in order destroy them and make them too scarce to circulate as money.[35] I found no record of how many cowries were collected in that year, nor a figure for head tax revenue. Assuming that the tax revenue in 1917 was comparable to that of 1916 (400,000 francs), it could be 600 million shells in one province alone. Furthermore, people mention that cowries were also seized in market places and confiscated (Iroko 1987:607). The huge piles of collected shells were burned to make lime and used to paint the administrative buildings. Likewise Manning (1998:53) mentions local authorities who would, late at night, take sacks of cowries with canoes to the middle of the Muhun River and secretly dump them in the water. That measure, too, was a failure. Cowries gained value sharply against the franc. Between 1920–22, the value of the five-franc piece went down from 4,000 to 1,500 cowries in Lobi country. Twenty years later, even in its seasonal high, the value of the five-franc piece had decreased to the value of a mere 500 cowries (Iroko 1987:600). Evidently the destruction of large quantities of shells in 1917 did not make them too scarce for circulation, but instead helped them retain their value relative to the franc.

In 1925 the colonial government published a new version of the *Code d'Indigénat,* the special penal code that applied to subjects of the colonies, reducing the number of offenses punishable without trial from 30 to 15. The refusal to accept French currency in the marketplace remained one of the offences in the new version.[36]

The cowries continued to be used for purchases and sales in the province until the 1940s. After World War II, in the political ferment that led eventually to independence, cowries disappeared from market places. The younger generation was now proficient in the use of the coins and notes, and the conviction spread that the advent of colonial money was irreversible. People who had large stocks of shells turned them out and in the flooded market the value of the cowry went down for a period. The monetary career of the cowry had come to an end. I believe that this end was ultimately prepared by the growth of trade and the growing proportion of goods imported from Europe in this trade, coupled with the large increase in the volume of colonial currency, which together made the cowry shells finally a comparatively scarce and inconvenient commercial medium. The shells finally succumbed, if not to the authority of the colonial regime then to the economic changes that it had brought. But in the 50 years since the French conquest of the region, cowries had served their partisans well. They had protected the local people from inflation and erratic prices, and they helped squeeze some economic value from the relatively affluent salaried employees—perhaps even by facilitating double pricing.

The demonetization of the cowry did not proceed evenly. Even after cowries were no longer used as currency in Bobo-Dioulasso, the province of Gaoua to the south and the neighboring areas of northern Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire continued to use them until the 1970s. In the late 1950s, two thirds of all market transactions in Gaoua were made using cowries, including 90 percent of the trade in food, raw or cooked (Boutillier 1993:251). The cowry may have survived as money longer in that area due to events that happened in the final two decades of the 19th century. In that troubled period, Zaberma merchant/warrior leaders had used this area as base and entrepôt for their captives. As a consequence large numbers of cowries poured in to purchase these captives or to ransom relatives (Tauxier 1912:140–141). This late abundance, the distance from colonial centers, and the lesser effect of trade and of taxation together preserved the utility of the shells as currency in the Gaoua province for another 30 years.

Differences between localities in the exchange rate of the cowry created incentives for transporting the shells to the places where they remained high in value. With the newly available trucks, Jula traders collected the depreciated cowries in the Bobo province and took them to Gaoua to buy shea oil, cattle, and the locally mined gold. In 1945, the authorities in Gaoua seized tons of shells from traders and the tribunal convicted them for "money trafficking." An appeals court later reversed this conviction, because officially the cowries were no longer money (Iroko 1987:610). According to another police document, ten metric tons of shells went through Bobo-Dioulasso within the single month of September 1946 (Somda 1993:242). The administration combated the inflow by passing a special tax on cowries as "clothing ornaments," although the commandant thought that it was "impossible to find a solution to this problem" (Iroko 1987:602, 610). The revival of the shell trade made them so indispensable that the native officials of Gaoua submitted in 1946 a petition to the Commandant asking that part of their salaries be paid in cowries (Somda 1976:87).

In later years this area became the region's reservoir for cowry shells, and people from afar converged to its markets to purchase them, because, as already mentioned, the ritual and medicinal uses of the shells continued unaffected after they stopped serving as currency. During the 1970s and 1980s, a nominal exchange rate of 20 cowries to five CFA francs remained fixed in the minds.[37] With inflation in CFA, this rate undervalued the shells and holders preferred to keep them. They became extremely precious. Outside privileged transactions within village and kinship groups, they almost disappeared from exchange. The pressure finally broke the standard rate. The price reached levels that alarmed the village elders responsible for organizing the ceremonies. No need for us to join those who bemoan the loss of wealth because the shells were stripped of monetary function. Except for brief reversals at transition points, cowries' value increased continuously. Some people lost money, but, as Jean-Louis Boutillier notes (1993:261), the ones who kept their cowries were the winners: They did better than the people who saved in francs *and* those who saved in gold. Between 1900–1960, the French franc depreciated 750 times, while the cowry's value continued to appreciate.

CONCLUSION: MONEY IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF COLONIAL TRANSITION

The refusal of a local population to substitute colonial coins for cowries was not unique to the west Volta. Other cases from West Africa are reported by Iroko (1987: 583–633), Ben Naanen (1993), and Ofonagoro (1979). This monetary resistance remained unrecognized in anthropology, because the field became preoccupied with a static contrast between types of money, instead of focusing on the relationship between economic process and political life. Polanyi had introduced the terms *special purpose* and *general purpose* money to explain the difference between ancient societies and the capitalist market (1957:264). Paul Bohannan brought these terms to Africanist anthropology to account for the incorporation of the Tiv of central Nigeria in the colonial economy (1959). For him the brass rods that the Tiv had used to buy and sell produce, small animals, and handicraft items were special-purpose money. But the money of the colonial administration was general-purpose money, which established equivalency and exchangeability between goods that the Tiv had conceived in different categories. Historians took issue with this description (Dorward 1976; Latham 1971), but Bohannan's analysis remained influential among anthropologists because it voiced a muted criticism within the then-prevalent modernization paradigm.[38] Unfortunately, it also led to the widespread assumption that precolonial moneys were always special purpose and quickly disappeared when confronted with colonial moneys. The idea that Africans categorized different objects in ranked spheres of exchange was adopted uncritically for a variety of places within the continent. By offering shared norms as motivation (but weakly so against colonial desires), it turned researchers away from exploring the strategic purposes some local people might have in wanting to circumscribe the circulation of wealth objects.

A different line of inquiry emerged from Claude Meillassoux's (1964:220–225) discussion of marriage payments among the Gouro of Côte d'Ivoire. His originality lay in that he drew political implications from the restrictions imposed on exchange. When valuables that were necessary for marriage remained outside of general circulation, senior men more easily kept their dependents subordinate. This argument is by now familiar, and Bloch and Parry (1989:14) revisit Bohannan's original analysis in its light. Mary Douglas (1967:129) also saw a connection between restrictions on exchange and questions of power and hierarchy, but she put a different spin on it. The wealth objects of the ethnographic record—those that were held by senior men and could be exchanged only against a limited number of goods or in highly circumscribed contexts—were instruments for rationing. They gave subordinates only conditional access to few privileges. They either were not money or were very imperfect moneys. Such licensing tools can serve to fairly apportion some necessities among the population, but they inevitably end up buttressing the power of those at the top. Perfect money is for Douglas, as it was for Georg Simmel: "an instrument of freedom" (1989:405–445). Any restriction on the use of money turns it into a coupon, the equivalent of "special purpose" in the distinctive sense Bohannan gave to this expression.

The point is powerfully made but we can question this sharp distinction between money and coupon. No money is so perfect as to be totally fluid, and all moneys to various degrees have the effect of channeling entitlements. Restrictions on exchangeability, however, do not invariably lead to subordination. Recently Keith Hart (1999:280) argued almost the opposite: that, in our advanced capitalism, the internet is bringing closer the opportunity of making money what it once was—a personal instrument, opening space for independence on a scale not previously seen. The example he offers is the growth of special-purpose nominal moneys operating in closed circuits of barter and exchange.

By its most general definition, money is a medium of accountancy by which people can lay claim on goods and resources. Money procedures open up different ways of organizing one's own activities, commanding the work force of others, or accumulating the claims as abstract wealth. By rejecting one kind of money or restricting what it can buy, people can affect the mode of access to resources or the distribution of the product. This means that the exchange range of a currency is not fixed once and for all. Under circumstances of discontinuity, one group may try to change a money's range—by narrowing, for example, its validity to a particular context, or conversely by broadening its use. Whom these restrictions ultimately serve and whether they support hierarchy or its subversion cannot be determined in advance. Nor can we, on the basis of standard expectations, understand why particular actors uphold particular practices. We need to explore the political implications of these struggles in the specific circumstances of each case.

By refusing to use government-issued money for transactions other than paying taxes, the women traders, merchants, and lineage elders of the west Volta managed to lock this medium in a narrow loop between produce sales and administration coffers. They were thus able to maintain some economic independence, obtain an advantage over colonial salary earners, and keep a greater proportion of the economic value that they produced. As a result of their action, the colonial coins and bills had a much more limited range than the cowry. They looked like but were not the same as the money that circulated in the metropole.

In anthropology, the colonial transition has often been seen as a "first encounter," an apocalyptic moment of African history. The older moneys of Africa tend to be treated as if they were isolated elements of an authentic culture coming into contact with radically different foreign objects. It is important to remember that not only the cowry but also some iron currencies that now decorate ethnographic museums in Europe (Dupré 1995) and brass moneys were brought to Africa by European merchants for the Atlantic trade. Jane Guyer (1995) proposes that we should see a series of mutual adjustments in this long history. In the colonial episodes, no less than in the precolonial ones, African agents strove and often succeeded in partly shaping the outcome.

Cowries no longer serve as money in western Burkina, but their former currency function left recognizable traces. Iroko (1987:720–722) describes how in the mid-1980s in Ouagadougu people gave alms to the poor in cowries, mixed with coins or alone. In the summer of 2002, I was told that the situation had not changed and in major markets I saw traders who specialize in selling items used as offerings, including cowry shells.

The skyrocketing cowry prices are now a scandal. Elderly men who want to buy them for ritual uses find themselves competing either with those who produce craft items for sale to tourists or with young men who seek cowries to trim costumes that have become popular for stage use. In my recent trips to Burkina Faso, when I mention the Indian Ocean origins of cowries people listen attentively. I would not be surprised if someday one of the enterprising men or women traders of West Africa discovered the Maldives during an import/export trip to Dubaî or Hong Kong and restarted the historical shell trade.

Mahir Şaul Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801

NOTES

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1. Research for this article includes two extended periods of fieldwork in southern Bobo country in the vicinity of Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso; yearly shorter visits, carried out since 1983; and historical research in the Archives Nationals Section Outre-Mer (Aix-en-Provence, France), Archives Nationales de Côte d'Ivoire (Abidjan), Archives of the Society of Missionaries of Africa (Rome, Italy), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique et Technologique (Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso), and the archives of the Haut-Commissariat of Bobo-Dioulasso.

2. This overview is based on explorers' literature, scholarly works quoted in the text, early colonial archives, and fieldwork carried out by the author. Three French explorers crossed the Volta region between 1888–91, Binger (1892), Crozat (1891), and Monteil (1895), providing the most valuable information on the economy. René Caillé provided an earlier window from his travel in trade caravans from Tenegera to Jenne in January–March 1827, following a path close to the current Mali-Burkina border (Caillé 1968). In July 1853 Heinrich Barth, went through the north of what is now Burkina and his scholarly description includes references to the Volta zone (1857). The 796-page-long book of Tauxier (1912) is rich in production and trade information gathered in the first years following the French occupation, by either himself or by fellow French officers. Yves Person made a grand survey of the institutions and patterns of the economy of the savanna zone in the first volume of his magisterial work (1968–75, ch. 3:89–129), complemented by the introduction and contributed chapters in Meillassoux (1971). A more general survey of West Africa in relation to the Atlantic trade can be found in Austen (1987). Information from the monthly and quarterly cercle reports of the early colonial administration found in the National Archives of Côte d'Ivoire have been tabulated in a manuscript (Şaul 1997) from which I draw in this article. A political history of the Volta region in the 19th century and the colonial institutions of the early 20th century are presented in Şaul 1998 and Şaul and Royer 2001.

3. See Caillé 1968, chs. 15–18; Barth 1857:361–362 describes the complex operations involving salt, cloth, cowries, and gold. Late-19th-century trade patterns in the Volta region are discussed in Diallo 1997:199–204. Trade statistics revealing the same patterns during the first years of colonial occupation, 1899–1905, are presented as tables 3–21 in Şaul 1997.

4. For the markets, see Crozat 1891:4801–4808; Binger 1892:409; Diallo 1997:166–181.

5. There was virtually no coinage in West Africa, but Dupuis reported a stamped gold mithqal minted at Nikki (on the border between present-day Benin and Nigeria) in the early 19th century (Hunwick 1999:86).

6. Besides cowries and cotton goods, some elderly Bobo maintain that matrilineal treasures included gold. The gold panned in the lower Muhun was traded northward through the Volta zone (Kiéthéga 1983). Payments in gold were made to the mercenary bands that were enlisted by political leaders or by village alliances. But it is hard to determine if many farming groups could lay their hands on enough of it to put it away in their sacred hoards.

7. A large literature exists on cowry shells, quoted by Hogendorn and Johnson (1986). The major contribution after that publication is Iroko (1987). Cowries arrived first in West Africa as part of the trans-Saharan trade, by way of the Mediterranean, before the Atlantic trade era. Hunwick 1999:88–90 summarizes the evidence for this.

8. See Law 1995 and the many other publications quoted there.

9. Gold and silver were commodity moneys, but precious metal coins carried two different kinds of information. Their metal value derived from their commodity nature, whereas their generally higher face value was proclaimed by the issuing political authority. The difference between the two magnitudes—called "seigniorage"—accrued to the authority with monopoly over the mint. Far from the realm, or when the prince lost his clout, the coins tended to fall back on their commodity (base) value. When the relations of production are not market wage, the "cost" of the production of commodities is complicated by issues of subordination within the domestic/production unit.

10. Iroko 1987:493–512 provides a comparative description.

11. See Leduc 1965. In most of the British territory cowry imports had been banned in 1904 (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986:79, 150). We can surmise that the great cowry inflation of the late 19th century had already reduced the flow of new cowries to the Volta region to a trickle before this import ban, by making transporting the shells inland less and less profitable. According to Monteil (1894:282), cowry shells worth only 50 francs necessitated in the Sahel a donkey to transport. See Iroko (1987:566–567) for other examples of prohibitive transport costs. Hogendorn and Johnson (1986:143–147) discuss the factors affecting the exchange value of the cowry when the main demand is for monetary use.

12. Statistics are provided in Şaul 1997.

13. The rate of the head tax was not uniform between neighboring cercles, and sometimes varied even between different parts of one same cercle (cf. Duperray 1984:161, 216).

14. Despite this decree taxes continued to be paid in cowries in some places: in Gaoua until 1909 and in Samo country until 1910 (Iroko 1987:589). Even in Bobo-Dioulasso the treasury accepted cowries in 1908 and then spent them (Second Quarter report, 1908).

15. Cowries constituted 30 percent of the total head tax revenue in 1899, 17 percent in 1900, 26 percent in 1901, 20 percent in 1902, and 25 percent in 1903 (Şaul 1997).

16. Haut-Sénégal Niger, Bobo-Dioulasso, Rapport Politique May 1903. ANCI 5EE 21.

17. Until 1911 another way to raise funds to pay taxes, especially in the southern half of the Bobo-Dioulasso province, was to sell wild rubber from Landolphia vines.

18. Rôle des Patentes, attached to Haut-Sénégal et Niger, Cercle de Bobo-Dioulasso, Rapport Administratif, 4th Semester 1907. ANCI 5EE 23.

19. Colonie de Haute Volta, Monographie du Cercle de Bobo-Dioulasso, Année 1920. Septième Section, Questions administratives et financières. ANCI 3 Mi 7. The next year the government of the newly constituted colony raised the fee for sorghum beer licenses "to combat the worrying increase in alcoholism among the fetishists, especially among the Mossi." Rapport d'ensemble sur la Situation de la Colonie de la Haute Volta, December 31, 1920. ANCI 5EE1(1).

20. This is not different from the difficulty that people in Europe encountered when old francs gave way to new francs or, recently, when national moneys were replaced by the Euro. Lack of experience in judging the scale of values disposes one to continue to convert the prices to the old unit.

21. Rapport Commercial, 4th Quarter, 1908.

22. See Shi 1995 and Trejos and Wright 1995 for these theoretical developments in economics.

23. First Quarter report, commercial bulletin, 1919.

24. Rapport d'Ensemble sur la Situation de la Colonie de la Haute Volta, December 31, 1920. For the Leo residency of the neighboring province, see Duperray 1984:225.

25. Administrators at higher levels had a more positive attitude toward trade. Jacques Méniaud, for example, who was commissioned to write a major survey on the economy of the colony Haut-Sénégal-Niger, adopted a liberal perspective and viewed trade with the British Gold Coast and German Togoland in a positive light. He even proposed developing a monetary system between the three powers to promote this trade and made a favorable reference to cowries for helping to the same end (Méniaud 1912, vol. 2:273).

26. In Nigeria, the Royal Niger Company's persistence in using cowries against the wishes of the government has been attributed to the advantage this gave them against new European competitors who wanted to specialize more narrowly (Hogendorn and Johnson 1986:149).

27. Monthly Rapport Politique, June 1909. All the reports concerning the years 1908–1909 quoted in this section can be located in ANCI 5EE23.

28. Rapport Politique, February 1909.

29. Rapport of Major Bourgeron, Commandant of the Cercle, on his tournée February 7–March 29, 1909.

30. Rapport Financier, 4th Quarter, 1908.

31. "Obligation par les caisses publiques de recevoir cette monaie sans limitation maximum de manière à inspirer confiance aux indigènes" (Rapport commercial, 1st Quarter, 1909).

32. Rapport Politique, May 1909.

33. Rapport Politique, June 1909.

34. Rapport Financier, 4th Quarter, 1908.

35. The first mention of destruction of cowries collected as tax is from January 1907 in northern Dahomey (Iroko 1987:607; see also Duperray 1984:162).

36. The text of this code is reproduced in Spittler (1981:200–201) in its French original.

37. The French used metropolitan francs in their colonies, but also notes from the Banque de l'Afrique Occidentale, which were the same money with a different face, issued to prevent the casualty of money from the colonies flowing back and creating inflation in France. During World War II, France created a new monetary unit and new banking institutions for its colonies, the Colonies françaises d'Afrique (CFA) franc, also tied at a fixed rate and freely exchangeable with the metropolitan franc. After independence in 1960 the arrangement was reformed into an interstate monetary union and the reference of the acronym changed to Communauté financière africaine. The CFA franc remained at a fixed exchange rate to the French franc, guaranteed by France. Therefore, in international markets the CFA franc was seen as a version of the French franc. The CFA franc was devalued against the French franc for the first and only time in 1994, by 50 percent.

38. In an earlier article (1955), Bohannan had explained that the brass rods could be exchanged against all kinds of goods, except for land and labor. In fact, his point was to show that the desire for self-aggrandizement led to tolerated but discouraged conversions between spheres of exchange, an idea later expanded by Barth (1967). He also carefully presented the notions that the Tiv overtly held, by discussing the meaning of key words pertaining to trade in Tiv language, keeping them separate from his own analytic notion of "spheres." The terms *special purpose* and *general purpose* do not appear in this earlier article. They were obviously inspired by Polanyi 1957. The juxtaposition of two spheres of exchange, one in subsistence goods and the other in prestige goods, was inspired

by the ethnography of the Pacific Islands, partly through the work of Malinowski and R. Firth. See Shipton 1989:14.

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