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**"PERIPHERAL MARKETS" AND
THE PURCHASE OF MUSEUM COLLECTIONS
IN EARLY COLONIAL EQUATORIAL AFRICA**

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By Jane I. Guyer

Paul Bohannan's (1955) work on Tiv spheres of exchange decisively moved forward the study of a domain that all of us would agree is part of a far larger theoretical and empirical endeavor. Although current thought departs from Bohannan's position in some respects, there is a persistent reaffirmation of his heuristic foundation in moral-cultural constructions (Strathern 1988), in the differences in kind between commodity and gift economies (Gregory 1982), and the systemic character of "the *totality* of transactions" in any social arena (Bloch and Parry 1989:1; my emphasis). In the present era of rapprochement between history and anthropology, however, exchange is seen as not only resting on and expressing cultural premises, but as the medium through which these premises are constantly reworked, generated by and contributing to the development of new social configurations. Georges Dupré has defined this new version of the anthropological mandate as the study of how societies "orient themselves in time, that is to say how they produce their history" (1982:12).

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The paper was composed for presentation at the American Anthropological Association Meetings, Chicago 1991, for the session entitled "Bohannan's Spheres of Exchange—Contemporary Views," chaired by Charles Piot. I am grateful to all participants for their comments. I have benefitted more than I can yet incorporate into the text from the comments made at a seminar given at the Department of Anthropology, The Johns Hopkins University.

The problem we then face in developing this set of ideas for the study of the twentieth century is less deciding whether this or that specific claim or interpretation from Bohannan's publications from the 1950s does or does not apply to any particular area or era of history,¹ but how we are now—for dominated (or incorporated) societies—to conceptualize the kind of systematicity on which the use of his insights depends. There are claims coming from across the entire theoretical spectrum, to which Bohannan contributed with his paper on "The Impact of Money" (1959), which explicitly or implicitly place the terms of exchange and valuation in the twentieth century *outside* dominated local arenas; there is a definitive rupture.² But having contributed forcefully to 1960s work on the articulation of modes of production, Dupré now defines our mandate in a different way, rejecting externally determined periodization that reduces people's history to "an annex of the history of capitalism" (1982:11) in favor of close attention to indigenous periodicities. Gregory's work on Papua New Guinea states even more forcefully that the problem is to understand, not stages in the transformation of a traditional sector into a modern sector, but "the simultaneous rise of both commodity production and gift production" (1982:115). What is needed, then, is neither to drop the ideas behind spheres of exchange altogether as irrelevant to the twentieth century, as Bohannan himself implied at one point, but to rework their thrust: to take them out of the intellectual project of building discrete models and into the project of understanding historically changing interfaces.

While this is the general inspiration and direction of the present paper, it also demands a brief, more personal review. The values I have looked at closely in former work are of two kinds. On the one hand are particular "prices" that reflect modes of domination, and indeed the kind of domination through "class alliance" that P.-P. Rey (1980) and feminist scholars (e.g. Henn 1984) were advocating. Originating on one side of the colonial/indigenous interface was taxation (1980), and on the other bridewealth (1982), both focussed on because of their centrality in processes of domination. On the other hand, I also looked at price systems that clearly arose by processes more complex than

¹Reading for this paper, I have been amazed at how often works on other areas of Africa and the world comment on whether or not spheres of exchange "exist." The concept is much more often referred to than it is used analytically.

²Historians express this in terms of periodization. A long section could be devoted here to whether old dynamics have been destroyed, as is implied by theorists as far apart as Meillassoux (1964), Curtin (1984), and Vansina (1990). The newer neo-Marxist works, by scholars such as Geschiere (1982) and Dupré (1985), at least place a question-mark over the completeness of the shift.

domination, and in new institutions created at the interface itself rather than on one side or the other, namely prices in the urban food supply system (1987).

During these explorations I became increasingly aware of a key interpretive problem, namely, that long-term fluctuations in the values of key transactions could not be understood without also addressing the nature of the stabilities. For example, having worked diligently on understanding the twentieth-century history of Beti bridewealth rates in terms of people's reworking of these payments in the context of various complex shifts within a commoditizing economy (Guyer 1982), I was taken aback by Fernandez's claim, for a closely related group, that "Despite very great fluctuations in colonial currency, the real value of the woman had remained about the same over the years" (1982:148). And then to read of Dupré's empirical finding, from a more closely consonant theoretical position to my own and with more detailed economic data, that "if we take the part of marriage payment constituted by local goods, we can establish that taken together they are equivalent to 6 nzundu (metal anvils), that is, a precolonial marriage payment" (1982:336). What, then, did my fluctuations amount to, what did they reflect? The impact of new and changing forms of commoditization, or simply adjustments within the framework of an ancient established repertoire?

Back at the "drawing board," it seemed to me then that thinking about the commercialization and commoditization of the twentieth century as essentially connected to a *long history* of indigenous currency use in preceding centuries might provoke useful thinking, not in the first instance about the nature of "stabilities" themselves, but rather about our own conceptual and descriptive categories for studying "valuation" in economies that have been at such market interfaces for centuries; that is—to use another concept from Bohannan's work—to look again at "peripheral markets" and the economies of which they are a part.

It is worth devoting a few words to the term "peripheral," in itself problematic because it conveys a mental image of the edge of a larger picture, whereas I want to bring that edge to center-field. Despite its problems, it is the term already in the literature and at least one of its various definitions is useful, referring to the lack of effect, or as I would prefer to say, the indirect effect of the prices of products on the allocation of factors of production, particularly land. Bohannan and Dalton put forward the concept of "peripheral markets" in 1962 in the context of a survey of African markets, whose introduction—but not the actual format of the book—classified them into "marketless economies," "peripheral markets," and "market economies." Dupré and Rey's (1968 [1980]) attack on the evolutionary implications of their formulation was seminal. It brought the study of colonial

violence and Balandier's "colonial situation" into the forefront of anthropological studies of "the transition to capitalism," and confirmed the promises already held out by Meillassoux (1960) that neo-Marxist thinking had essential and original contributions to make. Their article was absolutely centered on what they saw as the key weakness of "an impossible typology" (1980:129), where "peripheral markets" constituted a "stage" between marketless and fully market economies.

Since then there have been great advances in thought and knowledge, and they are so broadly accepted that a brief summary will suffice before exploring how radically the conceptual problem has been reshaped away from "impacts" and "stages." First, the colonial violence that Dupré and Rey documented for the Congo has been confirmed both for Equatorial Africa (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972; M.-C Dupré 1990) and elsewhere (e.g., Boahen 1987 for a summary), thereby weakening support for claims that the process of market growth was evolutionary. Second, as Geschiere (1982) has been the boldest to note, even violence has only partially incorporated African polities and economies into fully capitalist relations, thereby weakening any claim that "transition" or even incorporation has been effectuated. And third, painstaking historical scholarship over thirty years has documented such breadth, depth, and complexity in African commerce during at least three centuries before colonial rule that all assumptions about the novelty of market relations in the twentieth century have to be abandoned. A full list of references on this point would be very long; let me only note that Warnier and Fowler (1979) were so impressed at the slag heaps from iron production in the Ndop plains in Cameroon that they depicted it as a "Ruhr," after the German industrial region; Herbert is incredulous when she puts together estimates of a vast copper production within Africa and imports from Europe from the seventeenth century to suggest as a "very conservative calculation" that the amounts in use and circulation by the end of the nineteenth century were 50,000 tons and possibly up to double that figure (1984:181); Johnson and Hogendorn give the figure of almost 36,000 tons of cowries—that is 14 billion shells—shipped into Africa by five German and French companies between 1851 and 1869 alone (1986: 75-76); and Curtin summarizes the current state of knowledge on gold, that West African gold was important into North Africa from at least the end of the first millenium (1983:241). The currency collection from Equatorial Africa in the Belgian Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren contains at least 120 different shapes and sizes of metallic currencies, and there were critically important shell and cloth currencies³ in this region as well.

³Phyllis Martin 1987; Mahieu 1923; Hilton 1985.

The record is massively impressive, and so are the questions that are raised and that I turned to in order to address my problem of long-term valuation at the interface. The interpretations and conceptualizations of historians are, however, much more tentative than their extraordinary data. Beyond laying to rest any vision of "non-economic man" in Africa, the actual tools they offer to trace out the meaning of all this are rather meager. Johnson and Hogendorn note that since cowries did not inflate, they must have been absorbed into circuits of exchange, but the implications for local and regional economies are inferred rather than explored in detail.⁴ Herbert wonders "what has become of it all" (1984:182), i.e., the copper that was produced, exchanged and worn with such enormous effort and imagination, particularly throughout Central Africa. Webb (1982) speculates that an assumption of increased monetization of the internal African exchange economy may not be altogether warranted if the perquisites of state power also expanded; but this issue, and even "the impact of colonial monetary policy on regional economy and indigenous African states remains unexplored territory" (1982:467). Curtin ends a finely detailed chapter on "Africa and the Wider Monetary World 1250-1850" with the statement that "No conclusion is possible" (1983: 261). And the most important recent historical scholarship of Equatorial Africa concludes that after centuries of involvement in the commercial exchanges of the slave and ivory trades, these were still fundamentally "wealth in people" systems.⁵ The profound cultural mutations that were surely developed, and their possible place in a repertoire that continues to be drawn on into the twentieth century, form a topic whose power is contained, constricted, and perhaps in a sense "tamed" by the over-muscular periodization built into these studies. If the tradition "died," then the selective re-working of its elements up to the present seems a less intellectually challenging problem to address, but to our loss. If we see, on the other hand, that threads of meaning and practice are rewoven rather than severed, then the transitional or transformational moments become critically important to describe ethnographically.

Suffice it to summarize here that the institution Bohannan and Dalton referred to as "the peripheral market" as a long-term historical phenomenon can no longer be seen in the terms they suggested: "A common indicator of a peripheral market is the minute quantities

⁴For example, "the absence of hyperinflation during a long period of huge money imports is convincing evidence that growth in the scale of monetary transactions was taking place in West Africa during the era of the Atlantic slave trade" (1986:146).

⁵Miller writes "The old strategies continued to prevail to the extent that even African merchants and trading kings remained primarily committed to accumulating people rather than goods" (1988:66). Vansina writes "after centuries of trading, goods still retained their value as items for use rather than for exchange. Wherever possible, wealth in goods was still converted into followers" (1990:251).

transacted—it is on a pin-money level" (1962:7). On the contrary, the field of exchange has involved vast, varied, and long-lived cultural and political production, for which, however, new conceptualizations of the cultural and material underpinnings and dynamic implications seem rather too slim.⁶

Interestingly, Georges Dupré (1985) has recently explicitly rehabilitated the concept of peripheral market in his studies of Béembe precolonial history. He concludes that relations based on "peripheral markets" that were founded well before colonial rule in the nineteenth century and defended against ferocious colonial violence in the twentieth, were the seeds out of which new social orders have been born. The "peripheral market" is recentered, this time as a long-term, highly complex, highly sophisticated, and potentially generative institution, existing across all the watersheds of transformational history. The logic of all this recent Africanist work then, in many ways at odds with Bohannan's conceptual scheme, does seem to recycle certain of his premises.

A holist approach—as was Bohannan's—is endorsed, but without the necessary assumption that static classification of the "things" is the most important characteristic to describe. In conceptualizing what else to look for, there is inspiration in the anthropological work on New Guinea. Strathern has advocated that we pay far more attention to the underlying sets of qualities given to both things and people, some transactable and others not. Of particular interest for the study of Equatorial Africa is Chris Gregory's (1982) focus on the processes built on and expressing these premises, namely, the paths of wealth pooling and the velocity of circulation of items of value when there are two coexistent possible uses: to create debts through prestation and circulation or to alienate through destruction. In the case of prestations, all redistribution from political centers provides potential competitors with the means to create debts of their own. In alienation, the relationship of thing to person is conceptually severed and the stock of total wealth available for debt creation is reduced.⁷ Bringing these insights into African studies would, I think, require two other categories. In addition to prestation in promoting circulation of wealth in Equatorial Africa, there is clearly the payment for service and investment that

⁶In my own view, this is because the historical work has maintained an implicit watershed approach to periodization. Meillassoux's (1960) model of trade in prestige goods via the elders was very provocative but hardly historically comprehensive and also strongly periodized. There is probably a vast variety of source material in monographs that could be brought together for a new theoretical synthesis, drawing on a new appreciation of the complexity of local production and importing the Melanesian conceptual insights into the analysis.

⁷His key example of alienation is the destruction of wealth in potlatches, when the stock of wealth within the never-ending competitive prestatory exchange is dramatically reduced.

underlay an expansion of specialist production of a wide range of items, material and immaterial, all of which were paid for with indigenous currencies. And in addition to destruction as a means of reducing the store of wealth in competitive political situations, in Equatorial Africa wealth could be immobilized through storage techniques.⁸

The Equatorial tradition contained all these possibilities for the deployment of wealth: investment, prestation, immobilization, and destruction. The shifts between investment, prestation, immobilization, and alienation—as goods changed, as price registers fluctuated, and as the velocity of circulation of currencies rose and fell in peripheral markets—may be the long-term historical process on which we need to concentrate an ethnographic imagination.

As I write, I am still not altogether sure whether the question as presently phrased is addressable, let alone answerable in enough detail from the sources we have, but it does point in an empirical direction. The present paper is an exploration—of a particular series of transactions, at the "peripheral market" interface, at a "transitional" period in a very long-term and continuing Euro-African relationship—with a view to defining the further ethnographic understandings one would be reaching for in the analysis of the changing meanings and uses of wealth.

The Museum Purchases⁹

The methodological advantage of looking at the great museum purchases of the first two decades of this century is that they offer descriptive material, from a peripheral market, across an unsurpassed spectrum of objects. There is probably never a single moment at which a culture—perhaps any culture—is more *comprehensively* marketed than when its material inventory is to be bought for a museum. The collectors bought fishing nets, canoes, charms, musical instruments, houseposts, impressions of teeth, photographs of

⁸ Appadurai (1986) notes this general characteristic of elites, but does not explore it in detail, namely their capacity to "freeze" flows of wealth. The concept of "investment" from neo-classical economics does not cover this critical process of wealth management, namely control of the stock of items and their velocity of circulation, independent of any direct material link to growth or future returns.

⁹ Throughout this section I make rather shameless use of Vansina's claim (1990) that there is an underlying unity to the Equatorial Tradition. The collections I use were made along the Zaire and Ubangui Rivers, to a point not far beyond the confluence. For ethnographic and historical sources on this region I have drawn on well known works on peoples in this region. It remains to be comprehensive about the ethnography and to match the exact point of acquisition, where possible, to the exact group from whom the item was acquired. The collection archives, however, do suggest that goods made and used by one group were sold by another, so it is not altogether clear how crucial this matching is to the general argument about the dynamics of purchase and the use of wealth which must remain—beyond a certain point—conjectural.

tattoos and dances, recordings of songs, statuary, spears, ear-plugs and ankle rings, and had to purchase cassava to feed their followers and indigenous currencies to pay wages. The most obvious exchanges they did not enter into were acquisition of offices, titles, dances, land resources, and rights in people, although one collector does mention the difficulty his followers had affording the sexual services of the women in one locality. The collections offer possibly the most comprehensive picture of the exchange economy we could get for this period, albeit from a highly distinctive vantage point. Ethnography has to provide the links to local processes.¹⁰

First, the context of this interface needs description. All historians place a watershed in the political and economic dynamics of Equatorial Africa some time between 1886, when the Congo came under the personal rule of King Leopold of the Belgians, and the 1920s, when the domination of the French side of the river by the grand concessionary companies was nearing its end. There were military camps all along the river, still engaged in skirmishes in some places, and not yet engaged with the full-scale revolt that would soon develop over taxation in others. Pressures for the population to pay taxes—first in kind and then in cash—began in the first decade of the century, building up to major confrontations in some places after 1910. Vansina argues that by the 1920s the old tradition of the Equatorial peoples was essentially dead (1990:247).

The great museum purchases were made in the midst of this period of apparent transition: the Frobenius collection, primarily for the Hamburg Museum, was made in 1905; the Starr collection was made in 1905-1906 [author: correct years?] and sold to the American Museum of Natural History in New York,¹¹ the Lang-Chapin collection was made for the same museum in 1910-1914; the Torday Collection was made for the British Museum in 1900-1909; and there were various other collections, much smaller, such as the one referred to below, made by Van de Weyer, a Belgian administrator, for the Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale in Tervuren in 1913.¹²

¹⁰I myself, have never done field research in this area, although Southern Cameroon, where I have worked on indigenous currencies, does fall within what Vansina (1990) refers to as the Equatorial African Tradition.

¹¹Enid Schildkrout generously made available to me a draft article (1990) comparing Frederick Starr and Herbert Lang as collectors.

¹²I draw briefly on the study of the archives of two other collections made two decades later: the Schwab collection from Southern Cameroon, which belongs to the Equatorial African tradition, and the Harley collection from Liberia, which does not.

The two collectors' notes I use here refer to experiences buying objects along parts of the same general stretch of the Congo River from the Malebo Pool to beyond the Ubangui confluence. Their records suggest that a vast variety of objects was available and that almost everything one could ask for was amenable to purchase.¹³ Was this simply a function of the political instability? Frederick Starr's diary¹⁴ provides a vivid description of conditions of life that may have affected willingness to sell. The impression given is of a vague—although perhaps very powerful—climate of fear rather than of active intimidation. He mentions, for example, using the stationed troops as subjects in the collection of dental impressions and anthropometric measurements.¹⁵ He describes an occasion when a European was shot and killed right at the station. In one village there were discussions of taxes and "The universal sentiment was for war."¹⁶ When Starr's "loose cannon" of an assistant managed to tell a village "with agile gesticulation that we were after their teeth . . . there was much excitement and sudden scattering. We had some difficulty in re-gathering them and making them understand that what we really wanted were fishtraps."¹⁷

Both the refusals and acceptances that Starr describes had, on the other hand, a certain spontaneity that suggests some degrees of freedom. Some people did refuse, point

¹³ One has to ask whether people were selling out of fear, desperation, destitution, or "moral collapse" (Mack 1990:8) under the political circumstances. The first decade of this century was an extraordinarily violent one, as mentioned already. King Leopold and the concessionary companies forced the tapping of latex on local populations, who were brutally physically punished if quotas and taxes in kind were not met (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1972);. Thousands opportunistically moved their villages across the river to find the least repressive environment. There were tax revolts, resulting in military camps set up all along the river: camps often sited alongside missionary stations, administrative headquarters, ferryboat landings and traders' stores, where collectors also—for obvious logistical reasons—might have a base camp or port of call. One key fact worth noting, however, is that, while the Belgian and French governments did accept certain indigenous currencies as legal tender, taxes were still either in kind or still under construction, so the high demand for emergency cash during the "tax season" did not seem to have the same effects on sales of items of material culture here as it clearly and explicitly did in Southern Cameroon twenty years later. Archives, Peabody Museum, Harvard University (PMHU), Schwab collection.

¹⁴ The diary is held in the Archives of the University of Chicago (UC), although the Starr collection is held at the American Museum of Natural History. I owe to the generosity of Enid Schidkroun the information that such a record existed and the opportunity to read her copy in New York. Her unpublished paper (1990) provides essential background material on Starr's expedition.

¹⁵UC, Starr Papers, Notebook 8: 37, Box 10. "We have measured 299 soldiers and eighteen villages during the week."

¹⁶*Ibid.*, Notebook 3:57.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, Notebook 2: 41.

blank and with apparent confidence.¹⁸ Others tried to keep part of the sale back when it came time to hand it over.¹⁹ Others bargained hard. One chief held up a promised supply of local indigenous currency Starr needed to pay the workers, to his inconvenience and aggravation.²⁰ Twice he was subjected to theft of items: once it seemed that one of his workers had "sold" an axe to a local man, which Starr ironically—since he also was buying goods of possible collective or at least non-personal ownership—found a totally implausible excuse on the part of the buyer.²¹ And later one of his packing cases was opened and contents taken and/or ruined.²² Sometimes "we tried to buy spears and harpoons but they were held at fearful prices."²³ It was not always easy to make a purchase, nor to have to bargain along the trail of the flamboyant, extravagant, and imperious Leo Frobenius, about whom Starr complained; Bakuba hatpins, "before Frobenius's visit were easy at six for a machete—at 10 centimes each; Frobenius gave a piece of cloth for each."²⁴

Only once, with explicit guilt about acting "in the spirit of Frobenius," did Starr write about threatening a recalcitrant seller, the owner of a medicine pouch. The owner gave in, but slowly, first trying to take out the most valuable contents, and then finally, as a way of giving in, offering it as a gift.²⁵

But then there were the moments when people apparently sold with either total nonchalance or eagerness. Starr stopped people on the path and asked them for their ear-plugs, baby's head-binding, bows and arrows, knives, spears, and indeed anything they might want to sell. Arriving in one Bakete village, he found his assistant "followed by a great drove of men, women and children from whom he was buying truly all sorts of things."²⁶

¹⁸*Ibid.*, Notebook 6:55. "What I did *not* get was apparently for immediate use: it was a calabash rattle. . . . I made every effort to secure it in vain." There are many such incidents recorded in the diary.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, Notebook 7:28.

²⁰*Ibid.*, Notebook 7: 2-3

²¹*Ibid.*, Notebook 7: 1

²²*Ibid.*, Notebook 10: 54.

²³*Ibid.*, Notebook 8: 13.

²⁴*Ibid.*, Notebook 6: 7.

²⁵*Ibid.*, Notebook 5: 60.

²⁶*Ibid.*, Notebook 5: 55.

One might argue then, that although the conditions of purchase may have been contextualized by repression, they were perhaps not in themselves directly repressive enough to completely overturn all criteria of indigenous valuation. Several times Starr mentions that the people had bought the items in the first place and were quite open about the cost; for example, a "remarkable composition was bought at the cost of sixty pieces of cloth, to cure him of head troubles; it has been entirely efficacious."²⁷

What, then, do the patterns of sale show with respect to categories and implicit values? First of all, the collectors do not seem to think that items were cheap and they found the bargaining expert. Exploration of this topic requires much more investigation of exchange rates and prices in France and Belgium than I have done in order to assess these claims, but Starr, for example, was outraged when a child tried to take him for a hefty tip.²⁸ Torday suggests that high prices were paid for items (Mack 1990:67). Both were inclined to blame Frobenius rather than the sellers, which in and of itself expresses their acceptance that the people were accustomed to holding out for a price. In fact, all collectors noted that production for sale—of baskets, knives, masks and almost anything—was already an entrenched practice (Mack 1990:34; Starr Papers).²⁹ People immediately responded to collectors by making new items in a manner that bespeaks the prior existence of production for sale, either to the public or to a patron. Artists worked for demand; here was a new demand. One gets the sense of easy replacement for many items; artisanship was an active career practiced at one level or another by practically everybody,³⁰ producing the spectacular display of expertise we now see in the museum.

As a result, the lists of items do tend to show that a great deal was amenable to sale, along a single currency scale that was, however, characterized by some sharp discontinuities. Van de Weyer's list of 68 items is the only list of its kind that I have come across, all collected for the same area, namely the Ubangui-Zaire confluence, and all within the same time period by the same person. They come from seven ethnic groups altogether, with Samba, Libinza, and Baloie accounting for 55 of the items. All are valued in terms of

²⁷*Ibid.*, Notebook 2:40.

²⁸*Ibid.*, Notebook 2: 26

²⁹*Ibid.*, Notebook 5: 2 notes, for example, that there were "regular prices" for Bampende masks.

³⁰*Ibid.*, Notebook 5:29. People brought "beautiful new figures which they had prepared with much care. . . . We were all day refusing nice new fetiches."

kwa, an iron currency, as well as Belgian francs, and occasionally the buyer notes the amount he actually paid as well as what he terms the "value."³¹

Each of the three ethnic collections shows a similar set of characteristics: (a) a price scale going from one or two *kwa* up to 150 for the Samba, 300 for the Baloie and 1,000 for the Libinza, but with gaps in the scale; (b) the dominance of metal items, which figure all across the spectrum of prices, suggesting the sheer variety of the blacksmiths' work: harpoons, arrows, war-spears, tools, raw materials for the smith and so on; (c) many of either the objects themselves or the bloom came from elsewhere. For example, the list notes: "Le village d'eau de forgerons est Bongemie. C'est l'endroit principal sur la rivière où se travaille le fer.," "Fils de laiton . . . importés; introduit par les Libinza, est employé comme monnaie indigène. . . ." (14527); "Lances de guerre . . . se trafiquait dans le temps. . ." (14542-6); and (d) there are old and new currency pieces, all exchangeable against the *kwa*. In fact, as the above quotation suggests, the currency repertoire seemed to be growing and changing around this time.

Where the list mentions items of prestige and bridewealth, they are hardly associated with very high price or scarcity. For example: " Lance 'ganza.'..trafique assez répandu dans les villages. . . . (materials imported by Libinza) . . . employés surtout dans les ventes ou achat de femmes. . . . 50 kwa" (my translation of notes in parentheses; 14562). Unfortunately he does not tell us how many are needed to make a bridewealth, and this, of course is the crucial information for constructing a price scale, but the note does clearly indicate that bridewealth components were bought and sold.

Individual pieces indicating pride of status were not particularly expensive. A Baloie headrest of imported brass, a "signe de richesse" (14570), and a Libinza "couteau avec chaine . . . fortement orné . . . signe de richesse" (14573) both cost 50 *kwa*, less than a tool for trimming palm trees (14565) and only 20 *kwa* more than a tool for carving out a canoe. Even an imported metal hoe for women's farming (14576), and a item of women's clothing tied on under her skirt to give greater amplitude (14589) each cost 20 *kwa*.

Much higher in price were certain inputs of production and trade: a trunk-container for a canoe (14591) and the bellows of the forge (14744) each at 100 *kwa*, and a 200 kg "minerai de fer "(ore) for over 1,000 *kwa*.

³¹ MRAC, Van de Weyer list. Numbers refer to the acquisition number of the item to which the note refers.

In a category by themselves are two items associated with chieftaincy: a drum made of iron, worth 1,000 *kwa* but bargained down to 500 "avec grande peine," was owned only by chiefs (14588), and van de Weyer managed to purchase for 20 Belgian francs (400 *kwa*), an item never usually sold, namely a type of head-dress referred to as "la suprême élégance chez les femmes" and worn only by the wives of Balobo notables (14590).

The evidence it seems to me clearly suggests that for this area of the Ubangui-Zaire confluence a wide variety of goods had a price, that utilitarian items could command higher prices than decorative or prestige pieces, that bridewealth could be built up through market transactions even if the total price was high, and that currencies were exchangeable against one another and fungible back and forth into objects through the extraordinary skill of the smith.³²

What if anything, then, was *not* easily purchaseable by the collectors, and therefore possibly categorized differently? Returning to Starr, the most commonly given reason for refusal to sell, where one was given at all, was not that the kind of item fell into a particular moral domain but that the particular piece in question had other liens on it or was inherited, that is, that it was imbricated in prestation and debt. A woman would not sell a calabash "as it is apparently part of the outfit of some club or society."³³ A fly-whisk included feathers that had belonged to a renowned chief, now dead, and the sale would bring shame.³⁴ The owner of an iron rattle-bell "was immovable. He had received it from his ancestors and must pass it on down."³⁵ The owner of a knife refused to sell on the grounds that he "held it in a debt" and was afraid that the debtor would demand "a fantastic compensation" if he sold it. But it is striking, given that Starr was quite annoyed by such refusals and noted them down, how relatively few cases of liens there seem to be. Once he was quite shocked that a brazen request for a ritual item while a group of men were in the process of a ten-day rite that apparently actually used it, was greeted with willingness to sell. In sum, liens certainly existed, and they slowed down circulation, if not prevented it entirely, but such liens do not figure extremely often in the bargaining process.

³²Harms writes of the entire Congo river trading basin that, with the possible exception of the Tio, there were no spheres of exchange and "no evidence that they ever had" (1981:166). Imported brass, cloth, political office and ritual positions "became marketplace items to be purchased by the highest bidder" (Harms 1981: 191). By the latter half of the nineteenth century, he argues, anything and everything was amenable to purchase with one or another of the zonally specialized currencies.

³³*Ibid.*, Notebook 2: 38

³⁴*Ibid.*, Notebook 2: 39

³⁵*Ibid.*, Notebook 10:24

The second type of refusal to sell does, however, relate to the nature of the item. There is explicit reluctance to sell certain "charms," sometimes referred to as "fetishes." For example, a seller had to be given a "dash" even to open up the six cloth wrappings enclosing potent substances that had been bought at the great expense of sixty pieces of cloth, let alone to sell it.³⁶ Again, the whole set of ethnographic and documentary sources needs exploring to contextualize these transactions. At this point it seems logical to me that the charms that *were* purchased may have been new ones made for the purpose, and that older ones were so profoundly linked to personal and political power (see Vansina 1973 on the Tio *nkobi*) that the sellers' prices were in a totally different range from anything the buyers were willing to consider for objects that would hardly "show" well in a museum case. This is speculation, but brings into view the other spaces on the indigenous price register that could not—for reasons on both the demand and supply sides—be brought into a mutually acceptable market relationship. In other words, the two value registers in the market—Euro-American and African—were only partially overlapping, even though both were monetized.

Before returning to the Equatorial ethnography, I want to look then—briefly in this case—at the cultural constructions of the buyers which surely affected market conditions in some ways.³⁷ Starr, at least, clearly saw Equatorial Africa as a market; he expected to find regular prices and he competed with Frobenius. Beyond that, however, the effect of Western cultural priorities is reflected less in the prices paid than in the kind and amount of objects thought worth paying for at all. Certain objects, such as baskets and musical instruments, were worth more—or only bought at all—if they were new, while others were preferred old, with clear reference to the nature of the U.S. market; "the three or four baskets have no recommendation—except age—which in baskets (except for some California faddists) does not count."³⁸ The Euro-American valuations have to do with a ranking of symbolic/secret over utilitarian, that interplays with an utterly non-African distinction between old and new/effective. Scarcity is another factor in attributing value, although notes from the Liberian Harley collection suggest there are times when the buyer has been very persuasive to convince his metropolitan sponsors that some quite utilitarian-

³⁶*Ibid.*, Notebook 2:40.

³⁷Schildkrout 1990 covers this ground much more completely than I do here.

³⁸UC, Starr Papers, Notebook 5: 4, Box 10.

looking object to their eyes is actually extremely rare, secret, and therefore valuable.³⁹ Undoubtedly these Western values were developed much earlier in the history of collecting, and extended to the new Equatorial African materials by fairly complex taxonomic processes that I am not competent to address. But the expressed purpose of the collection as a whole was very clear; Torday represented the British Museum to the Kuba king as "a treasury of the finest in world cultures" (Mack 1990:17), that is, an immobilized store of wealth in its own right.⁴⁰

Ethnographic Inferences

Taking all conditions into consideration, these records suggest that Equatorial African societies were unusually profoundly commercialized at the beginning of colonial rule. Three centuries of participation in the slave and ivory trades provide a context but not an explanation. Indigenous premises that clearly, according to Gregory's (1982) analysis, would underly commercial exchange—such as the relevance of acquisition by capture, the practices resulting in wealth immobilization, and step-wise prices on a single currency scale—also exist in areas within the same cultural region that were not profoundly involved with the trade⁴¹. It remains, then, to try to follow not only "the trail of the leopard" as Vansina (1990) does with respect to hierarchies of power, but the currency pathways into stores of wealth and strategies of control.

I have been surprised at how difficult it is to pull the themes out of the ethnography, partly because of the sheer complexity of the cultures themselves and partly because of the extraordinary detail of the sources. The following is the beginnings of an interpretation and a set of questions for further exploration.

Immobilization and Destruction of Wealth

The importance of alienation is compellingly presented in the historical sources by the nineteenth century: the alienation of enslavement, the pervasiveness of sales, and large-

³⁹Purchase of one of the clay whistles for the making of the voice of the Poro masks was carefully described and justified.

⁴⁰ See Dupré (1990) for a discussion of the place of expert validation by museums and ethnographers in the pricing of non-Western art. Witness the Japanese corporate investment in art, antiquities, and antiques in the mid-1980s, and the keen interest on the part of producers of art to have their work exhibited in recognized store-houses of treasure in order to qualify it for this realm of valuation.

⁴¹See my paper on Beti, 1986.

scale funerary destruction⁴². Extant throughout the entire western part of the Equatorial region was the practice of accumulating cloth, some of which was destroyed at funerals.⁴³ Brass rods were placed in graves or destroyed at the ceremony, in some cases as an explicit replacement for the sacrifice of a slave (Eggert 1980: 309).

Alongside destruction was also an elaborate system of wealth immobilization, through the literal reshaping of the currency into another form. Where brass rods constituted currency, they could be stored in the converted form of the heavy collars worn by wives, daughters, and favorite female slaves. In a case quoted by Harms for 1877, one chief's womenfolk were wearing 633 kg. of brass, made out of over six thousand brass rods. Collars ranging in weight from 10 to 13 kg., and anklets of 6 kg. were thought of as wealth in convertible form. Iron currencies, too, could be stored and/or converted. Many, it was said, were destined for the smith. Van de Weyer writes that a certain kind of spear "sont fabriqués par les forgerons de l'endroit au moyen de 'kwa,'" the *kwa* being a type of currency piece; and a "couteau pour palmier [was] fabriqué sur place de kwa."⁴⁴

An inference to be drawn here is that the blacksmith's ritual power in these societies was intrinsically related to wealth management. In pragmatic terms, the blacksmiths were deeply implicated in currency production, storage, and in the velocity of circulation because they controlled liquidity. In fundamental conceptual terms, their ritual role must have involved the very definitions of things as potentially alienable.⁴⁵

⁴² Martin documents the massive growth in funerary destruction of cloth in the eighteenth century on the Loango coast, where the following example is given "The wrapping of the body had taken a year and the final mass, ready for burial, was twenty feet long, fourteen feet high and eight feet thick" (1987:6). Teke funerals involved large-scale cloth destruction (Vansina 1973), and Dupré documents the reworking of this theme in a new context by the Béembe. One is struck by the difficulty of thinking about this as a variant of the "wealth in people" system, since the possibility of creating debts is destroyed and potential followers are sold in order to achieve it. Harms noted with great originality that the natural reproduction rate for the Bobangi in the era of the slave trade was known, by them, to be low. I have reservations, then, about the reiterated theme of population growth and investment in the reproduction of social relations as a historically invariant characteristic (see, e.g., Vansina "Whenever possible, wealth in goods was still converted into followers. . . . 1990:251).

⁴³ Taking an institutional approach, one can see that the relative places of contributory prestations expressly made for the occasion by a wide range of participants to the collection of cloth destroyed versus the use of the already-immobilized ("saved") stores of the wealthy might well provide a means of periodizing what otherwise seems to be a practise manifesting continuity.

⁴⁴ Archives of the Musée Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren (MRAC); van de Weyer notes.

⁴⁵ There is a large literature on the blacksmith in Central Africa. I have not yet searched its pages for the inferences I am drawing here; the point could well have been made by others and indeed I myself suggested the "pragmatic" point about the blacksmith's role in currency control (1986). The new thesis of

One further line of exploration on the bases for alienation should, I think, be the link between the sources of goods and their fate. Purchase and capture may be conceptually linked to destruction and immobilization, whereas production within the framework of past prestations is committed to the endless round of debt creation. Key items of material and symbolic value could be literally acquired by capture rather than produced through work or negotiated through the prestatory process: slaves, the leopard, ivory, and even wives under certain circumstances.⁴⁶ The hunt is a central occupation and a source of the imagery of spiritual power⁴⁷. The centrality of capture as a process, a concept and an imagery could be further illuminated.

Prestation and Purchase from Specialists

Two means of disbursing wealth within societies included the classic prestations of marriage payments and competitive exchanges, in almost infinitely variable forms. The transfer of wealth clearly created long-term debts, and both Vansina's and Miller's models of kinship ground themselves in the assumption that these debts were efficaciously binding. A further line of enquiry to pursue would be the implications of the sheer multiplicity of prestations, not only as producing different kinds of social *grouping* but also different kinds of social *ranking*.

Alongside prestation as a means through which wealth circulated was outright purchase of power from specialists. By the nineteenth century titles, dances, magical charms, and the political services of spiritual specialists (to administer the poison ordeal, for example) were all purchasable and expensive (see Eggert 1980). Vansina describes the purchase of the *nkobi* ritual boxes that became a source of local power among the Tio and the focus of a whole ideology of countervailing forces to the king; "Only great and wealthy

Josette Rivallain may well deal with these concepts. One important comparative note to insert here is that the technological and historical differences between Melanesia and Africa must be kept clearly in view when that literature is used as an inspirational source: Melanesia has, as far as I know, no long iron-working traditions and a different configuration of concepts with respect to the transactability of rights in persons.

⁴⁶See Vansina 1990 for an extended exposition on the Equatorial tradition, in which the threat of warfare has a central place.

⁴⁷The forge and the weaver's loom possibly stand in tension with the hunt, since the former's products are necessarily limited by productive capacity. All sources suggest that by the end of the nineteenth century the blacksmiths were working extremely intensively, possibly to keep up with the intensified competition of political and commercial life.

lords could afford important *nkobi*. The tie with wealth and trade is therefore evident" (1973:456).⁴⁸

Finally, there was clearly very significant investment of wealth in future production, at least of certain kinds: the iron ore and the canoe trunk valued on van de Weyer's list, the canoes purchased by the Bobangi. In both these cases, specialists were conduits for wealth circulation just as their goods entered into the circuits of prestation and alienation. The cultural underpinnings of what must have been a spectacular florescence of cultural production during the two centuries or so prior to colonization is a critical topic for research on wealth.

A Synthetic View

As a speculation, I suggest an additional dynamic to the regional competitive model developed by Vansina, namely, that the competitive interplay among all the means of wealth control within local societies meant that at any one time there was a highly complex and dynamic internal ranking of persons. The framework of valuation was this ranking of persons, constantly open to play, rather than a classification of "things," fixed in space and time. In Equatorial Africa purchase, prestation, immobilization, and destruction of wealth existed side by side, involved the same physical items, and were thereby constantly at play one with the other, rather than insulated by the barriers of moral spheres. In the "ideal type," no barriers exist at all to prevent the ambitious man from working brilliantly from one to the other mode in pursuit of political prominence.⁴⁹ The barriers to achievement were then the leaps that had to be made, not over moral watersheds of conversion from one category to another of items whose quantity was intrinsically restricted by social conditions of production and exchange, but rather over the gaps on a single value register that was, in principle, a continuous differentiated scale. Entrenched political leadership might have interest in maintaining the interrupted value registers, while others might strive to reduce the gaps.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Smiths can also be seen as specialists. It seems to me, however, that the whole realm of expertise could be reanalyzed in relation to the circuits of exchange and wealth use.

⁴⁹Although Vansina claims spheres of exchange for the Tio, he makes it clear that these were actually large gaps in a continuous register valued throughout in *mitakos* (1973:292-93), which I think is the general model for this region, as I argued, Guyer 1986.

⁵⁰In my own earlier work on the indigenous currencies of Southern Cameroon I illustrated the astronomically high "prices" of some things relative to others. Bridewealth, for example, was on the same scale as a chicken, a gambling debt or a pipe, but the quantum leap was vast among the items amenable to

These peoples of the forest were not the obedient and orderly followers of managerial elders who controlled all items of wealth, nor were they patient plodders in the slow and incremental accumulation of key resources through labor. The cultivation of personal powers and skills, the rapid convertibility of anything into anything else, the existence of specialist production and exchange over long distances and the value accorded to novelty all suggest systems for which "power by capture" was one mode through which political prominence could be gained.⁵¹

One might further suggest that these scales of value accorded to persons—manifest in the sheer breadth of techniques for the cultivation of personal beauty, strength, skill, and general worth—must be brought into any understanding of the dynamics of the "wealth in people" model. It cannot be understood in sheer demographic or materialist terms. Numbers of people must have been far less important than their quality; debt creation must have been selective. Still existing today are terms that distinguish a real person (*mfan mot* in Beti) from a nobody (*zeze mot*), people with independence of character (*nti*) from all the rest. The processes by which inter-personal rankings became elaborated as wealth came into the region would help in resolving the conundrum of an over-materialist version of "wealth in people," namely how so many were sold and some were sacrificed if acquiring people was the purpose of the whole endeavor.⁵²

The sites of pools of wealth continue to shift in the twentieth century, but still through shifts in the institutionalized practices of marriage payments and funeral distributions. Dupré, for example, documents a rise in bridewealth accumulation among the Beembe up to the 1950s, apparently surpassed by a spectacular rise in pooling and

currency exchange. Marriage payments were only much lower in a sub-region where control of marriage was achieved primarily in other ways: by exchange and tribute (see Guyer 1985).

⁵¹In a more extended study, it would greatly repay attention to analyze all the terms that apply to earning, receiving, capturing, spending, storing and destroying items of value to trace out the etymologies and penumbras of meaning. Certainly, in Southern Cameroon giving and spending are different terms, with "spending money" alluding clearly to alienation; *ndamna*, to spend (money) relates to *ndaman*, spoiled, destroyed, and even—for example—applied to a miscarried fetus. The association of sale with destruction is not a simple invention of profound moral disillusion with the colonial situation; it may belong to a much older commercial terminology for alienation of the item from the person.

⁵²I am indebted to Ashraf Ghani for pointing out the power of thinking in terms of "the production of persons of value." It fits closely with an argument I have made in another context (ms) that African demographic regimes were regimes of quality as well as quantity. In my own view, Joseph Miller's (1988) interpretation of the slave sale dynamic in Angola does not bring the variable value of persons enough to the fore.

destruction at death⁵³ in the 1960s and 1970s, followed by a modification of the destruction in favor of inheritance and prestatory redistribution of the goods destined for the grave. Cultural constructions around funerals seem to offer a wider range of possibilities than marriage payments for simultaneous processes of prestation and immobilization, and for the fairly rapid shift from one mode of circulation to the other: funerary goods can be saved (immobilized) and then redistributed (inherited or presented), or they can be presented at the ceremony and then destroyed, or any other combination of prestation and immobilization. Prestation and immobilization are two different moments in the realization of cultural and political premises, and have quite different social implications. The extraordinary complexity of Equatorial African society and culture is perhaps due to the simultaneous maintenance of all these possibilities.

One could speculate finally, following Harms, that sudden waves of incoming wealth of the kind characteristic of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries might tend to favor strategies of immobilization and destruction on the part of the powerful, while slow and steady income might favor prestation. Leaders could keep others more firmly in their places if, during unprecedented surges, wealth goods were removed from the system or very substantially slowed down in their velocity of circulation. Predictability of wealth acquisition may, on the other hand, have favored the more difficult, diplomatic, and risky process of debt creation.

One cannot, however, be over-mechanistic, even in a speculative mode of thinking. The potential physical malleability of any particular form of wealth inserts indeterminacy. A metal such as copper (and copper alloys) used as currency lends itself much more readily than iron, for example, to immobilization due to the relative ease of reforging⁵⁴. And the generic rods and hoe blanks of either metal are more amenable to transformation than elaborately worked, multi-bladed throwing knives or one-meter-long spear blades. The acceptability of one currency form over another in any particular area must have been related to political control over fungibility and the enormous potential for leakage into and out of the circulation system. The existence of currency zones and multiple currencies within them may then be not just an expression of the pragmatics of inter-regional exchange or of ethnic identity markers; the physical forms may have been material means through which power to control the use and velocity of circulation of wealth was struggled over

⁵³I have made this logical connection; he does not, at least not explicitly.

⁵⁴I am indebted, as in the past, to Michael Gesellowitz for technical advice about the properties of metals that might affect fungibility.

within zones. Currency shifts from one medium to another opened new possibilities and closed old ones. As in all aspects of Equatorial culture—material and conceptual—multiplicity lies at the center of the dynamics of use.

For the study of on-going developments into the mid- and late twentieth century, when rural incomes still come from peripheral markets, through different social channels in a different medium, and on a different annual schedule, it still seems to me critical to address the multiple paths through which items of value circulate: new modes of prestation, immobilization, and destruction, and their systemic relationship to one another. Regardless of whether Bohannan's original model of spheres of exchange "applies," then, which it does not to Equatorial Africa, certain premises of his thinking are still highly relevant if placed in a historical context, namely the questions: what is wealth, and how does its use relate to entire systems of valuation and exchange? To address these questions adequately the transitional historical periods, with their surges and massive instabilities, need to be seen not only as structural ruptures but as experiences and constructions deeply relevant to both past and future.

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