

Shell Money Makers Of Malaita

The people living on the tiny, man-made coral islets along the coast of Malaita Island, in the Solomons, are highly-skilled makers of shell money. Originally made for bartering purposes, shell money is used nowadays only on important occasions such as a marriage, compensation for injury or offence, or for gifts to medicine-men or craftsmen.

By R. J. A. W. LEVER



Auki Island, off the west coast of Malaita. This tiny islet—one of a chain extending along the coast—was built up artificially from coral blocks. Below: View of Auki Island from the mainland.

ALONG the coasts of the narrow, 120-mile-long island of Malaita in the British Solomon Islands is a series of tiny coral islets. Close examination of these will show that they are not natural features, but are man-made from blocks of coral limestone. These were collected on bamboo rafts and laboriously built up above high-water level to form a foundation for homes.

It is believed that the ancestors of the present people were immigrants who arrived about two and a half centuries ago. They found the coastal land already occupied, and so decided to build their own small islands on which to settle.

The best known of these islets is Langalanga, near the local seat of Government at Auki, on the west coast of Malaita, which is separated from the Florida Group of islands by Indispensable Strait.

By the time houses were built and a few small gardens planted with crops there was very little space left, and so the inhabitants decided to specialize and sell their handcrafts—somewhat like the Swiss. However, instead of making watches and clocks they started a mint and made shell money, which they took by canoe to adjacent islands and other parts of Malaita to barter for pigs, fruit and vegetables.

Shell money is made primarily from small pieces of a marine shell called the thorny oyster (*Spondylus*). This bivalve occurs on certain coral reefs, and the islanders gather it by diving for it. The colour varies from a brick red to a raspberry pink—hence the alternative name of “red money”. Only the curved lower half of the oyster is used in this industry.

Men And Women Work In Turn

The work calls for a good deal of skill and perseverance. Different stages are carried out by the two sexes. First of all



the shells are roughly broken into small, round portions by the men. The women-folk then paste the fragments into grooves in slabs of wood, where they are given a preliminary polish with sandstone.

The next stage—also carried out by the women—calls for deft handling, as it involves the boring of each piece of shell by means of a pump drill. This is a most ingenious tool, consisting of a vertical wooden rod fitted with a hard, flint-like stone for a bit, and with a “flywheel” of wood or stone. It is given a fast alternating circular motion by means of two strings tied at one end to the top of the drill rod, and joined at the other end to the two extremities of a short horizontal bar.

Starting with the strings wound around the top of the drill, the small bar is pushed down, unwinding the strings and spinning the drill and flywheel assembly. The strings wind themselves around the rod, the horizontal bar comes up, and is pushed down, to send the drill spinning, in the opposite direction this time.

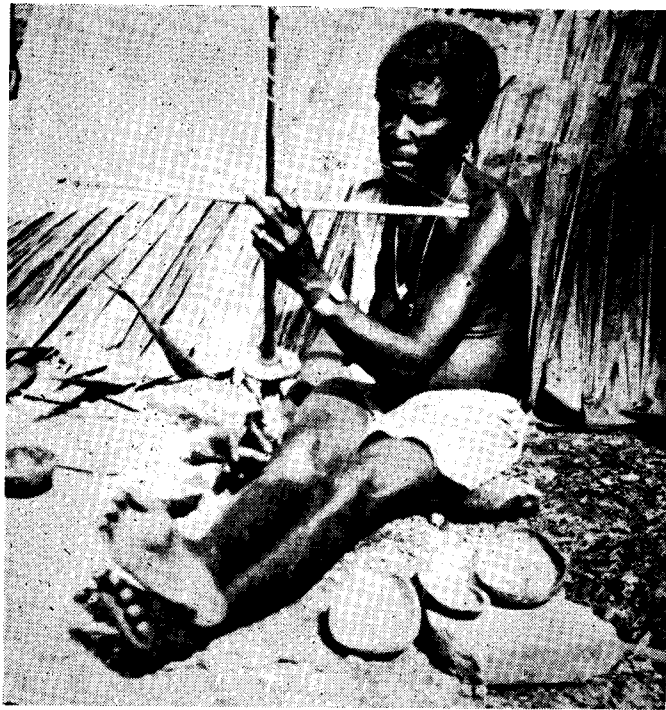
The principle involved is much the same as that of the simple toy, made of a loop of string and a button or small piece of wood, which children of all countries twist by pulling on both ends of the loop, producing a slight purring sound.

After this, the men take over again. Working in pairs, they thread a stout fibre through the bored pieces of shell and polish the edges with sand.

The final stage is the threading of the now uniform discs with a vegetable fibre thread, which is made up into fathom lengths measured from finger tip to finger tip across the outstretched arms. About sixteen discs go to the inch.

Not Used For Ordinary Trade

The purpose of the money is for use on important occasions such as marriage (from the bridegroom's to the prospective bride's parents), compensation for injury or offences, or gifts to medicine men or craftsmen. Shell money is not used in ordinary trade.



Left: Woman of Auki Island using the ingenious drill developed by the ancestors of her people for boring holes in shell.



Right: Close-up of drill. A pump-like action spins the bit, formed from hard, flint-like stone.

Below: Necklace of shell money. About sixteen discs go to the inch.



The value is estimated as 5/- per fathom string, of which twenty-eight would be needed for a pig (£5) and from 100 to 500 (£25 to £125) for a wife, according to her experience or expectations.

The value of shell money used to be based on official currency, though the war upset this; the Japanese troops just took the islanders' strings, while the United States forces paid more or less what was asked for them.

As time goes on, shell money will undoubtedly mean less and less to these people, as the advantages of normal currency become more and more apparent to them.

New Banana-Growing Scheme Launched In Fiji

With the main objective of stepping up production of bananas for export to Japan and New Zealand, Fiji's Land Development Authority plans to establish one hundred settlers on a 3,500-acre tract of land it has leased at Lomaivuna, about twenty-five miles from Suva.

Each settler will be allotted ten acres, four of which will be planted in bananas late in 1963 for an expected first crop a year later. As well, each settler will be encouraged to plant one acre in subsistence crops for his own consumption or sale locally. The Authority also plans to find a long-term cash crop or crops for the remaining five acres of each settler's holding. Among possible crops now being investigated is a high-yielding variety of rubber.

New Cash Crops For Owen Stanley Villages

The people of four villages high in the Owen Stanley ranges of Papua and New Guinea have built two airstrips from which half a ton of market produce is being flown each week to Port Moresby.

The villagers were helped with encouragement and advice from an agricultural extension officer, Mr. T. Brockhall, who also provided them with seeds of the European-type vegetables they are growing. These include potatoes, cucumbers, beans, tomatoes and cabbage, all of which are in brisk demand in Port Moresby.

The success of the project has encouraged the people of three other villages, two days' walk away, to build an airstrip for a similar purpose. They also have now been provided with seeds of European vegetables, and three are being shown how to plant and grow them by Papuan agricultural instructors, who have been stationed temporarily in the villages for this purpose.

All seven villages are only twenty minutes' flying time from Port Moresby. In addition to deriving a regular income from their new cash crops, the villagers will be able to visit Port Moresby more often, and through this contact add to their own education and general development.