

THE TAVAU, OR COIL FEATHER CURRENCY OF
SANTA CRUZ ISLAND, SANTA CRUZ GROUP.

By R. ETHERIDGE, Junr., Curator.

(Plate xliv.)

"THE basis of money is at times a shell, a bead, a robe, a skin," says Mr. O. T. Mason,¹ but, adds Dr. G. B. Tylor,² "in this roughest kind of barter we do not yet find that clear notion of a unit of value which is the great step in trading."

An account of the currency used by the native races of the South Pacific has yet to be written, and when investigated a very fascinating study it will prove to be. A perusal of the curious and interesting list of objects given by Dr. T. de Lacouperie as "Shapes of Currency from Barter to Money,"³ used throughout the world, will impress this fact on the reader. In a review of Dr. Lacouperie's list Dr. J. D. E. Schmeltz⁴ adds some further important facts, including the "feather money" of Santa Cruz.

Feather money, according to the Rev. Dr. R. H. Codrington,⁵ as a medium of exchange is also met with on Santa Maria, of the neighbouring Banks Group, and on Meralava (or Meralaba), the northernmost of the New Hebrides Group. A form of feather money is again said to occur in Samoa by Professor W. T. Brigham, who in his excellent "Preliminary Catalogue"⁶ mentions "Feather currency from Samoa."

An opportunity was afforded the Trustees last year (1901) of acquiring by purchase a coil of the Santa Cruz currency, and it is now my purpose to describe this in detail, for, so far as I know, very little, with the exception of a passage in Codrington's work, has been written on the subject. This coil is twenty six feet ten

¹ Mason—Origin of Invention, 1895, p. 71.

² Tylor—Anthropology, 1881, p. 282.

³ Lacouperie—Brit. Mus. Cat. Chinese Coins, vii. Cent. B.C. to A.D. 621, 1892, p. xx.

⁴ Schmeltz—Internat. Archiv. Ethnographie, vi., 1893, p. 57.

⁵ Codrington—The Melanesians, 1891, p. 324.

⁶ Brigham—Prelim. Cat. Bernice Pauahi Bishop Mus., 1, 1892, p. 18, No. 142.

inches long, and may be described as follows:—As a kernel or support to the coil are a few turns of stiff bark, nine inches in diameter when rolled, and joined by a cord of twisted beaten bark, two feet long, to the tongue-shaped end of the feather rope, which is a plaiting of the untwisted fibres of the rope, with an edging of Job's-tear (*Coix lachryma*) sections, covered with a plate of turtle shell, and a tassel of four lengths of strung *Coix* sections, each length terminated by pieces of Nautilus shell. The feathered portion succeeding this tongue consists of a flat rope, two and a quarter inches wide, by a quarter of an inch thick, and is to some extent flexible. The rope is transversely bound with fine beaten bark fibre, but of what it is composed internally I do not know; on one side this fibre is visible, but on the other it is completely hidden by the remains of the red feathers of a Lorikeet (*Trichoglossus massena*, Bonpt.) At thirteen feet two inches from the end are suspended from the edges of the rope two tassels of five strings each of *Coix* seed sections, each length terminated by pieces of Nautilus shell roughly broken into a triangular shape. On the inner side, at this point, a hexagonal panel-shaped device is worked by passing blackened Pandanus (?) leaf strips over and under a certain number of bark-fibre strands, producing a checkered pattern like a draught board. From this point the remainder of the rope measures thirteen feet eight inches, and the extreme end is simply a repetition of that already described, except that the terminal tassel has three lengths of *Coix* seed sections, two of them terminated by lanceolate pieces of Pearl shell, and the third by a Univalve (*Atys cylindrica*, Helbling.)

Edge-Partington figures⁷ a coil of this money from Santa Cruz, but without the interior bark support, "made of a band of wood with parrot feathers sewn on to the outer surface." On another plate Edge-Partington figures,⁸ instead of the bark coil, three forms of wooden frame supports of quite a different type, said to be used "for keeping the coils of native money in position," but it is not said the feather money, in fact I do not see how a semi-rigid body such as the latter is, could be coiled with advantage on at least two of these supports; possibly the native money meant may be the strings of shell sections so prevalent throughout the South Pacific, and employed in the dual capacity of personal ornament and currency.

Our specimen also lacks the "three armed piece of wood (cut out of the solid) invariably found with the 'parcel' of feather money" figured⁹ by Edge-Partington.

⁷ Edge-Partington—Album, 1st Series, pl. 165, f. 1.

⁸ Edge-Partington—*Loc. cit.*, pl. 163, f. 2-4.

⁹ Edge-Partington—*Loc. cit.*, pl. 165, f. 2.

The only account I am acquainted with of the manufacture and use of the Santa Cruz currency, is the following extract from Codrington's work,¹⁰ already referred to:—

“*Feather money* is peculiar to Santa Cruz ; it is made of the red feathers from under the wings of a parrot, *Trichoglossus massena*. The birds are caught in the deep bush, where they are very tame, with bird-lime smeared on a rod which a man carries in his hand, and on which they perch ; he must take care not to eat anything hot or fat, or they will not come near him. The small red feathers are first gummed on to pigeon's feathers, and these are bound on to a prepared foundation in rows, so that only the red is seen. A length of this feather money, called *tavan*, about fifteen feet long, is coiled up and packed with peculiar ornaments. Short pieces are made for convenience in arranging about prices. On festive occasions the dancing ground *nava*, fenced round with huge discs of coral, is hung with the uncoiled feather-money of those who make the feast. The people say that formerly they had also shell-money. Though this feather money is peculiar to Santa Cruz, there is in the Banks' Islands, in Santa Maria and Meralava, where the *som* shells are not found, a medium of exchange of the same character. The little feathers near the eye of fowls are bound on strings, and generally dyed a fine crimson ; these are used as necklaces or anklets, by way of ornament and distinction (*kole wetapup*), but also pass very much in the way of money.”

This feather currency appears to be comparatively rare in collections, and I shall be glad to be informed of those cabinets possessing specimens. The following are known to me:—

1. Collection of the Rev. Alfred Penny (figured by Edge-Partington.)
2. Example obtained by Mr. John Jennings, in 1897, and now believed to be in the British Museum, London.
3. Australian Museum, Sydney.

¹⁰ Codrington—*Loc. cit.*, p. 324.



Etheridge, Robert. 1902. "The Tavau, or coil feather currency of Santa Cruz Island, Santa Cruz group." *Records of the Australian Museum* 4, 289–291.
<https://doi.org/10.3853/j.0067-1975.4.1902.1104>.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/31165>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3853/j.0067-1975.4.1902.1104>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/3525>

Holding Institution

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

Sponsored by

Harvard University, Museum of Comparative Zoology, Ernst Mayr Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: NOT_IN_COPYRIGHT

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.