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# WEALTH IN PEOPLE, WEALTH IN THINGS – INTRODUCTION*

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ONE of the guiding lodestones for social theorists and social historians across the entire theoretical spectrum has been 'wealth': the things people imbue with value, the caches they collect up by every means from prestation to predation, the performative displays they orchestrate, the treasures they store and eventually leave behind, and all the complex cultural constructions whereby such things are counted, praised and imagined as sources and instruments of power. Perhaps no other topic excites comparably and recurrently fresh interest, from the Marxian framework of capital to Veblen's 'conspicuous consumption', Schama's 'embarrassment of riches', Appadurai's 'tournaments of value' and Weiner's 'dense objects'.[1]

The study of wealth in African history is presently in need of such a revisit because considerable innovations relevant to a new understanding of material life have been developed in current history (and archeology), anthropology and the African humanities, and they have not yet been brought together systematically. The most exciting new studies in the work of each discipline have been done in areas, or theoretical terms, that do not automatically meet: punctiliously documented studies of currencies and trade in Africa, conceptually challenging studies of transaction and value in world cultures and analyses of terminologies, idioms and genres of expression in language and art. The topic of wealth itself may also exert a brake. The idea of growth itself is controversial, since Rodney's position on absolute impoverishment during the eras of the slave trade, colonialism and neo-colonialism is – and should be – still part of the debate.[2] But by any definition, Africa has had its share of riches, and not only in the category referred to in development theory as 'untapped resources' (hardwoods, minerals, botanical specimens, landscapes). Both Africans and outsiders have found, created and otherwise acquired an array of things of fabulous value, some of which – such as gold, ivory and art – moved easily into Western categories of wealth. Other items

* I would like to acknowledge the important and continuing inspiration given by Achille Mbembe, co-organizer of the symposium of this title presented at the African Studies Association Meeting of 1992. The participants in the panels were K. Barber, J.-F. Bayart, B. Cooper, F. Cooper, L. Cassanelli, C. Fisiy, P. Geschiere, A. Haugerud, E. Mandala, C. Piot, E. Schildkrout and J. Vansina. I thank them, and the editors of the *Journal* for substantial commentary.

[1] T. Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions* (New York, 1899); S. Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York, 1987); A. Appadurai, 'Introduction: commodities and the politics of value', in his (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge, 1986); A. Weiner, 'Cultural difference and the density of objects', *American Ethnologist*, XXI (1994), 291–403.

[2] W. Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London, 1972).

that were greatly valued within Africa fit European rubrics poorly; Poro whistles from Liberia and Congo 'fetishes' were not favorite items in the voracious search for museum pieces in the early part of this century, even if the owners could be persuaded to part with them at any price at all.[3] And there has been a vast array of goods that fall between these two extremes, those whose African and European values could be adapted or forced into relationship but whose social and cultural pathways of origin differed. It is now generally recognized that the most important of these 'goods' was people. Wealth embodied in rights in people lies close to the center of African economic and social history over the past five hundred years: in the slave trades on the one hand and in political and kinship history on the other. The concept of wealth-in-people, as a specifically African mode of accumulation, was developed to apply to this perception.[4] We cannot, however, lose sight of wealth-in-things and its relationship to wealth-in-people. As the new historical work shows, material life was also enriched and diversified over the same centuries. To read the possible meanings of this history, when the direct sources on meaning and social dynamics are slim, new resources from anthropology and the African humanities need to be tapped.

It is this connection that the symposium set out to re-explore. The source material and disciplinary development have been enriched enough in the past twenty years to warrant a new connection being forged around the interrelationship of these valuation processes: the centuries-long cultural and material elaboration of value within Africa, the determined and inventive efforts of merchants to tap into those values, the loss and destruction of values that were either irrelevant or obstructionary to the colonial enterprise and the dynamics of those themes such as slavery that already figure prominently in the historical record. There is a mutual necessity of an anthropology of transaction and personhood, a humanities approach to meaning and a historical study of the extraordinary and volatile course of change in Africa's material wealth.[5]

[3] An example of a collector's brush with the extremely high currency value of fetishes is described briefly in J. I. Guyer, 'Wealth in people and self-realization in Equatorial Africa', *Man*, XXVIII (1993), 250–1. During the period when George Harley was acquiring his famous collection of Dan masks and material culture for the Peabody Museum at Harvard University he had to emphasize in a letter to Dr E. Hooten, the museum director, that 'the articles of greatest value and rarity are the pottery whistles used by the head of the Poro ...'. The transaction he describes for their acquisition makes very clear the utter incommensurability of the value of the objects and a single monetary register, in both systems of value. Papers of the Harley Collection, Harvard University: letter from George Harley to E. Hooten, 13 Sept. 1932, Document File 30–6. I am grateful to Kathleen Skelly and the former director of the museum, Karl Lamberg-Karlovsky, for access to these documents.

[4] The concept is reviewed in J. I. Guyer and S. M. Eno Belinga, 'Wealth in people as wealth in knowledge', which follows.

[5] The most recent anthropological contributions are based on twentieth-century wealth dynamics in Southern Africa, rather than the centuries-long and continuing interface that characterises West and Equatorial Africa. See J. Comaroff and J. L. Comaroff, 'Goodly beasts and beastly goods: cattle and commodities in a South African context', *American Ethnologist*, XVII (1990), 195–216; J. Ferguson, 'The cultural topography of wealth: commodity paths and the structure of wealth in rural Lesotho', *American Anthropologist*, LXXXXIV (1992), 55–73.

Many anthropologists were educated in the seminal idea of persistent 'spheres of exchange'[6] in African societies, whereby designated items from a finite store of material wealth functioned as 'coupons'[7] in the orderly distribution of people to groups and status attributes to individuals. But historians' documentation of the sheer size, multiplicity and growth in the inventory of material items produced in Africa and imported from outside make such structural fixity implausible. To the famous findings at Igbo-Ukwu that date from the ninth century have been added the copper croisette currency found in Central Africa, whose beginnings date from before the tenth century,[8] and whose extraordinary inter-denominational relations are still being unravelled,[9] a gold trade from the end of the first millennium,[10] cowry use from the tenth century[11] and iron objects with currency functions which develop and proliferate from about the eighth century onwards.[12] In the sixteenth century, intercontinental trade intensified along the maritime routes, and with it came a massive growth in the availability of certain material items, especially those used as 'currencies'. A full list of references on this point would be very long.[13] Suffice it to note some highlights: the slag heaps from iron production in the Ndop plains of Cameroon that so impressed Warnier and Fowler that they depicted it as a 'Ruhr' after the German industrial region;[14] Herbert's estimations of copper production in Africa and imports from Europe that 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;[15] Johnson and Hogendorn's 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.[16] And the Tiv, who are the first exemplars of

[6] P. Bohannan, 'Some principles of exchange and investment among the Tiv', *American Anthropologist*, LVII (1955), 60–70.

[7] M. T. Douglas, 'Primitive rationing: a study in controlled exchange', in R. Firth (ed.), *Themes in Economic Anthropology* (London, 1967), 119–47.

[8] P. de Maret, 'L'évolution monétaire du Shaba Central entre le 7e et le 18e siècle', *African Economic History*, X (1981), 117–49.

[9] J. A. Schoonheyt, 'Les croisettes du Katanga', *Revue Belge de Numismatique*, CXXXVII (1991), 141–57.

[10] P. Curtin, 'Africa and the wider monetary world, 1250–1850', in J. F. Richards (ed.), *Silver and Gold Flows in the Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Chapel Hill, 1981), 231–68.

[11] A. F. Iroko, 'Les cauris en Afrique Occidentale du Xe au XXe siecle' (Thèse d'État, Université de Paris, 1987).

[12] J. Rivallain, 'Étude comparée des phénomènes prémonétaires en protohistoire européenne et en ethnoarchéologie africaine' (Thèse d'État, Université de Paris, 1987).

[13] My introduction to an edited collection on the history of money in West African communities includes some of the sources. J. I. Guyer, 'Introduction: the currency interface and its dynamics', in Guyer (ed.), *Money Matters! Instability, Values and Social Payments in the Modern History of West African Communities* (Portsmouth NH, 1995) 1–33.

[14] J.-P. Warnier and I. Fowler, 'A nineteenth-century Ruhr in Central Africa', *Africa*, IL (1979), 329–51.

[15] E. W. Herbert, *Red Gold of Africa: Copper in Precolonial History and Culture* (Madison, 1984), 181.

[16] J. Hogendorn and M. Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge, 1986), 75–6.

the concept of spheres of exchange, are revealed to have been producers and exporters of the 'Munchi cloth' (*tugudu*) that circulated as a currency throughout the vast Hausa area,[17] and they were users – in one of their spheres – of imported iron bars that came to them from the coastal trade.

Even Meillassoux's[18] modification of Bohannan's spheres of exchange theory – to incorporate the shrewd control and manipulation of a changing stock of valuables by powerful elders rather than the operation of collectively endorsed moral principles – could hardly do justice to the enormity of the substantive reality it purported to explain. Both the assorted items themselves and the intricacy, variability and changeability of the human, often kinship, relations that were at its heart spill beyond the model. The concept of wealth-in-people was developed in the 1970s, mainly by Miers and Kopytoff,[19] as a less theoretical, more descriptive, looser and therefore more open concept to encapsulate established observations that no one disputed: that human beings could be explicitly valued in material terms in Africa, and that many of the person – thing conversions have been about acquiring and consolidating direct controls over people in a context where indirect controls through land, capital and the threat of superior force are either absent altogether or only intermittently realizable. The value of wealth-in-people, whether thought of in Marxist terms as accumulation of social relations or in substantive institutional terms as kinship, religious clientelism or political prebendalism, has been invoked as a guiding and persistent principle of African social life, even when shifts in shape and content over time are clearly envisaged.[20]

By extending the richness of the social historical analysis *within particular societies*, however, the extent and complexity of change in material life on a *regional* or *continental* scale has been held – as it were – in abeyance. There is no powerful reason beyond expositional clarity why this should be so, but in the case of Africa expositional clarity is a powerful reason. We know enough to be able to imagine the complexity. One suspects that it would be hardly

[17] D. C. Dorward, 'An unknown Nigerian export: Tiv benniseed production, 1900–1960', *J. Afr. Hist.*, XVI (1975), 438; Dorward, 'Precolonial Tiv trade and cloth currency', *Int. J. Afr. Hist. Studies*, IX (1976), 576–91; M. Johnson, 'Cloth currency' (Paper presented to the African Studies Association Meetings, 1977).

[18] C. Meillassoux, 'Essai d'interpretation du phenomène économique dans les sociétés traditionelles d'autosubsistance', *Cah. Ét. Afr.*, IV (1960), 38–67.

[19] S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977).

[20] Examples include Vansina: 'after centuries of trading .... Whenever possible, wealth in goods was still converted into followers', *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison, 1990), 251; Miller: 'A wealthy man increased productivity by organizing and controlling people ... (by) aggregating human dependents', *Way of Death : Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade 1730–1830* (Madison, 1988), 43. In a modern context, and writing of contemporary 'prebendalism' at the state level in Nigeria, Joseph invoked Peel's analysis of clientelism in late nineteenth-century Ilesha to clarify a persistent 'political rationality or logic'; R. A. Joseph, *Democracy and Prebendal Politics in Nigeria* (Cambridge, 1987), 198; J. D. Y. Peel, *Ijeshas and Nigerians: The Incorporation of a Yoruba Kingdom, 1890s -1970s* (Cambridge, 1983). Berry develops the idea of investment in social relations as a persistent, even while changing, characteristic of African resource control, S. Berry, 'Social institutions and access to resources', *Africa*, LIX (1989), 41–55.

readable if, for example, Curtin's description of changing prices along the Senegambia River,[21] Law's analysis of prices in Dahomey[22] or Johnson's description of assortment bargaining and the ounce trade,[23] as historical accounts, were integrated with social and cultural descriptions of the intricacies of struggles and transformation within societies of the kind represented by Fardon's analysis of marriage in a region of central Nigeria and West Cameroon[24] or Janzen's analysis of the relationship between Lemba marriage and matrilineal kinship in Zaire.[25] And yet the two domains of kinship politics and wealth were inextricably connected, most obviously through the regionally circulating items that figured in local marriage payments, many of which were imported or circulated against imports, as did the people themselves in various forms of servitude, clientship and pawnship. The history of exchange and the history of relationships must permeate one another, but to take on both phenomena at once, as they changed over time under separate influences and with inter-connected dynamics, may demand strategic substantive entry points and new analytical tools that can reduce the complexity to manageability.

Anthropologists have kept at bay the large-scale historical findings about African economic history, and for a variety of reasons. The voluminous and often technical documentation masks their social and cultural import. And even if one could gather the import, the methodological challenge of studying these dynamics with little direct ethnographic or cultural historical evidence is discouraging. New anthropological work on the micro-dynamics of transactions is inspiring but also difficult to apply in Africa, simply because the indigenous currencies are no longer used. In principle, however, research on such topics should underlie any wealth-in-people model: the cultural creation of persons, the meaning of transactability, and the possible relationship between persons and things, in general and in highly specific situations or transactions. Much of this conceptual work has centered on Melanesia, where old systems of transaction and valuation can still be understood from their current practitioners.[26] This work remains a little-

[21] P. Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison, 1975).

[22] R. Law, 'Computing domestic prices in precolonial west Africa: a methodological exercise from the slave coast', *History in Africa*, XVIII (1991), 239–57.

[23] M. Johnson, 'The ounce in eighteenth-century west African trade', *J. Afr. Hist.*, VII (1966), 197–214.

[24] R. Fardon, 'Sisters, wives, wards and daughters: a transformational analysis of the political organisation of the Tiv and their neighbours. Part I: The Tiv', *Africa*, LIV (1984), 2–21; 'Sisters, wives, wards and daughters: a transformational analysis of the political organisation of the Tiv and their neighbours. Part II: The transformations', *Africa*, LV (1985), 77–91.

[25] J. M. Janzen, *Lemba, 1650–1930: A Drum of Affliction in Africa and the New World* (New York, 1982).

[26] Again, the sources are many and stem from a much more long-standing literature on 'The Gift', initiated by Mauss. But they include C. A. Gregory, *Gifts and Commodities* (London, 1982); N. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim (Papua New Guinea) Society* (Cambridge 1986); M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (Berkeley, 1988); N. Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge MA, 1991). For a longer summary and application to Equatorial Africa see Guyer, 'Self-realization'.

tapped repertoire of ideas to draw on when exploring how thingness, personhood, connection and the 'additional process' implied by the concept of 'wealth' were certainly differently configured in historical African cultures than either in Melanesia or under any straightforward political-materialist notion of status and accumulation. Ethnography suggests that 'wealth' itself can fall into differing indigenous categorizations. In Southern Cameroun *akuma* – conventionally translated as wealth – consisted primarily of wives, indigenous currencies and livestock, while *biem* – currently meaning 'things' – covered trade goods, including both the ivory traded out and the imported goods brought in. Items we think of as things, in the sense of being inanimate, fell into both categories. Thingness and personhood are themselves concepts that need re-examination. For example, MacGaffey writes of the Bakongo: 'To a considerable extent, *minkisi* (medicines, 'fetishes'), as personalized objects, were functionally interchangeable with human beings, who in turn were in certain respects "objectified" ... '.[27] The indigenous cognitive concepts for their mutual influence need to be examined with the rigor that philosophers Hallen and Sodipo bring to Yoruba epistemology,[28] and African expressions of enumeration, especially with respect to people, need to be seen with literature-specialist Julien's sense of genre.[29]

This is where the humanities are so important. Analysis of Igbo linguistic terminology suggests the cognitive approach needed to understand these classifications. Manfredi writes 'The Igbo lexicon distinguishes two categories of wealth: a) *ụ̀bá*, literally "increase" of "plenitude", that is, the abundance of self-replicating entities such as crops, livestock and persons, derived from the verb *bá* which means "be fruitful and multiply" and b) *àkhụ*, "property acquisitions" derived from the verb *khụ̀*, "catch" .... In keeping with the strong collocational restrictions which hold between verbs and direct objects in Igbo (as discussed by Anoka 1972), the attainment of each kind of wealth is expressed with a different verb.'[30] Types of wealth were represented by different icons on ancestral altars.[31] Often currencies and other items that could figure in the acquisition of rights in persons belonged terminologically in the same cultural category – a 'sphere', in Bohannan's terms – as those same persons. Bohannan defined these spheres by their current content and transactability, whereas historically it is linguistic and cultural *principles* that must have been applied to a *shifting* vista of 'things'.

There remains, then, an ethnographic and cultural-historical project for which the Melanesian work can be a resource for African studies. And the African humanities can further contribute to resolving the problem that very little Melanesian work helps us with, and the key issue for Africa, the

[27] W. MacGaffey, 'The eyes of understanding', in W. MacGaffey and M. D. Harris, *Astonishment and Power: Kongo Minkisi and the Art of Rene Stout* (Washington DC, 1993), 80, my insertion.

[28] B. Hallen and J. O. Sodipo, *Knowledge, Belief and Witchcraft: Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy* (London, 1986).

[29] E. Julien, *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington, 1992).

[30] V. Manfredi, *Personal Communication on 'Wealth' in the Igbo Language* (Boston MA, 1993); he quotes from G. M. K. Anoka, 'The verb meaning "to buy" in Igbo' (M. A. thesis, University of Leeds, 1972).

[31] M. A. Onwuejeogwu, *An Igbo Civilization: Nri Kingdom and Hegemony* (London, 1981), 49–50.

historical problem of understanding growth.[32] The contours of African growth in wealth are still not clear. Not all wealth-in-things was converted into wealth-in-people because we know of vast storehouses of cowries,[33] gold[34] and other goods,[35] and funerary destruction on a massive scale[36] as well as, and alongside, large scale polygyny and political expansion. There were complex interactions of both material and demographic paths of advance, for example in the elaboration of ranked title systems.[37] And there may have been alternative modes of acquisition of wealth-in-people; large followings were built up around shrines or spiritual powers, for which any possible material mediation is unclear.[38] What, then, determined one strategy of wealth-in-people over another, given that the concept is broad enough to apply to all of them (wives, children, clients, political followers, religious acolytes, titled associates, occupational apprentices and so on)? How was growth of any kind - demographic or material - envisaged and managed in conceptually inflexible systems such as the positional succession system described by Miller for the Imbangala of present-day Angola,[39] or the Tonga?[40] And behind these questions lie the fundamental definitional issues: what were people's own concepts for wealth and how did they value each other and themselves?

Combining several literatures – historical, anthropological and artistic, regional and local – rather than holding one more or less constant in order to explore the nuances of the other, opens up a Pandora's box of new conceptual and descriptive challenges. The African Studies Association symposium to which these papers originally contributed focused on three issues, corresponding to the three words 'wealth', 'in', and 'people': (a) material wealth and its changing and varied components and uses, (b) the valuation process with respect to people and personal qualities and (c) political mobilization and its material bases. B. Cooper, Piot and Mandala elaborated on the concepts of value and personhood.[41] Geschiere and Fisiy looked at the thing–person and person–person influence.[42] My own contribution, originally co-authored with Enid Schildkrout, addressed the issue of how any of this could be seen

[32] Although see Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, for a major exception.

[33] Iroko, 'Les cauris', 465.

[34] T. C. McCaskie, 'Accumulation: wealth and belief in Asante history: I: To the close of the nineteenth century', *Africa*, LIII (1983), 23–43; 'Accumulation: wealth and belief in Asante history: II: The twentieth century', *Africa*, LVI (1986), 3–24.

[35] Vansina, *Paths*.

[36] P. Martin, 'Power, cloth and currency on the Loango Coast', *African Economic History*, XV (1987), 1–12.

[37] R. N. Henderson, *The King In Every Man: Evolutionary Trends in Onitsha Ibo Society and Culture* (New Haven, 1972).

[38] J. W. Fernandez, *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* (Princeton, 1982).

[39] J. C. Miller, 'Imbangala lineage slavery (Angola)', in S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, 1977).

[40] E. Colson, *Marriage and the Family among the Plateau Tonga of Northern Rhodesia* (Manchester, 1958).

[41] Papers presented at the Symposium on 'Wealth in people, Wealth in Things', co-chaired by J. I. Guyer and A. Mbembe: B. Cooper, 'Women's worth and wedding gift exchange in Maradi, Niger, 1907–1989'; C. Piot, 'From slave to gift: slave as gift?'; E. Mandala, 'Malawian elders in pursuit of the cotton cloth, 1860–1940'.

[42] Symposium paper by P. Geschiere and C. Fisiy, 'Sorcery discourses and the valuation of people and things: examples from south and west Cameroon'.

as 'adding up' to accumulation.[43] We hoped, eventually, to be able to build back up to an understanding of macro-movements: to examine the acquisition, composition, use and conveyance by gift, inheritance or other means the large caches of material wealth in pre-colonial Africa; to understand the techniques by which pre-colonial war-lords built up, motivated and remunerated their followings; to trace out the implications of sudden aggressive surges in particular imports – of guns or copper *mitakos* or Madras cloth; or to take a new look at the material transactions that consolidated not only marriage but descent as well. And behind it all there is the still-unexhausted inspiration of Rodney and Dupré and Rey from thirty years ago:[44] How – exactly and in slow motion – have African and European changing systems of wealth acted, and continue to act, upon one another?†

[43] Enid Schildkrout and Jane I. Guyer, 'The value of people and objects in Equatorial Africa: an exploration of sources'.

[44] Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*; G. Dupré and P.-P. Rey, 'Reflections on the pertinence of a theory of the history of exchange' (1968), translated in H. Wolpe (ed.), *The Articulation of Modes of Production : Essays from Economy and Society* (London, 1980), 128–60.

† *Editors' note.* As initial responses in answer to this question, the *Journal* presents here two papers developed from those given at the 1992 ASA meeting, Guyer and Belinga and B. Cooper. The editors welcome further contributions related to the themes of wealth in Africa introduced here by Professor Guyer.