Sibbele Hylkema


The bulk of the book consists of an unfinished manuscript by the missionary Sibbele Hylkema (1933–1998) that deals with the role of cowries in the society of the Me living in the central highlands of West Papua. Editor Anton Ploeg contributes a helpful introduction which portrays the life and oeuvre of Hylkema (pp. 1–21) and an illuminating appendix in which he compares Hylkema’s work with the work of other scholars interested in Melanesian shell money such as Stephane Breton, Joel Robbins, and David Akin (pp. 169–182). The book concludes with an extensive bibliography and helpful index (pp. 183–194).

Although it is difficult to outline the argumentative structure of the text due to its unfinished state, which results in the presence of a lot of unconnected chunks and parenthetical ideas, the manuscript consists of two clearly separable sections. The first one outlines the mechanisms which underpin the economic rationale of the Me and the influence of the introduction of cowries (pp. 21–126). The second section continues with a discussion of the bride price which elucidates the conclusions made before (pp. 127–168). In the first section Hylkema discusses how the cowries are intellectually grouped and graded into categories and assigned different values (pp. 43–53, pp. 85–89), how their origin is intertwined with mythological stories (pp. 112–125), and how they are caressed on an emotional level (pp. 109–111). He also reflects on the gender dimension of the shell use (pp. 70–76), its relation to the numerical system (pp. 54–59), and compares it with the cowrie use of the Dani (pp. 90–97).

But the question which seems to bother Hylkema most is well-known to Melanesianists, namely how to conceptualize the indigenous understanding of the relation between human subjects and non-human objects and their respective role in economic exchange. What is most refreshing in this regard is the author’s ignorance of most of the anthropological tradition which enables him to pursue the conceptual consequences of indigenous statements instead of merely integrating them into the conceptual orders of anthropological truisms. In his analysis of the bride price, Hylkema tries to come to terms conceptually with the following problem: how it is possible that Me accept the seemingly contradictory statement that women are bought and sold, in the sense that they have a price, without thereby being stripped of their individuality (p. 128)? In his struggle to find an explanation he reasons that first, it’s not necessarily an
either/or proposition, and second, that these categories themselves say more about Western conceptions than about Me cosmology and society. He argues that the conceptions of ‘subject’ and ‘object’ rely on the notions of ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’ in a different way among Me than in Western understandings. Me are not compelled to either cancel the quantitative idea of a price and retain the qualitative subjectivity of women or retain the idea of price and objectify women. Both his discussion of a mundane exchange as well as of the bride price are illuminating in this context. With regard to the first, Hylkema stresses the fact that Me wish ‘[…] to banish every personal element from the exchange, in order to make a purely businesslike deal’ (p. 66). What he means by ‘a purely businesslike deal’ is in some ways the exact inverse of Western values and traditions: the Me ‘subjectify’ their exchanged object, a single cowry, and objectify themselves. Hylkema explains:

‘[…] his customer approached him from behind and silently offered him a cowry over his shoulder. Without ascertaining the identity of the buyer, the seller took the offered shell and began to assess it. Apparently the shell did not answer to the portions [of pork meat, M.S.] laid out ready. At this point the seller should have handed the shell back over his shoulder in silence, leaving it up to the customer whether or not he wished to offer another shell. However, exemplifying the prevailing spirit of enterprise, the seller began to rearrange his portions, until he had composed a portion of equal value to the proffered shell. Not content with this offer, once again the customer silently stretched his hand out over the shoulder, his finger pointing to the shell which the seller had put down in front of him. […] By offering a cowry while remaining out of sight, in the eyes of the customer his behaviour assumed the character of a gamble. By taking this gamble, on the one hand, he kept himself out of range, but simultaneously he trusted his fate to the shell. Not the customer but the shell accepted the challenge.’

pp. 66–67, my italics

In contrast to singular cowries, each bride price is composed of heaps of shells, consisting of shells of specific categories, and different strings of shells. A bride price is therefore always an empirical conflation of what could be called a specific ‘quantitative-quantitative value’ (the economic value of all shells and strings taken together) and, internally, a ‘complex composition’ (p. 134) of different ‘quantitative-quantitative values’ and hence a unique ‘qualitative-quantitative value’. This has the consequence that ‘all prices are different in composition’ (p. 136) and as such they can be exchanged against a bride without
her being reduced to a comparable thing. Just as every bride price is a singular qualitative composition of different quantitative values, so every bride is unique, although she remains the object of the transaction. She is acted upon by society in the same way as a grammatical object is acted upon in a sentence: she changes social position by being moved to the family of her husband.

In other words, a standard monetary value is not what these transactions result in; it is the point from which they start. By calling these complex arrangements ‘business like’ Hylkema makes an innovative point: having a price and being a subject—the abstract potential of monetary value and the immanence of cultural value—are not two separate and mutually exclusive systems operative in Me society. Rather in being always already intermeshed, the conflation of quantity and quality is constitutive of Me society. The transactions are indeed complex arrangements involving ideas about family, identity, gender, and religion, but they can only become moments of cultural rearranging on the ground of Me’s conflation of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of prices. Precisely because Me conflate quantity and quality, they are able to conflate being an actor and being acted upon.

What’s interesting for readers of this provocative manuscript is therefore not the mere fact that marriages are arranged in a transaction involving people and things, but Hylkema’s descriptions of the elaborate understanding of quantity the Me use to arrive at what’s considered a fair and appropriate exchange.

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