SHELL ORNAMENTS OF MALAITA

Currency and Ritual Valuables in the Central Solomons

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Malaita is an island in the Solomon chain which lies southeast of New Guinea. Inhabited by about 60,000 Melanesians, it is one of the least accustomed islands in the Pacific. Forbidding and beautiful, it is a continued island on the eastern side of the chain, lying 9° south of the equator. Tropical and mountainous, about 3600 meters at the highest elevation, it has over 500 centimeters of rainfall a year. Numerous trees including the sago palm and canarium albidum, dense undergrowth, and vines give the island a thick, impenetrable-looking green coat. The soil is sandy near the shore, bright red in the interior, and rocky on the central mountainous ridges. Paths are narrow, steep, and usually extremely slippery and muddy. Because of the dense vegetation erosion is slight and the numerous rivers are not muddy except after the most violent storms. The crystal clear, fast flowing river water is pure enough to drink. Though there are roads around the coast of the island, there are only pails leading to the mountainous interior. This means that to get oilides, except those with agile feet and a willing guide, the interior is inaccessible.

Tattoos and lagoons on both sides of the island are inhabited by coastal people who build houses either on small islands, or on piles over shallow water. These people are fishermen, while the hill people are farmers. The sea people on the east coast are the Langalanga, manufacter the artistically and economically important shell discs which are used for money. In areas of the island where there are reefs and off-shore islands, the sea people and the hill people maintain a clannish distance, and do not mingle, although fish and taro are regularly traded at weekly markets and their languages, traditions, and art objects are quite similar with only minor variations. Feasts honoring dead ancestors, called moomo, are the most significant cultural events to be found among both salt water and hill people. In southern Malaita and on the nearby small island of Ulawa, initiation rites for boys held during the bunoi fishing season are also important.

I spent a year on Malaita with a tribe called the Rouga, who live in the northeast hills along the Sasafo River. In that year I learned much about both the form and the content of their art. Shell valuables are the most unusual and technically interesting form of Malaitan artistic expression. These discussed here were made by the Baeu from shell, teeth, and fiber, and were worn during feasts and weddings, and on other special occasions.

They were used to display wealth and social status, as well as for personal adornment.

Strings of carved shell discs and porpoise teeth had a precise monetary value and travelled the entire length of the Solomon Island chain. Most valuables were worth $10 Australian, two fatom (breid-price) strings were worth $20 Australian, large porpoise teeth were worth five cents, and small ones two for five cents. The strings of shell discs have been found in Micronesia in the Carolines (Buehler 1962:71) and in Polynesia in Hawaii (Feber 1969:49). However, though strings of shell are found elsewhere in the Pacific, weaving the discs into patterns is a typically Malaitan art form. These discs were woven together to create armbands, wristslets, anklets, belts and necklaces. By weaving them into rows, using white, red and black discs, geometric patterns were created. These patterns were symmetrical and executed with great precision.

In addition to these small discs woven into patterns, other shell valuables were made by carving tridacna shell (giant clam) into rings or discs and sometimes adding delicately carved tortoise shell ornaments. These ornaments are usually circular and are polished to a smoothness resembling marble. Occasionally pearl shell was used instead of the giant clam.

The first example of shell money depicted here is known as tofui'oe (Fig. 1). This is the type of money used for "bride-price" and is predominantly red in color. Red discs are considered to be more valuable than white or black. This particular shell seems to have been distinguished by its length, and is called ko aha which can be translated as two fatomos, or double the span of a man's outstretched arms. This longer string is the size normally used for bride-price.

This would be used for other special occasions, such as gifts to medicine men, or for paying war debts.

In addition to the tofui'oe which comprises the basic bride-price, other objects are included, such as porpoise teeth, food, and shell ornaments. The marriage the groom's family presents the bride-price to the bride's family, and the bride goes to live with her husband's family. Toasting and all night singing feasts the couple. After a short while, perhaps several weeks, the bride's family visits the new bride. At this time they bring her a married woman's apron and a shell disc belt. These two items proclaim her as married, and she wears them constantly.

The shell belt for married women, called eau, is an important word in determining shell value. In this belt, as in the shell string just described, there is a strict symmetrical plan. The central section is red, a red and white chevron pattern, flanked by a black and white chevron pattern. The side design consists of a diamond pattern flanked by black chevrons. The two red arrows at each end provide a finishing touch. Longitudinally, the belt is divided into four strips, the discs are placed at a
45° angle alternating at each strip. This pattern is most easily seen in the white disc areas. The belt displays the Malaitian stylistic characteristics of symmetry and balance, red flanked by black and white, and geometric designs such as lozenges, W's, and triangles.

Another example of this type of work is the armband in Fig. 3. The finest example of shell disc work I saw in Malaita, this type of armband is called eko guroro. It is usually worn by men. It is not constantly worn, as is the married woman's belt, but is brought out only for such special occasions as feasts and weddings. While the discs in the married woman's belt in Fig. 2 are about one-half centimeter in diameter, the discs in the armband in Fig. 3 are only one-quarter centimeter in diameter and are unusually uniform in size. The longitudinal pattern is composed of ten strips of discs again set at alternating 45° angles. The central section is the main focus of the ornament and consists of six red diamonds. The white background clearly shows the alternating angles of each strip of discs. The armband again is symmetrical, uses geometric motifs (the lozenge and chevron), is composed of red, black, and white, and is distinguished by the small size of the discs and the precision of workmanship. In this type of shell disc work, obviously the design is planned before work begins. A vegetable fiber is used to saw the discs together. Since the discs are placed on edge, the fiber holding them together is inconspicuous and both sides are equally presentable. Ties are left at each end so that the belt, ankle, wristlet, or arm band can be adjusted to fit the wearer.

Wristbands similar to the armband just described are worn by people farther south in Malaita. Constructed in the same way, these wristbands have a slightly different motif—a two-headed arrow. The symbolic meaning behind these arrow and chevron designs is not definitely known, but evidence suggests that the frigate bird is represented. The frigate bird is a favorite motif in Solomon Island art, and is depicted by various geometric patterns which bear little resemblance to the actual bird. The "W" designs found on the married woman's belt and on the arm band seen in Figs. 2 and 3 may be based on frigate birds. The "arrow" designs found on the wristlet mentioned above were thought by Lawrence Faunana, a Malaitan who is assistant curator of the Solomon Island Museum in Honiara, Guadalcanal, to represent frigate birds.

The fascination with the frigate bird could not be satisfactorily explained by the Iago people when asked. They would mention its high, soaring flight, or the fact that it was a harbinger of hurricanes. There seemed to be no specific reason for its popularity as an art motif.

However, among the Tet's people in southern Malaita, there is a definite reason for depicting the frigate bird because it is associated with the bonito clan. The catching of bonito (a favorite food fish) during certain times of the year is accompanied by ceremonies and rituals (Ivens, 1927:39). Fregate birds, which follow schools of bonito, help fishermen sight the fish, so the frigate bird is a symbol of good fortune and has astropoetic qualities.

In addition to the shell work just discussed, other shell valuables include various types of necklaces. Some are a combination of shell discs and porpoise teeth clusters. Some are entirely of porpoise teeth, which give a lavish and expensive effect. Since each large tooth has a value of five cents, in Malaitan reckoning, a considerable amount of wealth is involved in a necklace composed of hundreds of these teeth. The gali is another type of ornament worn by boys and girls before marriage. It crosses the chest and consists of eight strands of white shell discs. These strands are joined together in two places, once in the front and once in the back, with a cross-cross section of white discs separated from the rest of the necklace by two dividers.

A second type of ornament worn by boys and girls before marriage is the fulu (Fig. 4). This shell valuable in a combination of large porpoise teeth, red and white discs, and black seed pod beads. Again, a strict symmetrical plan prevails. The central section, a white burst of large porpoise teeth, is created by stringing eight teeth on each of the ten strands. A combination of a white, a black, and a white disc close and open each section. This gives the shell valuable an exceptionally finished look. Tortoise shell dividers separate the sections. This pinc also uses white instead of red in the central section which is a different color arrangement than usual. The white center is flanked by red which is flanked by black. The unusually large area of black sections is relieved by large white discs, one large white disc sliding over each black disc section.

The use of color in Malaitan art is important. Though there are only three colors—red, white and black. Here these are used in most apparent in the shell disc work. Red serves as the high intensity color. The
concepts of red, blood, and sacred are tied together in the Baega mind, with three similar words being used for all three. (The word for red is abu.) In the shell disc work, the central focal sections are red, with two exceptions. The exceptions are the ornaments worn by children, the julo and the julu, which have central sections of white. White is associated with the innocence of childhood, whereas red is equated with adulthood and blood, which includes both the bloodshed of war and the blood of marriage and fecundity. Therefore, red is the color of the bridge-price strings, and serves as the focal color of shell disc ornaments worn by adults.

When Jean Gueret discusses color symbolism in Sepik River art in New Guinea, he equates red with softness and life, while black represents immortality and death (1964:13). Though in Malaitan art black and red have similar meanings, I do not think it is possible to create a dualism between red and black because black is not as important as red. Red is the central focal color, the primary color—the emotional, upsetting, life-giving color. It dominates the static black and white which have a secondary status.

Black (including brown) is used to delineate design lines in shell work, as in the use of tortoise shell overlays (to be discussed below). Black is also used to flank red areas of shell disc work. The word for black, hohoro, has the connotations of earthly, unclear and dark.

White is used in the central sections of the children’s ornaments and also serves as a background color to set off red and black. The word for white, kawo, has the meaning of shining, clear and by extension childlike innocence. The meanings attached to black, white and red are similar to our own; however, red is by far the most powerful color with the most significance.

Another type of shell valuable is a crescent-shaped ornament worn around the neck. Often a frieze bird carved in tortoise shell is overlaid in the center. The example in Fig. 5 has a clear-cut, representational frieze bird; but still follows the line of the inverted ‘W’ or chevron design, so prominent in the shell disc work already discussed. This ornament is made from a golden-lipped pearl shell instead of giant clam, and is more apt to be worn casually every day than other ornaments. Only men wear it.

Shell arm rings, kete kome (Fig. 6) were made from tridacna shell and were so finely polished they look like marble. Ivens described how these objects were made before the introduction of iron. A section of the clam was broken off by hitting it with hard stones. The broken piece was rubbed down in water with Flint and brain coral, then a hole was made by tapping it with flints (Ivens 1927:392). Considering this technique, the resulting finely polished symmetrical disc is remarkable. The number and size of the bands denote the rank of the owner. The most prized ones come from the thickest part of the tridacna shell (Opdyke 1887:132). These arm bands were worn during warfare, and were supposed to enable a man to crack another man’s ribs. Worn on the upper arm, the small size of the opening indicates how much smaller than Europeans these people are.

The most beautiful and widely admired shell valuable from the Solomon is the kop kop. This is a slightly concave disc of tridacna shell with a pierced center by which a tortoise shell overlay is attached with a string. The designs of the tortoise shell are intricate, delicate, luscious, symmetrical, and are applied in a radiating pattern (Fig. 7). This example belonged to an important Baega man. A family antique, he wore it only to show us how it looked.

The majority of kop kop seem to feature a petal or star-type design in the center surrounded by an intricate border consisting of three or four expanding rows composed of triangles, semicircles, or a square ‘U’ design. The dark tortoise shell filigree pattern is brilliantly set off by the white tridacna shell background. This is one of the best examples of the Baega use of black and white contrasting values in a positive-negative space relationship. Also the white background is much more effectively displayed on Melanesian skin and hair than it would be on lighter-skinned people. (Compare Hogbin’s North Malaitan man wearing a similar kop kop (Hogbin 1939:plate 3).) Kopkop have a wide distribution in Melanesia, occurring in New Guinea, New Ireland, New Britain, and the Admiralties, as well as in the Solomon. Whether they were manufactured in all these areas, or made in a single or a few locations and then traded, is not known. If they were once manufactured in Malaita, they no longer are, now being considered antiques. The two examples that I know (Fig. 7 and Hogbin’s example) are from northern Malaita and are quite similar. Each has a central flower or star motif bordered by
Luristan. He suggests that this influence penetrated beyond Indonesia into Oceania and the New World (1966:65).

After comparing *kap kops* with designs found on ancient Indonesian kettle drums from the Bronze Age (Bernet Kempers 1959:plate 21) I think he is probably right. The design similarities are unquestionably very striking. The central star burst surrounded by an intricate border design seems almost too similar for there to be no connection, so *kap kops* designs may indeed be based ultimately on ancient Eurasian motifs.

In conclusion, in analyzing Malaitan shell valuables, it becomes apparent that certain features are characteristic of this art work. Color usage is restricted to red—usually the focal color, black and white. There is symmetry and balance, and along with this goes a sense of restraint and equilibrium. There is stylization and abstraction, sometimes leading to non-recognition of form, as in the case of the frigate bird. The art has a static quality, and there is often a careful balance of angular and circular forms.

Ralph Linton divided Melanesian art into two major traditions. One is sensuous, dramatic, organic, and often huge in dimensions. This type is evident in the Sepik, Papuan Gulf, New Hebrides and parts of New Britain. In the other tradition, polychromy is limited, dignity and elegance are the distinguishing characteristics, and emotion is controlled. This tradition is strongest in the out-lying archipelagoes such as the Solomons, the Admiralties, and the Massim area of New Guinea (Linton 1946:76). Malaitan shell valuables clearly fall into this second Melanesian tradition: in fact, their dignity and elegance epitomize it.

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