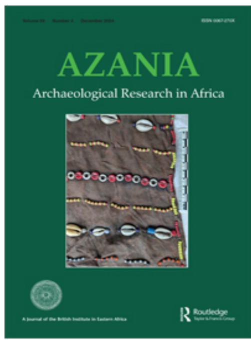

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Poking holes in things: a view from the museum

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ABSTRACT
This paper is not intended as a conventional research report, but rather as an experimental 'think piece' that attempts to situate African beads in relation to alternative geographical, temporal and theoretical frames. Throughout the history of archaeology, museums have (re)assembled artefacts to create new contexts for them by establishing new associations and juxtapositions with other artefacts. In pursuing a similar approach, this paper attempts to constitute a 'view from the museum' rather than from any particular disciplinary field. Museum practice promises an alternative model of speculative 'free association' where artefactual form enables sometimes seemingly unlikely connections to be made. The paper's intention is to highlight the theoretical richness with which beads can be approached as artefacts. In pursuing this agenda, it builds on David Graeber's important work synthesising and advancing anthropological theories of economic, political and cultural value. A central aim of Graeber's project was to put coins back in their place as rather peculiar denominators of value. Beads, with their considerably deeper history and wider geographical distribution, offer an alternative starting point from which to address questions of value in human lives.

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RÉSUMÉ
Cet article ne se veut pas un rapport de recherche conventionnel, mais plutôt un 'document de réflexion' expérimental qui tente de situer les perles africaines par rapport à des cadres géographiques, temporels et théoriques alternatifs. Tout au long de l'histoire de l'archéologie, les musées ont (ré)assemblé des artefacts afin de leur créer de nouveaux contextes en établissant de nouvelles associations et juxtapositions avec d'autres artefacts. En poursuivant une approche similaire, cet article tente de présenter une 'vue du point de vue du musée' plutôt qu'un champ disciplinaire particulier. La pratique muséale promet un modèle alternatif de 'libre association' spéculative, où la forme artefactuelle permet parfois d'établir des connexions apparemment improbables. L'intention dans cet article est de mettre en évidence la richesse théorique avec laquelle les perles peuvent être abordées en tant qu'artefacts. En poursuivant cet objectif, il s'appuie sur l'important travail de David Graeber qui synthétise et fait progresser les théories

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anthropologiques de la valeur économique, politique et culturelle. L'un des objectifs centraux du projet de Graeber était de remettre les pièces de monnaie à leur place en tant que dénominateurs de valeur plutôt singuliers. Les perles, avec leur histoire considérablement plus longue et leur distribution géographique plus large, offrent un point de départ alternatif à partir duquel aborder les questions de valeur dans l'expérience humaine.

Introduction

The regular white shape was unmistakeably artefactual — a result of human action — an isolated ostrich eggshell bead emerging from dark alluvial soil laid down by the Senqu River in the Lesotho Highlands of southern Africa. My earliest recollection of encountering an ostrich eggshell bead is this view from the trenches.[1] A few weeks later, I encountered ostrich eggshell beads again, this time for sale as jewellery at the Rosebank Market in Johannesburg. Subsequently travelling to Botswana to document contemporary techniques of bead production, I began to see ostrich eggshell beads less as 'small finds' and more as the results of technical processes I learned to complete with my own hands. I can still recall the sound of eggshell snapping between my thumbs, as well as the feeling of the wooden drill spinning between my palms. I learned to feel the texture difference and hear the sound change as my drill met the eggshell's hard outer shell, telling me to stop drilling and complete the hole with an awl.[2]

Subsequently finding employment at several British museums, I began to see ostrich eggshell beads in another way. Not just finds to be tagged, bagged and recorded on context sheets, or even as the outcome of bead making processes, but rather as part of a family of related artefacts, found on every inhabited continent. This perspective was shaped, in part, by my time at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, where I was briefly responsible for a collection of beads assembled by Horace Beck 'from all ages and regions', presented to the museum following his death in 1941.[3] In 1928, Beck outlined a 'Classification and Nomenclature of Beads and Pendants', describing every conceivable shape and form of bead. He explained in the introduction that pendants had been included since 'a number of archaeologists … all agreed that in many cases it was almost impossible to say whether certain objects were beads or pendants' (Beck 1928: 1). He also included perforated seals since these were equally difficult to distinguish from inscribed beads. For Beck, who probably spent more time thinking about the material qualities of beads than anyone else, anything perforated was potentially a bead. I propose to follow his essentially inclusive approach.

Both the archaeological and ethnographic records suggest that perforated artefacts have been a feature of human life for an extremely long time. While metal coins have likely been with us for less than 3000 years, shell beads from Bizmoune Cave in Morocco have been dated back to 142,000 years ago (Sehasseh *et al.* 2021). Largely made from marine snails (*Tritia gibbosula*), what makes them beads (or potentially pendants, if you prefer), are their holes, which exhibit polish and micro-striations, suggesting that they were deliberately bored (and likely strung). At its core, bead-making is simply a matter of poking holes in things. If, according to the old slogan for the Aero chocolate bar, 'It's the bubbles of nothing that make it really something', then, I hope to suggest

it is the hole that makes the bead. This is equally true whether we are considering pierced marine shells from Bizmoune from the far north of Africa around 150,000 years ago, Blombos Cave at the continent's southern tip around 75,000 years ago (d'Errico *et al.* 2005), shaped ostrich eggshell beads in East Africa around 50,000 years ago (Miller and Willoughby 2014), faience beads from Israel around 5000 years ago (Eliyahu Behar *et al.* 2016) or injection-moulded plastic beads thrown into crowds during contemporary Mardi Gras celebrations at New Orleans (Wilkie 2016).

In *Materials against Materiality,* Tim Ingold (2007: 6) invited archaeologists to consider the world from the perspective of a mole — a world of chambers and corridors. The mole's world consists of enclosures in which surfaces surround the medium, a seeming inversion of the 'objects', surrounded by their own surfaces, with which so much of archaeology is concerned. Can we not understand beads in a similar way? Doesn't the negative space at their centre ultimately provide beads with more affordances than the various materials from which they can be made? Marine shells were presumably first picked up and carried before they were perforated. Indeed, Chazan and Horwitz (2009) have suggested that items with similarly attractive sensory qualities were deposited in the darker areas at the rear of Wonderwerk Cave in South Africa's Northern Cape Province over 180,000 years ago. Once perforated, however, such materials can be strung. It is their hole that allows beads, of whatever material, to be attached to the body, potentially modifying its appearance in important and meaningful ways. Once holed, beads can be strung. Once strung, beads can be worn.

In developing an *Interpretation of Bushman Dress* on the basis of historic museum collections, Vibeke Maria Viestad (2018) draws on Roach-Higgins and Eicher's (1992) definition of dress as 'an assemblage of modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body.' While modifying the human body by transforming its hair, skin, teeth, nails, muscular and skeletal system and breath are logically — and therefore most likely chronologically — prior to the deployment of body supplements such as beads, these are much harder to identify in the archaeological record. Body supplements, such as the pierced marine shells from Bizmoune, may appear to be the earliest forms of archaeologically identifiable dress, but are probably better understood as extensions to forms of body modification such as styled hair. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) divide such body supplements into four categories:

1. enclosures (wrapped, suspended, pre-shaped and combinations of these)
2. attachments to the body (inserted, clipped or pressure fastened and adhered)
3. attachments to body enclosures (inserted, clipped or pressure fastened and adhered)
4. hand-held objects

The order of this list suggests that we should perhaps consider enclosures before freestanding objects not only from the perspective of Ingold's mole, but also when considering the artefactual domain from the perspective of the human body. Viewed from its centre, the hole in a bead is itself a sort of enclosure that enables attachment to the body, to a body enclosure (such as an item of clothing) or even to a combination with other beads to form a lattice that encloses the body directly.[4] Beads can even be used to adorn 'hand-held objects' suggesting considerable versatility in their deployment across all of Roach-Higgins and Eicher's (1992) categories of body supplement.

While archaeologists sometimes interpret early beads as evidence for symbolism, sometimes as part of the package of 'behavioural modernity' (e.g. Miller and Willoughby 2014), I am keen to emphasise something slightly different (cf. Wingfield 2005). One can certainly interpret forms of dress and jewellery through the lens of their symbolic significance, but this may be an unnecessarily restricted way to regard practices as polyvalent as those involved in the alteration and dress of human bodies. While symbolism implies an external referent, where true meaning and significance apparently lies, dress has the potential to be essentially self-referential (Faris 1972), emphasising and enhancing the visual appearance of the body in its own right. Forms of dress can, and frequently are, used as markers of social status or wealth, but they can also be used more straightforwardly to amend or enhance the appearance of the body. Forms of body modification and supplement are generally surface interventions, made where the body encounters the eyes of others. It is here that we need to locate beads to appreciate the ways in which they have continuously functioned across multiple continents for much of human history.

Not far from displays of Anglo-Saxon beads arranged by Horace Beck at the Cambridge Museum during the 1920s and 1930s, Mr H.F. Bird assembled a display of 'primitive currency' from all over the world, augmented by the collection of Professor William Ridgeway following his death in 1926.[5] A University Classicist, Ridgeway published the *Origin of Metallic Currency* in 1892, but it was working closely with the museum's extensive global collections, and particularly the displays assembled by Bird, that enabled Alison Hingston Quiggin to publish *A Survey of Primitive Money: The Beginnings of Currency* in 1949. Quiggin (1949: v), who dedicated her book to E.H. Bird 'who could and should have written this book', ultimately suggested that money arose not primarily from barter as a medium of exchange, but rather as a means to manage debts arising from 'bride-price'.

Quiggin's (1949: ix) use of the term 'primitive money … for want of a better name' included all objects that 'preceded the use of coins as the medium of exchange, and the objects that coins displaced.' In her chapter of 'Definitions', Quiggin (1949: 1) recognised, like Beck (1928), that it was frequently difficult to draw definitive categorical lines around terms like 'currency', suggesting that 'money … emerges dimly from objects of presentation or exchange, and shades imperceptibly into recognizable monetary forms with uncertain boundaries.' Quiggin pointed out that the same artefacts often fulfilled what were imagined as theoretically distinct functions:

> Strings of shell disks may be merely ornaments in one island, and objects of barter, currency or tokens of value in another. Trade beads, primarily used for barter, develop through 'currency' into 'money'; and cowries have passed through the same stages of evolution and back again into ornament without any money value
> (Quiggin 1949: 2).

Quiggin (1949: 3) further suggested that 'in sorting out material in a museum it is difficult to discover a dividing line' between those objects with and without 'social significance', pointing out that definitional niceties frequently broke down in the biographies of individual artefacts:

> Is a string of shell-money no longer currency when you wear it round your neck? Is a sovereign no longer money when dangled on your watchchain?
> (Quiggin 1949: 3).

Fundamentally, the problem that Quiggin attempted to address was one of value, i.e. why certain items became desirable and therefore acceptable as conventional items of exchange. While the majority of her book is arranged geographically, an initial chapter considers 'Cowries and Beads', the distribution of which, she suggested, 'takes us all over the Old World and into the New' (Quiggin 1949: 25), much more so than can be said for coins, at least until fairly recent times. This suggests that we should recognise beads, and along with them cowries, as more typical denominators of value across the course of human history than coins. Indeed, Quiggin (1949: 322) called cowries and beads the 'most universal of all forms of primitive money.'

While Quiggin defined 'Primitive Money' in 1949 as essentially everything that was used as a medium of exchange apart from coins, subsequent decades have seen coins increasingly marginalised as a medium of exchange across the global economy. Indeed, contemporary forms of 'primitive money' increasingly take digital forms. This suggests that conceptions of 'money', 'currency' and 'economy' constructed around an imaginary origin story for coinage may ultimately be unhelpful as guides to conceptions of value that have operated across the broader sweep of human history. Quiggin (1949: 322) herself suggested that metal coinage arose 'only in rare spots (possibly only in one rare spot) in the Old World.'

While European mythologies trace metal coinage to impressed lumps of electrum, minted by the Lydian King Gyges during the seventh century BC, contemporaneous metal coins in China seem to have initially taken the skeuomorphic form of cowry shells — the Chinese pictogram for money cementing this association. From the fourth century BC until European invasions and commercial penetration during the nineteenth century AD, Chinese *qian* coins retained holes at their centre, allowing them to be strung and worn about the body, sometimes even for apotropaic purposes.[6] They remained, at least in Beck's (1928) inclusive framing, beads. As such, unperforated forms of currency may actually be rather rarer than those with holes across the span of human history. Regarded from the standpoint of the anthropological museum, it is therefore coins rather than beads that appear to be peculiar. How might our understanding of economics change when viewed through the eye of a bead, rather than reflected in the surface of a coin?

Beads and value

In approaching this rather intimidating challenge, I intend to draw extensively on the important theoretical work of the late David Graeber, in particular his paper on 'Beads and money: notes toward a theory of wealth and power' (Graeber 1996). This became a central chapter in his subsequent book, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of our Own Dreams* (Graeber 2001), where he synthesised over a century of anthropological work on exchange systems, bringing together insights from Malinowski, Mauss and Marx, to name only those that alliterate. Graeber situated economic, political and cultural theories of value in relation to the body, in part through beads, to construct an ambitious globally historically comparative anthropological theory of value. I shall attempt to summarise, and unfortunately will therefore simplify, Graeber's arguments, but I hope that in doing this I do not significantly distort them.

Beginning with the purchase of Manhattan Island for $24 worth of beads in 1626, Graeber suggested that beads were one of the few European products that people

around the world were prepared to accept, meaning that, even if they had not previously been used as such, beads quickly emerged as a trade currency in many of the locations European traded. Beads are, he suggested, roughly commensurable, highly portable and do not decay, important qualities for trade goods. While these are qualities shared with many other things, Graeber argues that what sets beads apart is that they — like gold and silver — can also be used for personal adornment, suggesting that 'For the most part, money consists of things that otherwise exist only to be seen' (Graeber 1996: 5).

Graeber thus situates bodily display at the core of his theory of value, developing an opposition between the value of heirloom jewellery, whether Melanesian *kula* valuables or the British crown jewels, and the kind of exchange value represented by money, described primarily (but not necessarily) in terms of coins (as well as notes). Heirloom jewellery consists essentially of unique items with particular histories of ownership and use, arising from close contact with the bodies of their wearers. This makes them a sort of contact relic entangling the social identities of those who wore them in the past with those able to wear them in the present. A dollar bill, by contrast Graeber suggests, is a surface that is generally relatively frictionless to human history and the relationships that it involves.[7] Building on Igor Kopytoff's (1986) theorisation of the process of commoditisation, Graeber suggests that heirloom jewellery is ultimately singular, while coins are essentially common — they can generally be straightforwardly substituted for others with an equivalent value.

Graeber elaborates a theory of human activity characterised by two modalities of power which he describes as 'action' and 'reflection'. The first, 'action', involves the power to act directly on others, while the second, 'reflection', involves the power to move others to action (a type of agency also explored by Alfred Gell (1998) in his book *Art and Agency*). Both, Graeber (1996) suggests, tend to be expressed through metaphors of vision — the power of 'action' is often regarded as something that remains hidden or invisible, while 'reflection' tends to be seen as something essentially visible or displayed. Graeber suggests that the body of the king, bedecked with jewels, can be regarded as a paradigmatic example of 'reflection' at work, encouraging us to contribute our own tribute, whether through speech, action or further gifts. The effect of such displays was explored by Alfred Gell (1992) in terms of 'the technology of enchantment'.

Considering histories of European dress, Graeber argued that by around 1750 wealthy European men had largely abandoned the colourful costumes of the Renaissance as part of what Flügel (1930) called 'the great masculine renunciation'. This heralded the emergence of what we would now recognise as the business suit from the hunting costumes of the rural gentry. Graeber associates this with an ideological shift in Europe from aristocratic consumption and display to bourgeois sobriety, rooted in the moral value of productive work — Weber's (1992) Protestant ethic embodied in male dress.

Elite European male dress, rather than straightforwardly 'reflecting' wealth, came therefore to suggest a hidden, even veiled, capacity for 'action'. In the process, however, Graeber argues that the other modality of human action, that of 'reflection', was displaced onto what was increasingly referred to as the 'fairer sex', quoting the mid-twentieth century British poet Robert Graves to the effect that 'Man does, Woman is.' Formal European male dress, epitomised perhaps best by James Bond's dinner jacket (or tuxedo in American English), suggests the male body's capacity for

action, while formal female dress frequently not only reveals more of the body, but, in Graeber's framework, combines it with forms of adornment that define the wearer through the act of being seen.

In parallel to the male body's enclosure in the business suit, Graeber suggests that concealed money came to represent an equally hidden capacity for action. While money was rarely displayed about the male body in European society after 1750, it is certainly not the case that adornment entirely disappeared as a locus of power.[8] Rather, as Mauss (1990) suggested in relation to forms of gift exchange in societies dominated by an ideology of market-based forms of commodity exchange, it merely recedes from centre stage. Graeber suggests that even in societies seemingly dominated by notions of value denominated in terms of money, wealth is frequently translated into objects of unique and singular value such as mansions and paintings, which operate as adornments or extensions to their owner's person. The fact that both these things relate to domestic spaces suggests that self-fashioning and self-display are frequently displaced from the human body onto the home, as a larger enclosure for the person.[9]

Another location where we can observe the principle of adornment re-emerge in relation to the male body is in the form of expensive hand-made watches in contemporary society, objects worn by those who spend much of their time enclosed in business suits and something powerfully exemplified when French President Emmanuel Macron took his watch off during an interview in March 2023, provoking social media speculation that it might be worth $80,000. Building on Bruno Latour's (1993) characterisation of 'the modern constitution' in his book *We Have Never Been Modern*, we might suggest that the process of attempting to purify 'action' from 'reflection' along gendered lines was nevertheless accompanied by a proliferation of hybrid forms that blended these two modalities of power.[10]

It is at the meeting place between 'action' and 'reflection', commodity and gift, that Graeber (1996) locates the humble bead as something with a peculiar capacity to be transformed back and forth between uniquely singular artefactual forms (such as heirloom jewellery) and generic common ones (such as commodities). Beads can be stored in private, awaiting exchange, but can also be converted into jewellery that adorns the bodies of its possessors and their relatives. This allows them to cross boundaries between domains of value denominated in terms of an abstract numerical potential for 'action' (price), and those where value is vested in the power of heirloom jewellery to induce action in others through the power of 'reflection'. In Kopytoff's (1986) terms, beads lend themselves to both 'commoditisation', when unstrung, as well as 'singularisation' when strung.

Beads retain a capacity to become adornments for the body that can display not only their origins in acts of production and exchange, but also the forms of human creativity by which they have been attached and bound together. While a bag of unstrung glass beads, made in a factory in Venice or Amsterdam, seemingly exemplifies industrialised forms of commodity production where the labour of those who made them has effectively been effaced, the same beads, when bound into elaborate forms of jewellery, evoke the investment of those who performed this work.

(In)alienable possessions?

Annette Weiner (1992), in her book *Inalienable Possessions*, drew attention to the prominent role of women in the production and circulation of 'cloth' across the Pacific,

effectively knitting together society through the production of the items of dress that form an important component of the gifts that circulate between individuals, families and lineages to ultimately become a core dimension of *taonga* or ancestral possessions. Weiner's argument about gendered wealth, developed largely in relation to the bark cloth-producing societies of Oceania, appears to partially break down when relocated to southern Africa, where clothing historically took the form of processed animal skins, largely produced by men rather than women.

Beads, however, are a form of dress found across both Oceania and Africa (as well as in the Americas, Asia and Europe), presumably at least partly because of their deeper presence in human history. Indeed, when ostrich eggshell beads, produced in southern Africa, are considered alongside the *soulava* shell necklaces of the Trobriand Islands of Papua New Guinea there appears to be rather more commonality than difference in their surrounding practices. Polly Wiessner's (1977) account of the trans-regional system of exchanging gifts among the Ju/hoãnsi (!Kung) San of the northern Kalahari, known as *hxaro* (which literally means ostrich eggshell jewellery), has more in common with the *kula* exchange system of the Trobriand Islands documented by Malinowski (1922) in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific,* than with the differently gendered production of bark cloth clothing in Polynesia and leather clothing in southern Africa, although certain parallels do remain worthy of consideration.

A part of Weiner's argument is that the female labour that goes into the production of cloth creates an index of the (re)productive relations that exist between men and women in these societies. While we cannot straightforwardly transpose Marilyn Strathern's (1988) analysis of the gendered relations involved in pig rearing and growing yams in Melanesia onto the cattle herds and millet fields of southern and eastern Africa, nor perhaps especially onto the foraging societies of the Kalahari, the structuring role of gender in characterising forms of production, exchange and hierarchy remains extremely good to think with. During fieldwork in the Kgalagadi District of Botswana in 2022, as part of a British Museum Endangered Material Knowledge Programme project to document skin processing technologies, I was struck that while men were engaged in producing leather clothing, their female partners and daughters spontaneously set about producing beads from ostrich eggshell and porcupine quills with which to adorn these (Figure 1). One woman told me that where you have men's things you need to have women's things, and the leather aprons were decorated with ostrich eggshell beads and leather hunting bags fringed with porcupine quill beaded tassels, embodying in their material form the complementarity of male and female work — just as a human child grows from care and nourishment provided by both its parents.

One might imagine that a single-stranded ostrich eggshell bead necklace remains a straightforward product of female labour, but at its invisible core there often lies a sinew thread (at least historically) — taken from the backbone of a beast, most likely killed and butchered by a male. David Graeber suggested that the bead's material form embodies a tension between 'action' and 'reflection' around which he constructed his theory of value — its outer surface presenting a visible surface to the world, while the hole at its centre suggests a hidden capacity for action. He cites Jane Fajans to the effect that both actions and objects 'have a tendency to become models, representations in miniature, of the broader forms of creative action whose value they ultimately represent' (Graeber 2001: 82). Artefacts, whether ceremonies, jewellery or temples, can

Figure 1. Collaborative production of a leather dancing apron with ostrich eggshell beaded fringe at Ncaang, Kgalagadi District, Botswana (22 October 2022), Photograph Gréine Jordan (British Museum Endangered Material Knowledge Programme EMKP2020SG12), Shared under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

therefore become 'microcosms of the total system of production, of which they are a part, and that they encode a theory of creativity that is implicit on the everyday level as well, but is rarely quite brought into the open' (Graeber 2001: 82). This suggests that we might regard the individual bead in its elementary form as a kind of model human — its outer surface visible to the world, balanced by an invisible interiority representing a potential for attachment, entanglement and enchainment in all manner of different ways. While beads create connections between humans as items of exchange, when bound together into beadwork they have the capacity to index these attachments in the material forms they take.

The majority of ostrich eggshell beadwork produced in the Kalahari today is made for sale, transformed through forms of commodity exchange into seemingly equivalent monetary value. While historic museum collections in Europe suggest that people from the region have exchanged eggshell jewellery with visitors for at least two centuries, there are nevertheless hints that at least some items of jewellery had forms of significance and value more akin to heirloom jewellery in the past. The presentation of a necklace (Figure 2) to the British Museum in 1937 by Archdeacon J.W. Mogg (Af1937,1130.3) was accompanied by the following account of its acquisition:

> 'This was obtained from a Corporal in the Police about 1916. The story is as follows. Going into the Kalahari from the Kuruman (Cape Province) side some years prior to that chasing Bushmen who had been destroying Royal Game, this was picked up. Bushman tried several

Figure 2. Ostrich eggshell bead headband with suspended beaded tassels, donated to the British Museum by the Venerable Archdeacon J.W. Mogg in 1937. Mogg served the Anglican Diocese of Kimberley and Kuruman between 1915 and 1945. (British Museum, London: Af1937,1130.3). © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) licence.

> times to recover it by purchase and by theft, but the Corporal would not part with it. They told him it belonged to their 'Queen' and was very valuable and came from the past. Although I have seen several necklaces made of egg-shell (*sic*), this is certainly the best one. I have another long one but not at all like this.'

According to Weiner (1992: 6):

> 'Some things, like most commodities, are easy to give. But there are other possessions that are imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners which are not easy to give away. Ideally, these inalienable possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent group, or dynasty. The loss of such an inalienable possession diminishes the self and by extension, the group to which the person belongs. Yet it is not always this way. Theft, physical decay, the failure of memory, and political manoeuvres are among the irrevocable forces that work to separate an inalienable possession from its owner.'

While such loss is powerfully embodied in this account of early twentieth-century looting by a policeman, I intend to suggest that beads have a slightly different set of affordances,

or potentials, to the 'cloth' products that most concerned Weiner. When fabric wears out it can be cut up into sections and re-used in patchwork or quilting — a significant process of recombination that is often associated with female acts of care.[11] While it is fairly difficult, though not impossible, to actually unweave fabric, strung beads retain a potential to be fairly easily unstrung and incorporated into new items of jewellery.[12] When strings of beads break or are broken, individual beads survive in essentially unchanged form — a boon to future archaeologists. This also means that beyond a straightforward binary between alienable and inalienable possessions, beads with origins in other times and places have the potential to be incorporated into new items of jewellery, potentially retaining a sense of connection and continuity with their previous owners, against whose skins they may have been worn — an equivalent, perhaps, to re-setting a gemstone from an inherited item of jewellery. Beadwork has an inherent potential to constitute an artefactual enchainment of human creative action, referencing and building on earlier actions, artefacts and prestations. Beads, assuming they at least retain their holes, remain available for potentially endless re-use, connecting inheritances from the past with the needs (and bodies) of the present and future.

Anyone for wampum?

Two decades ago, Peter Mitchell (2003) drew attention to the limitations of *hxaro* as the sole ethnographic model for interpreting forms of exchange across the Later Stone Age archaeology of southern Africa. By taking up his challenge, I hope to suggest how we might fruitfully expand the use of ethnographic analogies beyond the regionally and temporally contiguous, when interpreting evidence for the use and manufacture of beads across the African past. In developing his original article into a book, David Graeber (2001) expanded his consideration of wampum into a chapter on *Wampum and Social Creativity among the Iroquois*, exploring the ways in which beaded belts functioned not only as a trade good in early American colonial society, but also how they embodied social relations and obligations that became central to the constitution of persons and processes of peace-making among the Iroquois.

Given the presence of complex interwoven forms of 'wampum-like' beadwork whether made from glass, metal, ostrich eggshell or other beads across much of southern and central Africa, for at least the past two centuries (early nineteenth-century museum collections contain such forms), we may need to find ways of thinking about how meaning and value have been, and continue to be, constructed through the acts of attachment associated with the artefactual forms taken by beadwork, largely through the creative practice of women. An overly symbolic approach to beadwork's visual patterns, of the kind widely associated with the notion of the 'Zulu love letter', which suggests a standard vocabulary of meanings are encoded in recognisable patterns of coloured beads, potentially reduces beads and the value they embody to something that can be straightforwardly 'read.' While there are important connections between words and beads, which Graeber (2001) partly explores in relation to wampum, including an etymological connection between texts and textiles (Barber 2007), engaging with beadwork as text-like necessarily involves going beyond attempting to straightforwardly decode its symbolic propositions.

We need to be alert to the potential for beads, in whatever material, to become the building blocks of artefacts that can be intimately associated with the surfaces of

human bodies, where they can make relations and forms of value visible — whether relations of production, exchange or hierarchy, or even ecological relations within an environment of non-human elements. It is noteworthy that the production of beads in locations geographically removed from their contexts of circulation and use does not generally seem to have detracted from their perceived value — wampum beads were originally made by coastal groups distant from the main Iroquois territory and were subsequently even made by European settlers. Material qualities of hardness, brightness and colour, all features of the surface, seem to have been sufficient to enable exotic beads to become carriers of both meaning and value. Like gold in Medieval Europe, the fact that the raw materials from which beads were made were often locally rare and had to be traded long distances (like cowries across much of Africa) presumably only served to enhance their value.

'Action', 'reflection' and beads in nineteenth-century South Africa

Writing from Cape Town in January 1824, Robert Moffat notified the Secretary of the London Missionary Society that land in the Kuruman Valley would soon be 'ceded' for 'a comparatively small sum (about £5)' (Moffat and Schapera 1951: 113). He had recently been granted permission by Kgosi (King) Mothibi of the BaTlhaping, the local Setswana-speaking *morafe* (kingdom), to relocate his mission. Moffat explained that he had personally made it a condition that payment be made, although he would likely have been freely granted land on which to live, having recently played a significant role in orchestrating the defence of the *morafe* from invading 'Mantatees' (Wingfield 2023). Returning from Cape Town in May 1824 with fresh supplies, Moffat 'settled with' Mothibi in relation to their agreement (Hamilton and Moffat 1825). According to a subsequent journal entry 'the ground belonging to the Mission … was purchased from Muteebe [Mothibi] for 40lbs. of beads' (approximately 18 kg; Moffat and Schapera 1951: 189). This transaction echoes the legendary 'purchase' of Manhattan Island in 1626 for '24 dollars' worth of beads and trinkets', with which Graeber (1996) began his paper on beads and money. How can we begin to account for this apparent historical echo, nearly two hundred years later and on another continent?

Did Moffat know enough of American history to be able to imagine a Manhattan-like future for Kuruman? When the new location had first been proposed to Kgosi Mothibi, it was dismissed due to a shortage of trees from which to build houses and cattle enclosures (Moffat 1842: 374). As a former professional gardener, however, Moffat planned to drain the valley, which then lay under twelve inches (~30 cm) of water, and channel the millions of litres of clear water that flow daily from the Kuruman eye, an underground spring, into an irrigation system. This would enable him to grow food that would feed the mission all year round. Moffat remained associated with this new location at Seodin for the rest of his missionary career, overseeing the first printing of the complete Bible in a Sub-Saharan African language at the mission in 1857. Now a South African heritage site that still carries the missionary's name, the Kuruman Moffat Mission is today a museum of sorts, adjacent to the former *apartheid* era township of Mothibistad, named after Moffat's former exchange partner.

In April 1850, a quarter of a century after their initial transaction, Moffat had his surveyor son, Robert Moffat junior, draw up a title deed for the land to be signed by

Mothibi's successor, Kgosi Gasebone. This became the basis for a claim made to the Levenson Land Commission in 1884, following colonial annexation of the territory. Although Levenson pointed out that the London Missionary Society's assertion of freehold possession of the land contradicted statements made by their own missionaries about the impermanent nature of Tswana land tenure, their claim was ultimately upheld. The mission lands at Seodin became a boundary between the freehold plots associated with the new town of Kuruman and the 'Lower Kuruman Native Reserve'. While much could be said about the ways these three transactions (1824, 1850, 1884) chart shifting patterns of land tenure associated with the Cape Colony's expanding northern boundary, what I intend to highlight is that the process of asserting ownership rights in land began, like the same process at Manhattan, with a transfer of beads. Why were beads accepted as an item of exchange during these initial transactions?

European accounts of both exchanges tend to emphasise the low value of the beads by referencing their monetary value — their purchase cost, presumably in London, Amsterdam or Cape Town. It is unlikely, however, that coins or promissory notes would have bought much of anything at either Kuruman in 1824 or Manhattan in 1626. Beads, by contrast, had a recognisable value on both the African and North American continents, irrespective of the circumstances of their production in Europe. In an account of a journey to the area in 1820, three years before Moffat's negotiations with Kgosi Mothibi, John Campbell (1822: 243), a visiting representative of the London Missionary Society, noted of the people he met that 'Beads and cattle are the only subjects which engross their attention':

> The people were greatly disappointed by our not having brought beads to exchange with them for cattle and elephants' teeth. Beads are the only circulating medium or money in the interior of South Africa. They answer the same purpose as cowrie shells in India and North Africa, or as guineas and shillings in Britain. The chief wealth of the Bootshuana [Batswana] and Morolongs [Barolong], like that of the more civilized nations, is hoarded up in their coffers, waiting for a favourable opportunity to make purchases … Beads made of thin glass, which are easily broken, however beautiful they may be, are of no more value, in their estimation, than coin, if liable to evaporation of dissolution would be … Red handkerchiefs and worsted nightcaps of the same colour, though well received as presents, are of small value as articles of exchange. They want money in such a case, that is, beads
> (Campbell 1822: 246–247).

There was evidently something essential about beads that red handkerchiefs and worsted nightcaps, although 'well received as presents', did not begin to approach. Campbell's account makes it clear that he thought at least part of the reason for this was that beads could be 'hoarded up' for future use. The relative material stability of glass beads allowed them to retain their value for mobilisation in future 'action', but it seems likely that they also had a conventionally recognised value that did not need to be negotiated from scratch. Campbell, who had to manage his own supply of trade goods while undertaking his journey across the African interior, evidently appreciated the way that beads could be used at 'a favourable opportunity to make purchases', but was he right to regard beads as a 'circulating medium or money' equivalent to 'guineas and shillings' in Britain?

I hope to have suggested that the holes in beads establish affordances that make them qualitatively different to nineteenth-century forms of British currency, allowing them,

unlike ‘guineas and shillings’, to be easily strung together and consequently converted into composite artefacts and forms of dress. Indeed, images made by Campbell, as well as subsequent visitors to Kuruman, suggest that one of things that distinguished high status women from others were the rows of beads with which they visibly adorned their bodies (Figure 3).

Campbell’s own account also suggests that beads carried associations that extended beyond their immediate exchange value. When an ambassador from Kgosi Makaba II of the Bangwaketse arrived in May 1820 (Campbell 1822: 266), Makaba was criticised by members of the BaTlhaping court because he ‘had not sent the beads as a sign of peace’ to Mothibi. Should we regard beads as not only acceptable as a medium of exchange, but also an indicator of potential connection, alliance and potential relationship? Are beads a seemingly hybrid artefactual form that equally embodies a potential for both ‘action’ and ‘reflection’, perfectly suited for gift as well as commodity exchanges?

Moffat was certainly keen to present his transaction with Mothibi as a straightforward ‘purchase’ of land for beads, but since land seems to have been regarded as essentially inalienable except by conquest, Mothibi presumably regarded the beads he was given as a form of tribute, establishing a foundation for his ongoing relationship with Moffat. I could assert that I ‘purchased’ my wife with £1500 worth of jewellery, but she would likely point out that she understood the engagement and wedding rings I gave her as simply demonstrating intent and commitment as the basis for our marriage. In many human societies, it seems, presentations of jewellery form a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for the establishment and maintenance of long-term relationships.

Moffat, however, seems to have been anxious to escape a relationship of patronage and dependence on Mothibi, arguably using the establishment of the new mission at Seodin,

Figure 3. Sketch of a BaTlhaping lady and maid servant, *c.* 1835 by Charles Davidson Bell (© Museum Afrika, Johannesburg: MA1965_3746).

at some distance from the BaTlhaping royal court, to establish himself as something of a Kgosi in his own right. He even seems to have been in the habit of wearing a waistcoat and jacket made from leopard skin, blending the enclosing form of the European business suit with a form of 'reflection' normally reserved for Tswana royalty (Moffat and Schapera 1951: 72). Indeed, the ceremony by which *dikgosi* assume their position involved them being wrapped in a leopard skin, such that in common parlance 'those who wear the leopard skin' normally refers to Tswana royals.

The arrival of European missionaries in what is now South Africa's Northern Cape evidently initiated a proliferation of such hybrid forms, blending forms of 'action' and 'reflection', commodity and gift. It was arguably only following colonial conquest, and the implementation of the recommendations of the Levenson Land Commission six decades later, that many of the ambiguities and uncertainties which arose from overlapping regimes of value were settled, although ongoing political contestation around land reform suggests that they remain unsettled for many South Africans today.

Conclusion: beads and the production of persons

In *Dress as Social Relations,* Viestad (2018) noted a number of ethnographic accounts from different parts of the Kalahari that described key moments of transition in the lives of both male and female individuals which were marked by their adornment of their bodies with beaded jewellery, given or lent by relatives — chiefly weaning, the arrival at womanhood, as well as marriage. While the exact contexts vary, such uses of heirloom jewellery are globally common and ethnographically unremarkable — on our wedding day my wife wore a necklace that was my grandmother's, while I wore my grandfather's tie pin. Similarly, the key moment of transition during the coronation of King Charles III in May 2023 was marked by the moment at which his body was unrobed in order to be dressed in the assembled heirlooms of his royal ancestors.

The adorned body constitutes a spectacle with a potential to mark the embeddedness of an individual within a network of intergenerational as well as contemporary social relationships. Howard Morphy (1991) memorably described the ways in which the paintings applied to the bodies of Yolngu boys during their initiations at Arnhem Land in northern Australia made their enchainment within clan and moiety structures visible on the surfaces of their bodies. In Graeber's (1996) terms, this form of reflection may encourage others to recognise the investments already made in their formation as human persons, while for Gell (1998) the adorned body can become an artwork which indexes the roles played by others, whose agency can be abducted from its resulting artefactual form.

During fieldwork at Kaudwane on the edge of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve in Botswana during 2022, I showed photographs made at Kikao Pan in the Central Kalahari during the 1930s by J.W. Mogg (the person who donated the stolen beaded necklace to the British Museum) to contemporary descendants. One of the women with whom I was working immediately recognised that one photograph (Figure 4) showed a young woman during a significant point of her early adult life — *≠gi g//e* — a stage she would have occupied in the two years following menarche. Enclosed in a leather wrap with tortoise shells attached, her neck encircled by beads with metal earrings hanging from her ears and sporting an elaborate haircut, her visual appearance was noticeably different to that of her companions. For Graeber (1996, 2001), her appearance might be regarded as exerting a

Figure 4. Young woman adorned with beads and tortoise shells. Photograph taken at Kikao Pan, now in the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, Botswana, by J.W. Mogg around 1935 (Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge: MAA P.7263.ACH1), Shared under a Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence.

form of power on potential suitors, inducing them to treat her in the way she has already been treated by the relatives and family members who likely provided her with these adornments. In Kalahari foraging societies of the period, potential suitors would have been expected to demonstrate their own capacity for productive 'action' by hunting animals the meat and skins of which they would have presented to the girl and her relatives.

We might initially regard this gendered pairing of 'action' and 'reflection' as essentially mirroring the gendered associations of male and female bodies that Graeber located in post-Enlightenment Europe. However, it is significant that this period of adornment

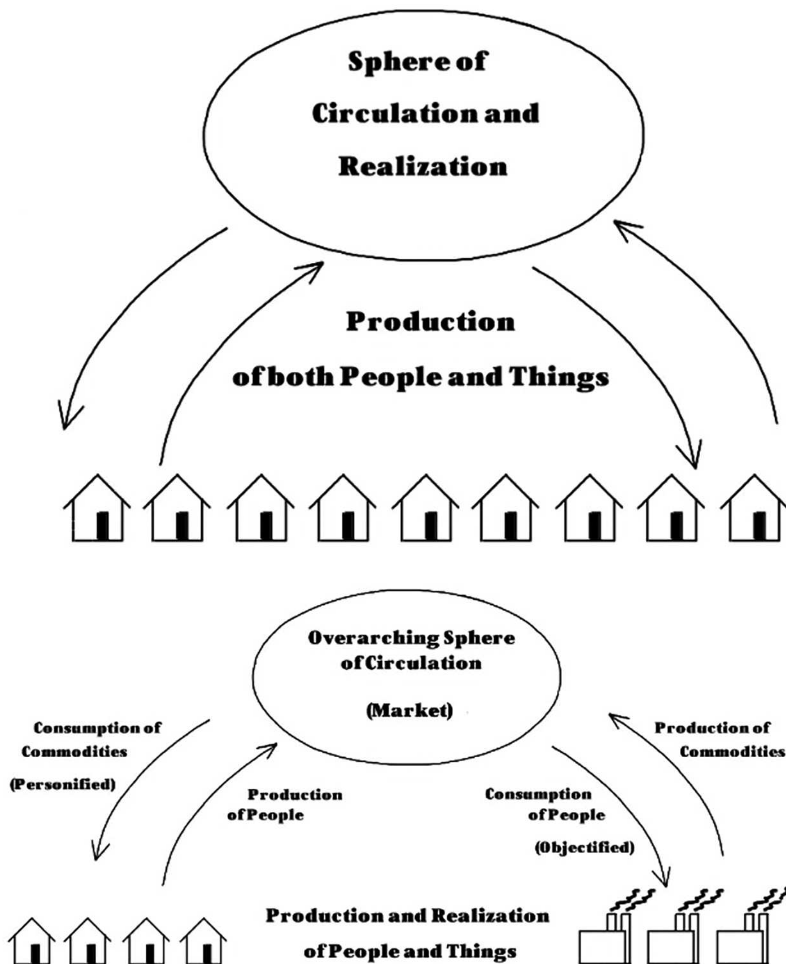

Figure 5. Diagrams from David Graeber's (2001: 79–80)) book *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* representing the models of industrial and non-industrial economies that he has in mind. They appear as Figures 3.1 and Figure 3.2 and are the only figures in the entire book.

for the female body in the Central Kalahari seems to have been a temporary one which preceded childbearing. This suggests that, in some ways, the adorned youthful female body parallels the besuited male body in modern Europe, evoking an invisible capacity for action. This is not expressed through forms of production understood in conventional economic terms through hunting or manufacture, but rather though reproduction. Like the enclosed space at the core of the bead, with its potential for attachment and enchainment, it is the possibility of reproduction at the core of the female body that constitutes the essential locus for human intergenerational enchainment through the production of children and their subsequent formation as social persons.

One of David Graeber's (2001: 78) theoretical ambitions was to reconnect the production of human beings and things, forms of production that he suggested had been artificially separated between factories and households by the rise of industrial modes of production in Europe during the nineteenth century (Figure 5). He suggested

that the market that arose to connect these separated spheres — domestic and educational spaces producing people to be consumed in factories, while factories produced commodities to be consumed in domestic spaces — functioned as a 'vast force of social amnesia'. It is surely only in a society in which bodies are routinely enclosed in business suits to pursue value denominated in essentially abstract numerical terms, that the essential 'productivity' involved in making human persons, upon which the ultimate survival of society and the human species is necessarily predicated, could seemingly be forgotten.[13]

If African art can be regarded as philosophy, as Souleymane Bachir Diagne (2012) suggested following Leopold Senghor, then what better form than beadwork to express the Tswana ethical maxim *Motho ke motho ka Batho,* which suggests that becoming truly human involves recognising and acknowledging one's implication within humanity as a whole. If individual beads can be regarded as model humans in miniature, then the connections enchained in beadwork establish an eloquent material statement of a sentiment expressed by the English Elizabethan poet John Donne, when he wrote:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.

It is striking, however, that Donne chose to use a land-based metaphor, highlighting the centrality of land as the ultimate source of value in European imaginations. Expressed in alternative terms, his verse might become:

No one is a single bead,
Isolated by itself,
We all are bound by jewellery,
Connected by its threads.

Notes

1. The recollection relates to excavations at the site of Likoaeng, directed by Peter Mitchell in July and August 1998. For details of the site, see Mitchell (2009).
2. Fieldwork was undertaken at D'Kar in the Ghanzi District and in the Kgalagadi District of Botswana during July and August 2001.
3. The first page of the Museum's Annual Report for 1947 recorded that 'Mrs Beck has presented her husband's world-famous collection of beads of all ages and regions, together with his microscope slides and detailed documentation of the specimens.'
4. Egyptian beaded net dresses are perhaps an archetypal example within museum collections of this sort of beaded enclosure. See, for example, 27.1548.1 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: https://collections.mfa.org/objects/146531
5. The first page of the Museum's Annual Report for 1921 notes that 'Mr Bird has installed a special collection of primitive currency in an upright case in the Babington Hall.' In the Annual Report for 1928 (page 1), the bequest of collections from the late Professor Ridgeway was noted, including 'a very important series of primitive currency, on which Professor Ridgeway was an acknowledged authority.'
6. On the Northwest Coast of the American continent, Chinese Qing dynasty (1644–1911) coins were accepted as trade goods by indigenous Tlingit hunters, and subsequently bound into forms of dress. See National Museum of the American Indian (16,8287): https://americanindian.si.edu/collections-search/objects/NMAI_180288

7. The secondary market in collectible historic coins, valued at sums higher than their face value, implies that even coins are not as frictionless as they might at first appear.
8. It is significant that one form of adorning formal male dress, medals, essentially take the form of perforated coins, but that they are intended to be read as markers of 'action', or at least of formal recognition for past 'action'.
9. This is not a unidirectional historical process, and the reverse may have occurred during the transition from the more domestically focussed artefactual realm of Roman Britain into the Anglo-Saxon period, when displays of wealth through jewellery were arguably more bodily — an observation grounded in the very different artefacts from these periods displayed in the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology's 'Cambridge Gallery' since 2012.
10. The redeployment of coins and notes as forms of bodily decoration in various parts of the world might be equally regarded in these terms.
11. While North American quilting traditions are well known, patchwork is associated in the contemporary Kalahari with the Nama, a Khoisan-speaking group, at least ancestrally.
12. The unweaving of fabric to isolate particular threads lay behind the development of Kente cloth in West Africa.
13. Nancy Fraser (2022) has written suggestively about the blind spots of contemporary capitalism, including social reproduction.

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