



COWRIES, THE CURRENCY OF TRADING

Gildas Salaün

Small shells, often called bujis or bouges in French archives (a deformation of the original Portuguese) and “whitish milk in colour [and] the size of an olive” (Prévost, 1748), were imported from the Maldives to the Gulf of Guinea via Europe within the framework of the transatlantic trade of enslaved African peoples. They were adopted as a form of currency as each one was identical in size and rot-proof. Therefore, it was possible to accumulate and transport them. Moreover, their rarity in West Africa made them precious objects.

A monetary standard

Introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th century, the cowrie emerged, in the 17th and 18th centuries, as the reference standard of the monetary system of the kingdoms along the “Slave Coast”, particularly Ouidah (Benin). European travellers confirmed that here, “[Black people] use Coris for monnoye” (Savary Des Bruslons, 1726).

The cowrie “is the most convenient currency for the trafficking of foodstuffs [...]. We must not forget to supply ourselves with bujis on our voyage to Ouidah” (Prévost, 1748), because their users “have such esteem for these shells, that in trade: [...] they prefer them to ‘gold’”(Prévost, 1748).

While the importation zone for cowries ranged from Senegambia to the Niger Delta, in reality, they were used as currency along the Gulf of Guinea, from Accra (Ghana) to Port Harcourt (Nigeria) and perhaps Bimbia (Cameroon). The monetary use of the cowrie was not confined to the coast, it went inland as far as the southern border of Niger, Burkina Faso, and southern Mali.

This “monetary cowrie” zone shows the commercial circuits and relationships that united the ports and their hinterland. Logically, the ports were the points of arrival of the means of payment brought by European traders (cowries) and the exit point of the merchandise sought by the former (captives).

A complicated usage

Because of their very low unit value, cowries were mostly traded in lots. They were pierced with the help of a special heated iron and threaded on cords. The cowries were then exchanged as heavy necklaces, verified on the markets by “a Grand figure of the Kingdom, named Konagongla. This



officer examin[ed] the cords; [and] if he [found] one shell missing, he confiscat[ed] them for the benefit of the King” (Prévost, 1748).

In Ouidah, there were four main multiples, designated by a special word in the local language, as well as in Portuguese and French:

- 40 cowries constituted a senre, or toquos in Portuguese, or toque in French archives.
- 200 cowries constituted a fore, or gallinha in Portuguese, or galine in French archives.
- 4,000 cowries constituted a cabèche (French term).
- 8,000 cowries constituted a guibatton (French term), or alkove in Portuguese.

In the logbooks of French ships, major transactions are generally quantified in ounces, each subdivided into sixteen sub-units called pounds (livres) or écus. Each ounce corresponded to 16,000 cowries and weighed around twenty kilos.

Finally, in the case of very large transactions, “the coris (we]re measured [...] in a sort of large bushel of yellow copper, similar to a large basin, or cauldron, which can contain approximately eight hundred pounds (livres) in weight” (Savary Des Bruslons, 1726). This corresponded to approximately 400 kilos.

Cowries as payment

Europeans used cowries on a daily basis. On the one hand, to buy their food, as well as that of their captives (twelve to fifteen chickens for example could be exchanged for a cabèche (4,000 cowries) in 1752); on the other hand, to remunerate their intermediaries, such as the capita who were responsible for supervising the porters, and received “two galines (400 cowries) for each trip” and each porter, three toques (120 cowries).

But above all, cowries were essential to Europeans for the payment of customs (taxes). For example, the La Rochelle ship Roy Dahomet, which arrived in Ouidah in March 1773, offered amongst other items 615 pounds of cowries to the king and 41 additional pounds to his representative (i.e. a total of 256,000 shells!). Only after paying these customs could the Europeans begin to acquire captives, and for these transactions, cowries were once again indispensable.

As such, the cowrie is an interesting indicator that allows us to monitor the evolution of the value of captives in Ouidah: while the price of a captive was 8,000 cowries in 1724, it rose to 80,000 in 1748 (Prévost, 1748) and the captain of the Roy Dahomet even had to pay up to 192,000 cowrie shells in 1773! Thus, in half a century, the price per captive had multiplied twenty-threefold! This “inflation” has been confirmed by numerous testimonies: “formerly only about twelve thousand pounds in weight for a cargo of five to six hundred [Black people] was needed; but these unfortunate [captives] are currently bought at such a high price, & the coris are so little esteemed [here, the



author is referring to the low unit value of the cowrie] in Guinea, that more than twenty-five thousand pounds are currently needed.” (Savary Des Bruslons, 1726).

All this explains why European ships embarked considerable quantities of these small shells, to the point that, when it came to goods for Guinean trade, cowries occupied second place in terms of absolute value, and were first place if we consider the volume transported.



About the author

A graduate from the Université de Nantes, Gildas Salaün has been head of the numismatic collections of the Musée Dobrée since 1998. He is the author of some dozen books and numerous articles. His research revolves around the study of currencies considered as documentary sources illustrating socio-economic relations. For several years, his work has focused on the role of Nantes in Atlantic international trade. Gildas Salaün is also a deputy of the City of Nantes.

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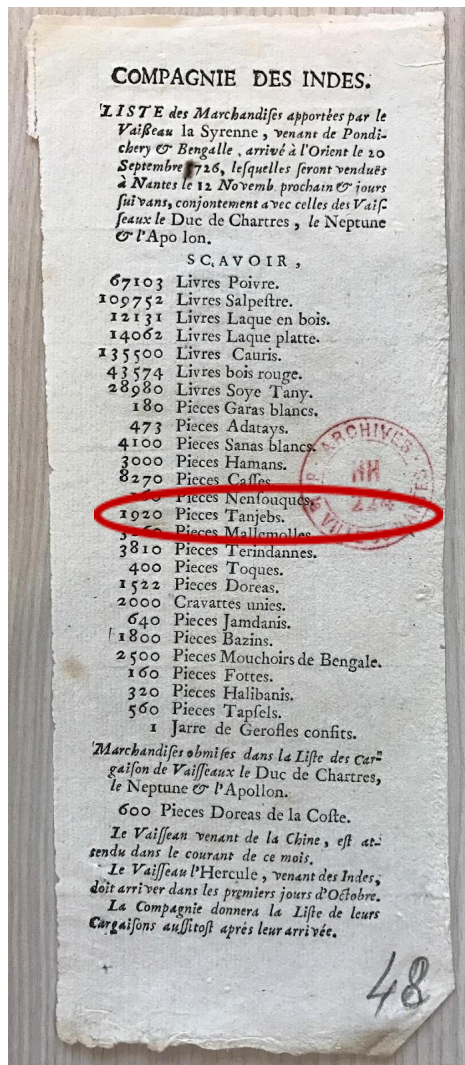
Salaün, Gildas. "Le cauri: monnaie de la traite atlantique, son usage monétaire à Ouidah (Bénin) au xviii^e siècle" in Frédérique Laget, Philippe Josserand, and Brice Rabot (ed.), *Entre horizons terrestres et marins, Sociétés, campagne et littoraux de l'Ouest atlantique*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017, p. 239-251.

Further reading

"Coquillages contre esclaves, le cauri monnaie de la Traite atlantique", lecture by Gildas Salaün for the Université de Nantes: <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/gildas-salauen-coquillages-contre-esclave-le-cauri-monnaie-de-la-traite-atlantique-4473585>

Illustrations

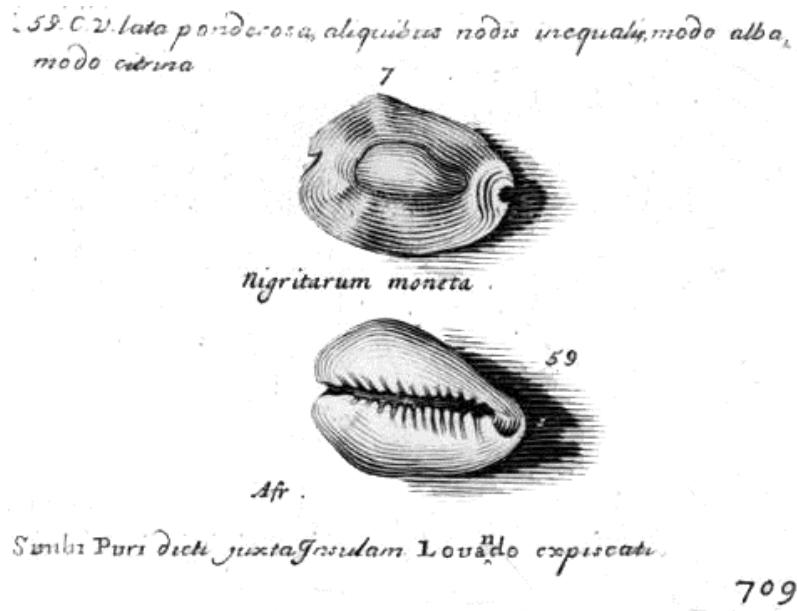
III. 1:



List of products imported to Nantes by the Compagnie des Indes in 1726: in weight, cowries comprise the heaviest merchandise.

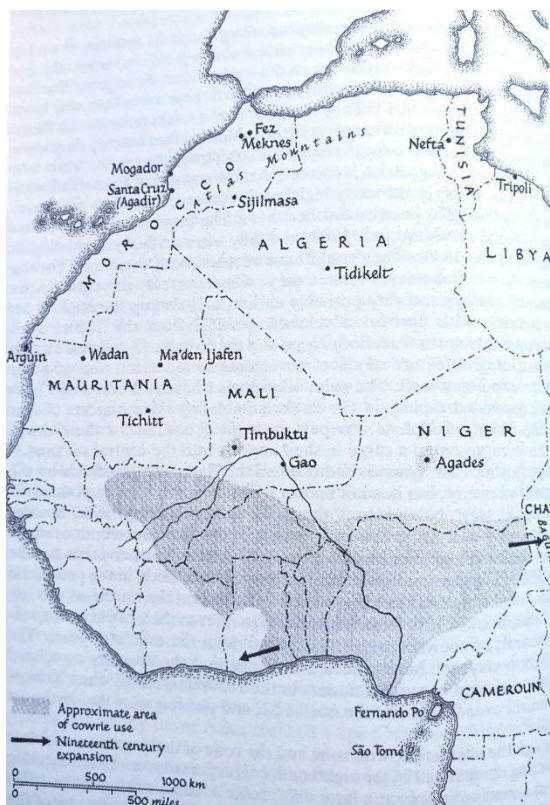
Photo by the author. Archives municipales de Nantes HH 224-48

III. 2:



Detail taken from plate 709 by Martin Lister, *Conchyliorum Bivalvium* (1696). Here, the shell is called *Nigritarum moneta* which can be translated as “the currency of Black women”.

III. 3:



Area where cowries were used as money. In total, nine countries were concerned by the monetary use of cowries. Several million captives were bought there in exchange for these shells. Map taken from Hogendorn Jan and Johnson Marion, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p.108.



III. 4:



This pile of a thousand pierced cowries corresponds to a European silver *écu*. Although very constraining in terms of logistics (volumes to be transported), the use of cowries as an instrument of payment was very profitable for Europeans, as in the Maldives: “they paid six sols per pound, sold it for twelve to eighteen in their metropolises, [and] it is worth in Guinea up to thirty-five.” (RAYNAL, 1772, volume II p. 96).

Moreover, rot-proof by nature, cowries had the advantage, over many other goods, of not spoiling during sea-crossings © Jean-Gabriel Aubert, Nantes.



III.5

Cauris.

6400 liv. de cauris, achetées à Lorient, & revenant à	6286	12	1	} 68532 3 7
64000 liv. idem.	60140	15	9	
400 liv. idem du Navire <i>la Musette</i> , à 90 ^{fr} le cent	360			
318 liv. idem de Tarvernier, à 90 ^{fr}	286	4		
<u>71118</u>	67073	11	10	
Pour prime d'affurance, de Lorient à Nantes, de 64000 ^{fr} à un pour cent.	640			
Pour fret & droits de gabarage, charroi, déchargement, rechargement en gabare, & charroi de l'entrepôt.	818	11	9	

Excerpt from the logbook of the ship *Le Saturne* which left from Nantes for Guinea in June 1789. To carry out its transactions, it carried 71,118 pounds of cowries, or over 35 tons!

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III.0



Cauris, *Monetaria Moneta*, © Commons Wikipedia