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Notes toward a theory of wealth and power
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abstract

Why have so many societies adopted beads or other objects of adornment as currencies of trade? The question opens up a series of other questions about the nature of exchange, visibility and invisibility, and the relation of exchange both to conceptions of the human person and ways of exercising power over others. [money, exchange theory, theories of magic, fetishism, the person, gender, agency and royal power, Madagascar]

> Moby Duck and Donald, captured by the Aridians (Arabs), start blowing soap bubbles, with which the natives are enchanted. "Ha ha. They break when you catch them. Hee, hee." Ali-Ben-Goli, the chief, says "it's real magic. My people are laughing like children. They cannot imagine how it works." "It's only a secret passed from generation to generation," says Moby, "I will reveal it if you give us our freedom." . . . The chief, in amazement, exclaims "Freedom? That's not all I'll give you. Gold, jewels. My treasure is yours, if you reveal the secret." The Arabs consent to their own despoliation. "We have jewels, but they are of no use to us. They don't make us laugh like magic bubbles."
> —from *How To Read Donald Duck* [Dorfman and Mattelart 1975:51]

Dutch settlers, as every schoolchild knows, bought Manhattan Island from the local Indians for 24 dollars' worth of beads and trinkets. The story could be considered one of the founding myths of the United States: in a nation based on commerce, the very paradigm of a really good deal. And the fact that so many people across the globe were willing to accept European

beads in exchange for land or anything else has come to stand, in our popular imagination, as one of the defining features of their "primitiveness"—a childish inability to distinguish worthless baubles from things of genuine value.

In reality, European merchants began carrying beads on their journeys to Africa and the Indian Ocean because beads had already been used as a trade currency there for centuries. Elsewhere they found beads were the one of the few European products they could count on the inhabitants' being willing to accept, so that in many places where beads had not been a trade currency before their arrival they quickly became one afterward.

But why was that? What was it about beads, of all things, that make them so well suited to serve as a medium of exchange—or at least as a medium of trade between people unfamiliar with each other's tastes and habits?

Admittedly, beads fit most of the standard criteria economists usually attribute to money. They may not be divisible, but they are roughly commensurable and highly portable, and they do not decay. But the same could be said of any number of other objects that have never been used as a means of exchange. What sets beads apart seems to be nothing more than that they are articles of adornment. In this, at least, they are in much larger company. It is remarkable how many of the objects adopted as currency in different parts of the world have been objects otherwise used primarily, if not exclusively, for adornment. Gold and silver are only the most obvious examples: one could equally well cite the cowries and spondylus shells of Africa, New Guinea, and the Americas, the feather money of the New Hebrides, or innumerable similar "primitive currencies." For the most part, money consists of things that otherwise exist only to be seen. Tiny copper axes have been known to become the stuff of currency, or very thin ones, but never axes that could actually cut down a tree.

It is from this observation that the present article—an essay more about the nature of wealth and power than it is about beads

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as such—really begins. This is because whenever one examines the processes by which the value of objects is established (and this is true whether one is dealing with objects of exchange, or wealth more generally), issues of visibility and invisibility always seem to crop up. For instance, while it is often difficult to come by systematic information about what people actually did with trade beads after they had been traded, such evidence as does exist indicates that when they were not worn as personal adornment they were quite self-consciously cached away and hidden—often, as we will see, in elaborately ritualized contexts. To understand why that should be, however, one has to return to the ethnographic literature and reexamine a whole series of familiar notions about value, power, exchange, and the human person.

the display of wealth

"Kachins," wrote Edmund Leach, "do not look upon moveable property as capital to be invested, they regard it rather as an adornment to the person" (1954:142). They would hardly be the only ones. Insofar as wealth is an object of display, it is always in some sense an adornment to the person. In countless societies the most treasured forms of wealth consist of objects of adornment in the literal sense—heirloom jewelry, one might say, of one sort or another. Often, as in the case of Kwakiutl coppers, Maori cloaks and axes, and kula armshells and necklaces, they are not only the most valuable objects recognized by the cultures that produce them, but their most important objects of exchange as well.

Now, from this perspective, what I have just said about money might not seem particularly surprising. If objects of adornment are already so highly valued, what would be more natural than to use them to represent value in general? But such a line of argument would soon run into problems, because the kind of value ascribed to heirloom jewelry in most societies has little, if anything, in com-

mon with the value we usually attribute to money. Let me illustrate what I mean by looking briefly at some anthropological ideas about exchange and the social person.

In using the phrase "adornment to the person" Leach was probably making an oblique reference to Marcel Mauss's famous essay on "the category of the person" (1985[1938]). In that essay Mauss argues that in societies lacking an ideology of individualism, the person, or public self of its members were often built up out of a collection of symbolic properties: names and titles, ritual paraphernalia, or other sorts of insignia and badges of office. Often the very possession of such badges of office could be said to convey title to the office in question. Such insignia, however, cannot become objects of exchange in any conventional sense; giving one away would be tantamount to abandon ing one's social identity entirely. A king who gives away his crown is a king no longer.

There is, however, an obvious continuity between Mauss's arguments on the person and his argument in *The Gift* (1967; cf. Weiner 1992) that gift giving can be a powerful a way of creating social bonds because gifts always carry with them something of the giver's self. It is in this essay that Mauss dealt with the sort of "heirloom jewelry" mentioned above. Heirlooms of this sort are, typically, unique objects. Each has its own name and history—and the latter is in larger measure responsible for the value it is seen to have. Since that history is almost always (at least in part) a history of ownership, the social identities of giver and receiver tend to become entangled in that of the object, and therefore always to be, to a certain extent, part of the stakes of any transaction in which it is involved.

Nancy Munn (1986:55—73, 111—118 et passim) has shown how, in kula exchange, the value of such objects depends on their all being different from one another; if they were not, they would not each be able to accumulate their own histories to begin with. In kula, as in many similar cases, there is a hierarchy of types of goods, with perishable and generic substances like food at the bot-

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tom and unique imperishable valuables at the top. But this only serves to underline how little the value of kula shells and other "heirloom jewelry" resembles that of money. Money does not consist of unique objects at all; it is absolutely generic, at least in principle: any one dollar bill is precisely the same as any other. As a result money presents a frictionless surface to history. There is no way to know where a given dollar bill has been. Nor is there any reason one should care, because neither the identity of its former owners nor the nature of transactions in which it has previously been involved in any way affects its value. This is why transactions involving money can be said to be "anonymous": the social identities of those transacting need not become part of the stakes of any transaction. In fact, they do not have to play any part in the transaction at all.

It is an anthropological commonplace that cloth ing and adornment serve as markers of social identity. They define differences between kinds of people. The display of heirloom jewelry, too, could be said to assert the distinctiveness of its owner. And so with wealth in general: in our own society, anyone who has managed to accumulate a very large amount of money will inevitably begin to translate some of it into objects of unique historical value: old mansions, Van Goghs, pedigreed thoroughbreds—all of which may be considered adornment to the owner's person.[1]

Clearly, money itself can never become an adornment to the person in the same way. It can only mark distinction in the quantitative sense: some people have more of it, some less. But I would argue—in fact I will be dedicating most of the next two sections to arguing—that money is quite often identified with its owner's person, if in a somewhat different sense. Rather than serving as a mark of distinctiveness, it tends to be identified with the holder's generic, hidden capacities for action.

[1] In fact, one would be considered somewhat odd if one did not.

action and reflection

If one turns to the literature on power rather than that on value, there is no lack of material on issues of visibility and invisibility. Phrases like "panoptics" and "the gaze of power" have been widely bandied about in social theory for some time now. Most of these usages go back to the work of Michel Foucault, particularly to his *Discipline and Punish* (1977:170—194), where he argues that there was a major shift in the way power was exercised in Europe at the beginning of the 18th century. In the feudal system that had existed until then, "power was what was seen" (1977: 187); it found its place in cathedrals, in palaces, and especially in the "material body of the king," which was on constant display in royal pageants and spectacles. Under feudalism, only the powerful were individualized, made "material" and "particular." Their faces were displayed on paintings and coins; their genealogies and deeds became the official history of the state, their private lives the stuff of public policy (Foucault 1977:191—192). The powerless remained faceless spectators. With the end of the feudal state, however, the terms of power reversed themselves. In the "disciplinary systems" that began to emerge at this time, power was exercised by faceless, invisible bureaucracies that inspected, examined, and evaluated their objects. The logic was one of surveillance, enshrined in such newfound institutions as the factory, the hospital inspection, the school examination, and the military review. Within such institutions, not only did those who wielded power become depersonalized abstractions, but the objects of surveillance became individualized—at least insofar as they each could be inspected, judged, and ranked according to specific formal criteria (Foucault 1977:189—192).

Foucault represented this change as a clean break between two entirely different types of regime, but I think it would be better to treat these as two different modalities of power, such as coexist in any society. After all, it is not as if pageantry, spectacle, and the display of power disappeared with the end of feudalism, any more

stuffs into icons of national unity and popular attempts to divert them into hidden sources of power—demonstrates anything, it is that these struggles over value are always, in the end political—if only because the most important political struggles in any society (and here I again follow Turner 1996b) will always be over how value itself is to be defined.

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Consider Gyges, making himself invisible so as to gaze on the body of the Lydian queen—or for that matter any of those generically dressed bourgeois males gazing at any of those ornamental, particular bourgeois women. Invisibility and abstraction here offer a way of indicating the power to act (and looking is certainly a form of action), but can they not equally well be seen as implying that the man is a creature of desire, to be characterized (at that moment) not by what he is but by what he is not, by an absence or a lack? After all, it is just this sense of absence, of incompletion, that moves one to action to begin with. Next, consider Marx's analysis of exchange, in which the desired object is always concrete and particular. Could one say that the abstraction, the lack of definition attributed to the desirer and his possessions, is also a way of figuring desire? It is an absence, if one that necessarily implies the recognition of some imaginary totality that would be its resolution. In such situations, I am suggesting, the object of desire plays much the same role as Lacan's mirror-objects: it represents an imagined wholeness on which desirers can fix their own inchoate sense of self. Or—to return for the moment to Marx's own dialectical terminology—it makes the desirer seem an abstract content that can only be realized through that particular concrete form.[19]

Even at this most individual level, then, action and reflection endlessly imply each other in an infinite variety of conversions and transformations. On grander levels of historical change, similar dynamics are always in the process of transforming—or at least contesting—the very categories by which value is perceived. And if the Malagasy example—with its royal attempts to turn money-

[19] I would not want to suggest that all desire is necessarily fetishistic. In fact, it might ultimately be useful to make a distinction between metaphoric and metonymic desire: only in the first, then, would the desired object become an imaginary representation of the wholeness of the desirer's self. Allowing for the possibility of the second would allow for the possibility that one could wish to unite with other persons or things because of their actual differences rather than their imagined similarities.

than did the display of wealth.[2] But this is not to say that there was not a certain shift of emphasis in European culture at that time. There are plenty of indications that there was such a shift—not least in the changes that took place in standards of personal adornment among Europe's elite.

J. C. Flugel, a historian of dress, has called this period that of "the great masculine renunciation" (quoted in Silverman 1985) during which wealthy men came to abandon the colorful costumes of the Renaissance for what was soon to develop into the modern business suit. From then on, bright, ornamental clothing, jewelry, and other forms of adornment were considered appropriate only for women. As Terence Turner points out (1996a:50—56), the new male garb actually developed out of "sporting clothes"—that is, hunting costumes favored by the rural gentry—and the change in attire was part and parcel of a broader ideological shift among the ruling classes, away, that is, from the old aristocratic ethos of consumption and toward an emphasis on bourgeois sobriety and the moral value of productive work. Male costume now implied a capacity for action; since the sphere of consumption came to be seen as an essentially female domain, women's costume changed less.

I might add (since it is important to my later argument) that differences in dress also came to encode an implicit theory of gender. As John Berger (1972:45—46) has aptly put it, "a man's presence is dependent on the promise of power which he embodies"—that is, on his capacity for action, "a power which he exercises on others." "A woman's presence," by contrast, "expresses her own attitude to

[2] If one consults the anthropological literature on "relations of avoidance" and formal relations of deference more generally, one reads repeatedly about contexts in which one must not gaze directly at those in authority, or not gaze at them at all, or at least not do so until they have first gazed at you. I suspect this principle shows up everywhere in some form, despite the fact that there are usually other contexts—in which those same figures of authority are performing in one way or another—in which staring at them is what one is supposed to do.

herself, and defines what can and cannot be done to her." Berger's insight, I think, has particularly interesting implications for any analysis of the politics of vision. Forced, he says, to live her life within the terms set by a male power that holds that what she is, is what she is seen to be by others, "a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost always accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisioning herself walking or weeping" (1972:46). A woman in this situation cannot act simply for the sake of acting, and her self is constantly doubled into an implicitly male surveyor and female surveyed.[3]

It is easy to see how dress codes reinforce this. Formal male dress is designed to hide the body. Its sobriety seems intended to efface not only a man's physical form but his very individuality, rendering him abstract and, in a certain sense, invisible. Clothing for women, on the other hand, not only reveals more of the body (or at least hints at revealing it): it transforms what is revealed into one of a collection of objects of adornment—body parts becoming equivalent, as such, to clothing, makeup, and jewelry—which together define the wearer as a sight, and, by extension, as relatively concrete and material.

As a critique of gender relations, this analysis applies only to Western society, and relatively recent Western society at that. But the basic division between a relatively invisible self acting on the outside world and a concrete and visible one relating primarily to itself is, I think, of much wider significance. It may very well be intrinsic to the dynamics of human thought and action themselves.

The same dichotomy is implicit, for instance, in Pierre Bourdieu's emphasis (1977) on how the grace and artistry of the truly competent social actor is largely dependent on that actor's not being aware of precisely what principles inform the actions in question. These principles become conscious only when actors are

[3] Thus, he says, the artistic stereotype of the woman staring in a mirror.

be realized through a future act of exchange. In this, it stands opposed to objects whose value is rooted in past actions (whatever those may be). The latter are not only often objects of display in their own right; they have a power to inspire action in others, a power that clearly has much in common with that of aristocratic display or royal splendor. But if, at its simplest, aristocratic display calls on the viewer to deliver wealth or homage to the displayer because others have already done so, the most elementary form of exchange value has precisely the opposite effect: it inspires one to try to acquire an object because others have tried to acquire it in the past.

If this is so, to understand the value attributed to any particular object means that one must understand the meaning of the various acts of creation, consecration, use, appropriation, and so on, that make up its history.[18] One must ask: Which of these actions determine which aspect of its value? Which among them are those who recognize that value being called on to repeat? And then there is the notoriously tricky question of fetishism. Perhaps the best way to describe the view of fetishism I have been developing is to suggest that when one recognizes an object as valuable, one becomes a kind of bridge across time. That is to say, one recognizes not only the existence of a history of past desires and intentions that have given shape to the present form of the object, but that history extends itself into the future through one's own desires and intentions, newly mobilized in that very act of recognition. In fetishizing an object, then, one is mistaking the power of a history internalized in one's own desires for a power intrinsic to the object itself. Fetish objects become mirrors, I have written, of the beholder's own manipulated desires. In a way, the very notion of desire—at least, as I have been developing it in this article—demands such fetishization.

[18] This applies both to its actual history and, especially, to that ascribed to it by those who consider it valuable.

the king or, at least, as creating the power by which he unifies the kingdom—in a word, his hasina.[17]

This is stated almost explicitly when, at the high point of the Merina ritual year, the climax of the Royal Bath ceremony, the sovereign displayed himself before representatives of the people, who presented him with hasina. Immediately afterward, he h id behind a screen to bathe, crying out as he did so, "May I be masina." After this he emerged to sprinkle his subjects with the water in which he had just bathed, in exactly the same way as sampy keepers, on other occasions, sprinkled the people with water that had been used to bathe the national sampy (cf. Berg 1979; Bloch 1987). Here, compressed into a brief succession of ritual gestures, is the whole pattern of sorona and ody: an object, displayed to represent the desi res of the kingdom, becomes an invisible charm regularly capable of bringing those desires to fruition.

prospects and conclusions

A central claim of this article is the existence of a very widespread distinction between the power to act directly on others (a potential that can only be realized in the future) and the power to move others to action by displaying evidence of how one's self has been treated in the past. Both, I have argued, tend to be expressed through metaphors of vision: the first represented as something hidden, the second realized through forms of visual display.

So, too, the distinction between the power of money and the power (or, if you like, value) of what I have called "heirloom jewelry." Money tends to be represented as an invisible potency because of its capacity to turn into any other thing. Money is the potential for future specificity even if it is a potential that can only

[17] There were in fact a number of proverbs implying that was really the giving of hasina itself that made the king (Meritens and Veyrieres 1967:35—37).

jolted out of their accustomed ways of doing things by suddenly having to confront some clear alternative to it—a process Bourdieu calls "objectification." One becomes self-conscious, in other words, when one does not know precisely what to do.

A similar distinction between action and self-consciousness is played out in Jacques Lacan's notion of the "mirror phase" in children's development (1977). Infants, he writes, are unaware of the precise boundaries between themselves and the world around them. Little more than disorganized bundles of drives and motivations, they have no coherent sense of self. In part this is because they lack any single object on which to fix one. Hence Lacan's "mirror phase," which begins when children first come face to face with some external image of their own selves, which serves as the imaginary totality around which a sense of those selves can be constructed. Nor is this a one-time event. The ego is, for Lacan, always an imaginary construct: in everyday life and everyday experience, one remains a conflicting multiplicity of thoughts, libidinal drives, and unconscious impulses. Acting self and imaginary unity never cease to stand in mutual opposition.

Both theorists pose action and reflection as different aspects or moments of the self, so that experience becomes a continual swinging back and forth between them. Not only is this a compelling way to look at the structure of human experience, but I think there is a good deal of evidence that cross-culturally it is a very common one. It is also one that almost always finds expression in metaphors of vision. Here let me turn from contemporary French theorists to a thoroughly antiquated English one: Edward Tylor's discussion of the origins of the idea of the soul in *Primitive Culture* (1874:430-463).

Tylor surveys the terminology used to describe the soul in dozens of different languages across the world. Almost all of them, he finds, fall into one of two groups. On the one hand, there is what might be called the "life-soul," or vital principle in humans, often figuratively identified with the heart or breath. The connotation is

that of a hidden force responsible for the animation of the body, and usually for such abstract powers as thought and intentionality as well. The life-soul represents, in short, a person's inner capacity for action. On the other hand, there is a very different kind of "soul," typically labeled by some word the primary meaning of which is either "shadow" or "reflection." In either case the term conjures up a person's physical appearance, detached from that person's actual physical being. In almost all Tylor's examples, this "image-soul" (if I may call it that) is said to be able to wander free of the body. Almost always, too, it is believed to endure after the body's death, while the life-soul most often is not.

Though Tylor claimed these two were ultimately conflated, his own evidence makes it clear that most cultures do not conflate them at all. They tend to see them as separate, if complementary, aspects of the self. The distinction may not be a universal one (certainly it is not universal in the relatively formal terms Tylor used), but it is so remarkably common that it seems reasonable to ask why mirror images should be so obvious a metaphor for the public self. What is it about powers of action that make them seem invisible?

Perhaps the best answer to the second question comes from Thomas Hobbes (1968[1651]: 659) (cf. Pye 1984:93—94), who suggested, in discussing idolatry, that whatever is invisible is "unknown, that is, of an unlimited power." Total lack of specificity, in other words, implies an infinite potential. What is entirely unknown could be anything—and so it could do anything as well.

What this would imply is that the hiding of the body and effacement of individuality encountered, for instance, in formal male clothing is itself a way of stating that a man is to be defined by his capacity for action—or, as Berger puts it, "the promise of power he embodies" (1972:46). It would also help to explain why human capacities for action in general—what Tylor called the life-soul—should so often be defined as something impossible to see.

To be visible, on the other hand, is to be concrete and "specific" (a word derived from the Latin *specere*, "to look at"). It is also to

a final note: the political dimension, or taxes as ritual sacrifice

I have not yet even touched on the political aspects of the use of money in Imerina, a topic dealt with in some detail by Bloch (1990), nor have I addressed the politics of visibility and invisibility in general. While there is no room here to enter into these subjects in any detail, it might be useful to end with an illustration of some of the directions such an analysis might take.

I have been describing Merina ritual as a series of techniques for creating and channeling hasina. While there is no word in Malagasy that really corresponds to the English *ritual*, one of the words used most often to describe rituals was (and is) *manasina*, literally "to endow with hasina" or "to make something masina."

Under the Merina kingdom, the verb *manasina* was most commonly used for the act of presenting gifts of money to the sovereign. This was partly because unbroken silver coins, the kind that were given in such ceremonies, were themselves called hasina. Hasina had to be given every time the king made an official appearance, and during public assemblies or the annual Royal Bath ceremony it developed into an elaborate ritual in which representatives of each of the various ranks, orders, and geographical divisions of the kingdom offered tribute in turn. But if one imagines the coins as a kind of sorona, it is easy to see how, in presenting these coins to the king, they gave him hasina in the other sense as well.

When whole silver coins were used as sorona or elements in charms—which they occasionally were—it is usually said that the coin, being round and unbroken, stood for wholeness and perfection. I have already mentioned one instance in which a silver coin represented the integrity of the national army. More often coins used in royal ritual were said to represent the integrity of the kingdom, the hope that its unity should remain intact. The act of giving a coin as a token of loyalty, then, can be seen as itself creating

visible form the words with which one prayed. Once those prayers had been answered, however, the status of the objects changed. They came to be seen as the embodiments, or conduits, of those same invisible powers—as objects through which human beings could enter into relations with these powers. As a result they were no longer displayed, but hidden as the elements of ody—placed in horns, boxes, or sacks, wrapped in red silk, or otherwise put out of sight. This could almost be seen as an example of the Maussian gift turned on its head: rather than being part of the giver's person, the gift comes to constitute the person of the receiver.

No doubt this was only one way among many of creating ody. But it appears to have been one particularly relevant to beads and money, providing a hint, perhaps, of the mechanisms by which objects of adornment could so suddenly and so generally vanish from sight and become hidden talismans. As sorona, beads and silver chains expressed their wearers' desire to gain wealth. Wearing them operated in the same way as any display of wealth: it was a persuasive act—even if, in this case, the object of persuasion was an abstract and invisible power. Here, too, the actions one carried out toward oneself were meant to serve as models for the action one wished to elicit from others. By covering oneself with wealth, one hoped to move others to do the same.

Once proven effective, however, it followed from the logic of Malagasy ritual that these same objects—these sorona—should become identified with the powers that had answered the appeal and so be hidden away. They became ody, with the power to draw wealth to the bearer on a regular basis. And even today, this is precisely the function of beads and silver ornaments. When they appear as ingredients in magic charms, they almost always act, directly or indirectly, to draw wealth to the owner.

be the object of action, rather than one who acts on others. Berger notes that even when she is gazing into a mirror, a woman's self can be said to be split between alien male observer and passive female observed. In a similar way the power exercised through the display of wealth or royal splendor is not a power that acts directly on others. It is always, in its essence, a persuasive power, meant to inspire in others acts of compliance, homage, or recognition directed toward the person engaging in display.[4]

This at least is one implication of Berger's analysis of "female presence," one of great significance for the study of power in general:

> Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, a woman must contain it and interiorize it. That part of a woman's self which is the surveyor treats the part which is the surveyed so as to demonstrate to others how her whole self would like to be treated. And this exemplary treatment of herself by herself constitutes her presence. Every woman's presence regulates what is and is not "permissible" within her presence. Every one of her actions—whatever its direct purpose or motivation—is also read as an indication of how she would like to be treated. [1972:46—48]

[4] A telling example is to be found in Nancy Munn's analysis of Gawan notions of "beauty" and its role in kula exchange (1986: 101—103). For Gawans, she says, display is held to be intrinsically persuasive: "the beautified person persuades by exhibiting his or her persuasive potency as a visible property of the self" (1986: 103). In this case the effect is to make others want to give the beautified person kula valuables objects of decoration similar to those with which one beautifies oneself. One places decorative shells on one's person so that others will be inspired to give you decorative shells. I note that this analysis is entirely in keeping with that of aristocratic display developed below.

What Berger describes is clearly a kind of power born of subordination. Perhaps it is better treated as a mere residual of power, all that is left to those who have no access to the more direct variety. In purely formal terms, however, there is little to distinguish it from the kind of power exercised through the display of aristocratic wealth or royal splendor. Kings and nobles, too, could be said to have decorated themselves with wealth in order to "demonstrate to others how their whole selves would like to be treated." After all, in the final analysis a king's status is based on his ability to persuade others to recognize him as such, and to pay him tribute for that reason. By making a show of magnificence, a king is able to define himself in such a way that others are moved to transfer some of their wealth to him. They do so not as part of any implicit exchange, not by virtue of anything they expect the king to do, but simply by virtue of the sort of person they believe him to *be*.[5] By covering themselves with gold, then, kings persuade others to cover them with gold as well.

Weber (1978:490—491) once observed that feudal aristocrats tended to justify their status through their way of *being*, their mode of life in the present, while the lower orders—including the mercantile classes—tended to define themselves by what they did, created, or aspired to. Here, too, the dichotomy lives on, now largely displaced onto ideas about gender. Just as men of high status tend to be defined in bourgeois terms, as active producers,

[5] This at least is the aristocratic ideal. In reality, of course, no king has ever relied exclusively on display to convey his authority. Such techniques only work in so far as they are combined with more active forms of persuasion. What I have tried to do in this article is to boil practices down to their simplest, most rarefied forms, so as to get at the underlying logic; this is not the same as claiming, for instance, that bourgeois males act in only one way, bourgeois women or feudal lords in another. Clearly, the exercise of power will always require an ability both to act on others and to define oneself. But degrees vary. And even more: certain types of people will always tend to identify themselves (and be identified) with certain characteristic ways of exercising power more than with others.

> is ultimately regarded as possessing some intrinsic virtue, and therefore is still worn after the imagined case for its immediate use has ceased.
> These sorona sometimes consist Of pieces of silver, or of silver chains; and sometimes of beads, more or less valuable. Occasionally strings of beads, of different colours, are made, and worn around the neck and wrists of the offerer… All these offerings of silver or beads are called, Haraina tsy maty—"rejected but not dead;" that is, offered but not lost—securing an adequate return of wealth and prosperity. [1837, 1:435][15]

Beads and silver, in other words, would be worn as a sorona to represent the "desired benefit" (in this case wealth) and, as such, displayed on the person of the sacrificer. And while Ellis does not explicitly say this, on becoming ody the ingredients were presumably hidden, as the ingredients of ody always tended to be.[16] That, at any rate, seems to be what happened to sorona dedicated on the ritual shelf of one's house, the same place that a family's ody or sampy were normally kept. Once one's prayers were answered, they could simply be wrapped in silk to join the other ody (Callet 1908:56; Chapus and Ratsimba 1953:91, n. 134).

To sum up, then: sorona were material tokens of request. They represented the desires or intentions of those who offered them, the action they wished the formless and invisible powers to take. They could almost be seen as physical hieroglyphs, reproducing in

[15] The translator is incidentally mistaking *haraina* ("wealth") for *ariana* ("thrown away, rejected"). The real meaning of the name is "wealth (that) doesn't die" or "enduring wealth." Nowadays it is the name of one popular variety of bead.

[16] Alternatively, they might have been treated in the way that strings of beads are most often treated nowadays: they are usually placed around the neck but underneath several layers of clothes. When I was in Imerina I never saw anyone in the countryside wearing beads in such a way as to be visible to other people.

which represented evils to be avoided, and were intentionally cast away.

Let me take a relatively simple example from *Tantara ny Andriana*, a collection of Malagasy texts from the 19th century (Callet 1908:51—52). Each time the king dispatched a military expedition, we are told, the royal astrologers would offer an unbroken silver coin as sorona,[14] praying that the army would remain similarly whole and not be broken into pieces by the enemy. Then one would cast a pinch of ashes from the king's hearth to the winds as a faditra, praying as he did so that the army should not be destroyed, as the wood had been rendered into ash.

The usual practice was to dedicate sorona as the accompaniment of a vow. One might, for example, place a bead or bulrush on the ritual shelf in the northeast corner of one's house, promising as one did so to sacrifice a sheep or a bullock to the invisible powers if the "desired benefit" was obtained. If it was, sacrificing the animal would itself be called a sorona, and the head and feet of the sacrificed animal would also be preserved (cf. Sibree 1880:302—303).

Now, sorona often consisted of exactly the same kind of objects that were used as ingredients of ody. Like them, they did not usually represent objects so much as actions (in the example above: being destroyed or holding together). Finally, at least in some cases, sorona could become ody. Here is what Ellis has to say about the process:

> The sorona operates as a charm to bring the desired favor, and is sometimes an animal sacrifice, of which, when killed, the principal fat is eaten. In some cases it consists in wearing some article specified by the sikidy [divination]; and in such instances it becomes, in course of time, an ody—that is, a charm or amulet—which, though adopted at first for a particular object,

[14] Called *vola tsy vaky*. Remember that money was usually used cut up into smaller divisions.

elite women have inherited the old aristocratic role of passive consumers. "Man Does," says the poet, "'Woman Is" (Graves 1964).

Weber's way of framing the issue is particularly useful in bringing out its relationship to time. In a sense, the distinction between my "action" and "reflection" is really only one between actions to be carried out in the future, and ones already carried out in the past. "The promise of power" embodied by a man is his potential for acting in the future; at the same time, a "woman's exemplary treatment of herself" consists of actions she has already undertaken, or at least, ones she is still in the process of carrying out. "The Person" could be said to vanish in orientation to action because action expresses a completion that can only exist in the future. At the same time, one's visible persona, one's "being," is simply the cumulative effect of actions that have been directed toward one in the past, of all those actions that have made one what one is. Being—if it is socially significant—is congealed action; and just as every category is the other side of a set of practices (Turner and Fajans n.d.), every unique being is the result of an equally singular history. By engaging in persuasive display, then, all one is really doing is calling on others to imitate actions that are implicitly being said to have already been carried out in the past.

money versus coin

It should be clearer now what I was getting at when I said that while Mauss's gifts are caught up in the specific social identity of their givers and receivers (their exterior "image," one might say), money is instead identified with a person's generic and invisible inner powers. I am not the first person to have made this point. Karl Marx said something similar more than a century ago.

In Marx's conception of the capitalist marketplace, money and commodities alike are continually being redefined in the perceptions of their buyers and sellers, shifting back and forth between

what he cal Is abstract ”content” and concrete ”form. ” The dialectical terminology may seem somewhat obscure to modern readers, but the meaning of these terms is not really all that different from my own ”action” and ”reflection.”

Let me begin with one of Marx’s own examples (1967[1867]:18—62). Let us say that one man has 20 yards of linen; another has a coat. The two agree to exchange one for the other. By doing so, they are agreeing that the two objects are of equivalent value. Each man, however, has a very different way of perceiving that equivalence. The first aims to acquire the coat; obviously it is the particular, material qualities of the coat that are important to him. This is not at all true of his attitude toward the linen. The linen is just a means to his end: anything else would have done just as well, provided its value was considered equivalent to that of the coat. As Marx puts it: from his point of view the linen is a mere abstraction, the coat a concrete, specific ”form.” Of course, from the other man’s point of view exactly the opposite is true.

Marx considered this to hold for al I transactions, including those involving money. Everything depends on the respective points of view, and the intentions of the actors. If I sell a commodity, my object is to acquire money. Therefore, it is money that seems a concrete ”form” to me, the goods I have to sell a formless abstraction. From the point of view of the purchaser, it is the other way around.[6] In other words, it is always the object of action—the

[6] Marx is not, by the way, talking about the distinction between use value and exchange value here. This is something he considered much more basic and universal, the very starting point of his analysis of value. Essentially, it represents an attempt to apply Hegel’s dialectic—in which human consciousness (or ”dynamic content”) is constantly seeking to transform itself into ”concrete forms”—to the problem of exchange. For this reason he starts with the simplest possible example, a purely imaginary one that would never occur in real life, and only gradually works his way toward the much more complicated transactions typical of a commercial economy. In these transactions the same commodities may, for instance, be bought only in order to be resold, and thus may be in a sense both means and ends, abstract and concrete, at the same time. The distinction between

charm contains 15 elements in all, most of them bits of wood. In the invocation, the name of each is called out, and the element is called on to act. In each case, the words used to describe the action are derived from that element’s name. The first, a piece of the *arify* plant (the word *arify* is from a root meaning ”to turn aside”), is called on to turn aside the bullets fired by the enemy. Another sliver of wood called *betambana* (”many obstacles”) is asked to ”stop the enemy from attacking, make some disaster occur that will be an obstacle to their attack” (Vig 1969:71), and so on. In almost every case the action of the charm is directed outward, toward someone other than the person using it; this, too, is typical of Malagasy ody. Rifle charms never make their owners impervious to bullets. They make the people shooting at them miss. Love magic does not make the user beautiful. It invokes desire directly in someone else. Rather than change the qualities of the bearer, ody always confer on her a certain capacity for action. Like Marx’s hoards of hidden gold or Engels’s talisman, the hidden elements of charms were, in effect, identified with their owners’ ability to act upon the world.

sacrifice and the creation of charms

This play of the particular and the generic, the seen and the unseen, recurred on every level of Merina ritual practice. So too did the link between words and objects implied in the prayers cited above.

Rituals of sacrifice are a good example. The word *sorona*, usually translated ”sacrifice,” could be used for any ”religious ceremony to obtain a desired benefit from that to which one prays” (Richardson 1885:591). Such rituals always involved offering some physical object, also called sorona, which was meant to represent that ”desired benefit,” to the invisible powers. Most rituals would involve offering some sorona, objects that were intentionally preserved afterward, just as they usually involved other objects called *faditra*,

of defining features. In the case of the Ranakandriana this lack of individuation is brought home by the continual emphasis all sources place on how difficult it is to see them. Ranakandriana were said to live in caves or lightless places where their voices were heard but their forms could not be made out. They were said to fly away as soon as one tried to set eyes on them; likewise, in prayers such as those cited above, they were regularly described as invisible or bodiless.

The uniform ambiguity of Malagasy spiritual forces has led to endless debates among foreign observers. There have been long discussions, for instance, over whether terms like *Zanahary* ("creator" or "god") should be translated in the singular or the plural. From a Christian standpoint this is obviously a very important question. But it does not seem to have been a question anyone else in Madagascar has ever found particularly important. I would suggest that the ambiguity is itself really half the point; in the absence of any defining feature, "spirits" become sheer formless potential. The term *zanahary*, for example, could apply to any being capable of creation through imperceptible means; rather than ask what such beings were like, or how many of them there were, it makes more sense to see this power of creation as emerging from their very lack of definition. Their generic nature is itself a way of representing power or unlimited possibility.

By this logic it was the fact that the ingredients of charms were hidden from sight that gave them their generic capacity for action. Ody, however, were not simply generic potential. The ingredients that made them up were specific objects, and it was those ingredients that determined the specific ways in which that capacity could make itself known. Each ingredient, in other words, corresponded to one of an ody's powers.

Lars Vig (1969), a Norwegian missionary, provides some very detailed descriptions of how ody were supposed to work. Consider, for example, his account of a popular *ody basy*, or "rifle charm" meant to protect soldiers from enemy bullets (Vig 1969:70—72). The

object of desire—that is concrete and particular in the eyes of the person who is acting or desiring. The means have no particular features of their own. Instead, they tend to be identified with user's own powers of action.

In his discussion of hoarding in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1970[1859]:125-137) and the *Grundrisse* (1973[1857-58]:228-234), Marx phrases the distinction between money in its abstract and concrete aspects as a distinction between "money" and "coin." "Coin" is the physical object offered in exchange. It only becomes "money" in the strict sense of the term when it is temporarily withdrawn from circulation—that is, when it is not the immediate object of anyone's action but instead represents a kind of universal potential for action. By holding on to the stuff the hoarder preserves his power, which is the power to buy anything at all. For the hoarder, money becomes a kind of ascetic religion—Marx likens it to Puritanism—in which the owner tends to develop an intensely personal, even secretive, relationship with the source of his powers. The impulse, once one has accumulated a substantial hoard, is always to hide it in the ground where no one else can see it:

> An outward expression of the desire to withdraw money from the stream of circulation and to save it from the social metabolism is the *burying* of it, so that social wealth is turned into an imperishable subterranean hoard with an entirely furtive private relationship to the commodity-owner. Doctor Bernier, who spent some time at Aurangzeb's court at Delhi, relates that merchants, especially the non-Moslem heathens, in whose hands nearly the entire commerce and all money are concentrated—secretly bury their money deep in the ground, "being held in thrall to the

use value and exchange value arises through that discussion, and Marx seems to believe it emerges from the logic of capitalism, not of exchange itself.

> belief that the money they hide during their lifetime will serve them in the next world after their death." [Marx 1970(1859): 130]

As his example implies, Marx did not see such behavior as deriving from capitalism itself but from the nature of money, from its abstract and almost mystical powers. In a similar vein, Engels (in Shell 1978:41) suggested that coined money, when first introduced into the Greek world in the seventh century B.C., was seen less as an economic instrument than as a magical charm, "a talisman that could at will transform itself into any desirable or desired object."

Engels was no doubt getting a bit carried away with himself. But, as Marc Shell (1978:62) points out in a brilliant essay titled "The Ring of Gyges," ancient Greek stories about the man who first coined money did focus on a magical charm of sorts. They were about a ring that could make its wearer invisible.

Gyges, a sixth-century ruler of Lydia, was widely credited in antiquity—as he is today—with having been the first king to coin money. According to Herodotus, Gyges was a usurper whose rise to power began when he found the magic ring and used it to gaze unseen on the Lydian king's wife in her chambers. But as Shell emphasized, Gyges's trajectory was from invisible to visible; while at first he used his powers to look on things that would otherwise have been hidden, in the end he became a king, wielding power in the traditional, public fashion. In this respect Herodotus opposed Gyges's story to that of another usurper, Deioces, a judge who developed such a reputation for honesty among the Medes that they offered to make him their king. He accepted, but, as soon as he had the power, hid himself behind a golden wall and allowed no one to come see him; at the same time, he filled his kingdom with spies. Deioces managed to convert his fame—his public visibility—into power, but, in doing so, transformed the terms in which that power was exercised, making it invisible and private. While Gyges became a king, Deioces became a tyrant. In fact, just as Gyges has been

through their tombs or relics, for example, while Vazimba were spirits one encountered through certain trees, rocks, or springs. All these objects became conduits of the spirit's agency, and could thus be called *masina*—that is, "having hasina." The same was true of ody, whose power was derived from the relation between the ingredients and a class of spirits called Ranakandriana.

To use an ody, one had to first remove it from its wrappings, then call on it to "wake," and address it in prayer. Often one would have to explain in some detail what the charm was being asked to do, and why. Ody, in other words, were treated like conscious beings; they were objects vested with a sort of disembodied intelligence. In prayers they were often invoked in such terms as "you who have no eyes but can still see, no ears but can still hear,"' or "you whose name is known but whose face is never seen" (Callet 1908:84; cf. Ruud 1960:218; Vig 1969:59—60). Malagasy sources are always careful to distinguish between this consciousness (and capacity for action), identified with the spirit, and the "wood" or physical ingredients of a charm (Callet 1908:82-85).

On the other hand—and this is where things get complicated—while a charm's personality and capacity for action was identified with a disembodied spirit, that spirit had nothing to do with its individual *identity*. In invocations one called out to ody by their names, but these names were not those of spirits. Each one simply consisted of the name of the most important piece of wood that made it up. What made ody different from one another, then, was the specific details of their ingredients.

All this is part of a much broader Malagasy ritual logic, one already suggested by Délivré. All spiritual forces in the Malagasy cosmos tend to be generic beings. They take on individual identity only through the objects by which people come into contact with them. In themselves they are, for all intents and purposes, virtually indistinguishable. In some myths they are said to be quite literally identical in appearance (Ottino 1978:36); they are always identical in the uniform ambiguity that surrounds them, their complete lack

19th-century Imerina most descent groups seem to have had their own sampy. There were also royal sampy that guarded the kingdom as a whole. The latter would periodically be brought before the king's subjects, and water in which the sampy had been washed would be sprinkled on the assembled people to protect them from sorcery, disease, and other dangers (Berg 1979).

It is important to emphasize that ody were hidden things. The objects that made them up (mostly rare pieces of wood, along with beads and silver ornaments) were always kept out of sight in a horn, box, or small satchel. The containers were usually kept out of sight as well; even when one carried or wore them, it was usually underneath one's clothes. Most, however, were kept inside their owners' houses, wrapped in silk cloth, on the domestic altar that was always set up in the northeast corner of the house. This was even more true of sampy, which, even when they were periodically brought out before the public, were carried atop long poles and were always effectively invisible, swathed in silk (e.g., Callet 1908:179, 190—191).

The ingredients themselves mainly consisted of pieces of the wood, leaves, bark, or roots of rare trees. Such things were called *fanafody* (medicine), no formal distinction being drawn between what we would consider herbal remedies (such as an infusion of crushed leaves for an upset stomach) and what we would consider ceremonial magic (such as praying to a piece of wood to direct lightning on one's enemies). I should emphasize, however, that their power was not seen to derive from the nature of the materials that made up a charm. The materials were little more than a conduit.

The efficacy of a charm was called its *hasina*. In 19th-century Imerina almost all ritual action involved the creation or manipulation of hasina, a term Délivré (1974:144—145) defines as the capacity to affect the world through imperceptible means. Most often, he adds, hasina turned on the relation between an invisible spirit and a material object through which that spirit could come into contact with human beings: ancestors were spirits one encountered mainly

credited with the invention of coinage, Deioces has been called the inventor of tyranny.

Shell goes on to present a great deal of evidence that Greeks of Herodotus's time did tend to talk about money as having a certain kind of invisible power—one politically dangerous for the very fact of its invisibility. Since it represented private interests, rather than those of the state, money was seen to have much in common with tyranny—tyranny being defined as the exercise of state power in the private interest.

The distinction between public and private was central to the way the Greek polis defined itself. Jean-Pierre Vernant (1983) has described the emergence of the polis, over the sixth and seventh centuries B.C., as a process of disclosure and unveiling, even desacralization, in which every power that had once been secret, or confined to the interiors of aristocratic families, was brought into the public domain of the agora, where it was visible to all. Debates began to be carried out in public and laws were published. "The old sacra, badges of investiture, religious symbols, emblems, wooden images, jealously preserved as talismans of power in the privacy of palaces or the crannies of priestly houses" were gradually "moved to the temple, an open and public place" (1983:54). The furtive power of money was no exception; private hoarding was discouraged by the state. The government of course kept its own hoard, its public treasury, but in a form visible to all: the Athenian gold reserves, for instance, were used to plate the monumental statue of Athena in the Parthenon. The part of those reserves the state released for private use was stamped with its own impression.

I should emphasize that Gyges was credited not with the invention of money but with that of coinage. These are hardly the same thing. By his time, gold and silver had been in common use for millennia as a measure and medium of exchange—as money—throughout the Near East, in Lydia as well as Greece. Before Gyges, however, money does not seem to have been stamped out in uniform denominations by the state. People carried it around

in nuggets, which had to be weighed at each transaction. But this does not seem to have been much of a hindrance to trade. In fact, classicists (e.g., Finley 1974:166—169) have pointed out that the Greek monetary system was so complicated—with dozens of tiny city-states each issuing coins in their own sets of denominations, often based on completely different systems of weights and measures—that for most important transactions, coins, too, had to be weighed out. The invention and adoption of coinage then brought little improvement in economic efficiency. It was not so much an economic measure as a political one.

What I am suggesting is that if the polis felt the need to stamp money with its own image, it did so because it saw money as a dangerous, furtive power that had to be tamed and domesticated *by rendering it visible*. The emblem of public authority was to be impressed on it through violence, literally hammered in. The resulting coins were often objects of great beauty. Some were renowned as works of art even in their own day. But in the end, the very fact that the state was willing to seek out the finest artists of the day to cast its dies could be considered evidence of how desperate it had become to substitute some other definition of value for one that had a continual capacity to elude it. It was an attempt to transform money into an object of adornment, something visible in the most exemplary of fashions.

The legend of Gyges contains no explicit reference to the invention of coinage. Still, one might say that the legend was itself a model for the process: the transformation of private and invisible powers into legitimate, political ones, the latter made limited and particular by the public gaze.

various kinds of fetishism

Earlier I made a distinction between two sorts of social power: the power to act directly on others, and the power to define oneself

hold among the common people. To the contrary, over the following decades even the rich appear to have abandoned them. By mid-century, descriptions of wealthy people decked out in beads and silver, so common in Radama's time, disappear from travelers' accounts (cf. Edmunds 1897). Many of the huge silver chains and other elaborate forms of jewelry must have been melted down or buried. Others were retained as family heirlooms but were rarely, if ever, worn or displayed. The one area in which both beads and silver ornaments did continue to be used after Radama's time was the sole way they are still used today:[12] in the making of *ody*, or magical charms.

On this subject, at least, there is no lack of information. Malagasy magic is relatively well documented. There are even two essays devoted exclusively to the magical properties of beads (Bernard-Thierry 1946; Pages 1971).[13] Let me make a brief survey, then, of the ritual logic of 19th-century Merina magic, and then come back to the place of beads and silver ornaments within it.

ody and *sampy*

The term *ody* was typically applied to objects that served a single purpose. The purposes could vary enormously—to prevent attacks by crocodiles, to guarantee the success of a journey, to inspire love, or to make opponents trip over their words in court—but they were always limited to one such task. Ody were usually owned by individuals. In this they were distinguished from *sampy*, charms that provided a more general protection for larger social groups. In

[12] Nowadays most beads are made of plastic or wood, not glass, and "silver" ornaments—while called by the same names as in the 19th century—are actually made of tin.

[13] There is a complex system by which beads are classified, based on varying criteria of shape, color, material, and pattern, and each type of bead defined in this way is seen as having its own particular magical power. The authors cited above both provide outlines of the system.

ple, urging on them the advantages of commercial agriculture. Several representatives, however, objected that most of Radama's subjects had little motivation to compete over wealth, since sumptuary laws did not allow them to acquire any of the good things one could buy with it. After some discussion, the king agreed to abolish the laws. The result, according to Ellis, was an outpouring of public celebration unmatched since the abolition of the trade itself.

Around the same time—perhaps it was at the same assembly—Radama also announced that any debt incurred for the purpose of buying ornaments for the dead would no longer be considered recoverable (Ellis 1837, 2:304). It was necessary to do so, he said, because

> [M]any persons, endeavouring to make a display of respect for deceased relatives, often contracted debts in purchasing valuable clothes and ornaments to throw into the graves of the departed, agreeably to ancient usage; and several instances occurred, where individuals had been reduced to slavery on account of their inability to discharge the debts so created. Thus the dead had been enveloped in rich clothing, covered with ornaments, and surrounded with silver, whilst the nearest living relatives were by these means reduced to the lowest state of degradation.

Sumptuary laws, presumably, did not apply to the dead. Even if they had, there would have been little way of enforcing them, since no one would have dared to enter an unrelated person's tomb.

It is hard to avoid the impression that, taken together, these measures amounted to an attempt to shift the competition over adornment from the dead to the living—to bring it out into the open, so to speak. If so, it was not a particularly successful one. Although burying expensive ornaments in tombs probably did become less common as time went on, the habit of wearing them never took

in such a way as to convince others how they should act toward one. The first tends to be attributed to the hidden capacities of the actor, the other to visible forms of display. By now it should be easy to see how this same analysis can also be applied to value. If money tends to become an extension of its holder's capacities to act on the world (thus inspiring, according to Marx, the impulse to hide it), objects whose value is seen to lie in their particular histories or unique identity have an equally strong tendency to be assimilated to the social identity or persona of their owners, thus generating the impulse to show them off.[7]

It is important to emphasize that these terms are never fixed. Few objects are simply one thing or another. In a market system, in Marx's formulation, money and commodities are always two things at once, since buyer and seller conceive them from opposite points of view. And in any system of value there are, at the very least, constant diversions and slippages back and forth, continual struggles over definition. Often—as in the case of the Greek polis—these struggles are quite openly political ones. And insofar as they involve attempts to reconcile such contrasting values as artistic beauty, wealth, and civic authority, one might say that, in essence, they are *always* political.

The constant transformation of the visible into the invisible, and back again, might provide an answer to the question with which I began this article: Why beads? Why, in so many societies, should money, too, consist of objects of adornment?

Recall that, at the time, I contrasted money to the sort of objects of adornment that played so central a role in Mauss's writings on the gift, and in anthropological exchange theory in general.

[7] Note that I am not saying that money or property merely "stands for" or "represents" a person's capacities for action, or identity. Money *is* capacity. Having money in a cash economy enables one to act in all sorts of ways one could not otherwise act. In the same way, if I were to buy the *Mona Lisa*, I would be, for most people in the world anyway, "the guy who owns the Mona Lisa" before I was anything else.

These, I said, were unique treasures, and, as such, entirely different from money. But Mauss himself remarks that the rarest and most valuable of them—Maori axes and cloaks, Kwakiutl coppers, and kula armshells and necklaces—were all seen as having a personality, will, and intelligence of their own. It is almost as if the very fact of an object's having an individual identity—a unique form, a name, a history—implied the presence of some sort of hidden life-force or agency behind it, just as, in Tylor, the inner life-soul always lies hidden behind a person's unique exterior "image."

But why should heirlooms tend to have a capacity for action attributed to them? In part, it is probably an effect of their value. Value, after all, is something that mobilizes the desires of those who recognize it, and moves them to action. Just as royal splendor calls on its audience to do as others have done, so does the perception of value in objects of exchange. Others have sought to acquire these things, runs the implicit message; therefore, so, too, should you.

In a broader sense the value of heirlooms is always, as I have said, historical value, derived from acts of production, use, or appropriation that have involved the object in the past. The value of an heirloom is really that of actions: actions whose significance has been, as it were, absorbed into the object's current identity, whether the emphasis is placed on the inspired labors of the artist who created it, the lengths to which some people have been known to go to acquire it, or the fact that it was once used to cut off a mythical giant's head. Since the value of the actions has already been fixed in the physical being of the object, it is a short leap to begin attributing the agency behind such actions to the object as well, and speak, as Mauss does, of valuables that transfer themselves from owner to owner, or actively influence their owners' fates.

The obvious comparison here is with Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism, one that he also, incidentally, extended to money. According to Marx, while all that really lies behind the specific, material form of the object one desires to buy are the human energies that went into producing it, the desirer tends to see those

for sale. For money, silver dollars were cut up into a series of smaller denominations—the smallest being 1/720th of a dollar—and weighed out at each transaction.[11] As Bloch has pointed out, however, the supply of silver was unreliable, and if too much time went by without slave traders passing through, it would often dry up and the money economy cease to function. As soon as one appeared again, markets revived and rulers were once again able to collect taxes.

One reason the money supply could dry up so quickly was the habit of melting down imported coins to produce silver chains and other ornaments. Along with beads, silver ornaments were the most important forms of personal adornment in Imerina at this time. Chains in particular—the largest containing as much as 400 dollars' worth of silver—often became important family heirlooms (Edmunds 1897:474—476). It was not every family, however, that was allowed to own them. The sources are frustratingly vague, but apparently there was a fairly elaborate set of sumptuary laws regarding clothes and personal ornaments. Red beads, for example, could be worn only by men or women of noble status; the bulk of the population seems, in theory, not to have been allowed to wear expensive adornment of any kind at all.

That at least is the implication of an account of the royal assembly held in 1834, at which the sumptuary laws were abolished. By this time Imerina was a unified kingdom and its king, Radama I, signatory to a treaty with England abolishing the slave trade. The account is based on that of Radama's British adviser, James Hastie, as published in William Ellis's *History of Madagascar* (1837, 2:302—303).

The British government had sent Radama seeds and cuttings for potential cash crops that might substitute for the export of slaves. At this assembly he distributed them to representatives of his peo-

[11] Beads were apparently no longer in use as a medium of exchange by this time—that it is, if they had ever been so used in Imerina itself.

18th- and 19th-century Madagascar—tells a somewhat more complicated story. It is the story of a diversion of value, in which things that had entered the country as money were converted into objects of adornment, and those objects of adornment finally transformed back into tokens of hidden power, but into tokens of hidden power of a rather different kind.

Madagascar and the slave trade

Indian Ocean trade beads were in wide use in Madagascar at least from the 12th-century A.D. on (Verin 1986), and probably well before. Red coral and, later, red glass beads seem to have functioned as a trade currency. In the 17th century European merchants stopping for provisions on their way to the East Indies found that these red beads were the only kind the inhabitants would readily accept in exchange for their cattle. During the 18th century, however, the importance of beads declined with the rise of the slave trade,[10] which was conducted largely in silver. Spanish dollars gradually took the place of red beads.

Imerina, the part of Madagascar whose later history is best known, is located on the central plateau of the island, far from the major ports of trade. Imerina was, for much of this time, something of a backwater. Politically fragmented, it was a regular target for slave-raiders from the coasts; and its rulers were almost constantly at war with one another, partly to secure captives they could sell to the foreign merchants (most of these merchants were apparently Indian Muslims but included the occasional European).

Maurice Bloch (1990:182—185) described the economic situation that prevailed around 1777, when the first European account of Merina society was written. There were weekly markets throughout Imerina, in which all sorts of goods were available

[10] The peoples of Madagascar were being exploited as a source of labor for European plantations in Mauritius and Reunion.

powers as intrinsic to the object itself. They seem to give it a will and power of its own. If nothing else, commodities certainly exert a power over anyone who desires them. Marx's commodities differ from heirlooms largely because, in their case, the illusion of agency emerges from the fact that their true history has been forgotten; in the case of heirlooms, the value that makes the illusion of agency possible derives from that very history, real or imagined. In either case, energies that went into creating the particular form of the object and made it desirable are displaced; they come to seem a ghostly agency that guides its present movements. The object of desire becomes the illusory mirror of the desirer's own manipulated intentions.

All this, in turn, would make the various mirror metaphors that have cropped up over the course of this essay much easier to understand.[8] A person looking into a mirror is split into active and passive, observer and observed. The very perception of one's own image implies the existence of an unseen agent who is seeing it. Walter Ong (1967:121—144) has in fact suggested that it is in the nature of vision always to suggest a beyond, something unseen. Eyes only take in the surfaces of things. To tell if a coin is gold or merely gilded, you do not stare at it; you bite it, weigh it on your palm, or rap it to hear the sound. Looking at a thing, according to Ong, is always looking at a mere fraction of a thing, and the viewer

[8] Most of the authors who have looked into the symbolism of beads (l am thinking primarily of Comaroff and Comaroff [1992:170—197] on the attitudes of 19th-century English missionaries, and George Hammel [1983] on those of the native peoples of 16th- and 17th-century North America) also find a significant symbolic relationship between beads and mirrors.

When one looks in a mirror, of course, one is looking at an image of oneself, reflected in some other object. So one could say there is an immediate affinity between mirror images and "adornment to the person," in the sense in which I have been using the term: both have to do with an extension of one's self or person into some thing outside one's body, in a form that can only be realized by being seen.

is always at least vaguely aware that there is something further underneath.

At any rate, the continuities between action and reflection, the constant movements between visible and invisible forms of value, the fact that valued objects are so often seen as embodying a hidden power, all make it easier to see how money might emerge from objects of adornment. These things are always slipping into their opposites.

At this point I can finally return to beads.

I am not sure if beads have ever, anywhere, been used as money in a fully monetarized economy. Almost always they have played the role of trade currency—as an anonymous means of exchange between people of different cultural worlds. Most often they have been used as trade currency between members of societies in which there is a full-blown commercial economy and others in which there is not. No doubt one reason beads lend themselves so well to this role is that they can be so easily transformed back and forth from unique forms to generic ones: they can be bought in bulk, sewn together into elaborate beadwork or onto other forms of adornment, and then—whenever the need is felt—broken up into individual, mutually indistinguishable items once again. It makes them ideally suited for passing back and forth between radically different domains of value.

A nice illustration can be found in the use of wampum, the purple and white beads made from the shell of the quahog clam, that became the main currency of trade between European settlers along the coast of 17th- and 18th-century North America and the Iroquoian peoples in the interior who provided them with furs. Demand for wampum was so great that the settlers began manufacturing it in huge quantities. For them, wampum was clearly a form of money. Not only did they use wampum to buy things from the Indians, they used it to buy things from each other: wampum was for a long time legal tender in New England (Weeden 1884).

The Iroquois, however, did not use wampum—which was traded in belts of solid white or solid purple, the purple beads being worth twice the white ones—to buy or sell anything to each other.[9] Instead, it circulated largely within a political elite. Women would break up the belts used as currency and rework the beads into new, patterned ones, which negotiators would then present as gifts in mediating feuds and creating peace—this sort of peacemaking being considered, among the Five Nations, the very essence of political activity. In ceremonies, speakers would place one belt after another on the ground, revealing them as the physical accompaniments of their words. These words were words of condolence, which aimed at clearing away the effects of grief, bereavement, and the desire for vengeance on their recipients, and to open their bodies to a joyful unity with the cosmos and other people, and wampum beads were valued largely because they were seen as having a particularly powerful capacity to effect such transformations (Beauchamp 1898, 1901; Foster 1985; Hammel 1983; Holmes 1883). There is a whole philosophy of society entailed here, and a theory of value, but one that the colonists who manufactured wampum would have had little understanding. At the end of these ceremonies most of these belts (or "words") would be taken apart for later use; but the most belts"—would be preserved as heirlooms of a sort, valued as memorials of the peace they had played a part in making. Wampum at the same time represented the value placed in a certain kind of action (the creation of peaceful concord), served as the medium by which it was brought about, and commemorated such actions after they were accomplished.

This is a relatively simple case of the way beads and money can pass back and forth between regimes of value. The case study that follows—which concerns the use of beads and silver money in

[9] Nor is there any evidence they used them as objects of adornment. One looks in vain for any mention that members of the Five Nations wore wampum, although members of the Algonquin-speaking groups on the coast often did.