

THE STONE MONEY OF
UAP.

BY

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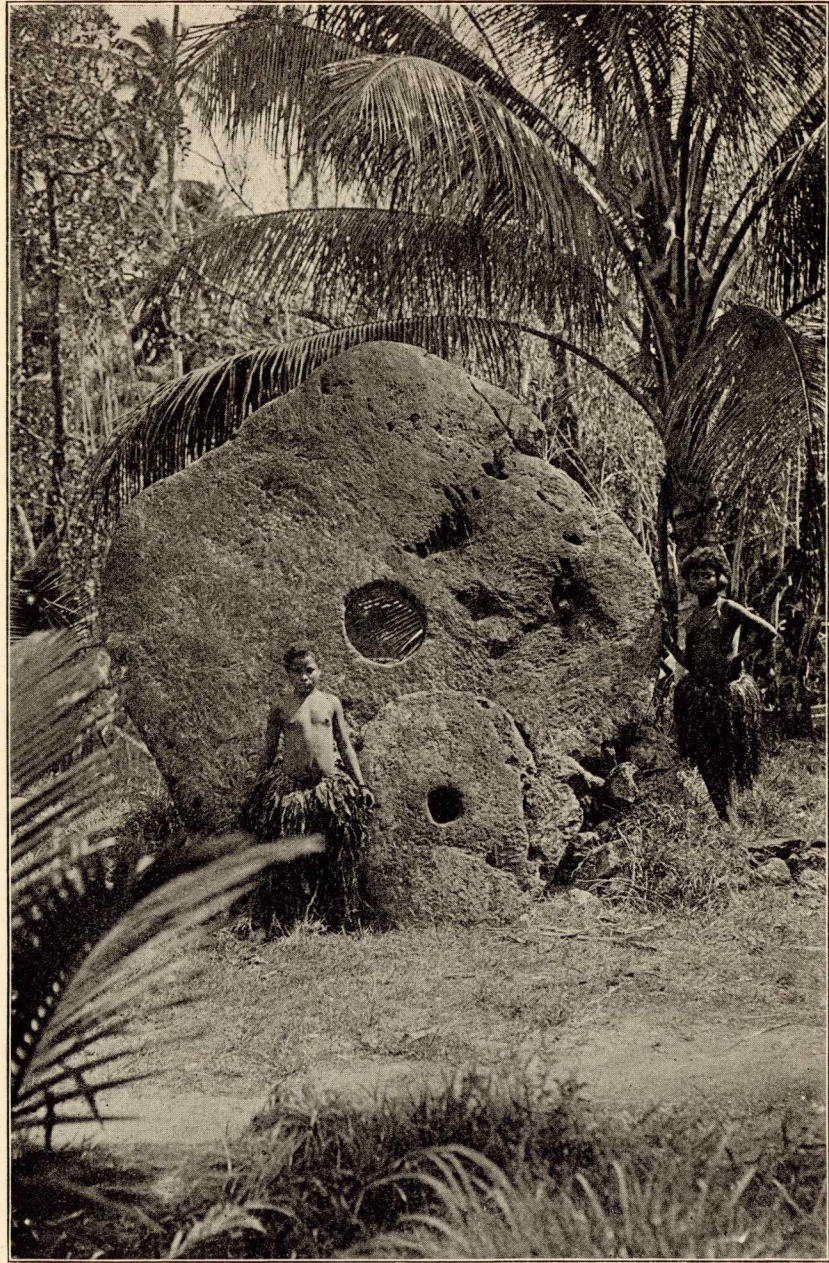
THE STONE MONEY OF UAP.

WESTERN CAROLINE ISLANDS.

IN that happy land where free food and drink and ready-made clothing grow on trees, it is really a difficult problem to run into debt, and the man who hopes to live by barter and sale receives a sad check when all his customers can step aside from the jungle path and pluck from a neighbouring tree all that necessity may require or luxury demand. Perchance (I venture but a mild surmise) it is this lavish charity, showered by Nature on her tropical isles, that gives to her spoiled children a zest for head-hunting and for obtaining that with which a man would least like to dispense.

Such were the conditions, in days gone by, on the small island of Uap in the Western Caroline group, when the people, before the 'iron came,' as they name the advent of white men, found difficulty in bargaining and trading, for the insuperable reason that their desires were so limited and feeble that there was nothing to tempt an exchange. They did not turn, however, to head-hunting; possibly by reason of the very limited field for operations afforded by the diminutive islet whereon they lived—Uap is but twenty miles long at its longest and ten miles wide at its widest part.

When, in general, for purposes of trade, the need neither of food nor of clothing can be appealed to, vanity or the love of ornament is usually the next thing to induce in human breasts a '*sacra fames*;' the medium of exchange then becomes some personal adornment—shells, beads, or feathers. Among the Uap islanders no one of these attractions was in great demand; bright sea shells are plentiful along the coral reefs; the variegated leaves of the Croton, abundant along every path, can be gathered dewey fresh every morning for garlands or for bright girdles to their skirts of Pandanus leaves. Thus lavishly and freely supplied by Nature with every need for the outer and inner man, it seems as though for them the idea of barter and sale were non-existent. There yet remains one need with which Nature does not supply them and this is shelter for the night and from the weather. This shelter must become a substantial house, and to build this requires time, activity, and labour.



1. One of the largest Fel in Uap, about twelve feet in diameter.

Here, at last, is the point where trade enters their lives. Labour is to be bought with labour. For the equivalent of value they have, with unconscious logic, selected as a standard that which represents neither food nor clothing nor ornament, but simply and solely—labour. This medium of exchange they call *Fei*, and it consists of large, circular, stone wheels ranging in size from a foot in diameter to twelve feet, and having in the centre a hole, varying in size with the diameter of the stone, wherein a pole may be inserted sufficiently strong to bear the weight and to facilitate transportation. These stone coins, if I may so call them, are not made on the island of Uap, but were originally quarried and shaped in the Pelao Islands, four hundred miles to the southward, and then brought to Uap, by some venturesome navigators in canoes and on rafts, over seas by no means as pacific as the name implies. When once safely landed, these enterprising speculators, with a plausibility worthy of a trader in 'wooden nutmegs,' succeeded in persuading their countrymen that these 'novelties' were most desirable and handy things to have about the house.

Of course the larger the stone the greater its worth, but it is not size alone that is prized. The *Fei* must be also of a white limestone of fine grain, if it is to be of the highest value; it is by no means any large flat stone from the Pelao Islands that will be accepted as a medium of exchange; it has to be a stone of a particular variety and quality.

When new, or when stored in houses out of the wind and rain, the specimens of *Fei* present an opaque white appearance, somewhat like quartz, but not of so fine a grain; when it so happens that a man's wealth is too great for him to bring it in his house, it then remains outside his door, and, exposed to all sorts of weather, its colour changes to a dirty gray, resembling sandstone, and the surface becomes rough and covered with moss and lichen. This does not, however, detract much from its value as currency; this 'unearned increment' can be easily scraped off and the diameter, on which depends its value, be no whit diminished. During a recent visit to the island of Uap, I saw many thrifty possessors of stone money cheerfully chipping away at their riches, thus disproving the old adage that moss is a want generally felt by all stones even if they can roll.

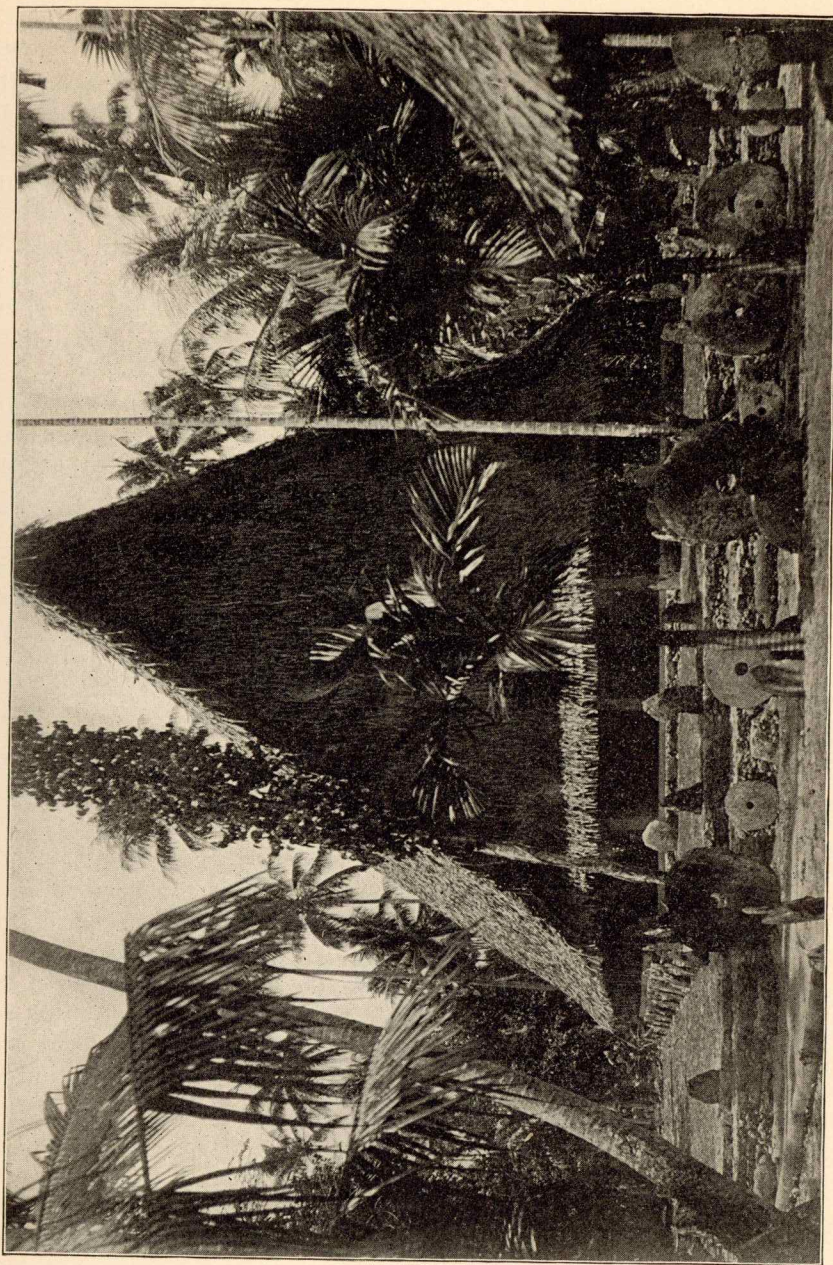
Fei are, as I have said, circular but not always exactly so; to facilitate transportation they are pierced in the centre and the aperture is about one-sixth of the diameter of the stone; furthermore, the smaller portable 'coins' slope from the centre in one or two ring-like gradations; wherefore if at the centre they are six or eight inches thick, they are but an inch and a half or two inches thick at the periphery. Their value depends upon the diameter, measured in spans, which in Uap means the stretch of index finger and thumb, and also upon the fineness of the stone, its whiteness, hardness, and smooth surface.

Apart from their value as currency it is extremely difficult to discover what these circular stones really represent; their original meaning and the true source of their value have vanished with the grandfathers of the present generation of Uapans. It is possible, however,—and it seems to me not unlikely, as I have already remarked,—that they present to the people a certain visible and tangible amount of labour that has been expended in their production; in other words, they are certificates of deposit of work, and more palpable than the promise to pay on our bank notes.

It is about the Bachelor houses or *Pabai*, as they are called, that the greatest number of Fei are to be seen, and this it is that leads me to suppose that they represent an equivalent of work, or stored energy. Large parties of the men of the Pabai, not necessarily all bachelors, spend days and nights in fishing for flying fish in the open sea outside of the lagoon, and while so engaged are subject to the most rigid tabu, eating only food specially prepared, never joining in the singing or dancing, never looking in the face of a woman, not even of their wives when they bring them food, and at night on shore sleeping in separate little stalls of palm leaves laid out on the floor of the Pabai. The fish are paid for in Fei and in large round pearl shells, which become the common property of the Pabai. Or it may be that some householder in the village may want to build a new house or to have his roof new thatched; thereupon he hires the members of the Pabai, the strong young men, to turn in and help; for their services they are likewise rewarded with a good-sized Fei, which is placed against the side of the Pabai or on edge near the platform outside the entrance, where it attests to the industry and wealth of the community within.

Another strange feature of this stone currency is that it is not necessary that its owner should have it in actual possession; indeed a man, after concluding a bargain which involves a Fei too large to be conveniently moved, is quite content to accept the bare ownership merely by agreement, and, without so much as a mark to indicate the exchange, let the coin remain on his neighbour's premises.

From an old soothsayer named Fatumak I gained much information; he was a man of Uap of unusual intelligence, and being unfortunately deformed had been obliged to spend much of his time in quiet observation and meditation, living by himself in a little house that was a veritable magpie's retreat with the amount of queer odds and ends that he had collected, his choicest possessions being kept in a tin biscuit box, through the lid and side of which he had punched holes for the insertion of the hasp of a padlock. Around his house was a fence of bamboo, and whenever he left the premises he was most careful to padlock the gate, although anyone could have pushed the fence over with one hand. He became one of my closest friends, and proved to be intelligent and trustworthy on many subjects, and among other things informed me that there was in a village near by a family whose wealth was unquestioned—acknowledged by all, and yet no one, not even the family



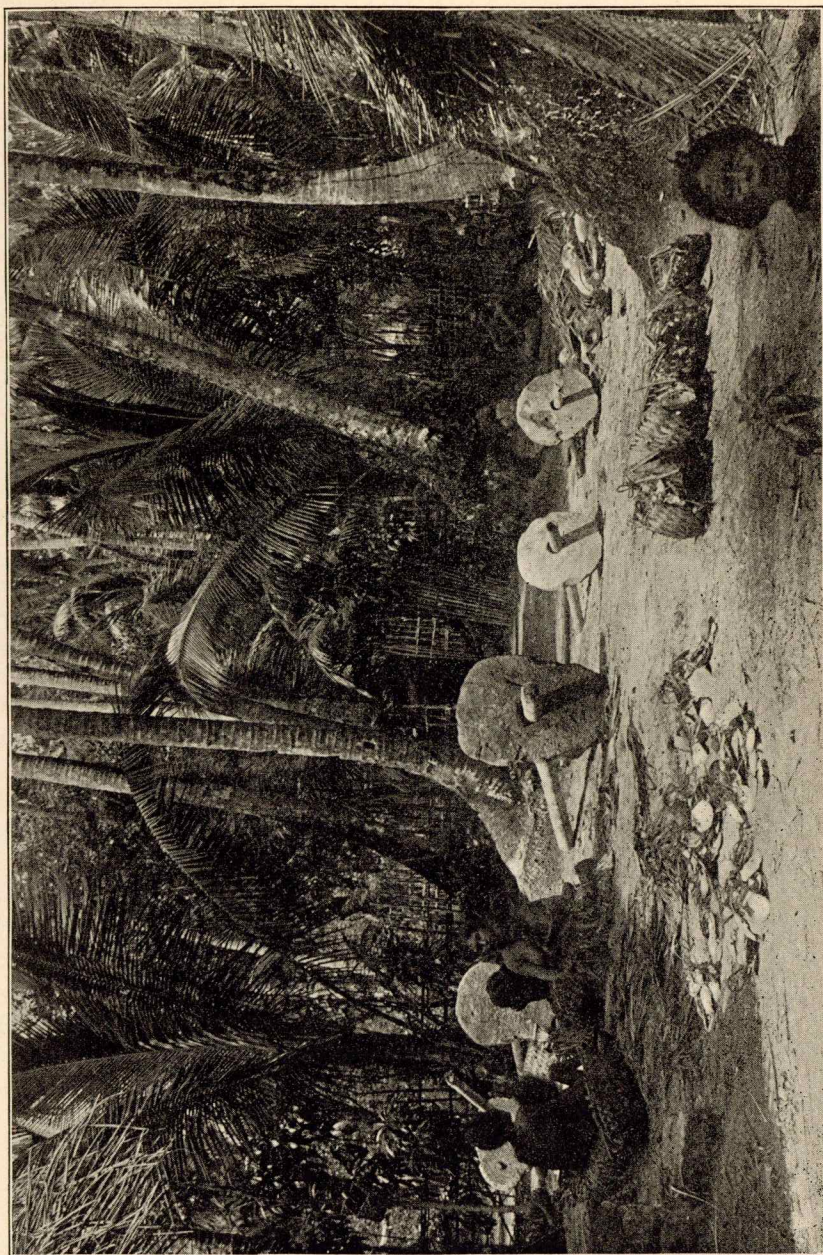
2. A Bachelor House or Pabai, as it is called, in Uap.
The stone money belonging to the Pabai is placed against the platform in front.

itself, had ever handled this wealth or even seen it, for the reason that it consisted of a Fei of unknown size, at that time and for two or three past generations lying at the bottom of the sea! Many years ago a member of this family, on an expedition after Fei, secured this remarkably large stone, which was placed on a raft and towed homeward; a violent storm arose and the party to save their lives were obliged to cut the raft adrift. When they got home, however, they all testified that the Fei was of magnificent proportions and quality, and was lost through no fault of the owner. Thereupon it was agreed on all sides that the mere accident of its loss overboard was too trifling to mention, and that a few hundred feet of water ought not to affect its marketable value; so the purchasing power of that stone, whenever the owner wishes to use it, remains as good as if it were leaning securely against the side of his house or propped on edge beside a jungle-path, and represents wealth as effectually as the hoarded inactive gold of a miser of the Middle Ages, or in our own times the empty safe of Madame Humbert.

There is one advantage in this form of wealth among people whose houses are as fragile and open as are those of the Uapans. Burglary is somewhat disheartening when it takes four men to carry away the price of a moderate-sized pig. Thefts of Fei are rare.

When a man of importance dies the women of the village and all his female relatives are the chief mourners, and sit about the house and in the yard surrounding the house singing lamentations and condoling with the bereaved family, but it is strictly against custom for men even to come within the enclosure of the yard in front of the house except when they bring a present for the dead; when they deposit this they must leave at once. The presents to the dead consist of good-sized Fei and strings of large round pearl shells—seven shells on each string—and the friends of the deceased vie with each other in the liberality of their gifts; the women, sitting about the enclosure, lamenting by turns and occupying themselves by weaving little pouches of Pandanus leaf for cigarettes or plaiting fronds of coconut palm into baskets to hold their betel nut and tobacco, gossip among themselves, and make whispered comments on the generosity or stinginess of their friends as their presents are deposited. Once when attending a funeral with Fatumak, I expressed amazement at the wealth of Fei and shells that had been presented, he replied, 'Ah, yes, indeed, everybody liked Mafel, but all those Fei and shells will have to be returned in two or three days.' That is the custom; as soon as the tears are dry and the dear departed is planted safely in the ground, then the rules of Uap etiquette direct that the dead and buried having no further use for money, the presents shall be returned to those who showed such affection and self-denial as to give them.

There are no vehicles of any kind in Uap, and consequently no roads; but the natives have always had well-constructed and clearly-defined paths communicating with the different settlements. When the German Government



3. Fei and Strings of Pearl-shell Money Presented to a Corpse at the Time of Burial.

assumed control of the Caroline Islands, which they bought from Spain in 1898, many of these paths were in bad condition and the chiefs of the several districts were told that they must have them repaired and put in good order. The blocks of coral roughly dressed were, however, quite good enough for the bare feet of the natives, and it took many a threat on the part of the governor to make the men of the different Pabais see the necessity of obeying the order. At last it became necessary to fine the chiefs of the districts for disobedience, but whereof was the fine to consist? It was impossible to demand silver money from them,—they had none,—and to force them to pay in their own currency would have required in the first place half the population of the island to bring the fine to court, in the second place a vast government building to hold it when collected, and finally Fei not being 'made in Germany' they could hardly be expected to circulate as coin of the realm. At last by a happy thought the fine was exacted by sending a man to the Bachelor houses and simply marking a certain number of the Fei with a cross of black paint to show that the stones were claimed by the government. This worked like a charm; the people thus impoverished in imagination turned to and repaired the roads so that they are now like park drives from one end of the island to the other. Then the government again sent its agents and erased the crosses; the fine had been paid and the Fei were once more the property of the Pabais.

Fei are not prized solely because they are old, nor is there any sacredness attached to them on account of legends that they were the work of the gods or ancient heroes; this was proved by an enterprising Irish-American copra trader who, living for many years in Uap, carried on a brisk trade in stone money by sending his schooner to the Pelao Islands with several Uap men who knew all that is essential to Fei. There they quarried the stones, shaped them properly, and the schooner returned laden to the scuppers with Fei, which were traded off for tons of dried coconut and bêche de mer.

The value of a Fei seems to depend largely upon the casual desires of the owner at the time of trading. Fatumak gave me, however, the following scale of values which no doubt his avaricious old soul (he was intelligent and a dear old fellow, but—closefisted) would have insisted upon in a trade. A three-span Fei of good whiteness and shape ought to purchase fifty baskets of food—this basket is about eighteen inches long and ten inches deep, and the food consists of taro roots, coconuts, yams, and bananas,—or, it is worth an eighty- or a hundred-pound pig; or, one thousand coconuts, or one pearl shell the full length of the hand and three fingers' width up the wrist. I gave a small short-handled axe for a very good white Fei fifty centimetres in diameter, and for another a little larger I gave a fifty-pound bag of rice—a rather disproportionate price. I was told that a well shaped Fei, about four feet in diameter, is the price usually paid to the parents of a girl, or to the headman of her native village, when she is made a *Mispil* or slave of a Pabai. This compensation is apparently by way of consolation, and is paid only after the formality of stealing her has been secretly performed.



4. The Pabal at Goror, in the Southern End of the Island of Uap.

I do not mean to imply that in possessing no intrinsic value the Fei of Uap is peculiar; in the New Hebrides there are mats made of fibre which are absolutely useless except as articles of trade among the natives. They are kept folded up tightly and suspended from the rafters of a house especially constructed therefor, where a fire is kept burning continually to blacken them with smoke. They are never used as mats; they represent industry. In Uap there is also a useless mat which is considered as wealth and never unfolded. Again, for example, the hoe money and the knife money of China represented well-known useful articles which in still earlier times were themselves used for trade, but for convenience mere representations in bronze of the implements were substituted as promises to pay. The feather money in use in many of the South Sea Islands has a similar origin; it represents ornaments and might of itself be used as such. For the stone money of Uap I can, however, find no exact parallel; it cannot be used for any practical purpose, and it is not the representation of anything that is either useful or ornamental, and furthermore it is of such a size and shape that it cannot be readily transferred from hand to hand.

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