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THE ISLAND OF STONE MONEY.

THE Caroline Islands, at the close of the Spanish-American war, were purchased from Spain by Germany for the sum of \$3,300,000. The recent establishment of British authority in these islands has brought us in contact with a people whose ideas on currency are probably more truly philosophical than those of any other country. Modern practice in regard to gold reserves has a good deal to learn from the more logical practices of the island of Uap.

The island of Uap is the most westerly of the group, and its inhabitants number from five to six thousand. Dr. William Henry Furness, in a work, *The Island of Stone Money* (1910), gives an account of the islanders' currency. Having no metal, they have had recourse to stone; how and with what results will be apparent from the extracts,¹ which, with Dr. Furness's permission, are printed below.

"As the island yields no metal, the islanders have had recourse to stone, stone on which labour in fetching and fashioning has been expended. This medium of exchange they call *fei*, and it consists of large, solid, thick stone wheels, ranging in diameter from a foot to twelve feet, having in the centre a hole varying in size with the diameter of the stone, wherein a pole may be inserted sufficiently large and strong to bear the weight and 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 at Babelthuap, one of the Pelao Islands, four hundred miles to the southward, and brought to Uap by some venturesome native navigators, in canoes and on rafts, over the ocean by no means as pacific as its name implies; and, with the stones safely landed, these navigators turned speculators, and induced their countrymen to believe that these 'novelties' were the most desirable 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 limestone of which the *fei* is composed,

¹ From Chapter VII.

to be of the highest value must be fine and white and of close grain. It is by no means any large stone, however skilfully fashioned, from the Pelaos that will be accepted as a *fei*; it is essential that a *fei* be made of this particular variety and quality of limestone.

“The noteworthy feature of this stone currency is that it is not necessary for its owner to reduce it to possession. After concluding a bargain which involves the price of a *fei* too large to be conveniently moved, its new owner is quite content to accept the bare acknowledgment of ownership and without so much as a mark to indicate the exchange, the coin remains undisturbed on the former owner’s premises.

“My faithful old friend, Fatumak, assured me that there was in the village near by a family whose wealth was unquestioned—acknowledged by everyone—and yet no one, not even the family itself, had ever laid eye or hand on this wealth; it consisted of an enormous *fei*, whereof the size is known only by tradition; for the past two or three generations it had been, and at that very time it was lying at the bottom of the sea! Many years ago an ancestor of this family, on an expedition after *fei*, secured this remarkably large and exceedingly valuable stone, which was placed on a raft to be towed homeward. A violent storm arose, and the party, to save their lives, were obliged to cut the raft adrift, and the stone sank out of sight. When they reached home they all testified that the *fei* was of magnificent proportions and of extraordinary quality, and that it was lost through no fault of the owner. Thereupon it was universally conceded in their simple faith that the mere accident of its loss overboard was too trifling to mention, and that a few hundred feet of water off shore ought not to affect its marketable value, since it was all chipped out in proper form. The purchasing power of that stone remains, therefore, as valid as if it were leaning visibly against the side of the owner’s house, and represents wealth as potentially as the hoarded inactive gold of a miser of the Middle Ages, or as our silver dollars stacked in the Treasury at Washington, which we never see or touch, but trade with on the strength of a printed certificate that they are there.

“There is one undeniable advantage in this form of weighty wealth among people whose houses are as fragile as those in Uap—when it takes four strong men to steal the price of a pig, burglary cannot but prove a somewhat disheartening occupation. As may be supposed, thefts of *fei* are almost unknown.

“There are no wheeled vehicles in Uap and, consequently, no

cart roads ; but there have always been clearly defined paths communicating with the different settlements. When the German Government assumed the ownership of the Caroline Islands, after the purchase of them from Spain in 1898, many of these paths or highways 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 roughly dressed blocks of coral were, however, quite good enough for the bare feet of the natives ; and many were the repetitions of the command, which still remained unheeded. At last it was decided to impose a fine for disobedience on the chiefs of the districts. In what shape was the fine to be levied ? It was of no avail to demand silver or gold from the chiefs—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 transport the fines ; in the second place, their largest government building could not hold them ; and finally, *fei* six feet in diameter, not having been ‘made in Germany,’ were hardly available as a circulating medium in the Fatherland. At last, by a happy thought, the fine was exacted by sending a man to every *failu* and *pabai* throughout the disobedient districts, where he simply marked a certain number of the most valuable *fei* with a cross in black paint to show that the stones were claimed by the Government. This instantly worked like a charm ; the people, thus dolefully impoverished, turned to and repaired the highways to such good effect from one end of the island to the other, that they are now like park drives. Then the Government dispatched its agents and erased the crosses. Presto ! the fine was paid, the happy *failus* resumed possession of their capital stock, and rolled in wealth.”