

etnográfica

Etnográfica

Revista do Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia

Número especial | 2022
Número especial

Numonu/moahau: red feather coils from the Santa Cruz islands, Temotu province, Solomon islands

Peter I. Crawford



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/etnografica/12737>

DOI: 10.4000/etnografica.12737

ISSN: 2182-2891

Publisher

Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia

Printed version

Number of pages: 125-132

ISSN: 0873-6561

Brought to you by UiT Arctic University of Norway

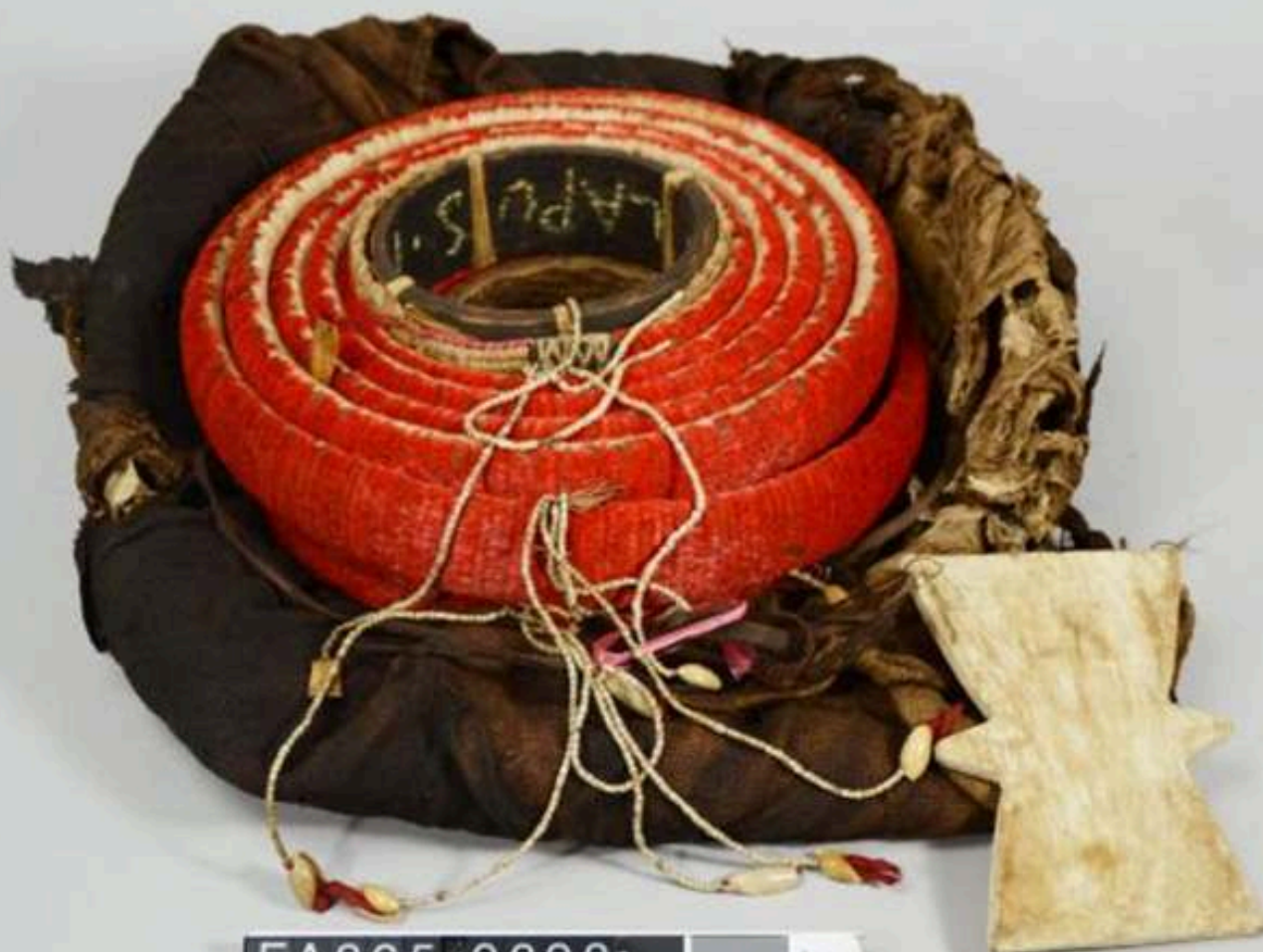
UiT / THE ARCTIC UNIVERSITY
OF NORWAY

Electronic reference

Peter I. Crawford, "*Numonu/moahau*: red feather coils from the Santa Cruz islands, Temotu province, Solomon islands", *Etnográfica* [Online], Número especial | 2022, Online since 22 December 2022, connection on 09 January 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etnografica/12737> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/etnografica.12737>



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



EA265-0292

Red feather coil. From the collection held at Moesgaard Museum, Aarhus, Denmark. One of three coils collected by Jens Pinholt on the island of Nifiloli in 1974.

Source: Photo from Moesgaard Museum.

◆ *Numonu/moahau*: red feather coils
from the Santa Cruz islands,
Temotu province, Solomon islands

Peter I. Crawford

UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Norway

In the amazing building constructed in the early 19th century to house the Bank of Scotland, in the centre of Edinburgh, you will find the Museum of the Mound, a museum basically dedicated to anything to do with “money”. Its collection contains marvellous pieces of what we may call traditional forms of money from various cultures all over the world. What I would say is arguably the most spectacular and iconic of these objects is what frequently is referred to as “red feather money” from the Solomon islands. It is certainly often used because of this in the museum’s PR material, such as posters and the website, and this object is what this article is about.

In 1994 I was invited by my friend and fellow Danish anthropologist, Jens Pinholt, to the Reef islands, a number of islands approximately 25 nautical miles north of Ndeni or Nendö, the main island of the Santa Cruz islands in the eastern Temotu province of the Solomon islands. He had asked me to bring a video camera so that we could film everyday life and also traditional ceremonies and culture, forming part of what in Solomon Pijin is known as the *kastom* or tradition of the isles, and their two neighbouring, separate but intermarried, ethnic groups, marking the beginning of the long-term Reef Island Ethnographic Film Project. The larger islands are inhabited by the Aiwoo-speaking Melanesian group of the Reef islands. We have stayed and worked with this group many times since my initial visit, staying in several of the string of vilages of the oblong island of Fenualoa or Ngasinue. The Pileni-speaking Polynesian group lives on small coral atolls, only one of which, Nifiloli, lies within the lagoon encircled and protected by a barrier reef. While the Aiwoo-speaking group makes its living mainly from horticulture, the larger and higher-lying islands having sufficient topsoil to support this and enabling garden production of staple root crops such as sweet potatoes and cassava, the smaller low-lying coral islands make it difficult to grow anything but coconuts and plantains,

a bottom layer of feathers from the white Pacific dove (*Ducula pacifica*) onto which dozens of overlapping bright red feathers from the honeyeater are glued, the glue made from the sap of the paper mulberry plant (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). Each plate has at least 30 red feathers and the total number of plates is around 1800. One of the craftsmen, using a small wooden spatula as a tool, makes the individual plates, which are then fastened to the coil by the other craftsman.

I was told by one craftsman along Graciosa Bay in 2005, who was trying to revitalise the making of the coils, and two of my friends on Reef, who started in 2015, that it takes up to three months' work to make a full coil, not counting the time and effort required to collect the feathers of both birds, often done by people who sell them to the coil-makers. Needless to say, this is a clear indication of the value of the coil by any standard. I have recently been offered a new *numonu* at a "friend's price" of 60.000 SBD (approximately 7500 EUR), the friends I know trying to sell them to collectors for twice that amount. This also tells us that today, the main interest in the coil is commercial, as a way of making money, turning what traditionally definitely had something to do with value but not in a purely monetary sense. Actually this is one of the points I am trying to make, that traditionally the coils were not "money" or, rather, they were also in some specific senses money, rendering the term red feather money if not invalid then at least simplistic and inadequate to understand the traditional meaning of the coils, a point raised in anthropology more generally about the so-called "traditional money" phenomena, for example by the British anthropologist Raymond Firth in the context of the Solomon islands, and the French anthropologist Maurice Godelier, based on his work among the Baruya in the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Different forms of traditional money may have been used in exchange, but that doesn't in itself make them "money" in a Western or Marxian sense.

Numonu, while still in traditional use in the Reef islands, were normally stored after being carefully wrapped in several layers of cloth and leaves, above the fireplace in the leaf kitchen hut, the smoke keeping away insects that might damage them, while at the same time almost being monitored round the clock by members of the family, not that I have ever heard of any being stolen, one explanation being that they were *tabu*, and protected by ornaments tied to the coils (see main picture), until the church prohibited that, claiming it was superstition. The smoke, and wear and tear, would gradually change the appearance and colour of the coils, the older they got almost losing the bright red colour entirely, and rendering them less valuable than a brand-new crimson coil. Using the money metaphor, which people would often do, especially after the advent of Western money, in the days of being a British protectorate, *i.e.* until independence in 1975, being Australian dollars, the different values of the coils would be the equivalent of different money denominations. A very old and almost black coil would thus be said to be only worth 1 dollar while a

new would perhaps be 100 dollars. They were even divided into ten different denominations, a set of ten often being the required number for the payment of a bride price, one of the most well-known traditional uses, and probably the main reason why the money metaphor emerged in the first place. But the use and significance of the coils was much more complex and varied.



Figure 3 – A set of ten different ‘denominations’ of numonu, a typical bride price payment, on display in the village of Tenge, Fenualoa, in the early 1970s.

Source: Photo by Jens Pinholt.

While payment of bride prices undoubtedly was one of the most common and significant uses of red feather coils, and could be considered the equivalent of a monetary payment, there were several other important uses. Firstly, they could be used in the settling of conflicts and payment of compensation between conflicting groups. A curious old case dating back to the 1910’s, recounted to Pinholt during his early fieldwork, was about a man who committed “creep”, a euphemism still used all over the Solomon islands when a man creeps into a house at night and has sexual intercourse with a woman, who in this case was married. This caused a fight with bows and arrows between the creeper and the husband, both supported by their respective male friends from their so-called men’s house (*sapolau*), then existing in all villages. One man on either side was wounded as a result. The conflict was resolved when the husband, with help from his *sapolau*, paid the offender ten feather coils as compensation and this was reciprocated by the offender paying ten other feather coils to the husband, assisted by his *sapolau*. Financially speaking, this evidently does not make sense, but symbolically the use of coils had restored peace.

A second important use, which we have filmed on several occasions, is the use of the coils in various ceremonies, typically age-set rituals, such as a ceremony in which children are given their first loincloth, the big men (*pesalik*), *i.e.* the owners of the red feather coils, performing an instrumental symbolic role, take a *numonu* and circle it around the body and between the legs of the children or youth. This signified both the status of the big men involved and the new adult status of the young boys and girls going through the ritual

A third use, which is where it became closest perhaps to “money”, is when they were used to pay for something big and important, because other payments in kind would be difficult due to the high “price”. A typical classical example would be to cover the payment of a large *te puke* canoe, used in the trading exchange system (see figure 1), which is why the Duff islands, or Taumako, lying another 60 nautical miles north of Reef, formed part of the system, making it a triangle. This is where the master Polynesian boat builders lived.



Figure 4 – The paramount chief of the Aiwoo-speaking community, Alfred Melotu, displaying his six out of a total of seven numonu during our shoot in 1994, footage from which was included in the film *Alfred Melotu – The Funeral of a Paramount Chief* (2002, remastered 2022). Source: Photo by Jens Pinholt.

The final example of the noteworthiness of the coils has to do with how they simply denote the status and importance of their owners, traditionally the Melanesian big men and the Polynesian chiefs, indicating the powerful *mana* they possessed, as well as their wealth. In a film we made about a paramount chief (see figure 3), Alfred Melotu, this became obvious, both when he was alive, when he insisted on us filming him with them, and when he had died, the coils being displayed throughout his funeral. It serves as an indicator of why this particular object has meant so much to my research and film work in the Reef islands. The spectacular coil, unknown to me prior to my first visit, and allegedly no longer being made or even existing in the local communities, turned out to be one of the most central elements to understand the traditional trading system, ceremonies, conflict resolution, rank, political leadership and power in the two neighbouring communities. During my more recent periods of field work, I have also witnessed the attempts to revitalise the tradition of making the coils, now increasingly, one could argue, really trying to turn them into red feather money.

I would like to thank Ulrich Høj Johnsen, PhD and curator at the Ethnographic Collections of MOMU Moesgaard Museum in Denmark, for his help in localising and providing the relevant information about the collection of the artefact covered in this article. ♦

