

The Hidden Story behind *the Stones of Yap*

by Rod Matthews

Most people don't display their money in front of their home. But where it won't fit in the bank, and you can't lift it anyway, you don't need to worry too much about thieves. Money you can't easily move and don't normally use—what's the point?

Most likely Yap is a very long way from where you live. It is (or was) famous for its stone money. Yap is a small group of islands in the western Pacific with a population of around 12,000, making up one state of the Federated States of Micronesia. It's beautiful, remote, and its traditional money teaches a lesson for a lifetime—and I don't mean it has "In God We Trust" stamped on it. Actually, Yap does use the American dollar as its

primary currency, which does have that neglected message on the one-dollar bill.

The unique stone money of Yap is seen across the islands in most villages—large and small "wheels" of stone, with a hole in the middle. Large ones are often propped up outside homes, and some line roads as if they fell from the broken necklace of a giant woman, right out of Gulliver's Travels. Some are quite small, perhaps a couple of centimetres across, up to very large (well above the height of a man) and exceptionally heavy, and every size in between. Obviously the larger ones cannot be lifted by a single person. They must be carried or rolled on a pole through the hole.

Each individual stone has a specific value. Some are precious enough to buy a plot of land or a house.

However, you cannot tell the value of the stone by its size. A smaller stone could be worth much more than a larger one, even though it obviously it took much more effort to move the larger ones to their current location. So how do you tell?

Behind each stone is a story. It's a saga of a journey of challenges, of storms and endurance, of braving the elements and the open sea. For these stones do not originate in Yap. Most came from Palau, another group of islands 450 kilometres to the southwest. The stones were fashioned from the rock of Palau and then transported by rafts towed by open canoes, with outriggers and sails, by the courageous men of Yap, across vast distances of the western Pacific where the trade winds blow and there is an annual season of dangerous typhoons.



Plain sailing with a following wind, and you could be home in under a week, with never a doubt about the safe arrival of the stone "wheels". But encounter a storm, and the famed navigational skills and seamanship of the men from Yap were tested to the limit. Perhaps the canoe started to disintegrate under the weight of the stone and had to be repaired en route. Without doubt many such stones line the bottom of the Pacific along the route from Palau to Yap.

If the men had to wrestle the elements with all their might and skills to bring a stone home safely, then a higher value was attributed to that stone. A large stone that arrived after an easy trip was worth less than a smaller stone that endured tempest and trial, and perhaps nearly sank the canoe and its crew.

So, the lesson of the stone money is that you can't know its value by how big or heavy it is. Its value is inherent in its history. And that history isn't recorded in a certificate of authenticity but in the oral account of what it endured to get to where it is now. Of course, the history of many (perhaps most?) stones has been lost as they sit in the same place from generation to generation, once a symbol of triumph over the forces of life in the Pacific, and valued on the sacrifice of the men who brought them home. Now they are more decorative.

But when I wondered about the saga of the stones I was privileged to see personally when I visited Yap several years ago, it occurred to me that they contain a powerful lesson for each of us against judging by appearances. Looks often deceive. Like the stone money of Yap, the voyage of life that a person has experienced—whether been forced to take or chosen—is not printed on their forehead or tattooed on their arm.

The magnitude and scope of the mountains climbed and depths dived, the “snakes and ladders” of life, are known only to God, even if, in the safety of friends, parts of that journey are shared. The poverty-encrusted old man under the bridge, the weathered lines of the hunched grandmother, the sunken eyes of the cast-adrift teenager, the fear—and hope—of the refugee born to a family in a country he or she did not choose,



the tragic casualty of brutality who was in the “wrong place at the wrong time”, are so often the victims of presumptions and judgments and condemnations and dismissal.

We humans love ranking things, and people. Too often we make comparisons and attribute weaknesses so we feel better about ourselves, all based on scant facts and assumptions. How unfair!

Yet every person has a truly unique story and their looks tell us little. In the grand scheme of life here and afterwards, how personally grateful we can be that there is a God, who looks not on the outward appearances but on what cannot be seen: the heart.¹ The New Testament apostle Paul warned one of his congregations about comparisons based on looks and assumptions saying: “But in all this comparing and grading and competing, they quite miss the point”.²

Each man, woman, and child is a valuable treasure carved from the quarry of human life, and brought home across the stormy seas where “God is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but everyone to come to repentance”.³

Seeing the formidable stone money of Yap, we can only be reminded of the value and respect, honour and love given to every human

being by the Creator, who made incredible sacrifices and gave up his own life that we should be brought safely home.⁴ We are not just an adornment to the front of God's house, placed there after a stormy journey, but a treasured member of his household forever: a child, yes, but a companion and friend, whom he wishes to love, and live and interact with forever.⁵

God's physical creation reflects his love of diversity and variation. With the divine perspective we see how God treasures each one of us, and therefore that perception should permeate our approach to one another.

The remarkable stone money of Yap, each piece with its personal history, stands as a physical monument to a greater spiritual truth that, if remembered in our daily walk, would preclude so much adverse comparison, aggravation, confrontation, and war.

Notes

- ¹ 1 Samuel 16:7.
- ² 2 Corinthians 10:12, the Message paraphrase.
- ³ 2 Peter 3:9.
- ⁴ John 3:16.
- ⁵ John 15:15.