

# **The Valuation and Production of Tabu Shell Currency**

**By Stephen DeMeulenaere, 2002**

## **Introduction**

Tabu is the shell currency of the Tolai people of the Duke of York Islands and Gazelle Peninsula in the Province of East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. It is made from the shell of the *Nassa Callosa* and *Nassa Camelus* snail, which is harvested from the beaches of New Britain, New Ireland and the Solomon Islands.

The tops of the shells are pinched in a way that reveals a small hole which is then threaded onto cane (rattan) strips. These strips can be bent and broken at lengths appropriate for the purchase of the full range of locally produced goods and services. Tabu is acquired and produced in the home, and is divided into two types functioning as savings with a third type functioning as a means of exchange.

The first type of savings is of medium-term duration, for the payment of "bride price", compensation payments as the result of Local Level Government court settlements, and other medium-scale expenses. The second type of savings, and the method of issuing the currency, involves the long-term storage of Tabu in large rolls which are cut open and freely distributed at the ceremony after one's funeral, or after the funeral of one's parents or relatives or matrilineal line.

Whatever amount of Tabu is not necessary for either of these types of savings, functions as a medium of exchange until it is in sufficient volume to be added to either the medium- or long-term savings.

Tabu is valued in units of Fathoms, which is equal to the Imperial measurement of six feet or 183 centimetres, and divisible down to a unit of 10-12 shells. However, up to this point in time, the exact length and the number of shells in one fathom, and therefore in its sub- and supra- units, has not been standardised. There is also an aesthetic preference expressed concerning the quality and colour of shells used.

## **Issuance of Tabu**

Tabu is a commodity money, similar to gold or silver coins, which are valued by the Tolai people for its ceremonial and customary uses, as well as a divisible medium of exchange for primarily locally-produced goods and services. To those non-Tolai people who are willing to receive Tabu as payment, it is considered a credit currency good for redemption only from a Tolai person in goods or services, or at the Local Level Government office at which it can be converted into PNG Kina.

Tabu is primarily a long-term savings instrument. Tabu is produced and wound onto large wheels, to be opened only upon the death of the owner or his or her parents. At the funeral, the wheel is cut open and distributed freely in quantities befitting the social status of those attending the event. Some of this money comes into circulation in small denominations, the rest of it is bound up into someone else's large wheel.

Next to the funeral, the paying of 'bride price' is another significant custom involving Tabu. Bride price is paid to the parents of the daughter, who give the wheel of Tabu with 2-300 fathoms

(4-600m, 1,800 ft.) on it to their daughter to hold, which is usually distributed by her on the death of her father.

The groom earns Tabu through the custom of killing a pig, cutting it up, and selling it only for Tabu. The Tabu received in this way is bound onto a wheel and used, in part, for the payment of bride price.

Tabu is also valued by the Local Level Governments, who accept Tabu for the payment of Head Tax, fines, and restitution payments ordered through court and dispute resolution processes.

### How Tabu is Valued

Tabu is valued in three ways, by the length of the fathom or shells, by the number of shells in the length, and the quality of shells being presented. Since it is time consuming to count out tens of shells, people develop traditional ways of measuring a length. One fathom of Tabu is traditionally measured in the following way:

The Tabu is held between arms raised to the sides, with the length hanging to the point of the sternum on the chest.



**Traditional method of measuring one Fathom of Tabu.**

Shells are generally spaced by sight, with about 2mm between each shell. On average, there are three shells for every 2cm (3/4 inch) of length. White or yellow shells are the most preferred, followed by brown shells which are sometimes interspersed in the length so that they will be accepted. Black shells are not acceptable.

### Process of Producing Tabu

The production of Tabu involves a simple division of labour. Children prepare Tabu, women string Tabu, and men wind it onto wheels.

The Tabu shell (*Nassa Callosa*) is set with the point upright by small children, and an older child pinches the point of the shell off with a pair of pliers.

In this case, a small table used for the scraping of coconut meat from the shell in the production of copra (dried coconut meat) which is one of East New Britain's main export crops.





Detail of the action of snipping the ends of the shell off.



Young women prepare the rattan strips on which the shells are threaded using a standard modern potato peeler.

They are under the watchful supervision of the mother.





The mother produces the best quality Tabu and teaches the young women how to do it right.

Often, she will have the girls strip good shells from shorter lengths of Tabu, and restring it onto a larger length of top-quality Tabu, used to impress visitors and recipients.



The process of splicing and joining rattan strips from shorter pieces of Tabu to become full length pieces again.





While the women are stringing the Tabu, the men prepare the wooden ring on which the Tabu is wound. They then take strips of cloth and wind it onto the ring to keep the Tabu from slipping.

Rows of Tabu are set to the ring, and tied with a natural fiber.



The Tabu is tied to the ring as it is wound on.



The son keeps a watchful eye as his father does the winding, as he may be asked at any time to take over!

The Tabu is wound around the wheel until the desired amount is reached, for example 10 fathoms on a small wheel, which is tied specially to identify the amount.