

## RAFFIA CLOTH DISTRIBUTION IN THE LELE ECONOMY

MARY DOUGLAS

THE distribution of raffia cloth among the Lele<sup>1</sup> raises two questions. One, mainly ethnographic, is that of the various functions served in the course of its circulation from hand to hand. In answering this, the second question arises. In some aspects raffia cloth seems to perform monetary roles. Is it to be classed as a type of primitive money? In the widest sense it seems to be an imperfect type of money, performing in a restricted manner some of the main functions of money: it acts as a store and a standard of value; it is given as payment for services and sometimes used as a medium of exchange. It is not, however, the principal, or usual, means of distribution in the economy. I hope that a discussion of the short-comings of Lele raffia as a form of money may be interesting to others working in societies which are similarly on the verge of a market economy.

### DISTRIBUTION OF GOODS

Little in the environment or productive system of the Lele encourages large-scale collaboration. They live at a density of about 4 persons to the square mile (the figure excludes recent alien immigrants). There are no markets. Each village<sup>2</sup> (average population 190) is largely self-sufficient in producing for its needs, and with one exception there is no team-work or long-term collaboration within it. The exception is the communal hunt, in which most of the able-bodied men of the village combine. Normally work is individually performed, and the basic unit of collaboration consists of husband and wife, each performing the tasks traditionally allotted to their sex. The division of labour has the characteristic—common enough, but worth noting for its consequences—of reserving physically exacting work for the men. This puts the older men at a relative disadvantage, which is partially adjusted by raffia-cloth distribution, as I shall show.

As the table shows, units of labour do not correspond to units of consumption, and, though for most goods the range of distribution is wider than the producing unit, it is still not very wide. For most things, the kin of individual producers living locally are the widest group claiming a share in the product. Only for meat and wine is the whole village the sharing group. It would not be difficult for the Lele to lead their whole economic life within the bounds of each individual village.

Inheritance is another way of claiming goods. A new group emerges here, the matrilineal heirs of the dead.

The inheritance group does not appear as a unit in the first table, as they never work together, neither feed nor live together. It consists of fellow clansmen of the

<sup>1</sup> The Lele inhabit the region between the Loange and the Kasai rivers, in the Kasai District of the Belgian Congo. My fieldwork among them in 1949–50, and in four months in 1953, was made possible by a fellowship of the International African

Institute and with help from the Belgian Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Pattern of Residence among the Lele', *Zaire*, xi, 8, 1957, pp. 819–43.

TABLE I  
*Distribution of Goods*

<i>Productive work</i>	<i>Range of collaboration</i>	<i>Product</i>	<i>Range of distribution</i>
<b>MEN</b>			
Hunting:			
(a) Communal	Village-wide	Meat	Village-wide, according to membership of cults, and according to kinship obligations of hunters
(b) Bow, snares, or pit-traps	Individual		
Clearing land for cultivation	Individual or 2 age-mates or brothers		
Raffia-palm cultivation	Individually owned and worked, except for sending junior for wine	Wine	Village-wide, at nightly men's club; father, mother, and mother's brother of tapper and his age-mates
Weaving	Individual	Cloth	Distribution detailed below
Oil-palms	Individual cuts fruit from wild palm for wife to process and use or sell	Oil and Cash	Man keeps cash, woman uses oil
House-building	Sons, brothers, age-mates, son-in-law may occasionally help	House	Man, wife, small children
Smithing	Individual leisure-time specialists, collaborating with charcoal burner/bellows boy	Hoes, knives, arrow-heads, gouges, &c.; maintenance of these	By gift with small acknowledgement fee to kinsmen of smith; or sale to strangers
Wood-carving	Individual leisure-time specialists, with occasional junior help	Drinking-cups, bellows, bows, plates, pestle, loom, shuttle, combs, drums	As for smiths
<b>WOMEN</b>			
Sowing, hoeing, harvesting	Wife alone, with occasional help from mother or sister	Maize, manioc, bananas, peppers, ground-nuts, calabashes	If stored, crops under wife's control; if sold, cash jointly owned by husband and wife
Cooking	" "	Cooked food	Wife gives to husband and his age-mates, to son and his age-mates; children and sisters and wifeless fellow clansmen
Fishing	" "	Fish	As for cooked food
Firewood and water	" "		For household use
Salt-making	" "	Salt	" " "
			or given to kinsmen for small acknowledgement fee
Gathering relish, vegetable or insect	" "		As for cooked food
Basketry	Individual leisure-time specialists	Baskets for storage, transport, fishing, sifting, &c.	By gift with small acknowledgement fee to kinsmen of craftswoman, or sold to strangers
Pottery	" "	Cooking-pots	As for baskets

dead living in the same village or in villages near by. The members coalesce as a group through their common interest in the distribution, not of goods, but of rights over women. None of the goods (detailed in (A) of Table II) are as interesting as the rights over women ((B) and (C) in the table) that a man may leave, excepting such small stocks of camwood and raffia or money as may be left which can be used to acquire such rights.

TABLE II

*Inheritance*

<i>(A) Goods</i>	<i>Heirs</i>
Crops	Matrilineal inheritance group. Crops used for maintenance of children in year of mourning.
Raffia palms	" " "
House	Generally destroyed if death took place at home; otherwise kept by widow, or allocated according to village needs.
Personal belongings, weapons, tools, drum, containers, &c.	Matrilineal inheritance group distributes to sons or sisters' sons.
Stocks of raffia, camwood, or money	Matrilineal inheritance group, entrusted to eldest man to be administered on behalf of group as a whole, after claims on dead man's estate have been settled.
<i>(B) Widows</i>	Matrilineal inheritance group; after year of mourning widows allocated to members, according to seniority, need, and incest regulations.
<i>(C) Rights over Clients</i> (i.e. descendants of women paid in blood compensation)	Matrilineal inheritance group; administered on behalf of group as a whole by eldest men.

As may be seen from these tables, goods are distributed mostly on the basis of status, and not by purchase. A man's claims to a share in the product of anyone's labour, including his own, depends directly on who he is (boy, husband, father, &c., i.e. his relation to others) and not on his purchasing power, or on his work. Ultimately, of course, his status is something which he builds up by his own efforts, i.e. by generously and effectively interpreting his obligations. But at any one moment his status is known, and determines his share of what is going. This means that, although many things appear to have a traditional price, in raffia cloth, there is no real price system or level of prices, since it is not offer of the traditional price, but the status of the recipient, which entitles him to the goods.

## USES OF RAFFIA

Every man and boy can weave. The preparation of materials for weaving is long<sup>1</sup> and the actual work of weaving is more arduous than might be supposed. After the loom is set up, a man has to work steadily to weave two or three lengths in a day. Five lengths is supposed to be very fast working, and most men make one in an afternoon.

Two lengths sewn together, with stitched, embroidered, or fringed hems, make a skirt for a woman or a man. Five to ten sewn lengths, without embroidery, make a semi-ceremonial man's skirt, *lupungu*. Ten lengths, with a richly appliqu  border, is a dance-skirt, *mapel mahangi*. This is the joint property of the matrilineal clan section,

<sup>1</sup> A joint article on 'Lele Techniques of Production compared with the Bushong', in which weaving is discussed, is being prepared in collaboration with J. Vansina.

the group of matrilineal heirs, and a highly prized heirloom. Worn in everyday use, for hunting and working, a raffia skirt lasts only about four months. They are often carefully darned and patched. Shabby dress is much despised. Lele love the sight of well-woven cloth, correctly folded and tied for presentation.

Informal gifts of raffia cloth smooth all social relations: husband to wife, son to mother, son to father. They resolve occasions of tension, as peace-offerings; they make parting gifts, or convey congratulations. There are also formal gifts of raffia which are neglected only at risk of rupture of the social ties involved. A man, on reaching adulthood, should give 20 cloths to his father. Otherwise he would be ashamed to ask his father's help for raising his marriage dues. A man should give 20 cloths to his wife on each delivery of a child which qualifies him for entry into a cult group,<sup>1</sup> or she may repudiate the marriage. He should bury each of her parents with a mortuary gift of 20 cloths; if she reports a would-be seducer, he should reward her virtue with 20 cloths.

Certain dues must be paid before a relationship or status is entered. Among these are age-set dues, which may vary from 6 to 10 or so, according to the local rule; marriage dues, 50 to the father, 40 to the mother; entrance fees to cult groups: Begetters, 100, Diviners, 100, Twin Diviners, 40, Pangolin cult, 20. Then there are fees for ritual officiants who perform healing rites or give oracular consultations: these may mount from one or two for a divination to 100 for a major cure.

Fines are paid to restore status after an offence has been committed. Adultery damages are usually 100 cloths; fines to the village for ritually spoiling it by fighting may be from 2 upwards, according to the occasion. Finally, tribute to chiefs is paid in raffia cloths.

This list, though abbreviated, shows that raffia is used extensively for the payment of services and the acquisition of status. The high demand for it for these purposes probably creates a value apart from its intrinsic value as a textile. The heaviest charges fall in the early part of a man's life, and the raffia paid on most of these occasions goes from young men to old men. A man who has entered an age-set, married, entered the Begetters' cult, and become a diviner, will have disbursed a minimum of 300 raffia cloths, and probably spent many more in maintaining good relations with his wife, in-laws, his father and mother, and settling adultery damages. Cloths paid for admission to cults are distributed between existing members, so that a man, once he has joined a cult, can regard his own fee as an investment which will bring in a regular return when each new initiate pays for entrance. Similarly, a man with several daughters enjoys an income of raffia cloths from his sons-in-law.

The effect is that young men are constantly in need of large quantities of raffia cloth, and older men are constantly receiving it. Young men do not expect to weave enough to pay for their own needs, in fact, old men are said to have more time for weaving. So young men go to old men to ask for help in raising their fees and fines. Thus there is asymmetry in raffia indebtedness between young and old, which goes some way to redress the disequilibrium between the generations created by the division of labour. Old men have a fund of raffia from which they can reward juniors, bolster up their own prestige, and make up for their declining effectiveness in cultivation and in the hunt.

<sup>1</sup> See 'Animals in Lele Religious Symbolism', *Africa*, xxvii, no. 1, 1957.

A man trying to raise large sums of raffia draws on maternal and paternal ties of kinship, but more heavily on the former. Investigation of this is difficult, for people tend to forget the help of men with whom they have later quarrelled. Raffia loans and debts have a *prima facie* suitability for quantitative treatment, but I found I could not rely on information about transactions I had not witnessed, and here I confine myself to reporting a few such cases.

A man may be able to collect raffia from several quarters: from his own clan, his father, and affines, from his lord if he is a clan-client,<sup>1</sup> and from his clients if he is a lord. This is obviously more relevant to a study of kinship behaviour, but here it is worth noting that one of the characteristics of raffia, divisibility into small units, makes it a suitable form of wealth to reflect certain characteristics of the kinship pattern: division of responsibility between maternal and paternal kin, and the freedom of the individual to affiliate to the kin group of his choice.

#### EXAMPLES

I describe here how a man and his two sons raised large sums for marriage dues and adultery compensation. I shall refer to them by letters, indicating clan membership, and numbers, indicating age-position in their local clan section. Both sons of B7 needed to raise their marriage payments at the same time. For the elder, A13, his father gave one she-goat worth 40 cloths, and 10 raffia cloths, and the boy's clan accepted responsibility for the rest of his dues. The boy himself was ill and was not expected to make a contribution.

A14 raised his marriage dues in instalments. For the first payment of 10 cloths, he wove 6 himself, and his father gave him 4. For the next payment of 10 cloths, he wove 3, his mother gave 3, three of his senior clansmen contributed one each, and E3, a client of his clan, gave one, saying that his own mother's mother had been married to A14's mother's mother's brother. Then he raised 300 francs, the equivalent of 30 raffia cloths. One hundred francs were given by A5 who obtained them from a man of E clan on a promise of 10 raffia cloths. It is noteworthy that the money was 'bought' on a promise of raffia, but it was eventually returned when A1 trapped a pig and sold the meat, so if the supplier of 100 francs hoped to get raffia for 10 francs a piece, he was disappointed. Another 100 francs were given to A14 by his father, who had borrowed the money from a friend in the next village. Another 100 francs were given by the three men of clan C living in the village, on the grounds that their father had been A14's mother's brother. A14 also earned another 250 francs himself. The equivalent of 75 raffia cloths had been raised, but the full amount of 100 cloths would have to be raised before he could marry the girl, as she came from another village, and no existing ties facilitated the negotiations. His brother, by contrast, marrying a girl of the same village, had already been able to set up house, though only half the payment had been completed. His father was hoping to be able to raise another 200 francs for A14 by demanding a refund of the purchase price of a worthless dog he had bought from another village.

<sup>1</sup> I use the word 'client' for the status of men and women descended from a woman over whom certain rights have been transferred to settle a blood debt, and the word 'lord' for the status of the representa-

tive of the clan to whom these rights have been transferred. As the institution is complicated, with far-reaching effects on Lele social organization, it must be described in a special article.

In this case, the wide range of kinsmen from whom contributions were taken is significant. A14 had great difficulty in levying anything substantial from his own clansmen, of whom there were 17 in the village. Men in smaller, more compact clan sections generally had more support from their clansmen. A5 had been on begging rounds for him, and reported that all but two had refused: the older men made difficulties because A14 had been fighting and was a disturbing element in the village; the boys junior to himself replied that they were young and had nothing to give. Refusals to help the young man with his marriage dues were intended as sanctions on his past behaviour, but the effect was to weaken bonds of clanship, not to strengthen them. The same old men later felt unable to ask A14 for services which they would have liked to command.

While these negotiations were proceeding, B7, the boy's father, was caught in adultery with the wife of their mother's brother, A5, who demanded immediate payment of 100 raffia cloths. B7 was now in real straits, because his own clansmen were involved in a factional quarrel, so they were unusually slow to co-operate with each other. He produced the equivalent of 40 raffia cloths, as follows: a fellow clansman lent him a small bar of camwood, valued at 20 cloths; a man of clan C, not a kinsman, advanced to him, against a promise of payment, a smaller bar worth 10 cloths; a man gave him 100 francs as an outright gift because his brother had married B7's sister's daughter. He was given time to find the rest.

It emerges from these examples that certain goods and Congo francs are acceptable in lieu of raffia. No doubt, as the economy becomes more commercialized, the range of these alternatives to raffia will increase, but at the time of my fieldwork they were limited to camwood, Belgian Congo francs, and goats. Certain objects, traditionally acceptable, had gone out of circulation: iron bells worth 50 cloths, copper bars worth 100 cloths, and slaves.

The adoption of goats in recent years, as a substitute for large raffia payments, is interesting, as their role is also almost purely monetary in the Lele economy. The Lele do not eat goat-flesh<sup>1</sup> but accept goats as a store of value which can always be converted into francs by sale to Luba lorry drivers and plantation workers.

The following is a list of the main units and equivalences used in raffia negotiations:

TABLE III

*Raffia Values*

<i>Unit of raffia</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Equivalent goods</i>
9 or 10 cloths	<i>ibok la bipolo</i> (bundle of cloth) or <i>ihangi la bipolo</i> (10 cloths)	Axe
18 or 20 cloths	<i>mabok ma pe</i> (2 bundles) or 1 <i>nghei</i> (trade salt)	a 3-foot bar of camwood a he-goat
40 cloths	2 <i>mihei</i> (trade salt)	2 <i>mihei</i> or one she-goat or a 5-foot bar of camwood
60 cloths	3 <i>mihei</i>	3 <i>mihei</i> or she-goat with young
90 or 100 cloths	<i>lutuku</i>	<i>ikoko</i> (copper bar) <i>ibondo</i> (slave)

The peculiarity of these units is the 10 per cent. margin allowed in making up a

<sup>1</sup> See chapter on the Lele in *African Worlds*, 1954, in which their repugnance for the flesh of domestic animals is discussed.

standard amount of raffia. *Ibok* is supposed to consist of 10 cloths, and *lutuku* of 100, yet no one can haggle or complain if the exact number is not reached when the payment is in raffia cloths. But this latitude is not extended to the goods accepted as substitutes for raffia. If a bar of camwood does not come up to 2 *mihei* in quality or size, it is treated as a 1 *nghei* unit; the goat is always the number of *ibok* indicated by its sex, neither more nor less. The full money equivalent is always required. For example, if raffia is valued at 10 francs a piece, for a payment of 100 cloths the full 1,000 francs must be paid, though if it is made in raffia cloth, 90 cloths will be accepted. Whatever the origin of this convention, it usefully expresses the higher value of raffia over any of the conventional substitutes.

#### MONETARY ROLE OF RAFFIA

Raffia cloth is bartered for the goods which are imported from foreign tribes. The Lele see themselves in their foreign relations as the great clothiers of the Kasai region. The Njembe from the south come with large calabashes, arrow-heads, hoes and knives, bells and other iron work; the Dinga on the river bank sell pottery and fish; the Pende to the east sell baskets, and camwood which they have obtained from the north, and the Nkutu sell camwood, all in exchange for raffia cloth. The Cokwe hunters accept it in payment for game, though they do not wear it, and intend to sell it.

Apart from its export as a barter commodity, raffia cloth is used in internal trade, whenever anything is bought from a skilled specialist with whom the buyer has no close kinship ties. In these cases raffia has a real monetary role, as a medium of exchange, for the seller accepts it in order to use it as payment for other exchanges.

This range of goods is very narrow, as people tend to go without, if they cannot obtain what they need from a kinsman. However, skilled craftsmen sometimes gain a great reputation for carving, and may supply drums, bellows, or drinking-cups to strangers from afar off. They will charge as much as 50 raffia cloths for a big item. These charges are real prices, to be distinguished from the gifts made to a craftsman who furnishes objects to kinsmen. Baskets, fish-traps, fur hats, carved cosmetic-bowls, dishes, cups, loom, mortar—the producer of these things is likely to receive no more than one or two cloths from a kinsman, in recognition that both parties acknowledge their relationship.

I had great difficulty trying to buy ordinary domestic objects with francs. They had no traditional price, as they usually changed hands on kinship lines, with an 'acknowledgement fee' of one or two cloths. My friends, mistaking this fee for a price equivalent to the value of the goods, tried to persuade reluctant sellers that they ought to part with their things for 10 or 20 francs, the official equivalent of one or two raffia cloths. However, even if I doubled the number of francs, they were still not willing to sell. For raffia cloth they would have sold willingly, but my ethnographic collection seemed doomed, since I could not buy raffia cloth for francs.

#### RELATION TO CONGO FRANCS

Although raffia cloth is only used as currency in a limited range of transactions, the analogy with money is the simplest way of describing its behaviour. In one sense the Lele were trying to work with a raffia currency convertible into Belgian Congo

francs at a rate which undervalued raffia. The conversion of raffia into francs applied only to a few rare purchases (such as buying a drum from a distant craftsman), but it applied extensively in all payment of compensation, dues and cult fees, and fines. The older men, who were not wage-earners, needed francs for payment of taxes and fines, while many young men found it easier to earn money than to obtain raffia, so this arrangement suited all parties. Even at the Native Tribunal fines and taxes could be paid in raffia in lieu of francs, and an official rate of exchange was therefore recognized. In 1924 this was two raffia cloths to the franc,<sup>1</sup> and since that date the value of raffia has gone up by leaps and bounds, expressing the greatly increased circulation of francs in the region, the opportunities for wage-earning, and the development of retail shops. On my first visit in 1949, one cloth was valued at five francs; in 1953 it was worth ten francs. Even then these prices, fixed for the payment of fines at the Tribunal, did not at all reflect what raffia would have earned in a free market. The Lele adopted the official rates of exchange for all their dealings in raffia among themselves; they knew it was undervalued, but felt obscurely that a devaluing of the Congo franc would be against their interests. The result was that it was impossible to buy raffia for francs at the official rate, but to offer a higher unofficial rate was disapproved. Once I had acquired raffia I could easily buy goods which had been refused for the equivalent value in francs, but I could only obtain raffia by applying to the Tribunal, and even there the native clerks were reluctant to sell large quantities.

In their reluctance to sell for francs, and the readiness to sell for raffia, there is an element of what I can only call 'irrational producer's preference', which I believe may attach to goods produced for subsistence in any economy. For instance, in our own economy, the producer of garden flowers or home-made jam would similarly be unwilling to sell his goods for cash at the retail price, though he would be happy to give them away to a neighbour for nothing. Some things are classed as more suitable for gift or friendly barter than for sale, and the ordinary market price would not compensate the producer for his work in the same way as he would be rewarded by the prestige and satisfaction of making a gift.

This attitude is exactly the reverse of the producer whose goods are intended primarily for sale. To him money seems scarcer than the products of his daily labour, and he will cheerfully barter away the goods at less than the usual price, if by doing so he can avoid parting with hard-earned cash. This difference was suggested to me by Dr. Salim's study of mat-weavers in Iraq,<sup>2</sup> and I suggest that the contrast between the attitudes of subsistence producers and exchange producers to the money value of their products may be widespread.

Although the Lele would sell small objects to me for raffia, but not for francs, this was not simply a preference for one kind of currency over another. The situation was, for them, redolent of the atmosphere of gift-exchange, not of trade, and the conventions of the former make one kind of exchange more acceptable than the other.<sup>3</sup> It is none the less true that the official rate undervalued raffia cloth. Why did

<sup>1</sup> *Rapport Économique*, 1924, *Registre Ethnographique*, Basongo.

<sup>2</sup> Doctoral thesis, now being prepared for publication.

<sup>3</sup> Many instances of similar conventions restricting exchanges could be cited, cf. Bohannan, P.,

'Some principles of exchange and investment among the Tiv', *American Anthropologist*, lvii, no. 1, 1955; Leach, E. R., 'Structural implications of cross-cousin marriage', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, lxxxi, 1951. See also many examples cited by E. Hoyt, in *Primitive Trade*, 1924, pp. 84-85.



a black market in raffia not develop? Or at least, why did the production of raffia not increase to keep pace with the demand for it?

Social pressures inhibited men from buying and selling raffia. I heard of men obtaining francs with the promise of raffia, but I rarely heard of the eventual repayment being made in anything other than francs. Wage-earners in the north would sometimes carry their money to the south where opportunities of wage-earning were few, and the demand for francs consequently so much higher that the official rate was probably satisfactory to all parties. In these cases kin ties between the parties were not likely to inhibit the sale. Normally, for a man to be obliged to buy raffia with money would be felt as a failure of all the social bonds by which he could be expected to raise raffia cloth. It would be as absurd as the imaginary case of an Englishman reduced to buying Christmas cards to adorn his mantelshef. In other words, there was no market in raffia, so there could not easily be a black market.

Men would never admit that the difficulty of raising fees deterred them from applying for cult initiation. On the contrary, they would boast of the sources they could hope to tap. For example, one man, who was the son of a village-wife,<sup>1</sup> said that his fathers (meaning the men of that village) would be delighted if he were accepted as a candidate for pangolin initiation, as it would give them an opportunity for contributing the whole of his raffia fees. Another man, who married the daughter of a village-wife, said that of course he had been obliged to undergo initiation into the Begetters' cult in her village, so that his fathers-in-law could stand the whole of the costs for him, and they would have been very hurt if he had been initiated in his own village. The very costliness of marriage with a daughter of a village-wife is an attraction, as it gives scope for proving social solvency. Less successful individuals, like B7 above, who have to weave, earn, and somehow scrape together their raffia payments by themselves, are assiduous in excusing their various kinsmen, or, if they criticize the living for meanness, it is because they compare them with some dead uncle or father whom they could have touched for as much raffia as they required.

#### SHORTAGE OF RAFFIA

Every man and boy can weave, and every man and boy would like to possess more raffia than he does. But they do not try to satisfy their own demand by sitting down to produce it. The Lele would explain that they are short of raffia now because they have so many competing demands on their time, especially earning money for taxes, that they cannot weave as much as their ancestors used to. This may be true, but, if so, I believe it only aggravates a shortage of raffia which is inherent in a quasi-inflationary situation.

In capital investment Lele economy is as stationary as any other primitive economy. But from the point of view of an individual who starts lending and borrowing raffia, it appears as a temptingly expanding financial system. The 'enterprises' into which a man is asked to put his available raffia cloths are productive, not of material goods, but of prestige: helping a kinsman with marriage dues, compensation for offences, medical fees, fines, entrance fees. Ever since boyhood he has been drawing on the

<sup>1</sup> 'Village-wife' is a woman whose marriage dues have been paid by an age-set of the village, and who is for all practical purposes regarded as the com-

munal wife of the men of the village. See 'A Form of Polyandry among the Lele of the Kasai', *Africa*, xxi, no. 1, 1951.

stock of his elders, and has been made aware of a sense of obligation when they helped him. As soon as he acquires any surplus stock of his own, he starts to create obligations towards himself by lending. He gets drawn into a social game in which, if he cannot give the impression of generosity, he loses not only prestige but the opportunities of obtaining credit when he needs it. A man's dignity as a member of a village, able to pay his way and help his kin, depends on credit, for the contributions of clansmen to one another's raffia needs are largely a matter of gifts made in the expectation that the recipient will be equally generous when their turn comes to ask his help.

Since it is desired, not as purchasing power, present or future, but for the sake of the prestige gained by parting with it, there is no point in hoarding raffia. Raffia cloths stored away are buried talents. The Lele would agree with the millionaire industrialist who said that the ultimate failure of a rich man was to die rich. The more famous and the more generous a man has been, the greater the number who expect to share in the division of his estate, but in practice, reputedly rich men tend to leave paltry possessions. The heirs are often disappointed to find that they are burdened with the debts of the departed. Needless to say, the men who have died after extracting the last jot of credit out of their acquaintance are those who are considered to have lived most successfully.

Lele are constantly turning over in their minds ways of meeting their financial commitments, counting their assets, and possible future expectations. Among the young especially there is a feeling like financial pressure. A man will make promises on the strength of his unborn daughter's future bridewealth; any insult or injury will be almost welcomed as possible subject for a claim. In the frequent conversations about the need to raise raffia cloth, it is a striking fact that men think first, not of sitting down to weave, but of pursuing any debts or claims outstanding. They hope to meet their demand for raffia by increasing the velocity of circulation rather than by increasing supplies. No one is expected to be anything but quick in making claims, or ruthless in pursuing debtors. The result is an inflationary pressure on the available supplies of raffia. It is a situation in which too few raffia cloths are circulating after too many debts and promises. Raffia is no sooner paid over than it is transferred again to liquidate debts of ten or twenty years' standing.

I cite one example to show how easily an I-owe-you situation can be transformed into a you-owe-me one. A diviner in South Homb was temporarily cured of his leprosy by another diviner from afar, who charged him 100 raffia cloths. It is held that a cured man will relapse if he does not promptly pay his doctor. The patient had raised the equivalent of 30 cloths by borrowing from a colleague, and was casting about for more credit when his healer fell ill with intestinal trouble. The former patient quickly dispatched a powerful remedy, and reckoned that if he obtained a cure he would charge 70 cloths, thus exactly discharging his own debt. In other cases, when there is not so much urgency, payments can generally be delayed for years, so that when the final reckoning comes, both parties have scores to settle with each other.

#### THE VILLAGE TREASURY

From what has been said, it will be obvious that no one keeps large stores of raffia, and also obvious that this was too delicate a subject to investigate. Individuals like

to store a few surplus cloths with one of their sisters, so as to evade the demands of wives and children. A woman trusted in this way would generally justify her brother's regard for her discretion. A much easier insight into raffia distribution came to me through watching the public affairs of the village.

Each village has an official, named *itembangu la bola*, whose post combines the duties of spokesman and treasurer. He is a young man, chosen because of his *lutot* (eloquence) and because of his trustworthiness for keeping the *bikete bia bola* (things of the village). As the village budget is run on a deficit, the last responsibility is a matter of accountancy, not of keeping valuables under his hand.

The village has a corporate personality. Like a man it can acquire wives, slaves and clients, sue for compensation for injury to these, and receive payments for a transfer of rights over them or their children. Corresponding to these abilities, it has liabilities to make all the usual payments a man is liable to make in acquiring wives, or in compensating for offences committed by their children, paying sons' marriage fees, and so on. Whenever something is paid to the village, a meeting is called, and decisions are taken about how the new funds are to be disposed of.

Five daughters of village-wives of South Homb were married within a few years of each other. Three of them married within the same village, and their husbands were therefore required to pay over only half the amount that would have been asked if they had come from outside, i.e. 2 *mihei* instead of 4. One man was blind, and though now married for 8 or 9 years, he had never been pressed to give more than the first instalment, one bar of camwood. This the village had put with two other bars raised from another source, and used to make the first repayment of a debt of ten bars of camwood (200 raffia cloths), owed to a man of North Homb who had died unpaid, and whose heirs were pressing for payment. Two other girls were married to a man of Bushongo, as a kind of gesture of welcome when he came to settle permanently in the village. He was subsequently installed as junior official diviner of the village, and the 4 *mihei* which he paid to the village for both girls exactly covered the fee which the village owed to the outside officiant who had performed the rite of installing him.

For one of the two girls who married outsiders, the groom paid up five bars of camwood. On receiving these, the village ignored outstanding claims against itself *qua* village, and quietly divided them amongst each of its five constituent clan sections.

For the youngest girl the prospective son-in-law paid up 3 *mihei* while I was there. The fourth was still outstanding. Of the 60 cloths paid up, it was agreed that 40 should be given at once to the grandfathers of the girl herself as marriage dues for her mother. As the latter had been herself a daughter of a village-wife, 4 *mihei* or 80 cloths should have been given. At first the representative of the grandfathers refused to accept the half payment, pointing out with some justice that it was already long overdue. The men of South Homb rallied him by asking why he had not brought the ten chickens with which it is proper for a father-in-law to acknowledge the receipt of marriage dues, and he finally agreed good-humouredly to take what was offered, and to go home to collect the chickens, giving South Homb time to collect the remaining cloths.

South Homb actually had an additional 20 cloths in hand, for their son-in-law had paid 60, but it had been decided that this last *nghei* should be devoted to settling an equally long-overdue debt with the head man of the next village, Middle Homb.

He required 30 cloths in damages for a charge of sorcery made against one of his wives, who had been cleared after submission to the poison ordeal. It was agreed at the meeting that 100 francs should be raised by levies on each of the clans of the village, and that these should be added to the 20 cloths, so that this claim of twenty years' standing could be settled outright.

At the same meeting, the old head of the village of South Homb put in a rather hopeless claim for at least 30 cloths as part repayment for the copper bar he had advanced to the village for the marriage dues of one of its (now quite elderly) village-wives. The claim was brushed aside, on the grounds that many big debts had to be written off now that it was no longer possible to settle accounts by the transfer of women. On this point I shall have more to say.

These examples illustrate clearly the importance of raffia in its social role, creating ties of mutual obligation, between individuals and their fellow clansmen, between young and old, between clans and villages, and between villages. If we recall that the scale of their economy is so small that each village could almost produce and consume its whole wealth in isolation, we can see that raffia circulation immensely enlarges and enriches their social life.

#### RIGHTS OVER WOMEN

To take the monetary metaphor too literally would lead us to doubt the whole analysis of raffia distribution, for in a monetary economy the shortage of raffia would eventually stimulate an increase in supply. It is not enough to explain the continued shortage of raffia by the imperfections of the market, or the undeveloped mercantile spirit of the people. It has also to be appreciated that until recently any Lele man had always the means of liquidating at one stroke an excessive pile of raffia debts.

One hundred cloths were equivalent to rights over a slave or a woman. Slavery (following capture in war) had ended in the early 1930's. Rights over women, creating a form of clientship which was used to settle blood debts, could still be transferred, but the Belgian administration was trying to end the system. Anyone wishing to repudiate his status of client can now take the matter to court, and end the relation with a cash payment. This is a subject for a separate study. But it is essential here to know that the Lele think of raffia primarily as a means to acquire rights over women, and therefore, if they could not repay loans in raffia, could settle by a direct transfer of rights over a woman or a slave.

Raffia is indeed paid out for all the various purposes I have listed, but when a man receives raffia, he hopes to use it to acquire a wife, or to sweeten relations with his wife and her kin, or to help a sister's son to acquire a wife. It may be diverted into other directions before he can put it to these ends, but this is simply because other men have made successful claims on his stocks, which they also intend to use for acquiring and maintaining wives.

In a sense, raffia keeps its high value, not because of its use as a textile, but because it gives command over women, and, in a polygamous society, women are always scarce. Consistently, then, if a man's debts of raffia threaten to overwhelm him, he can cancel them by relinquishing rights over women in favour of his creditor. When this happens, no comparison with bankruptcy could be apposite, for the social bonds of creditor and debtor have been replaced by kinship ties. Formerly, the 'inflation'

which I have mentioned was not controlled merely by the limits of lenders' credulity. Under the old system, the man who advanced 100 raffia cloths to a friend did so against the security of the sisters and clanswomen of the borrower. If repayment were refused, public opinion would applaud him for taking one of them by force. It follows that the inflationary trend was transferred to rights over women, who were, even before their birth, pledged as backing for loans.

It is this final equation of 100 raffia cloths for rights over a woman which clarifies the difference between the system of raffia distribution as it used to be, and the quasi-monetary system it is becoming, and which also explains some apparent anomalies in the Lele attitudes to raffia values.

#### CONCLUSION

What has become of the view that raffia might be classed as a primitive type of money? The essential quality of money is that it gives its possessor purchasing power. Lele use raffia principally for payment of marriage dues, fines, blood-compensation, and cult entrance fees, which may be collectively called 'status-payments', not purchases. As a medium of exchange it functions only rarely, as this is not a market economy. A very great number of other forms of so-called 'primitive money' are used in these ways, in Melanesia and North America, as well as in other parts of Africa.

Primitive money is often discussed without reference to the degree of commercial development. To correct this tendency, I find the most useful theory of money is Menger's,<sup>1</sup> which starts from the different degrees of saleability of commodities in general. Those which are most highly saleable tend, with the development of markets, to become generally acceptable media of exchange—'money'. Improved market conditions increase the superior saleability of such goods, so that when such goods as are relatively most saleable become money, there results 'an increasing differentiation between their degree of saleableness and that of all other goods. And this difference in saleableness ceases altogether to be gradual, and must be regarded as something absolute . . . hence the difference of meaning attaching to "money" and "wares", to "purchase" and "exchange".'<sup>2</sup>

At first sight, Lele raffia seems to have a high degree of saleability. If markets were to have developed without European contact or the introduction of francs, it would have been likely to have become a medium of exchange. But its saleability, on closer inspection, is not something inherent in the internal working of the economy, but something which strikes the outsider arriving to do business. If the outsider can acquire raffia, he can buy everything with it, so it seems to him pre-eminently saleable. But it turns out to be not buyable, and this is because it is not strictly saleable between members of the community, because of what Menger calls 'limitations imposed socially and politically upon exchanges and consumption of that commodity'. On the criterion of saleability Lele raffia has evidently not developed into a form of primitive money, because most of their goods are distributed without buying or selling.

This approach suggests why travellers in other societies have so readily reported

<sup>1</sup> Menger, Karl, 'On the Origin of Money', *Economic Journal*, ii, 1892, pp. 239-477.      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

that a favourite commodity, wampum, shells, or iron bars, is the native money: they observe that when it comes into their hands it has an altogether superior degree of saleability, and if they stay to trade they may never remark that between natives it was originally scarcely saleable at all, though with the introduction of markets it soon becomes so. The advantage of following Menger is that we can avoid the paradox of money without commerce, and the study of primitive money can be confined to its appropriate sphere, the emergence of market economies.

### *Résumé*

#### LA CIRCULATION DU RAPHIA DANS L'ÉCONOMIE LELE

L'ÉCONOMIE Lele est simple et restreinte: la plupart des biens sont produits et répartis dans les limites mêmes du village. La part de chacun est déterminée par les liens de parenté et les droits liés aux positions sociales. Le tissu de raphia fait exception car sa circulation est très étendue. Il sert de vêtements et de dons et s'emploie aussi pour les redevances de culte et de classe d'âge, les dots de mariage, les amendes et les dommages et intérêts. Dans la mesure où il y a une tendance pour les jeunes à acheter ce tissu de raphia aux hommes plus âgés, ces derniers se trouvent de ce fait avantagés.

Il est troqué, en exportation, avec d'autres tribus, et même parfois, pour payer les produits des artisans Lele spécialisés qui n'ont aucune parenté avec l'acheteur. A part cela il ne constitue pas une monnaie d'échange, car les biens ordinaires ne font pas objet de commerce entre les Lele.

Il y a un taux officiel pour le raphia, en francs Congo, car on peut l'utiliser pour payer les amendes et les impôts. Mais ce taux officiel le sous-value et il est donc impossible d'acheter du raphia avec des francs. La production du raphia n'est pas suffisante pour satisfaire la demande, car les gens procèdent avec lui à des emprunts ou au retrait d'anciennes dettes, ce qui augmente l'intensité de sa circulation. Autrefois on pouvait contrôler cette tendance à l'inflation en observant le transfert de droits sur les femmes pour libérer des dettes de raphia.

La fonction principale de la circulation du raphia n'est pas le commerce mais l'acquisition d'une certaine position sociale; il ne peut donc être légitimement considéré comme une 'monnaie'.