



Historical Perspective

Shell Money



Please note the creation of items by the artist is not just a hobby. Traditional skills combined with cultural teachings are used when making items, done in a way that respects the spirit of the things used, and honors the person who the item will go to. All is designed to honor my Ancestors and Nadosh (the dance). Elders have shared that when we create items, a part of ourselves or our spirit is in the item.

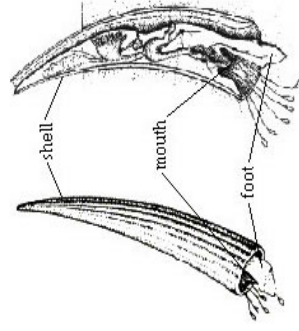
The elders say to us, "How would you like it, if you were created, and then just hung on a wall to look pretty?. It is for this reason that I share about the importance to take the necklace out, so that it will be able to dance & sing, as the sound that the shells make are referred to as "singing". ©Lisa Brown 1995

Many of the items created contain contemporary materials, they are designed and manufactured by Lisa Brown, Siletz Tribal member and descendant of Tututni, Macanotin (Grandmother), Shasta, Pit River & Modoc (Grandfather). Often used are ancient beads, traded in Africa that are over 100 years old (the yellow-green beads are "Vaseline" beads).

Many of the items are created using clam shells (Saxidomus nuttalli) traditionally used as money by Coastal Tribal groups, as well as for religious and ceremonial jewelry. Abalone, clam and olivella shells were often used for ornament and to create dance regalia. Clam beads and abalone were traded from this area to distant parts of California and beyond. Shells have long been known as a form of money, given to the people by the Creator. Often they were traded as a means of compensation for offenses by a group or person, to a victim, and often prevented feuds between tribes (Blood Money, 2001). The work to prepare the shells takes much time and effort to detail. **(NOTE: The fine dust of shells is TOXIC - you must use gloves & mask and is sometimes water, when working with these shells)**

I share the following historical accounts, due to the fact that these tribal groups traded with my ancestors of Southern Oregon and Northern California. The information shared helps us to understand the importance of natural resources and their connection to my diverse cultural history.

Shells often used include Abalone, Clam, Olivella and Dentilium - website /historical info follows:



Dentilia also called Elephant's Tusk, Elephant's Tooth, or Tooth Shell mullusk class Scaphopoda

The Wintun and the Patwin used shell beads as money. These were strung, and the string often measured from finger tips to shoulder. The most popular beads, obtained from the Pomo and Coast Miwok, were made from clam shells usually roughed out or in finished bead form. The Wintu also used clamshell beads as money, but counted them as coins rather than measuring them by the string length. Dentalium shells traded from northern neighbors. Magnesite cylinders were used by all the Wintun; these were rare and greatly valued.

Within the community, trading often took the form of gift-giving. The presentation of a gift was done with the understanding that its equivalent would be returned in the near future. This practice was the basis for a north-south trade chain that connected the various Wintun sub-areas and extended from San Francisco Bay to the **Shasta** territory. Clamshell disks came from the south and were exchanged for the superior obsidian, pelts, and yew wood of the north. In view of the Pui'mak geographic position on the river, it is not surprising that fish, especially salmon, were a major trade item. Salmon and river animals were traded with the foothill Nomlaki in exchange for pine nuts, acorns, mountain seeds, and mountain animals. The exchange was not in terms of straight barter, but by purchase with shell money and

valuables, such as magnesite. With the same currency used in the extensive north-south trade route, a rather well-developed pricing system appears to have emerged, as noted by Kroeber: "They did have an unusually exact set of shell bead valuations for property of various kinds" (1932:422).

<http://www.californiaprehistory.com/reports02/rep0026.html>

Money - Values for clamshell disc beads were: once around the hand without crossing the wrist, 25 cents; five times around the hand, \$5.00.

<http://www.gerlecreek.com/documents/yokutsmonoe ethnography.htm>

From Yoimot, reportedly the last full blooded Chunut Yokuts from the northeast shore of Tulare Lake, Latta obtained a number of stories. Concerning Poza Chaná she stated: Indian traders used to meet to trade with the coast Indians. Kahn-te the oldest chief of the Tache told this story about their trading.

The bead and seashell traders from the coast met the Tache traders at Poza Chaná. The Tache and the other Indians would not let the people from the west come right up to the lake. They were afraid they would learn how to get things without trading, he told how his people used to trade off fish, kots [obsidian], salt grass salt, and some seeds. Sometimes they traded kuts [koots, soapstone] beads. They brought back shell beads and sea shells, *traw-neck* [abalone], *cawm-sool* [clam], and *caw-sool* [olivella or periwinkle].

<http://www.californiaprehistory.com/reports01/rep0014.html>



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