Chapter 5

Wampum and Social Creativity among The Iroquois

In this chapter, I’d like to say a little bit about wampum, the white and purple shell beads which became a currency of trade in early colonial Northeast North America. Among “primitive valuables”—a category that includes such things as kula necklaces, Kwakiutl coppers, or the iron bars used in bridewealth exchange by the West African Tiv—wampum holds a rather curious place. Simply as an object, it’s by far the most familiar. The average reader is much more likely to know what wampum looks like, or to have actually seen some in a museum, than any of the others. Nonetheless, unlike the others, wampum has never been treated as a classic case in anthropological exchange theory.

There are probably several reasons for this. For one thing, the contexts in which wampum circulated is closer to what a Western observer would be inclined to see as political than economic. The heyday of wampum was also a very long time ago: in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, long before the birth of modern ethnography. But it’s also hard to escape the impression that the case of wampum is in most other ways just a little bit too close to home. Wampum was, after all, material manufactured from clams found primarily off the coast of Long Island, whose shells are still to be found scattered on the beaches of Fire Island, the Hamptons, and other places where New York’s stockbrokers and literati like to spend their summer weekends; it was used mainly for trade with the Iroquois towns that then dotted what is now upstate New York. Wampum was first manufactured in bulk by the Pequods of Connecticut, a group later to be wiped out by English settlers in a notorious massacre in 1637. This is not the sort of history most New Yorkers like to dwell on—or Americans in general, for that matter.

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Finally, anthropologists' own role has not always been entirely innocent. In the late 1960s, when many of the Six Nations of the Iroquois were trying to win back control of their heirloom wampum collection from New York State museums, William Fenton, who was then and remains to this day one of the most respected Anglo authorities on the subject, took it upon himself to write a major treatise entitled “The New York State Wampum Collection: the Case for Integrity of Cultural Treasures” (1971) which made an elaborate case for refusing to accede to their requests. The essay, as one might imagine, served only to reinforce the widespread (and to a large extent historically justified) Native American impression that anthropologists were at best agents of cultural imperialism, and at worst, of even worse sorts. Resulting bitterness has made the whole issue of anthropological views of wampum somewhat sensitive.

All this is quite a shame because it seems to me that the study of wampum is of potentially enormous interest to any theory of value. For one thing, it is probably the best documented case of beads being used as a medium of exchange between European traders and a very differently organized society in which we have a fairly clear picture of what the non-European parties to the transaction did with the beads once they got them. The focus in this chapter will be on the Iroquoian peoples of what came to be known as the Five (later, Six) Nations. What I’m going to do first of all is tell the history of wampum, up to around the end of the eighteenth century, which took on an extraordinary importance in the creation of the Iroquois Federation itself. The first effect of the arrival of European traders in search of fur, and soon after, settlers, on the coast of Northeast North America was, predictably, to plunge the peoples of the interior into an almost constant state of violent upheaval: a world of endless feuding, massacres, forced migrations, whole peoples scattered and displaced, of two hundred years of almost continual war. Wampum had a peculiar role in all this. It was the principle medium of the fur trade, which had sparked so much of the trouble to begin with—wampum was one of the lures held out by the newcomers to inspire people to attack each other; but at the same time, within the Iroquois confederacy—and the Iroquois were considered by their Indian neighbors a particularly ferocious and terrifying population of warriors—it was valued primarily for its ability to create peace.

the origins of wampum

So much changed so quickly once Europeans began to arrive on the coasts of Northeastern North America that it becomes difficult to say anything for certain about the years before. There’s no consensus about whether something that could be called “wampum” even existed before 1500; nonetheless,