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Review: Money and Exchange in West Africa

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Project

Money and Exchange in West Africa

Project Team

[Leigh Gardner](#), Project Director, London School of Economics

[Ellen Feingold](#), Project Director, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

[Jennifer Gloede](#), Collections Manager, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution

Project URL

<https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/money-and-exchange-in-west-africa/5riFCVvFDNcXodgL>

Project Reviewer

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Project Overview**Leigh Gardner and Ellen Feingold***Project Description*

Currency objects provide a window into histories of trade, politics, and cultural interaction. In West Africa, they reflect the complex legacies of colonial rule and decolonization. Understanding the history of the currency objects themselves — why they were created, where they circulated, and what they communicated to their users — has been central to knowledge about how monetary systems developed in the region.

Money and Exchange in West Africa is an ongoing collaboration between the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Smithsonian Institution's National Numismatic Collection (NNC). Supported by the LSE's Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund, we digitized the NNC's [880 West African currency objects](#). To make these objects useful for teaching, we also curated digital collections of selected objects with background materials and readings based on our published research. These digital collections appear on the Smithsonian's Learning Lab platform, which is designed for K-12 teachers and students.

This project provides a new model for digital collaborations between museums and universities. Inverting the standard approach of digitizing large collections in the hope that they will be used in academic research, our research-led model prioritizes the digitization of small collections that have already been the subject of published research. This approach enables academic research to reach new audiences outside the academy.

Team

Dr. Leigh Gardner is an Associate Professor of Economic History at the LSE. Her research focuses on the financial and monetary history of Sub-Saharan Africa in the 19th and 20th centuries and, in particular, how the financial history of the region reflects economic and political change over that period.

Dr. Ellen Feingold is the Curator of the NNC. She curated the National Museum of American History's permanent gallery of numismatics, *The Value of Money*, and has published on the history of currency counterfeiting in colonial West Africa.

Jennifer Gloede is the Collections Manager and Outreach Officer of the NNC. She carried out the digitization process including cataloging and photography of the West African currency objects. In addition to digital and preservation initiatives, she manages the NNC's research room.

We are also working with the National Museum of American History's digital programs office and K-12 education team, who connected us with schools that are teaching subjects that the digital collection might complement.

Audience, Adoption, and Use

The combination of the full digital collection and targeted Learning Labs enables the project to reach both a general audience and K-12 students and teachers. The Learning Lab platform currently has 600,000 users who are able to use the labs we create or curate their own labs from the Smithsonian's extensive online catalog. In addition, making the digital images freely available can also facilitate their use in research and teaching within Africa. To our knowledge, no such comparative numismatic collection exists in West Africa.

A further access point to the collection is a physical display on the history of the U.S. dollar in Liberia within [The Value of Money](#) exhibition. This display is also accessible online through a [blog post](#) and [Learning Lab](#).

Project Review

Rebecca Shumway

Money and Exchange in West Africa brings users into contact with a diverse array of objects that were used as money, or objects of exchange, in West Africa from the late-18th century to the present. The project brings archival/museum collections into classrooms and digital public spaces while stimulating further scholarly research. The foundation of this project is a collection of 880 West African monetary

objects held and digitized by the Smithsonian Institution in its National Numismatic Collection. These include printed bills, coins, cowry shells, small sculptures used as gold weights, and other objects that were once used in West Africa's monetary system. A subset of the Smithsonian's Online Collection, they can be found within subject groups related to coins and currency and the exhibit called [The Value of Money](#). The brilliance of the project lies in steps its creators Leigh Gardner and Ellen Feingold took to bring these objects into educational, scholarly, and general interest historical conversations related to Africa, colonialism, trade, and economics.

Another major feature of the project is the development of a Smithsonian Learning Lab, in which a small subset of the most visually interesting digitized objects appears on a free internet platform designed for K-12 and post-secondary learners and teachers. The project directors provide a concise overview of trade and monetary systems in West African history together with references to further reading (some of which are digitally linked). On this platform, each object is linked to a paragraph-length description of the culture, geography, and commercial system in which the object would have been used. There are tools for marking the image for use in a personal project as well as the ability for "liking," sharing, downloading, or creating a citation for the image. The Learning Lab component will be particularly useful for teachers in the near future as West Africa negotiates a move to a common currency for the region, moving away from the dominance of the French-backed CFA franc. The franc serves as a constant and unwelcome reminder of French colonial rule in much of the region. Drawing on *Money and Exchange in West Africa*, educators will be able to show students the coins and objects that once circulated throughout precolonial West Africa, before colonial conquest divided the region into separate French, British, German, and Portuguese territories, each with their distinct European languages and currencies.

The project is particularly notable for bringing together a number of institutions and disciplinary approaches to fund the project and maximize its accessibility to new audiences as well as scholars in related fields. The project involved the London School of Economics, with support from its Knowledge Exchange and Impact Fund; the Smithsonian Institution's National Numismatic Collection; and the National Museum of American History's digital programs office and K-12 education team, which coordinates with K-12 schools. The result is a wonderful resource that will bring an otherwise rather obscure collection into a wide range of lesson plans and research projects.