

Basic Detail Report



Currency (Mfunte)

Date
19th Century

Primary Maker
Mambila

Medium
Iron

Description

Iron has become difficult to track in the history of tools of remote societies. However, post-Colonial iron imports helped shape the economy of African society with the newly available abundance of the material. Alongside copper, iron was important in local currency, especially in its agricultural manufacturing context. The smelting of iron and its use in agriculture became an integral part of African currency, as seen in hoe culture. Hoe-money consisted of currency being forged from a heavy iron sheet and shaped into varying forms. Hoe blades had been used in transactions through much of West Africa. Yet, with iron material becoming more available, and as cultural ritual of exchange of objects developed, the use and shape of hoes was changed. The utilitarian function of the objects diminished as exchange hoes became morphologically unusable for agriculture. Instead the currency pieces remained within the context of exchange as some were too large or had a shape unsuitable for farming. Hoe culture was an essential part of West Africa’s economy and constituted some of the most varied forms of African currency. The currency came with varying forms, sizes, names, and value depending on each region and intermediate shapes can be found. Shapes of the hoes included hearts, spades, paddles, teardrops, trowels, anchors, or even blades. In fact, the hoe classifications began to overlap the classifications of blade or knife currency. Hoes were a useful exchange object as the material could also be reformed into other shapes or implements as needed. Hoe money was also used for the payments of bride wealth. Though iron is more trackable from post-colonial sites, archaeologists know that Africans smelted ore, traded metal, or forged tools and weapons for 5,000 years. However, this process was arduous and required large amounts of charcoal. Buying the raw material in the form of rods or ingots was a much more viable option as the material could be shaped when needed. The production of intricate shapes, including those of hoe currency, flourished.

Dimensions

10 × 27 in. (25.4 × 68.6 cm)