



Armband Currency (Mwali)

Date

early to mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Massim

Medium

Conus shell, ovula ovum shell, cowrie shell, oyster shell, beads, possibly paper and pigments

Description

The Kula ring is a ceremonial exchange that takes place in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. It spans an archipelago with 18 participating Massim communities and involves thousands of islanders. Each year, participants sail hundreds of miles in canoes decorated with cowrie shells and painted splashboards and prows to trade soulava (also called bagi), a type of red shell

necklace, and mwali, shell armbands. Though the trade items are at the center of the deals, food and other goods are also worked into the complex negotiations, making Kula an important lifeline for many smaller islands. Soulava are traded clockwise and Mwali are traded counterclockwise around the Kula ring. Most men who participate in Kula exchange will have two partners with whom they almost exclusively trade, one for soulava and the other for mwali. With each swap both soulava and mwali are further adorned with shells and beads, causing them to increase in value and prestige as they move around the Kula ring. Mwali and soulava were only worn on rare occasions such as ceremonial dances, great feasts, and gatherings where several villages were represented. Given their primary use as a trade item and the rigidity of their medium, some mwali were made too small to be worn. Incredibly ornate pieces that have been traded for many cycles are often named. Generally, soulava receive male names and mwali receive female names.

Dimensions

12 7/8 × 11 × 4 1/2 in. (32.7 × 27.9 × 11.4 cm)