



Becoming like money

Proximity and the social aesthetics of “moneyness”

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In this article I take the scene of a group of South Indian villagers perceiving and counting a heap of collective money as a starting point to look at qualitative, subjective, and contextual variations through which money manifests itself as valued properties, circuits, performances, acts, repertoires, and capacities in social and personal life. As I argue, this requires us to scrutinize the shifting proximities between money objects and money subjects. I trace these through the notion of “moneyness,” and more precisely through the relational property of being (or getting) “*in*,” “*at*,” and “*out*” of what money is, becomes, and represents.

Keywords: money, moneyness, value and values, form and abstraction, becoming and being

“Her voice is full of money,” he said suddenly.
That was it. I’d never understood before.
It was full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that
rose and fell in it, the jingle of it, the cymbals’ song of it.
(F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The great Gatsby* [1925] 1995)

One might agree that money is a common resource or token that is transacted, pooled, stored, and even multiplied as currency and debt in the name of value. And as Simmel argued, “The more people develop relationships with one another, the more abstract and generally acceptable must be their medium of exchange” ([1900] 2005: 348). However, anthropologists of money (for an overview, see Parry and Bloch 1989; Maurer 2006; Hart and Ortiz 2014) are increasingly fascinated with the idea that *pecunia* is subject to continuous change and appropriation, while as medium and “process” (see especially Dodd 2014: 272) it has to “bridge the gap between everyday personal experience and a society whose wider reaches are impersonal” (Hart 2008: 5).



As to that, my concern in this article is with the socioaesthetic process that brings money objects and money subjects into mutual existence. Rather than starting from money as such—that is, by treating money as an object in its own right, or by placing an “arbitrary limit . . . on the use of the word” (Mauss [1925] 2016: 91, ch. II, n. 29)—I take “monetization” or “becoming like money” as a point of departure. Contrary to an epistemology of (infinite) distancing and abstraction, I use ethnography to show that (relative) closeness, form, and quality are fundamental with regard to that process. And, insofar as I refer to “social aesthetics,” I think of “culturally patterned [fields of] sensory experience . . . composed of objects and actions” (MacDougall 1999: 5), of habitus and embodiment (Bourdieu 1977), and of the role that money plays in that it resonates with our “style of life” (Simmel [1900] 2005: ch. 6).¹

In the following I will discuss and in some respect redefine the qualitative notion of “moneyness,” which, I believe, provides an important angle for anthropologists. Subsequently I shall turn to an ethnographic case of South Indian villagers creating, perceiving, counting, and embodying a heap of village money. The rest of the article discusses how “moneyness” may be addressed as a relational property of money objects and money subjects that emerges and vanishes with forms of physical and ascribed proximity.

Moneyness

As far as I am aware, “moneyness” has remained both unchallenged by and without conceptual appeal to anthropologists. Perhaps this is not too surprising. Where scholars employed the term at all, it was to account for what Simmel called the “essential quality of money” ([1900] 2005: 117) and which he subsequently specified as “the purest expression and embodiment” (ibid.) of “the value of things without the things themselves” (ibid.: 119). Thus, according to Ingham (2004: 5, 12, 14) moneyness is what uniquely specifies money regardless of form. Having identified “measure of abstract value” (for Ingham as well as for Keynes: the money of account, created by the state) and “transporting this abstract value” as the prime conditions of money, he contends that it is through the former that moneyness is “assigned” or “conferred” to whatever “form” of money (ibid.: 70–71).

Both my project and my definition are different. Most monies, of course, share the common feature that they “enable us to transform qualitative relations between values into quantitative ones” (Dodd 2005: 409; cf. Simmel [1900]

1. Indeed, it was Simmel ([1896] 2009) who coined the term “*Soziologische Ästhetik*.” More recently, the term (social aesthetics) was independently developed in visual anthropology (MacDougall 1999, 2006) to account for the “manner in which humans present themselves in space in order to constitute effective and affective social behavior” (Burns-Coleman 2013: 10; cf. Heidemann 2013), and how “each social landscape is a distinctive sensory complex, constructed . . . by material things . . . , human activities and the bodies of human beings themselves” (MacDougall 2006: 58). A philosophical but closely related approach is Böhme’s concept of “atmosphere” as the “common reality of the perceiver and the perceived” (1993: 122).



2005: 278). Yet the same feature is only attractive because it also holds the other way round: money in hand, or, more generally, “control over monetary means,” enables us to express and extend identity (Simmel [1900] 2005: 327f.), to transact desire (Buchan 2001; Yuran 2014), power, status, and history (E. Wolf 1982; Gregory 1997; Graeber 2011), to determine what money does or how and for what it pays (Zelizer 1994: 18–21, 201; Maurer 2015), and thus to realize qualitative relations and concrete “values.” One can thus agree in some respect that moneyness is both assignable and conferrable and that it has something to do with transporting and comparing value. However, I argue that it is the dialectic tension between *value-realization* and *value-abstraction* that specifies moneyness in the form of *monies*—plural and, importantly, as facts, qualities, and capacities in human life.

Therefore, I am not at all in line with Ingham where he explicitly points out the “widespread category error whereby ‘moneyness’ is identified with a particular ‘form’ of money” (Ingham 2004: 14, cf. 70–80). Quite to the contrary: the true category error emerged when Simmel philosophized upon “pure money” while he knew that such money could not exist in any strict sense (see Dodd 2007: 275). It was this working fiction, through which Simmel and many of his followers imagined money a priori as the “the most terrible destroyer of form” ([1900] 2005: 274) and then—of all things—pointed to an “empirical world” where the quality of money was precisely that “only money is free from any quality and exclusively determined by quantity” (ibid.: 281). This was at the heart of what Simmel ([1900] 2005: 221, 478–84) regarded as an overall socioaesthetic process of “distancing” (*Distanzvergrößerung*) which he thought to be characteristic of modern life and, simultaneously, the result of monetization (see also Simmel [1896] 2009). However, as we shall see, distance, closeness, capacity, and form are densely interwoven in the social fabrics of money—and moneyness, the quality, may be more usefully applied to the contextual uses and manifestations of money: a dollar or an Indian rupee are interchangeable units of account and their moneyness can render things comparable or rank values in terms of a quantitative assessment. But what if dollars not only monetize but dollarize? And if the rupee, to quote a former Indian finance minister, “reflects and captures the Indian ethos and culture”?² More generally: If abstract value is a key feature of money precisely because it represents the potential of realizing concrete values, how about thinking of moneyness as the *relational property* which pertains to such *realization*? Obviously, this means turning to another kind of definition.

Notably, research on derivatives has challenged the idea of money insofar as derivatives may be seen as “money in a newly created self-mediating form” (LiPuma and Lee 2004: 48) that “serves to blur the distinctions between money and capital” (Bryan and Rafferty 2011: 177). Now, in the technical language of finance practitioners, the term “moneyness” refers to an indicator that describes the “condition” of a derivative, namely as being “*in*,” “*at*,” and “*out*” of the money. It does so by way of relating its strike price (fixed by contract as an option to be exercised up to the expiration date) to its underlying asset (at any current rate). In other words, “moneyness describes

2. Pranab Mukherjee, budget speech 2010–11 (held on February 26, 2010).

the intrinsic value of an option *in its current state*³—and this state solely refers to the question of *what would be* if the option were to be exercised right now—that is, if it were to become like money. Of course, from the trader’s technical point of view, such final “realization” means just gain or loss. Yet the terminology of being “in” (signifying a temporary potential), “at” (break-even), and “out” of the money (signifying temporary failure) is intriguing, because it indicates the proximity of an option (and of its holder!) to what money represents in a given but still developing scenario.⁴

In the following, I borrow these terms, but I do not intend to use them exactly at par: according to my definition, moneyness is a relational property that concerns the potential and the power of becoming and being like money the social fact and process rather than the quantitative expression: that is, moneyness is an embodied and dialectically constructed relation with the shifting potential of being “in,” “at,” and “out” of what money as medium represents, demands, and allows for—at a given time, place, and situation (hence the “realization” of money). In this sense, I suggest thinking of moneyness in more aesthetic and semiotic terms—namely with reference to the *physical* or *ascribed proximity* of something or somebody to *whatever* is represented in or conferred through the focal relation(s) that money constitutes as a concrete medium, a process, and a common reference to value.

For the sake of brevity, the rest of this article focuses on observations of *people’s* moneyness, which is, anthropologically speaking, of particular importance (i.e., money is made, valued, perceived, and used by people). The following example of an annual ceremony of physically counting village taxes in rural South India provides a rich opportunity to enter into a broader analysis of how moneyness is in fact not a quality of money as such but emerges from social, cultural, and indeed sensual and bodily interaction among people as well as through acts of “getting in touch” with and connecting through a seemingly neutral but in the process actively value-laden (monetary) medium.

Perceiving the money heap

The human gaze has a power of conferring value on things; but it makes them cost more too.
(Wittgenstein 1980: 1e)

Consider the following scene: a group of no more than twenty South Indian villagers sit or stand in front of their main temple. All are male, most are elders, and all belong to the same ethnic community. The main village (*ur*) and fourteen associated hamlets (*hatti*) are also exclusively inhabited by this community. They are small tea growers, tea factory owners, and educated professionals. Today those who are formally required and those who are interested to join have gathered for the

3. <http://www.investopedia.com/terms/m/moneyness.asp> (accessed March 17, 2017, emphasis added).

4. Recent work has addressed the performative and creative dimensions of “the capacity to generate theoretical prices” (MacKenzie 2003: 855) as well as the contingencies of techniques, knowledge-gaps, philosophies, and dreams in the construction of (financial) markets (Miyazaki 2013).



purpose of counting the village tax. Two weeks earlier the tax was collected along with considerable donations among the “thousand houses” (*ur* and *hattis*) in cash. This was done in the course of the annual celebration of the villagers’ main religious festival. As we shall see below, the festival, the collection of taxes and donations, and the counting mark the end as well as the beginning of a yearly ritual and fiscal cycle.⁵

Since the group has assembled at the temple, all are barefoot. Besides this there is little formality. Most have dressed in white *dhoties* (*dhoti*: long cloth wound around the hip). Some of the men are wearing white shirts, and one, the village headman, also wears a white turban. Together, these three items make up the traditional men’s attire worn during all ritual and festive occasions, but it is not a requirement for the present event. A few distinctions are thus visible in the men’s manner of dress: the headman, the oldest man in the village, two minor headmen who each preside over a part of the main village, the priest of the village’s main deity, a retired politician who used to be a district treasurer, a lawyer, and a few cultivators wear white *dhoties* and white shirts. Meanwhile two others wear a white *dhoti* with striped, colored shirts. One is the comparatively young son of the priest who works as a life insurance agent. The other is a retired engineer who used to work for a major Indian company and has often traveled to Europe. Yet three other men are dressed in strikingly different attire: one, a retired teacher, wears pleated trousers, a white shirt, and a blue slipover. Another wears blue jeans and a striped business shirt. He is one of the local tea factory owners. One man’s dress, however, stands out in particular: he is a factory owner, but he is also the undisputed patron of the entire area, owning not one but several factories, a private school, and a gated community, as well as extensive landholdings. Moreover, he is the financial trustee of the village fund. This man is dressed neatly in black trousers, a light blue shirt, a yellow jacket, and a golf hat.

The priest opens a side door of the temple. He lights a lamp and conducts a small *puja* (offering to the village god). The bright sound of a bell and the smell of camphor are in the air. Blankets are laid out on the floor under the temple’s canopy, and most attendees sit down, forming a closed circle (fig. 1). The son of the priest opens a number of thick white bags containing the collected tax and additional donations. He also opens a few boxes containing offerings made at the temple during the festival. With a propitious susurration and jingling, he pours the money onto the ground. He empties one bag after another, and a heap grows in the center of the circle. The money is now the focus of all attendees. A few people comment on the “happy” sound of money, some others on the optical distribution of denominations, while others try to estimate the total amount or to compare the size of the money heap with memories of preceding years. As soon as the last bag is emptied, all who are present collectively touch the money. Then the sorting and counting begins. The money heap remains the focus while multiple hands mingle with each other as rustling notes and jingling coins are spread flat and distributed within the circle. The flurry of activity seems chaotic, but the scene is thoroughly structured.

5. I have chosen to leave the villagers and their collective money anonymized. The entire scene which I describe in the following was documented on February 27, 2013 in the course of a long-term field study. Documentation of the concrete case includes 302 photographs, some of which were later analyzed and discussed with informants who attended the event.



Figure 1: Counting village money. (All photos by the author.)

First, three men maintain a distance from the money. Like everyone else, they touched the money once all the bags were emptied, but now they do not sit within the circle. These three are the priest, the village headman, and the rich patron. Of them, the priest keeps the largest physical distance from the money heap while still watching the whole procedure. During the last village festival he and the village headman jointly led a procession of devotees who, over a period of several days, visited all the “thousand houses” of the village and its hamlets in order to collect the tax. Even then, the priest did not touch the money and never performed the gesture of receipt, only giving blessings in return. Now, the collected money is counted in the name of the village deity. Representing the god, the priest’s presence is indispensable. Yet, except for the moment of collective touching, he remains physically detached from the money. Similarly, the headman is not involved in counting. Unlike the priest, however, he sits on a bench close to the circle. When the counting is done, he will receive the money on behalf of the village and will publicly announce the final amount. Though he is the political authority of the village, and though he is responsible for the money, throughout the year he will not keep the money with him. That is the role of the third man: the rich patron. Seated next to the headman, the patron will be entrusted by him with the economic management of the village money. Since the rich patron has an undisputed capacity to guarantee the money, he will take and invest (on-lend) it throughout the year and as long as the money is not needed by the village. Though some villagers notoriously hold different opinions, it is also true that he shares the profit from on-lending with the village. Apart from that he will also quickly advance and often donate cash wherever it is needed for the common good. Like the headman and the priest, the rich patron does not sit and count within the circle. As the trustee, his role in the procedure is to cross-check the bundles of banknotes counted by the others with final authority.

Second, three persons within the circle assume different functions. One is the son of the priest. He takes part in the counting, but was also responsible for opening the bags and pouring the money out. Another is the retired teacher. He also counts, but his main duty is to note the value of each counted bundle on a sheet of paper and, finally, to add up the total amount, which will later be cross-checked by the patron. However, there is one man in the circle who neither counts nor sorts, nor staples, that is, the oldest man of the village. He sits close to the temple wall and appears to do nothing. Yet all banknotes, after having been sorted, bundled, counted (inside the circle), passed to the patron, approved (outside the circle), passed back to the teacher, and listed (inside the circle), are kept next to him.



Figure 2: From left to right: the patron, the headman, the oldest man, the factory owner, the politician.

Third, although there is no formal role for the other people in the seated circle, the performances of at least three stand out. One is the former district treasurer. He had a considerable career as a politician, and still maintains good contacts with and beyond the local administration, police, judges, parties, associations, and businessmen. In town he runs a registered chit-fund (Rotating Savings and Credit Association), and it is also an open secret that he is capable of mediating bribes and acting as a broker of big finance. Apart from that he is a forthright, charismatic person and a respected village elder who is always consulted on village and family affairs. Though he owns a big house and his influence may be feared by many, he displays, and indeed leads in some respects, a simple village life—wearing nothing but traditional dress, serving the community, attending festivals, funerals, and meetings, chatting with ordinary people, and working his own garden. In all this, he is well aware of the mysterious aura he radiates through his ascribed proximity to money, power, and people; and he knows how to play it perfectly. Thus, after the initial phase of rough presorting, he immediately grabs the big banknotes—first the 1,000 rupee notes, then the 500 rupee notes. This causes a few spontaneous joking comments. Yet what follows (to his great and joyfully staged pleasure) is that everyone who digs out big banknotes from the collective heap passes them over to him.

Meanwhile, the performance of the factory owner wearing the blue jeans and striped shirt is nearly the complete opposite. His dress is not really appropriate for the temple, but the choice indicates both his economic status and his modern attitude. Normally he is not much interested in village affairs, but like all local factory owners he has considerable economic influence, makes (and is expected to make) huge donations to the temple, and advances money to peasants prior to the festival. Presently, however, he faces an acute shortage of liquidity. It is a badly kept secret

that he came to the temple with the intention of borrowing village money for interest as soon as it is given to the patron. Throughout the entire counting process, he engages in subtle understatement: he modestly prefers counting smaller denominations—50 rupee notes, 10 rupee notes, 5 rupee notes, and, ultimately, even the smallest of the coins.

A third member of those involved in counting, the retired engineer, sits not next to but close to the teacher. Indeed, he carefully watches, announces, and comments upon what the latter notes. Later he also helps to check and confirm the teacher's calculations. Commenting on this performance, which did not, however, particularly deviate from that of other men on the left and right of the teacher, an informant later identified him as being "always close to the [collective] funds," remarking, moreover, that he was anxious for cross-checking and correctness since members of his family had recently accused him of mishandling joint land documents.

Other participants in the counting did not stand out in particular. Nevertheless, there were observable nuances concerning individual dress, gestures, speech, and so on, as they each embodied village money through their presence, personality, relations, and behavior, and through the fact that they had each contributed their own tax and donations, representing their house and family, to the heap. Importantly, the latter is true for *all* the "thousand houses" of the village (*ur* and *hattis*). All villagers are "in" the money of the scene (and all villagers could attend the counting), but some are even more so, some are particularly close.

What the scene thus shows is a set of people creating, experiencing, and indeed personalizing money in *a shared and enfolding monetary context* that includes cash, the village, the temple, the preceding festival, the known identities, formal roles, and spontaneous acts of those who are present. The entire scene is contained within an atmosphere that embraces sacredness, cooperation, and togetherness. Yet overall there is the focal relationship to the coins and notes which is constituted by the centrality of the money heap, by the physical and ascribed proximities of attendees, by each attendee's personality, body, and background, as well as by the collective spirit with which village money—now visible, audible, tangible, and countable—is already imbued.

Village money or villagers' money: What's "in" their heap?

There remains a considerable lack of ethnographic research on money and monetary culture in India. Yet money hardly possesses the same kind of autonomy with which it is credited in the West. Parry, for example, tends to locate the flow of Indian monies within a more encompassing process of circulation that includes souls and substances and "which maintains the cosmic and social orders" (1989: 81). In precolonial South India, a great deal of exchanges in goods and services used to be embedded in relations of caste and kin, whereas the flow of money appeared abundant precisely where it marked life-cycle events as well as the spiritual, social, and political integration of society (see Parthasarathi 2016). This also resonated with the revenue system and the state, whose power "continued to be constrained by the power of local communities" (*ibid.*: 18), while the institutions of (village) temples and temple endowments were linchpins of taxation and decentralized rule



(see Appadurai 1978; Morrison and Sinopoli 1992). More generally, the legacy of Indian money was and perhaps still is not that it veiled or alienated social, moral, material, and spiritual relations, but that it could help make and exemplify such relations (see also Miller 1986; Rudner 1994; Chari 2004).

How does this pertain to the villagers and the counting scene? And in which sense does moneyness provide us with a viable lens? “Village” refers in this case to a complex of a “thousand houses” (roughly true) which comprises the main village (*ur*) and fourteen surrounding hamlets (*hatti*). The latter were founded either by descendants of the main village or—as violations of the general rule of patrilocality are not altogether uncommon—by affine groups who joined later but “bow down” (i.e., pray and pay their tax!) before the political authority of the *ur*, the main temple which is called “the first house,” and the joint council over which the headman presides.⁶ The god, an avatar of Shiva, is identified as the mythical founder of the village and the ancestor of the main local lineage. It should also be noted that the entire complex is part of a far larger regional settlement structure of the same endogamous community. The “thousand houses” are thus related through their various agnate and affine ties that constitute and permeate the levels of their territorial, political, economic, and ritual integration both within and beyond the *hattis* and the *ur*.

Relatedness involves strong normative values of cooperation, respect, and solidarity that pertain with varying force to all levels of such integration. However, within the whole, individuals and groups compete for influence and recognition while economic development, too, tends to reformulate local relations in many ways. Income, education, profession, social commitment, and reputation are crucial determinants of an individual’s achieved status in society. At the same time a person’s reputation, contacts, power, and wealth are shared through large networks of kin, alliance, neighborhood, friendship, and patronage. Notably, when tea cultivation and industrial tea production became the community’s economic mainstay during the twentieth century, factory owners emerged as powerful modern elites, while hamlets, with the financial help of “their” factory owners, sought to enhance public recognition and to create a “relative” sovereignty within the “thousand houses”—constructing, for example, new temples, celebrating their own festivals, selecting their own (minor) headmen, priests, and councils, collecting a separate tax, creating their own funds, and investing in common goods such as village schools, roads, bus stops, community halls, cooperative stores, certain kinds of mutual insurance (in particular for funeral expenses), and so on.

Now it is important to note, although I cannot do it due justice here, that there is virtually no fundamental relation among villagers and in fact among the entire community at all that is not accompanied by a whole set of monetary expressions: ritual payments that must be made to honor the relation with gods, territories, ancestors, as well as (living) family elders; both bridewealth and dowry to create and maintain the ties between affine lineages; intergenerational networks of mutual monetary support that mobilize and meticulously record (in writing) the visits and the monetary gifts of even very distant relations in the frequent events of family

6. In precolonial times, the *ur* and its headman were responsible for paying a tax in cash to regional chiefdoms.

functions, funerals, house constructions, sickness, and hospitalization; taxes, fees, and fines with respect to all kinds of traditional authority and membership; an even more complex culture of fundraising and donation; advance payments “free of interest” in the competitive supply chain of tea production; a financial landscape that reflects (and often renegotiates) relatedness in terms of cheap or dear, secured or unsecured loans, or, indeed, in terms of running into debt for a beloved one or a good purpose, as well as in terms of the performance of collective monies such as are involved in self-help groups, rotating and accumulating savings and credit associations, cooperative banks, and village, funeral, and temple funds. “No money prospers without relations,” or “without relations there is no use for money,” to use villagers’ common expressions.⁷

What, then, is the value of the money heap? And how was the heap created? As I indicated at the beginning, the money was collected by a large procession of voluntary devotees during the villagers’ main festival, which is celebrated in the name of Shiva and the founding ancestor. In the course of several festival days, the procession had crossed all internal divisions. Each time they conducted a *puja* and paid a *kanike* (small ritual tribute in cash) to the community’s various ancestor and border stones. At various points of the track they were zealously hosted with coffee breaks and feastings along with up to several thousand guests.⁸ In turn the procession “brought the god” to each of the “thousand houses,” where they collected the tax and blessed the members. Finally, at the temple ground and under the frenetic applause of spectators, the procession had moved one by one through a trench of glowing embers with nothing but their bare feet—and, with divine blessing, all of them “walked very nicely,” and none of them “got burned.” Collecting and bearing the villagers’ money, for some time the procession had rendered the flow of money equal with both the movement and the belonging of people⁹—demonstrating to themselves as well as to outsiders the strength of their community, and literally earning in this way the blessing of their ancestral god. As villagers say: “If the village is good, there is good money rolling.”

By no means is this to be taken for granted. The festival and the tax collection pertain to the unity of all the “thousand houses,” but it is not an easy task to make money go round smoothly in the village and across all of its factions and leaders. As Bétéille put it more generally with regard to south Indian villages “unity . . . is

7. For a detailed analysis, see Zickgraf (2015).

8. The festival is an important social event. It is an occasion for all family members (including married daughters, their spouses and children, migrant sons, etc.) to join and to invite relatives and friends from many other villages as well as “honorary guests” like business partners, officials, or local politicians. While feastings are huge collective happenings that take place in the evening hours, together with the devotees of the procession there is also a permanent coming, going, and mutual hosting between all the houses and all the relations of the village during the entire festival week.

9. More generally, Heidemann’s (2013) study of “the cultural dimension of movement and space in South India” is highly indicative of the widespread relevance of the sensation of (social and physical) closeness in performances such as processions, public gatherings, and formal visits, the hosting of guests and relatives, as well as collective practices such as touching, seeing, and eating.



a changing reality, varying according to context and situation” (1965: 75; cf. R. K. Wolf 1997). Throughout the year, conflicts (about land, money, tea prices, politics, love, marriage and divorce, ritual responsibilities, council decisions, claims to sovereignty and leadership, etc.) are the norm rather than the exception; and “unity” may involve “units” as diverse as the house, the neighborhood, the family, the lineage, the hamlet, the small growers and factory owners, the individual patrons and their clients, the young and the old generations, the modernists and the traditionalists, and so on. It is commonplace that lingering conflicts escalate prior to or during the festival. If conflicting parties cannot be pacified, sometimes the entire festival and the collection are canceled (though this is very rare), or (more frequently) the procession cannot visit some of the houses or hamlets (meaning that some are either not allowed or not willing to pay their tax). Another consequence even of minor tensions may be that devotees burn their feet or have to “run” in the course of the fire-walk. Hence, what makes the value of the money heap is first and foremost the fact that (or the degree to which) the money was “successfully” collected among all their “thousand houses.”

Beginning with elaborate preparations, the entire festival, the rituals, the procession, and the collection combine into a staged performance of the villagers’ dynamic relations. As far as the flow of money is concerned, it is crucial to note that the festival involves not only the collection of taxes but also donations. Taxes are nominally levied to cover the expected expense of the festival (and in fact many other collective expenses throughout the year). They are equal and bearable for each house and in this sense each house contributes an equal share. In contrast, donations are voluntarily given both in cash along with the tax (which is relatively unproblematic and mostly given on behalf of a house’s married daughters) and in kind according to the material needs of the festival—in particular the prestigious events of hosting the procession and guests at variable(!) points along their route. Donations are rhetorically framed as prayers or loving commitments but implicitly they are also given (and expected) to reflect the pride, status, power, and wealth of an individual, a house, a lineage, a factory, or an entire hamlet. These are often interlinked. Thus, a factory owner may cover the major expense of a feasting in his hamlet. His patrilineage may contribute the necessary workforce and, if the council of that hamlet approves, it may support the cause before the “thousand houses” council and finally levy a small tax among its own houses to make sure that the whole hamlet contributes. However, beforehand, those who want to “show their love” (and strength) toward the community may also be strongly opposed by others. Since coffee breaks and feastings in particular are not only expensive, but also affect the exact route of the procession, how long they will stay in which place and not least the number of visitors who will join in that place, these need to be collectively approved and organized weeks before the festival starts. In fact, it is precisely where distinct units seek to make outstanding contributions to the common good that conflicts almost habitually erupt prior to the festival and threaten the unity of the “thousand houses.” However, insofar as villagers do finally succeed in reconciling their prevailing tensions in terms of mutual cooperation and compromise and thus to celebrate the festival “without disturbance,” the sum of donations may easily cover and exceed the total festival expense while the (equal) tax makes sure that everybody, including the ancestral god himself, is “in” the money. This is what

makes village money prosper—that is, what makes heaps and collective funds grow and what informs and reflects at least in one sense all other monetary flows and all the relations in the village: past, present, and future. It is the moneyness of village money—and this can hardly be better expressed than with the words of the priest, who explained:

The money which is given at the festival will roll around the village until it comes to the *deva mane* [main temple, first house]. This is considered as very prosperous and will give a good new year with good money rolling. Without festival there is no money and no history. (A. Pujari, “thousand houses,” 2012)

Money subjects and money objects, or: The value of personal action and the value form of money

Notwithstanding the fact that monetary value has quantitative dimensions, what I hope to have shown so far is how money may simultaneously be enacted, charged, and embodied as value through concrete people’s actions, behavior, formal responsibilities, and personality (i.e., the counting ceremony), as much as it may appear and flow (i.e., the heap and the procession) as an embodiment of the generalized values and relations that are shared, enacted, and ritually incorporated by a larger kind of community (i.e., the “thousand houses”). As Graeber notes:

Value is simply how we represent the meaning or importance of our own actions to ourselves. . . . This must also necessarily happen through some material medium: if not money then treasures, tokens, performances, privileges, and so on. . . . Since value may only be realized in the eyes of others . . . “society” largely emerges *as the audience* . . . for the realization of value. (Graeber 2009: 108, my emphasis)¹⁰

Importantly, values (plural) may not only be objectified as value (singular) through the form of money but also be generalized as “ethical value” (Lambek 2013: 141–44) incorporated in and circulated through “performative acts,” “judgment,” and what Lambek calls the “cumulation of acknowledgments” (ibid.: 156). Lambek illustrates this in an intriguing reinterpretation of the gift and the Maussian obligations to give, accept, and return. As he argues, the latter are “acts that *are* the gift and . . . the gift qua object is merely the materialization of the acts” (ibid.: 151, original emphasis). In a similar vein one could argue that the core feature of money is neither the thing nor abstract value as such, but being *transacted*.

In this regard, a hallmark in the field was Munn’s (1986) restudy of Melanesian valuables in terms of Gawan spacetimes.¹¹ Munn starts with the question of how

10. Elsewhere, Graeber addresses at length the claim that “value is the way actions become meaningful to the actors by being placed in some larger social whole” (2001: 254).

11. Graeber draws on Munn (1986) in order to make an argument very similar to that of Lambek (2013), namely that “if one gives another person food and receives a shell in return, it is not the value of the food that returns to one in the form of the shell, but rather the value of the act of giving it” (Graeber 2001: 45).



value rests on a community's (or person's) capacity to become an "agent of its own value creation" (ibid.: 20). This capacity, she argues, is procedural and lies in the "act" of manipulating the expansion and contraction of "intersubjective spacetimes." In speaking of value, she therefore does not strictly distinguish between value and values but rather points to the complementary "templates" (ibid.: 121) of "more general" and "more particular" *levels* of value that Gawans experience when they throw into circulation and thus into the spatiotemporal sphere of public consideration (and memory) not only exchangeable goods and prestige items but indeed the transactors' valuable bodies, names, and hierarchies, the spacetimes of fame, and the qualisigns of both their joint and individual performances and characters (see also ibid.: 8–9, 11f.). Crucially, where Munn refers to exchange as such, she borrows the Marxian term of the "value form" in order to indicate that an element, conceived as "*an act and its medium . . . finds 'the form of its own value' in the shape of another*" (ibid.: 148, n. 34, emphasis added). Value thus "emerges in action" (Graeber 2001: 45). What appears as money (or medium) is in fact just one value form among others.

It is precisely in regard to these notions that, in the remainder of this article, I turn to a more general discussion of how moneyness—that is, what I defined as the relational (and therefore predominantly contextual) property that is grounded in the potential of getting "in," "at," and "out" of what money as medium, form, and socioaesthetic process represents, demands, and allows for—may be approached through notions of *physical* and *ascribed proximity*.

Physical proximity

The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society,
in his pocket. (Marx [1939] 2005: 157)

Proximity marks the intensity of the merger between money subjects and money objects. A direct form of personal moneyness thus emerges and vanishes with physical closeness to or distance from that which appears to be the money media. As in the example of the counting, it can enfold through acts of grabbing, holding, carrying, operating, or standing close—and, in a more general sense, through any condition of effective or even affective access. Literally, if one holds money in one's hand or when one opens a purse, one is "at" the money—and the degree of being "at" the money indicates a temporal, subjective potential of becoming "like" money (or of money becoming like you).

Insofar as money derives its multiplicity from the differentiated meanings conferred whenever it is in our possession (see Zelizer 1994: 208–11), the condition of being "at" the money has powerful connotations: the bearer gets "in"-to the immediate (physical) control of what the money does and where it goes next, to whom or what it conveys meaning, value, and moneyness, as well as when, how, and why. At the same time, somebody who is "at" the money is neither independent of those who may be otherwise involved as initial givers, receivers, supplicants, owners, co-owners, or spectators (i.e., society, Graeber's "audience"; see above), nor is he or she independent of need, of moral or social context, location, and atmosphere. As the bearer gets "in"-to it, so are other aspects already contained with the money.

In the example of the money heap, it is the preceding festival, the aura of the temple, the known identity of each attendee and indeed all the members, events, disputes, and memories of the “thousand houses” that are already “in” the money of the scene. All individual proximity is further structured: the *priest*, the *headman*, and the *richest man* each keep a distance in respect of their status, wealth, or office. Their physical distance in turn highlights the closeness of all other attendees: those villagers who sit in the circle but do not particularly stand out; the *district treasurer*, who deliberately grabs a few 1,000 rupee notes from the heap and attracts in this way a directional flow of 1,000 rupee notes full of social meaning; the *factory owner*, who counts only small denominations but wears blue jeans and speculates on the possibility of borrowing the collective money afterward; or the *oldest man*, at whose back the counted and approved money rests for some time in undisputed neutrality. What constitutes moneyness is thus neither the money media themselves nor individual subjects but their joint presences and what their shifting proximities relate, how, when, and why.

There is, however, more involved in physical proximity than people, their personalities, and just any kind of money. It is the particular form of the money medium which resonates with the closeness of attendees—the tangibility, audibility, and visibility of *coins* and *notes* that weigh, jingle, rustle, and attract the eye when they are counted or change hands; the perceptibility, centrality, and beauty of a growing heap; the impression of quantity; the variance of denominations, which enables counting big notes or small coins as well as the order that emerges when notes are bundled and coins are stacked, to be placed at the old man’s back. The quality of the money medium is valuable as it speaks to the senses, responds to action, and allows for the articulation of aesthetically embedded practices such as collective touching¹² or *darshan*,¹³ the joint performance of counting, and the appropriation and testimony of flows and directionalities. In short, the form, quality, and physical presence of the money medium constitute the attendees’ corporeal and cognitive options of creating, sharing, and transacting moneyness through gesture, vision, performance, sensation, and embodiment (fig. 2).

The counting itself also pertains to significant transformations of form: this starts with the creation of a money heap, which includes among other things the impression of “size,” which attendees instantly compared with memories of the preceding year. It continues with counting, bundling, and adding, before it results in the final inscription of the heap’s total content as mere “quantity” on a sheet of paper (fig. 3). Ultimately, all attendees sign this paper before the headman reads out the total amount of the collections, the total expenses of the preceding fiscal year (or ritual cycle), and the net income (first in front of the temple and again at the next meeting of the “thousand houses” council). Finally, once everybody is informed, the headman takes the paper to the village files, where it will be kept for the perusal of future generations (together with the account books of the entire

12. Regarding the importance and magical connotations of touching money in South India, see Parthasarathi (2016: 10–13).

13. If broadly applied: a Hindu way of sharing a substance through vision. In orthodox terms: the practice of seeing the god (the idol) and of receiving the god’s gaze and grace (see Vidal 2004).

tax collection and an extra list of the more outstanding donors). The same kind of transformation allows the patron to deposit the money “formally” into a bank account held jointly with the headman, and to “informally” lend the money to the factory owner. Crucially, the transformation of form pertains not to the thing as such. Coins and notes remain coins and notes: having been collected, displayed, sorted, counted, added, deposited, on-lent, expended, and, in this way, “valued” through a sequel of “performative acts” (see previous section), they are subsequently dispersed into a myriad of other contexts where the just-bestowed value(s) may become entirely meaningless. Coins and notes may move from one kind of proximity “out” to distance “in”-to new proximities. Yet what remains grounded in the attendees’ bodies and minds as well as in village files and the villagers’ collective memory is the experience (or tale) of what money can be and who one can be in relation to that money. Now, at least in the concrete case, neither the transformation of form nor the alienability of the money media is absolute. In some sense the villagers do think of the coins and notes as inalienable and uniquely charged with their collective spirit, history and substance: they are “in” the money and the money has become like them. Therefore, they indeed hang on to a few coins and notes from the heap and reinsert them into their collection bags and boxes as a starting point for next year’s procedure.¹⁴



Figure 3: Transformations of monetary form.

Moneyness as physical proximity thus depends on and varies according to individual closeness, the closeness of others, the physical form of the money media themselves, and the a priori content contained “in” the money of a concrete situation. These coherences, contradictions, and transformations are well recognized in the anthropology of money: looking among other things into his own wallet,

14. In a different context, Weiner (1992) observes the paradox of “keeping while giving” (see also Godelier 1999)

Maurer (2015: 96) not only demonstrates the multiplicity of monetary form as an almost personal property, but simultaneously insists on addressing the “ecologies” of monies and payment (ibid.: 48 and 130)—the local and global, communal and commercial “infrastructures of value” (ibid.: 71) and “the diverse repertoires for using money” (ibid.: 48). Pickles (2013), too, looks at pockets and shows how Highland Papua New Guineans literally “carry with” them elaborate “personal” systems that allow them to control and differentiate their monies while a person’s pockets are subject to public discourse and speculation. Yet, beyond pockets, following Zelizer’s (1994) path-breaking work on the social practices of “earmarking” American dollars, Truitt (2013: 104–16), for example, demonstrates how citizens in Ho Chi Minh City have developed a range of cultural techniques of carrying, displaying, smelling, and grading diverse physical forms of money (coins, notes, plastic cards, and both national and foreign currencies), and how these monies are involved in the process of redefining social identities, citizenship, and moral values in the context of market liberalization, postwar politics and, well, “dollarization.”

Notably, while “cash” in these “ecologies” is in a certain sense more alienable than credit, book, or virtual money, it is also more tangible, and its materiality may be directly shared and appropriated by those who are close. Conversely, “book money” may seem physically detached, but it establishes other dimensions of proximity precisely because of its ability to overcome spatial distances, national borders, or physical barriers in short times (Leyshon and Thrift 1997), because of its capacity to generate personal data (Hart 2001), and because it links money objects and money subjects through personal accounts and new money media such as plastic cards, mobile phones, the Internet, servers, displays, tags, and readers (Maurer 2015). The interactions of transacting agents may henceforth include short messages, missed calls, and absent presences, as Kusimba et al. (2013) describe in the case of mobile money networks in Kenya; or high-speed “scalping” and painful index fingers “hovering in readiness” slightly above the mouse, as Zaloom (2005: 255–56, 263) describes the “discipline” of speculators who also count in ticks in order to avoid the irrational “feeling” of being “affected” in terms of the real world’s money. In turn, Maurer points to the possibilities of “re-imagining the relationship between numbers, money and embodiment” (2010: 179) by adding scanning technology to gesture, juxtaposing gesture with number, and connecting body, personality, and the social through electronic payment. Money, he speculates, could become a tale, while “quantities would always be the qualities of specific individuals . . . connecting identity and money” (ibid.: 183). Artist Heidi Hinder for example, already uses wearable payment technology (tags, readers, and a chip charged with credit) in order to create a number of interactive gestures that authorize payment, including the hug, the handshake, the high five, and the tap-dance. Calling her project “Money no object,” and having implemented this project in the field of donations, she says: “I have been looking at the role that physical currency plays and how it might become obsolete in future—and maybe if it does become obsolete with the rise of digital currencies what we might therefore value instead and in its place.”¹⁵

15. Video: <http://www.watershed.co.uk/dshed/money-no-object> (accessed on March 20, 2017).



Hence what is valued? What is the valuable? The money or the hug? The heap or the amount? The sign or the thing? The tale, the dance, or the transaction? From an anthropological point of view it is crucial neither to neglect the aesthetics of the monetary form, which, as a medium, contains qualia, the “experience” of which may be explored as a fact of sociocultural life (Chumley and Harkness 2013: 4; cf. MacDougall 2006), nor to ignore the transformations of form, content, and value that occur almost permanently when people become like money; when money in turn becomes “bitter,” “hot,” “barren,” or “fertile” (Shipton 1989, Znoj 1998); when it transports a previous owner’s substance and thus needs to be digested (Parry 1989); when money’s uses, flows, and creations contract time and space (Munn 1986; Pryke and Allen 2000); and when situatedness brings realms of “conveyances” and “conversions” into being (Guyer 2004; cf. Bohannan 1955).

Money flows and thus transports value, but in its orbit the medium defines and is subject to modes of interaction and of personal appropriation. Wherever the money medium “occurs” in its multiplicity of forms, physical closeness is effective and the moneyness that it bestows is perceptible and contains something that belongs to us. And whenever we are “at” the money, we posit our identity in relation to an object or idea, which embodies the deeds, the memories, as well as “the desires and wealth of all the other members of society” (Hart 2001: 259; cf. Buchan 2001).

Ascribed proximity

Ascribed proximity—the other side of moneyness—posits identity as closeness to money as the “social fact,” not the (tangible) media. It refers to the way in which we link certain ideas, models, or expressions “of” and “for” money with the interaction of what Bourdieu (1977) describes as “disposition” and “habitus” (the system of dispositions, a way of being) and of what he understands as the conditions of their evolution, the “dialectic of objectification and embodiment” (ibid.: 73ff., 87ff., 214). Ascribed proximity obviously rests on a vast field of cultural stereotypes, ideational constructs, aesthetic concepts, and moral values. It may be, and indeed often is, correlated with monetary capacity. Yet analytically it refers more directly to the symbolic productions of society and pertains to conditions of being “in” and “out” of the money, irrespective of whether one is physically “at” the money or not (such as Americans being close to dollars and dollarization, and yet—according to a well-known slogan—“99 per cent” of them also claim to be close to what it means to be “out” of this money). In other words, ascribed proximity concerns the question of how we are recognized and posit ourselves in relation to society (as audience) and to the money which we share as a common reference to value.

In part this has been demonstrated using the counting ceremony, the overall context of “village money,” and how attendees of the counting related to that money as persons, dignitaries, and characters in society. Yet we may also turn to Geertz, who long ago provided us with an intriguing example: “What makes Balinese cockfighting deep is thus not money in itself, but what, the more of it that is involved the more so, money causes to happen: the migration of the Balinese status hierarchy into the body of the cockfight” (1973: 436). Geertz carefully distinguishes the

innermost circle of “true” Balinese cockfighters from its immediate orbits and the cockfight’s periphery. In all these circles it would seem that people gamble for money. Yet, although the highest individual amounts of money are at stake in the center, and though money marks the intensity of this game, it is also here that monetary profit is (or should be) the least motivation. It is the center-stage of “deep play”—a tournament of value (Appadurai 1986: 21)—where we find “the really substantial members of the community, the solid citizenry around whom local life revolves.” Theirs is a game of honor, as Geertz put it. “The focusing element in these focused gatherings” (Geertz 1973: 435), this game is not about money as “value” but about value in society: as cockfighters become like money (and cocks, of course), “everybody” who engages money “in” the cockfight, from center to periphery (and at least in one sense “everybody” in Balinese society), strives to become like them. Why? True cockfighters “put their money where their status is” (ibid.: 434).

If only to take one more realm into the picture: as Martin (2002) has explored, first among others, it is hard to overlook the ways in which the contemporary finance industry has assumed center-stage, not only in that it posits itself as an intermediary regime “at” the money, which we pool like villagers as each of us—banked, loaned, salaried, invested, and insured—forms part of the financial machine (perhaps with Wall Street as the main temple), but also because it draws upon and re-creates images and disciplines of how we should marry our lives, needs, intentions, dreams, professions, and indeed monetary personalities with our own assets and the industry’s volatilities, stakes, and creations. Again, this is a tournament of value with centers, orbits, and peripheries. Traders and investors produce their own modes of discipline, morality, and reason (Zaloom 2005; Ho 2009). They are cockfighters, in a sense—and this means that they again embody another public model for becoming like money. Yet in this case the entire game at the heart of contemporary capitalism also rests on an institutionalized cultural premise that money—following the superior laws of a mystified extrasocial market, and yet largely derived from cultural techniques of imagining, prizing, and insuring the otherwise unknowable future—is value in its own right, thus fooling the audience: nobody wants to be and nobody really needs to become like “abstract value” or like “the men in grey” who “steal people’s time” (see Ende [1973] 1984). “Financial markets are explicitly designed to be a world apart” (Zaloom 2010: 21). Distance is their crucial apotheosis. They are central icons of capitalism, daily in the news, but out of focus or public control. Nevertheless, “when finance becomes you,” Martin argues, one not only subjects oneself “to the reason of finance,” but is also assured “that henceforward one will never act alone” (2002: 101).¹⁶

Social and economic life thus not only use and produce different monies but also reproduce and transact models and morals, characters and careers, institutions and entire societies, in relation to that money: agnates and affines, old men and young men, creditors and debtors, cockfighters, traders, gamblers, and devotees, blue- and white-collars, moneybags and Mandevillian bees, Americans, Chinese, and Europeans, Rotarians and punks, beggars and priests, headmen, big-men,

16. In this regard, it is illuminating to read Zaloom’s piece on evangelical financial ministries teaching how “to endow budgets with the capacity to reveal God’s hand in the world and the budgeter’s acts of faith” (2016: 325–26).



moneylenders, patrons and finance ministers, artists and tap dancers (see above), thieves and jealous welfare scroungers, housewives and rainmakers, or great female icons like Mother Theresa or Lakshmi (Indian goddess of prosperity, fortune, and money; often equated with the just-married wife, her love, and the money of her relatives).

The list, of course, could be endlessly continued, precisely because money relates models and meanings everywhere, every day. Agents in turn may personalize such relations. Consciously or unconsciously, depending on their identity, conviction, situation, and counterparts, as well as on their disposition of monies, models, morals, and aesthetic concepts, they may get “in” and “out” of what money represents in society. Indeed, moneyness as ascribed proximity is subject to tricksters (from petty hucksters to village politicians and nation-states) who actively create proximities and distances in order to attract and exploit what people ascribe, and thus to become attractive, powerful, fearsome, loveable, trustworthy, or persuasive.

Again, wherever money “occurs”—now in its multiplicity as a social fact—there is an a priori relation between people who create and embody value, that which people circulate, and what they mutually ascribe in the name of such value. We permanently create this relation, from exchange and identity, through history (or memory, see Hart 2001), and through our personal proximities, which we internalize in everyday experiences of becoming and being like money, that is, of getting “in” and “out” of what money represents to us.

Conclusion: Isn't it about value—in deed?

From giant carved stones to threaded shells; from holy cows to dear deerskins and mighty bucks; from plundered bullion to mined bitcoins; from Indian silver rupees to eurodollars and Chinese-owned US bonds; from copper pennies to elite credit cards and “African airtimes” (see Kusimba et al. 2013); from the king's circulated portraits to the transmitting gestures of cyberbodies; and from noble social obligation to the fantastic realms of global finance and investment—monies, multiple not singular, “evolve” as they represent the worlds writ large and small which people create, differentiate, interconnect, and value through exchange *and* identity (Weiner 1992; Godelier 1999), personal action *and* public consideration.

In this article I have suggested tracing the quality of moneyness not through an odd epistemology of abstract value and (infinite) distancing but through relations of form and proximity which include acts and performances, heaps, circuits, movements and perceptions, qualia, signs, and models. Therefore I have taken “moneyness” as the relational property that concerns not money, the thing, but the “realization” of money, the process. This doubtless needs further exploration. There remains, of course, the overall question of justice, distribution, and capacity, of the corresponding degrees of closeness, power, and inequality, and—most importantly—of what or whom society, as an audience, in Graeber's words (see above), values and what or whom it actually pays for. Yet, inevitably, answering these questions depends on how we imagine and construct our monies and how we account for the relations which money and human life constitute in the name of value.

Observing what we (the people) do and are, perhaps even imagining in a more applied sense what we could do, value, and be, with and in relation to our monies, rather than believing in the power of abstract value, or the system and universal monetization, is the “Kantian task” (Hart 2010) which the “anthropology” of money has gradually opened. Indeed, as Dodd remarks, this may lead us to a “broader assessment of money’s capacity for reinvention” (2014: 272).

Looking at moneyness, I would argue, adds to this project because it means to address (and perhaps question) the qualitative manifestations of money. After all, this world is as monetized as it is monetizing: We already have multiple monies at hand, and we are free to create more of them. Perhaps we could create monies that “hug,” “dance,” and “share” instead of “exploit” and “accumulate”; or monies that “vote” and “honor” instead of “price.” Of course, we might also end up with more monies that pretend to equality and embrace all humanity while they discriminate, kill, inflate, and leave our highest values “out” of the money. In any case, forget about the sedating excuse of abstract value—money is not anywhere, but precisely in our hands and minds! It is a joint human property. And it is the concrete expression of the ways in which we—you(!)—are, act, and become like money.

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Devenir comme de l'argent: la proximité et l'esthétique sociale de l'argent comme qualité

Résumé : Dans cet article, je prends comme point de départ l'image d'un groupe de villageois d'Inde du Sud comptant un tas d'argent perçu collectivement pour étudier les variations qualitatives, subjectives et contextuelles à travers lesquelles l'argent se manifeste comme un bien précieux, mais également comme des circuits, des mises en représentation, des actes, des répertoires et des compétences dans la vie sociale et personnelle. Comme je le suggère, cela requiert que nous analysons les proximités changeantes entre les objets de l'argent et les sujets de l'argent. Je trace ces variations grâce à la notion d'argent comme qualité ou qualia, plus précisément à travers les propriétés des rapports (rapprochement, accès, éloignement) à ce qu'est l'argent, ce qu'il devient et ce qu'il représente.

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