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IN AFRICAN FASHION

A Symbol of Everyday Resistance

Fashion and Personal  
Style Studies

Collection Editor

JOSEPH H. HANCOCK II

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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Any errors or shortcomings are my own.

# Abstract

This interdisciplinary study traces the cultural biography of the cowrie shell (*Monetaria moneta*) from its origins in the Indian Ocean to its contemporary deployment in African fashion. Drawing on marine biology, economics, archaeology, anthropology, history, and fashion theory, this book examines how a single object has functioned simultaneously as currency, sacred artifact, instrument of enslavement, adornment, and a symbol of cultural resistance across more than a millennium.

The book documents the cowrie's journey through trans-Saharan and Atlantic trade networks, its role as primary currency in pre-colonial West African economies, and its violent appropriation into the transatlantic slave trade, where shells purchased enslaved persons. Analysis of archaeological and ethnographic evidence reveals how cowries operated across multiple regimes of value, functioning as protective amulets, fertility symbols, divination tools, and markers of social status while mediating between human and spiritual realms.

A key focus of the research is the examination of cultural exchange within Western fashion systems, where designers have drawn from African cultural symbols for commercial purposes, often without proper acknowledgment or compensation. Through case studies spanning haute couture and mass-market fashion, the book proposes thoughtful ethical frameworks for understanding the line between appropriation and appreciation.

Drawing on post-colonial theory and cultural property law, it offers nuanced tools for engaging more responsibly and creatively with cultural exchange in contemporary fashion practices.

The final section profiles contemporary African designers, including Lafalaise Dion, Bubu Ogisi, Grace Wales Bonner, and others, who deploy cowries as instruments of cultural reclamation and identity formation. Their work demonstrates how material culture serves as memory work that preserves histories, maintains cultural connections, and imagines decolonized futures.

By attending to the cowrie's complex biography, it reveals broader patterns in how objects mediate power, and how fashion can become a site of liberation.

## **Key words**

Cowrie shell, African fashion, fashion history, cultural appropriation, material culture, transatlantic slave trade, decolonization.



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# Introduction

*Parmi tant de coquilles que le flot des mers rejette sur les plages, il n'en est pas que les hommes aient recherchées, recueillies, portées plus que les cauris (Gobert, 1951).*

Among the many shells that the sea waves wash upon the shores, there are none that humans have sought, collected, valued, and worn more than cowries.

Deep in the ocean's darkness, a transformation begins. Young sea snails emerge from their eggs and gradually construct their shells through a meticulous, lengthy process that unfolds across several years, adding material incrementally as they grow. By maturity, achieved over a span of two to ten years, each snail has fashioned an extraordinary vessel: lustrous, smooth, and built to endure. When the snail finally dies, its shell sinks to the ocean floor, joining an infinite graveyard of empty chambers. But the cowrie shell's death in the sea is merely a prologue. Throughout human history, these shells have been resurrected by human hands, reborn as objects invested with extraordinary power, as currency, as spiritual charm, as markers of identity, as symbols of wealth and beauty.

My own encounter with these shells began long before I understood their history. Growing up in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, I was surrounded by cowrie shells ingrained in the cultural fabric of my community. I heard stories about their importance, saw them adorning bodies and homes, and absorbed their significance

through osmosis. Yet it wasn't until 2018, when I met Lafalaise Dion, a renowned Ivorian artist and designer, that my childhood familiarity transformed into scholarly curiosity. Our conversation reignited questions I had carried since childhood: Where do these shells come from? And why do they matter so profoundly to our people?

At that time, the global fashion scene witnessed a resurgence of cowrie shell-inspired trends, prompting me to delve deeper into their historical roots and contemporary relevance. Despite their pervasive presence in West African material culture, I noticed a significant gap in the scholarly attention afforded to cowrie shells within the field of fashion studies. This realization sparked a desire to explore the multifaceted roles of cowrie shells, particularly their associations with money, trade, and cultural symbolism within the context of fashion. How did the various roles and the long journey of cowrie shells contribute to understanding the significance of the shell in the process of identity formation?

While cowrie shells historically played significant roles as currency, adornments, and symbols of spiritual and divine attributes in West African societies, their resurgence in contemporary fashion prompted questions about their enduring significance and evolution over time. It became evident that cowrie shells were more than decorative accessories. They were artifacts embedded with rich cultural meanings and historical narratives that warranted closer examination. Thus, my research journey began in 2018 in Abidjan with the desire to fill this gap in scholarship and shed light on the complex interplay between cowrie shells and fashion. By exploring their historical roots and tracing their trajectory from ancient times to the modern era, I sought to uncover

the underlying sociocultural dynamics that have shaped their usage and symbolism within fashion contexts.

My research aims to challenge prevailing narratives within fashion studies that often overlook non-Western materials and perspectives. By centering cowrie shells in my investigation, I aim to amplify their history and contributions to fashion history, highlighting their significance as cultural artifacts that transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. In essence, my research journey was propelled by a quest to unearth the historical underpinnings and contemporary resonance of cowrie shells in fashion. By intertwining narratives from the past and present, my objective is to provide a holistic comprehension of cowrie shells as emblematic representations of cultural heritage, identity, and resilience in West African culture and fashion.

Understanding cowrie shells in fashion requires an interdisciplinary approach drawing on anthropology, economics, archaeology, marine biology, art history, and cultural studies. While economists, anthropologists, and archaeologists have extensively studied cowrie shells, their role in fashion remains largely unexplored. In fact, cowrie shells frequently appear in historical images and museum catalogues, adorning women's garments, belts, and accessories, yet scholarship has rarely examined their construction, meaning, or cultural function. This oversight represents a significant gap in our understanding of material culture and identity formation. Given cowrie shells' considerable influence on fashion across diverse cultures and time periods, fashion studies scholarship must address this neglected dimension of material history.

This research understands cowrie shells as commodities with intricate cultural biographies, objects shaped through cycles of production, circulation, social investment, and cultural translation. The values that sustain these cycles, along with the objects' continuous movement and transformation, are mediated by political and cultural forces. Critically, the processes through which objects acquire value are themselves processes of knowledge and power. Cowries exemplify this dynamic: they functioned as markers of wealth and status while facilitating the production and reproduction of social and political relations. A biographical approach reveals that such objects' meaning and significance are not inherent but contingent, varying across time, place, historical context, and the object's position within its own life cycle.

## **Structure of the book**

This book comprises five chapters, examining the cowrie shell's significance across its historical trajectory, from its origins and role in trade systems, including the slave trade, to its contemporary use in fashion and identity formation. Rather than focusing on archaeology or monetary value, it prioritizes how cowrie shells have shaped identity, self-expression, and selfhood. By investigating cowries as cultural artifacts, the book explores their multifaceted role in personal adornment and community identity through jewelry, clothing, and ceremonial items. This approach reveals how decorative elements function as tools for shaping both individual and collective identities.

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the cowrie shell's historical and biographical context, Chapter 1 "Tracing the Cowrie: Origins, Trade, and Transformation", establishes the

foundational geography and history of the cowrie shell. It traces the shell's origins in the Maldives, explores its native habitat and early uses across Asia, and maps the complex trade networks, both maritime and trans-Saharan, through which cowries traveled to West Africa. By understanding these distribution patterns, we can appreciate how cowrie shells became woven into the economic, spiritual, and cultural fabric of African societies, setting the stage for the transformations examined in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2, "The Materiality of Meaning: Ritual, Symbolism, and Adornment", shifts focus from distribution to meaning. It examines how cowrie shells functioned as active agents within African spiritual, social, and aesthetic systems, deployed in divination practices, woven into music and performance, integrated into textiles and personal adornment. Rather than treating the cowrie as a passive symbol, this chapter reveals how African communities have strategically deployed shells to express identity, maintain spiritual connection, and communicate social status across generations.

Chapter 3, "The Cowrie Economy: Value, Exchange, and the Machinery of Enslavement", traces the cowrie's evolution from local currency to instrument of the Atlantic slave trade. It examines how cowrie shells functioned within sophisticated West African monetary systems for centuries before European contact, then analyzes the violent appropriation of these systems by European traders who weaponized cowries to purchase enslaved Africans. Through this analysis, the chapter reveals how the cowrie's economic role became inextricably entangled with slavery,

demonstrating how colonial powers exploited existing African systems rather than imposing wholly alien structures.

Chapter 4, “Out of Africa: Power, Profit, and African Aesthetics in Western Fashion”, analyzes the cowrie shell’s circulation through Western art and fashion systems. Rather than just celebrating Western designers’ discovery of African aesthetics, this chapter also critically examines how fashion houses have appropriated cowrie shells without reciprocity, credit, or compensation to source communities. The chapter ultimately argues that ethical cultural engagement in fashion requires not just individual designer ethics but structural transformations in how the industry values, compensates, and centers African creative voices.

Finally, Chapter 5, “Reclaiming the Cowrie: African Design Sovereignty and Cultural Futurity”, shifts focus to contemporary African and black diaspora designers who are reclaiming the cowrie shell on their own terms. Rather than accepting Western definitions of the shell as exotic trend or primitive charm, these designers deploy cowries as vehicles for cultural continuity, spiritual expression, and economic empowerment. The chapter examines how designers working across the continent and diaspora use cowries to assert creative authority, preserve cultural knowledge, and challenge Western monopolies over fashion legitimacy. By centering African and African diaspora voices and creative practices, this chapter demonstrates that the cowrie shell’s story is not one of victimization or appropriation alone, but one of resilience, resistance, and the ongoing power of material culture to encode and transmit meaning and culture across generations.

This book hopes to present a comprehensive exploration of the cowrie shell's multifaceted roles and enduring legacy, tracing its journey from historical origins to contemporary significance in the field of fashion. Through these chapters, the cowrie shell emerges as a powerful symbol of cultural continuity and transformation. It speaks to a rich history and evolving present, encapsulating the spirit of resilience and creativity that defines African identity in the modern world. The cowrie shell's story is one of adaptation and persistence, reflecting the dynamic nature of cultural practices and their ability to inspire and influence across generations. This intricate narrative underscores the profound connection between the past and present, highlighting how traditional symbols can continue to hold relevance and meaning in today's globalized society.

# Learning objectives

By completing this book, readers will:

1. Understand the cowrie shell's complex global history: Trace the shell's journey from its origins in the Maldives through Indian Ocean trade networks, trans-Saharan routes, and the transatlantic slave trade to its integration into West African societies, recognizing how a single object connected distant regions and facilitated intercontinental exchange.
2. Recognize cowrie shells as multidimensional cultural artifacts: Examine how cowries functioned simultaneously as currency, spiritual objects, markers of status, and vehicles for cultural identity in African societies, understanding material culture as embedded in multiple regimes of meaning rather than serving a single function.
3. Critically analyze cultural appropriation in fashion: Evaluate how Western designers have appropriated African aesthetics, identifying the structural conditions (absence of consent, credit, and compensation) that distinguish appropriation from ethical cultural engagement, and understanding how power asymmetries rooted in colonialism shape contemporary creative industries.
4. Appreciate African agency and creative reclamation: Recognize how contemporary African and Black diaspora designers are strategically deploying cowries to assert cultural authority, preserve spiritual knowledge, and challenge Western dominance of fashion systems, demonstrating

that African communities actively shape meaning rather than passively accepting imposed narratives.

5. Develop frameworks for equitable cultural exchange: Engage with theoretical and practical models for just cross-cultural engagement in fashion and creative industries, understanding that ethical exchange requires structural transformation, not just individual ethics, and that centering marginalized voices is essential to dismantling colonial hierarchies.

# 1

## Tracing the cowrie: Origins, trade, and transformation

They (the Maldives Islands) are all inhabited by people and by coconut palms, and their treasure is cowrie shells. Their queen amasses cowries in her treasure ... it comes to her on the surface of the sea, and in it, is a living creature—Sulaimān al-Tājir, circa 850 CE (Renaudot, 1718).<sup>1</sup>

The cowrie shell is small, glossy white, and deceptively simple, yet this modest mollusk has profoundly shaped human history. Across continents and centuries, cowries have served multiple functions: adornment, spiritual objects, markers of wealth and status, and currency. Native to the Indo-Pacific region, these shells captivated human communities, who wove them into the economic and cultural fabric of their societies. What makes the cowrie's history most compelling, however, is its displacement. The introduction of cowries into West Africa represents far more than a commercial transaction. It reflects complex patterns of cultural exchange, economic innovation, and the persistence of African agency in shaping how foreign objects were integrated

into local systems of meaning. How did a shell native to the Indo-Pacific become embedded in West African economies and spiritual systems? What networks of trade, exchange, and human movement enabled this geographic expansion?

This chapter traces the cowrie's journey from its native waters in the Maldives to West African shores. It examines the trade networks, maritime routes across the Indian Ocean, trans-Saharan caravan routes, and the complex exchanges connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe, through which cowrie shells traveled. By understanding these distribution patterns and the mechanisms that facilitated them, we can start to understand how cowrie shells became woven into West African social structures, economic systems, and spiritual practices, establishing the foundation for the cultural transformations explored in subsequent chapters.

To reconstruct this history, I draw on multiple sources: archaeological evidence and biological research on cowrie shells, historical documents and trade records, and diaries from early explorers and merchants. This multilingual (drawing on at French, Arabic and English archives) and multidisciplinary approach allows me to move beyond simple narratives of discovery or introduction to examine how different communities understood and deployed cowries according to their own needs and values. By bringing archaeological evidence into conversation with historical texts, I can test which frequently recounted stories align with material evidence and which require revision. Shells themselves, their geographic distribution, their modification, their presence in archaeological contexts, provide crucial evidence that helps ground this history in tangible reality.

## Archaeological context, etymology, and beyond

Seashells were money before coins, jewelry before gems, art before canvas ... Seashells are the earliest-known keepsakes tucked into graves ... Seashells have often been messages, to scientists, to diviners, to worshippers called together by the voice of a shell (Barnett, 2021).

Mollusks, the second-largest group of animals after arthropods such as insects, are ubiquitous and inhabit various environments.



**Figure 1:** Illustration by Anna Atkins for John Children's English translation of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Genera of Shells*, published in *Quarterly Journal of Science, Literature and Art*, Volume 16 (1823). Image sourced from the [Public Domain Image Archive](#)/New York Public Library.

Marine mollusks, the most diverse group of ocean animals, are responsible for creating seashells. They inhabit both tiny worlds, like the exquisitely striped but minuscule spiraled *Ammonicera* found on beaches worldwide, and vast ones, like giant clams. In addition to their beauty and ecological importance, mollusks play crucial roles in their ecosystems. For example, bivalves such as oysters and mussels are crucial for water filtration and habitat formation, while cephalopods such as octopuses are important predators in marine food webs. Understanding the diverse and widespread presence of mollusks helps enhance our appreciation of their ecological roles and cultural significance throughout history (Barnett, 2021).

Mollusks are characterized by their shells, which, along with stones and bones, are enduring artifacts that bear witness to ancient human civilizations and their relationships with the natural world. These durable organic materials endure the passage of time and provide invaluable insights into past societies. In archaeological contexts, shells serve as tangible links to ancient cultures, revealing glimpses into their daily lives, economic activities, and belief systems. From mollusk shells used for food consumption to those fashioned into tools, ornaments, and ritual objects, these remnants offer a wealth of information for researchers seeking to understand the complexities of past societies.

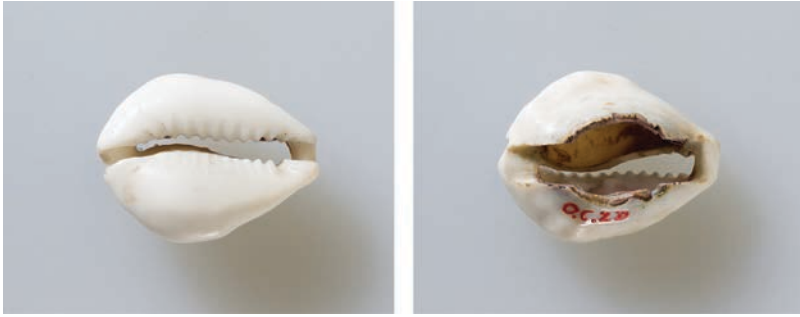
Researchers have increasingly acknowledged the significance of shells in reconstructing past societies, with studies concentrating on shell artifacts found at archaeological sites worldwide. These artifacts offer invaluable information about ancient economies, trade networks, social organizations, and belief systems, thus illuminating the intricate nature of human history. Anthropologists

have increasingly investigated the cultural significance and rituals surrounding shells in diverse societies. Shells have served as symbols of status, prosperity, fertility, and spirituality in a range of cultures, and their meanings frequently transcend their practical applications to encompass more expansive social and symbolic realms. In the field of marine biology, researchers have acquired a more profound understanding of the biology, ecology, and behavior of shell-producing organisms, including mollusks. Investigations into shell formation, growth patterns, and shell morphology have enriched our knowledge of marine ecosystems and the diversity of life forms inhabiting them.

A recurring shell type found in diverse archaeological contexts, and the central theme of this study, is the cowrie shell.

Commonly referred to in the literature as *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus*, the term “cowrie” (pronounced COW-ree in the United States and KOR-ree in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Francophone world) refers to a group of marine gastropods, belonging to the family Cypraeidae. The taxonomic designation *Cypraea* is linked to Cyprus, the supposed origin of Aphrodite worship, the goddess of love (Golani, 2020).

The early Greek term for cowrie shells was “little pig”, which referred to the shell’s stubby and rounded back. Thus, early European texts referred to these shells as “pig shells” (Jackson, 1917). Romans used to refer to them as *porci* or *porculi*, maintaining the pig association. Perhaps the most well-known name for the cowrie was the popular Italian term *porcellana*. In French, cowrie shells were called *porcelaine*, a precursor of the word “porcelain” (Jackson, 1917).



**Figure 2:** Cowrie shell, Ptolemaic Period, 332–30 BC, From Egypt; Possibly from Northern Upper Egypt, Akhmim (Khemmis, Panopolis) © The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

The term cowrie originates from the Hindi words *kauri*, *kaudi*, or *gauri*, which signify pearl, white, or shining and brilliant (Jackson, 1917, p. 126). According to professor Mervyn Hiskett (1966), the name is derived from the Sanskrit term *Kaparda*, which means a small shell or cowrie (used as a coin or braided or matted hair especially of Śiva). According to Hindu mythology, during the *Samudra Manthan* or churning of the cosmic ocean for *Amrit* (the elixir of immortality), many things were produced as by-products, some beneficial and some detrimental. It is believed that when Goddess Lakshmi emerges from the ocean during churning, cowrie shells accompanied her. Lakshmi is the deity of wealth, prosperity, and abundance, and the cowrie's association with her first appearance makes it a holy and auspicious symbol in Hindu cosmology (Yang, 2019).

Over the past 100 million years, cowrie shells have been found in prehistoric archaeological sites in India, China, Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa, and other parts of Afro-Eurasia. There are numerous species and subspecies of the cowrie, collectively

known as the family *Cypraeidae* as previously mentioned, with approximately 200 species of gastropods. The *Cypraeidae* family is predominantly found in tropical and subtropical marine environments. These gastropod mollusks thrive in warm, shallow waters, especially in regions with abundant coral reefs and rocky substrates, which offer optimal conditions for their survival and reproduction (Moretzsohn, 2014).

The cowrie shell, particularly the species we are most interested in, *Cypraea moneta* (now reclassified as *Monetaria moneta*), was initially collected in the Maldives, an archipelago situated in the center of the Northern Indian Ocean, southwest of India and Sri Lanka.

Cowries are primarily nourished by algae and other microscopic marine organisms found in coral reefs and shallow coastal waters. The Indo-Pacific region, which is home to extensive coral ecosystems, is an ideal habitat for mollusks. The temperatures in their natural habitat typically range from 72 degrees to 82 degrees Fahrenheit, and they are often found in intertidal zones and at depths of up to 165 feet. They prefer environments with rich coral formations, rocky crevices, and sandy lagoons, which provide both food and shelter. The complex structure of coral reefs also provides protection from predators and strong currents, thereby creating a conducive environment for cowries to thrive (Moretzsohn, 2014).

## **Extraction and processing**

The processing of *Cypraea moneta* in the Maldives depended on the region's abundant shell resources, which could be harvested in dense clusters. Local communities collected cowries

by wading knee-deep during specific tides and retrieving them from beneath rocks. After burial on sandy beaches to suffocate remaining animals, the shells were excavated and washed, revealing their characteristic lustrous finish (Hogendorn and Johnson, 2003). Their small size, which enabled traders to carry and exchange large quantities, combined with their durability and appearance, substantially enhanced their economic value (Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986). Historical records provide the primary evidence for cowrie extraction and export in the Maldives. The earliest account dates to 851 CE, when Persian merchant and traveler Sulaimān observed that “the wealth of the people is constituted by cowries” (Renaudot, 1718). Sulaimān documented two processing methods: the collection and drying of gastropods gathered on coconut fronds placed in reef shallows, and the burial of shells in sand. Al-Masudi, a tenth century Arab historian and geographer, later corroborated the burial method in his own travels.<sup>2</sup>

## Early trade networks and distribution

The North African traveler Ibn Battuta visited the Maldives in the first half of the fourteenth century. During his visit, he noted that in the Maldivian language, 12,000 cowries were referred to as *kotta*, and 100,000 were referred to as *bostú*.<sup>3</sup> Maldivians were already assigning value to specific quantities of cowries. Consequently, Arab traders who arrived with seasonal monsoon winds started purchasing cowrie shells in exchange for various goods, including pottery, rice, and glass beads. They procured these items at minimal cost from the Maldives and resold them

at substantially higher prices on the African continent. Soon afterwards, French and English traders joined this lucrative trade, trading cowrie shells for enslaved people who were then resold. Pyrard de Laval, a French traveler and author, documented this practice in the seventeenth century, stating:

They called them “Boly” and exported an infinite quantity of them to all parts, in such a way that I have seen 30 or 40 ships loaded with them without any other cargo. All of them go to Bengal, provided there is high demand for a large number of them. The people of Bengal use them for ordinary money, even though they have gold, silver, and many other metals. Additionally, kings and great lords have houses specifically built to store these shells and treat them as part of their treasure (de Laval, 1619, p. 251).<sup>4</sup>

According to de Laval, cowrie shells were transported from the Maldives to Bengal in exchange for rice. However, it was in India where they gradually assumed the role of currency, likely as early as the fourth century CE. The use of cowrie-shell money in India has been documented extensively. Historical records dating back to the fifth century CE indicate that Maldivian merchants traded rice and cloth for cowries. Although not all cowries were redistributed, a significant proportion remained in India. Kovács (2008) suggested that cowries were predominantly utilized in southern India, where they occupied the lowest tier of the monetary system. However, in 1990, John S. Deyell, First Secretary of the Canadian High Commission in New Delhi and a researcher in the field of medieval economic history, published his book *Living Without Silver*, in which he

reports the discovery of substantial cowrie hoards in northern India. Heimann (1980) notes that India was divided into local market economies that depended on cowrie exchange and larger economic systems that operated across multiple markets (transmarket economies) that utilized metallic currencies. In India, cowrie shells were assimilated into the state taxation system and donated to monasteries, serving ritualistic purposes or being stockpiled as reserves (Yang, 2019). From India, cowries were disseminated to mainland Southeast Asia, where they served as a medium of exchange across various regions including Laos, Siam, and Yunnan.

## **Cowrie circulation in China**

The origin of early cowrie shells in China remains a subject of debate. According to Bin Yang, a professor of history at City University of Hong Kong, an Indian Ocean source is most plausible. Yang has provided the most comprehensive view of the global history of cowrie money in his book, *Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money: A Global History* (2019). The Maldives did not have human presence until much later than the second millennium BCE, which could explain why cowrie shells were adopted in China before they were used in the Maldivian Archipelago. The earliest Chinese dates for cowrie use, predates the earliest possible occupation of the Maldives, suggesting that the cowries were likely sourced from the South China Sea or another location. Cowries have been instrumental in fashioning Chinese civilization and culture, symbolizing power, prestige, and wealth. Records for the earliest use of cowrie shell money in China date back to the second millennium BCE, as