2015

Review of Shell's "Wampum and the Origins of American Money"

Paul Otto
George Fox University, potto@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac

Part of the Cultural History Commons

Recommended Citation
cases, providing insight on how the law cases in the foreseeable future.

different forms of justice in order to discuss sovereign authority. Examples include a "dictatorial justice" (48-49), the view that can to redistribute limited resources to "complex mutual coexistence" approach, enabling that enable productive use of exercise power (55, 57-59). Legal solutions of a constitutional amendment to secure approach promoting the bilateral negotiations (175). Ultimately, Duthu supports what "(175-18cJ-). Here, tribal sovereignty is defined as the framework for tribal-federal

non-substantive issues—or explicable by a difficult read for those not familiar generally. For example, Duthu discusses vocabulary that originally suggests that an educated reader, but once the reader book flows seamlessly. Shadow Nations is ion, making it an important component country; the sheer amount of information for those with some previous knowl­

developed two topics more completely. The sovereignty. One primarily law-oriented Indian Gaming and Tribal Sovereignty: The Light and Kathryn R. L. Rand define power to embrace and effect a Native they also reference Duane Champagne's community is the right to adopt or reject tool changes that are culturally compatible (1). While in Duthu's book the argument reminders could have emphasized the legal battles that discuss justice are not also about the survival of culture.

Indian peoples, Shadow Nation could have communities have responded to the legal work of attorney Jerry Gardner of the responses and discusses unique solutions utilizing the power to banish people from another jurisdiction (such as local police), while Shadow Nations does not paint tribal


"In the beginning," wrote John Locke, "all the World was America." Were the author of Wampum and the Origins of American Money to pen these words, he would likely replace "America" with "wampum." This is overstated, but not by much: Marc Shell's short book is a wide-ranging exploration of language and currency, with a whimsical, allusive approach that allows him to traverse much territory. It is engagingly written, entertaining, and raises provocative questions throughout. Readers of the American Indian Culture and Research Journal, however, may find the book disappointingly fleeting in its discussion of wampum and particularly its role in Native American society. The operative premise of the book is that wampum was a Native currency which Europeans "adopted"; as Shell explains, they later "adapt(ed) those currencies according to their own traditional practices" (1). After establishing colonies in Indian country, Europeans—at least the Dutch and English—adopted wampum as a fiduciary currency in place of specie. Once the leap from specie to currency was made, it was an easy step to adopt paper money or "paper wampum," first in 1690 and then more or less continuously after that (2). Shell argues that this paper money was emblazoned with images of Native Americans, an expression of cultural imperialism and an effort to assuage European guilt by memorializing the indigenous origins of paper money.

Opening with the idea that "commercial exchange really matters to civilizations and how they change," Shell asserts that when coinage emerged in the ancient world, it was accompanied by philosophy, which he connects to "linguistic representation" and new political orders. The "same historical transition in the realms of economics, language, and political power took place" during the encounter of Europe and North America, and he contends, "for understanding this transformation, the key term would be wampum" (1). From there, Shell weaves a rich tapestry of connections between currency, linguistics, and political developments, as he draws on literature from diverse disciplines over a broad period of time. Key to Shell's approach is defining currency
Marc Shell’s authority to speak on wampum rests in the association of his last name with the raw materials used to make wampum. Throughout, but to give a sense of the logic they follow, imagine making the claim that Wampum was a highly prized, ceremonial item. It was used for decoration, yes, but its fundamental role in Native society was one of social cohesion. A vast array of religious ceremonies, social engagements, and diplomatic interactions were rooted in the use of wampum. This fundamental aspect of wampum in helping people relate to one another and in providing a means for social intercourse and discourse does, in fact, have interesting parallels to currency that are worth pursuing, but Shell brings neither ethnohistorical insights nor cross-cultural analysis to bear on such questions.

Historians and social scientists likely will find Shell’s allusory style intriguing and unsatisfying at the same time. At one level, although impressive, Shell’s use of language and the connections he draws is simply word play. As scholarly analysis, it’s disappointing. Where one looks for causation, he offers coincidence; where one looks for interpretation, he offers interpolation. Such creative connections are woven throughout, but to give a sense of the logic they follow, imagine making the claim that Marc Shell’s authority to speak on wampum rests in the association of his last name with the raw materials used to make wampum.

Although the occasional minor error can be found in most works, several scattered throughout this book further indicate the author’s thin grasp of the historical particulars of the topic. For example, as two separate peoples, and Abnaki, instead of Algonquin languages (1, are equated with New Amsterdam, the Netherland, the Dutch colony encor. Later, the author calls the Dutch colon. of animate and inanimate gender suggest instead a division of noble

Finally, despite the volume’s title, many of these mistakes result from a generation or more of scholarship, even as the author avers that his work in archaeology, anthropology, and folklore, as well as his association with Iroquois communities in New York State, has well established him as an authority in this field, but Shell ignores Hamell’s findings.

To be fair, the author does address the opposing argument that wampum was not Native currency when he suggests that anthropologists uncomfortable with the idea of wampum as money asserted that “wampum was often ornamental and money cannot be ornamental” (94). However, his response that many cultures employ “monetary tokens” as ornaments misses the point. Wampum was a highly prized, ceremonial item. It was used for decoration, yes, but its fundamental role in Native society was one of social cohesion. A vast array of religious ceremonies, social engagements, and diplomatic interactions were rooted in the use of wampum. This fundamental aspect of wampum in helping people relate to one another and in providing a means for social intercourse and discourse does, in fact, have interesting parallels to currency that are worth pursuing, but Shell brings neither ethnohistorical insights nor cross-cultural analysis to bear on such questions.

Historians and social scientists likely will find Shell’s allusory style intriguing and unsatisfying at the same time. At one level, although impressive, Shell’s use of language and the connections he draws is simply word play. As scholarly analysis, it’s disappointing. Where one looks for causation, he offers coincidence; where one looks for interpretation, he offers interpolation. Such creative connections are woven throughout, but to give a sense of the logic they follow, imagine making the claim that Marc Shell’s authority to speak on wampum rests in the association of his last name with the raw materials used to make wampum.

Although the occasional minor error can be found in most works, several scattered throughout this book further indicate the author’s thin grasp of the historical
ers may disagree with the wide scope of this book's argument. Among such belts, coins, banknotes, bank records, deed, his intent is to connect "money and categories" (3). This makes for an attempt to establish a theoretical basis for questions about why the two are or should be. His intent is to connect "money and categories" (3). This makes for a theoretical basis for the argument that wampum was not simply ornamental and money cannot be found in most works, several sources. The author's thin grasp of the historical particularities of the topic. For example, the author identifies Mohawks and Iroquois as two separate peoples, and Abnaki, Algonquin, and Ojibwa are listed as Iroquoian instead of Algonquian languages (1, 37). The colonies of New York and New Jersey are equated with New Amsterdam, the town that becomes New York City, and New Netherland, the Dutch colony encompassing both New York and New Jersey (38). Later, the author calls the Dutch colony New Holland (61). Shell's lengthy discussion of animate and inanimate genders in Algonquian ignores linguistic studies that suggest instead a division of noble and base or high and low genders (48). Such studies further argue that no animistic worldview is in play with such genders (see Ives Goddard, "Grammatical Gender in Algonquian," for example). Shell also incorrectly cites the case of the Native representatives meeting Colonel Bouquet in November 1764 as an example of Indian people requesting copies of diplomatic exchanges with Europeans (52); claims the Dutch introduced animal, as opposed to animal, scalping (65); and overstates the scope of wampum factories among Europeans and Native Americans (77). He confuses the Dutch East India Company with the Dutch West India Company (94), and he equates Roanoke beads with wampum beads (97).

Many of these mistakes result from Shell's heavy reliance on secondary sources. He has certainly read widely, especially in the nineteenth century, but much of wampum's story is still submerged within the deep waters of the primary sources, and the author cruises over this rather than diving into it. Furthermore, his reading of the nineteenth-century sources seems to miss their own historical context. The story of currency and paper money in the United States is an interesting one, and he cites political comment, economic theory, and editorial cartoons that resulted from the nineteenth-century debates, but so far removes them from their historical context as to render them nearly meaningless, at least for the purposes of historical inquiry.

Finally, despite the volume's title, Shell's discussion of wampum does not begin until the middle of the book and is never undertaken in any substantial way. Wampum is more of an idea than a material artifact in this book, and the idea of wampum provides Shell with a launching pad to engage in what amounts to an intellectual romp through culture, economy, and society, touching here and there on many interesting connections, but never settling down in any focused way on the topic at hand. The book is richly illustrated and the narrative moves effortlessly between history, myth, philosophy, and literature, but in the end, it's more intellectual entertainment than sustained scholarly inquiry.

Paul Otto
George Fox University