Title

[Afterword] Monetary Ingenuity: Drink It In

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Monetary Ingenuity: Drink It In

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> If you go drinking it's better to use MPESA because it's safer. Maybe you get drunk and you lose your money. If you find yourself unable to dial the number, it means that it's time for you to go home. (Iazzolino and Wasike 2015: 235)

One of Gianluca Iazzolino and Nambuwani Wasike's informants, a "family man" with a wife and two children, explained the benefits of using M-PESA when going out drinking with friends. M-PESA gave him control over his spending, or, rather, it prevented his spending when, due to drinking, he lost control. For the same reason, Iazzolino and Wasike find, married men prefer bank accounts over cash-only value storage or M-PESA because banks prevent easy access to your money. There are not very many ATMs, there are few branches, and this is a good thing – lack of access means more stability. The authors raise the concern that as electronic payment via cards becomes more ubiquitous in Kenya, this perceived benefit of bank accounts may fade. Perhaps M-PESA is better after all – at least you have to punch in some numbers rather than quickly and thoughtlessly swiping or inserting a card into a digital point-of-sale device.

Who could imagine payment could become so complicated, and interesting, and a site of such variegated social practices as documented in this volume? Payment has been backgrounded, made invisible, in so many accounts of development intervention, economic growth, trade and finance, marketplace dynamics. In many accounts, one often has to read twice, or more, to find out exactly how people are transferring value in a transaction, what technologies they use, what the kinematic and social dimensions of that use are, and which gestures, microinteractions, and verbal niceties occur. Only recently have payments, their infrastructures and social practices, seen significant scholarly attention (see Bátiz-Lazo and Efthymiou 2016). The beauty of the contributions in this volume is that they put the spotlight on the means of payment and thereby open up a whole world: a world of convention, practice, improvisation, and ingenuity. The lesson of this volume is that those who would remake payment or money with the aim of fostering financial inclusion, formalizing informal practices, providing additional safety and security for transactions, reducing crime or tax evasion – all reasons given from on high for reducing or eliminating physical cash – will fail unless they understand that ingenuity, and the myriad cultural and social forces in play whenever people pay.

The English term "ingenuity" has a muddled etymology. It derives from the Latin *ingenuus,* a sort of kinship term meaning "indigenous" but also "noble," because it also has the connotation of being inborn, the way nobility was presumed to be an inherent fact maintained through endogamy. It became associated with both creativity and simpleness (there are many lines to trace here, but I leave them aside for now), and thus the term "ingénue," borrowed from the French, entered the language, referring to a naïve yet good and virtuous young woman. Naïve, because possessed of the straightforward demeanor of one encountering the world fresh, as if for the first time; virtuous, because as-yet untainted by that world while superior to it.

Reading these chapters, witnessing the remarkable ingenuity of people navigating multiple systems of value and payment in multiple social, temporal, and geographic contexts, I have to pause and ask, who is the ingénue here? Is it the people described in these pages, having to grapple with the infrastructures of payment in rapidly changing economic and technological fields of power, regard, and recognition? Or is it those relatively well-off residents of the Global North who have enjoyed the luxury of not having to keep constant account of each others' debts and credits, or to worry about the reliability of the systems undergirding their economic well being, or to have concern over the day-to-day worth of their money? It is these same people, often in the role of experts or advisors, who have since before the financial crisis of 2007–8 advocated strenuously for "banking the unbanked" and have more recently been promoting an anti-cash agenda in the name of financial deepening and economic development. They imagine themselves above it all, noble and untainted by any market or mercenary interests. Yet this is part of their naïveté.

At the very first conference of researchers supported by the Institute for Money, Technology & Financial Inclusion at the University of California, Irvine, in 2009, Kenneth Omeje, a researcher from Nigeria, then based in Kenya, asked the gathering how many of them had lost money because of bank failures. At least half a dozen hands went up. He continued, pointing out how many of the researchers either came from or were working within active conflict zones where institutions and infrastructures could not be counted on to remain in full operation or even in existence from day to day or even hour to hour.

There are reasons, then, to doubt the ingenuousness of the experts of the North (myself included).

What does it mean to be at the margins, with money? I would literalize this bookish metaphor. Money is an accounting tool, a memory device, often centralized, whether in ancient temples that served as storehouses and recording houses or the contemporary Visa or Safaricom networks. Yet people write their own stories. They are on the margins and writing in the margins of the authoritative record. Thus, when the authoritative record says M-PESA is used for school fees, they simultaneously write the story that says, yes, it's for school fees, but those school fees sometimes come in the form of the thirteenth cow that must be given from the mother's brother to his nephew at the latter's initiation, more than a decade after a debt was first incurred through marriage, affirming the continuity of the patriline (Kusimba, Kunyu, and Wanyama 2015).

As we read these pages, we see a diversity of practices for everyday survival. As in biological evolution, diversity enhances the odds. I'd bring the biological metaphor into the domain of knowledge production and policy and industry application: we need a diversity of knowledge forms for survival, too. Randomized controlled trials might be great for now, or for one clearly demarcated set of interventions or circumstances. But what happens when the world changes? A little ethnography goes a long way. I think back to Kenneth Omeje, who asked his question at the first IMTFI conference. What happens when there is revolution? And there are all sorts of revolutions to be had, from political to religious to climactic, and always just beyond the horizon.

In a classic anthropological essay, Charles O. Frake described how to ask for a drink among the Subanun people on the island of Mindanao in the Philippines. While he is often read today as an exemplar of a certain perspective of culture that held it to be a code for action, an algorithm like a computer code, I am struck by the extent to which he emphasizes the style or panache with which one has to engage in the social interactions associated with drinking. Asking for a drink, Frake shows, is not just about getting that drink – and getting drunk. It is about "how to get ahead socially" (Frake 1964: 131). He writes:

> The Subanun drinking encounter thus provides a structured setting within which one's social relationships beyond his everyday associates can be extended, defined, and manipulated through the use of speech. (Ibid.: 131)

Substitute money for speech, or mobile money, or any other means of payment, value transfer, or value storage in this book and you have a nice picture of what is happening whenever we decide how we would like to pay.

By going to the margins, going into the interstices, the places that are supposed to be the blank spots on the page (there's nothing there! Or else, "here be dragons!"[1]), IMTFI researchers have found that the question of adoption of digital financial services is never a simple one. There are not core variables here, knobs and levers that work in all times and places, or rationalities that can be boiled down to the simplicities of rational choice or even the irrationalities revealed by behavioral economics. No, there is, in a word, culture. There is the hurly-burly of practice, both semiotic and material. There is infrastructure, both social and technological. There are multiple timescapes taking place simultaneously – think of that thirteenth cow again.

This is not to say that everything is so complicated and particular that there is no point in trying to intervene. But it is to say that if one wants to intervene, perhaps one needs to enter into that flow first, to truly engage – in social practice, in meaningfully inclusive dialog – to drink it all in before jumping in with a "solution" to problems other than what those others out there in the "target geographies" of one's intervention might actually be experiencing. It is to say that the enterprise must be collaborative. This deep sense of collaboration is what IMTFI has sought to incite.

Figure 14.1. The thirteenth cow.

Bill Maurer is dean of social sciences and professor of anthropology and law, University of California, Irvine. He is the author of *How Would You Like to Pay? How Technology Is Changing the Future of Money* (Duke 2015), among many other publications. The director of the Institute for Money, Technology & Financial Inclusion (www.imtfi.uci.edu), funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, he coordinates research in over forty countries on how new payment technologies impact poor people's well-being. His work explores the technological infrastructures and social relations of exchange and payment, from cowries to credit cards. His work has had an impact on US and global policies for mobile payment and financial access, and it has been discussed in venues ranging from Bloomberg BusinessWeek to NPR's Marketplace. He was appointed to the Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences of the National Research Council in 2015, recently received a grant from the National Science Foundation for a new project on bitcoin, and consulted with the Department of Treasury on the redesign of the US paper currency. He is a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and received his BA from Vassar College and his MA and PhD from Stanford University.

NOTES

1. The reference is to the European medieval practice of filling in the margins of maps with sea monsters.

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