

Opitz publishes book on traditional money

By George Manz

Charles J. Opitz has been collecting traditional money for 43 years. Besides being the president of the International Primitive Money Society, Opitz is a truly remarkable researcher and author.

When I first began collecting traditional money, I kept seeing references to Charles Opitz everywhere. So I started to read some of his works, which are now considered the standard references in this specialized field of numismatics.

But his latest work ranks as the most complete reference on the subject. It is virtually an encyclopedia for almost every kind of odd and curious money imaginable. That's because the author took 26 years to do the research for this book, reading more than 600 books in the process.

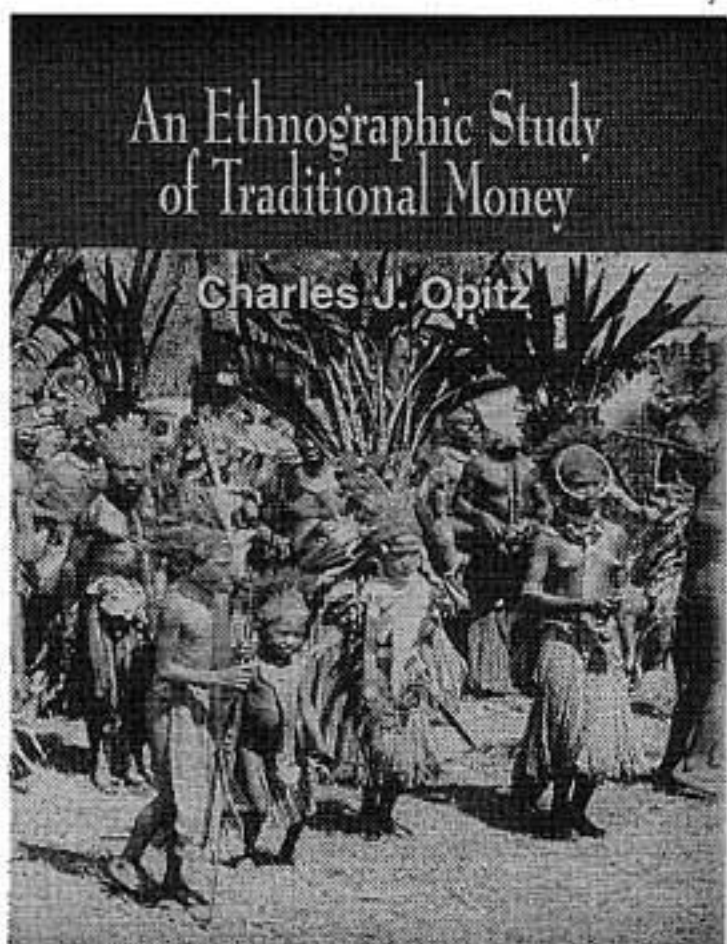
The book begins with a brief but interesting discussion of the different definitions of what constitutes money. For the next 400 pages, the author lists hundreds of different kinds of traditional money, many that I didn't even know existed. Opitz's 8-by-11-inch book is jam-packed with useful information.

Among the more interesting stories is the history of Yap stone money. Opitz says that the chief would give permission to young men to paddle to Palau in open canoes across inhospitable open ocean in order to carve and bring back money made from argonite, a rock with a hardness similar to granite. The young men, Opitz notes, produced many different sized Yap stones – from “two or three inches in diameter to about 12 feet in diameter.”

Opitz purchased his 23-inch Yap stone in 1965. That was the year the Yapese government made it illegal to export these stones from Yap. A letter from a Yap District administrator states: “At long last we have succeeded in getting your piece of stone money. It has been cleared and charges for shipping ascertained. I say ‘cleared’ because the local Yapese government has ruled against selling or shipping any more stone money. Your stone money and one (six feet) for the First National Bank of Sweden will probably be the last allowed out of Yap.”

The largest stone money outside Yap is seven and a half feet and weighs 6,000 pounds. In 1974, it was purchased by the Bank of Canada's National Numismatic Collection for \$11,000.

This book covers it all, from Chinese knife money from 500 B.C.E. to 23 C.E. to 20th century cigarette money. Opitz notes that immediately after World War II, an apartment rented for two packs of cigarettes a month in Vienna, Austria. Meanwhile in Indonesia, during that country's war of independence, “cigarettes were currency, and newspaper ads listed prices in cigarettes.”



An Ethnographic Study of Traditional Money: A Definition of Money and Descriptions of Traditional Money

By Charles J. Opitz

1847 SW 27th Avenue

Ocala, Florida 34474 USA

411 pages, hard cover, 2000. \$80 plus shipping.

Closer to home, Opitz discusses the use of beaver skins as money in North America. He notes that from “1774 to 1784, the Legislature of the State of Franklin (now part of Tennessee) by law set the salary of the County Clerk as 300 beaver skins per annum.”

A wide assortment of items have been used as money over the years, from shells, feathers and beads to arrows, axes, spears and guns.

Charles Opitz's account of cartridge money, used in Ethiopia from the 1800s to the 1930s, recalls how bullets were a much sought-after form of money. “Both loaded and spent cartridges were used as money. The unit of measure was four cartridges, which was worth a cake of salt. Four cakes of salt were worth a Maria Theresa dollar. In the old days, travelers frequently came upon warriors armed with spears but carrying bags of cartridges from the popular Gras rifle.”

Opitz writes that in 1908, “in an effort to promote the use of coins as money instead of cartridges, a fine of \$1 per cartridge was decreed if anyone was caught using the cartridges as money.” But by the beginning of World War I, the rifle cartridges were still “the most popular form of money, even more popular than salt.”

Not only is his book extremely informative, but this opus contains more than 1,200 photographs, including 150 in color. Almost all of the pictures in this book are from Opitz's collection.

The five-pound book includes not only a massive bibliography and index, but also a separate price list as well.