

The Money Manillas of West Africa

Seeking and securing their traces from 1439 - 2016

Summary

Any discussion of the money manillas of West Africa must start by defining which objects can be considered as belonging to this form of money. To begin with, it must be made clear that not all the metal bands imported into West Africa by foreigners or made and used there by indigenous peoples can be grouped together and called “manillas”.

The term “manilla” probably originates from the Portuguese and was later taken over into other European languages (e.g. German, English, French, Spanish). However, often the literature studied only gives “a copper or brass bracelet or ankle ring” as the translation. The real money manillas were never worn as jewellery as they were not suitable for this purpose. However, the literature does give native names for the money bands the Europeans called manillas. The *popo* type used on the Ivory Coast are given as *ngbolu* and *dagbo*, while the Birmingham type used in southeastern Nigeria are called *igbi*, *igbiki*, *ejemma*, *mkpoala* and *ojoma*. The money manillas were always manufactured and imported by the Europeans.

The first manillas were brought to West Africa - from Mauretania to the Kingdom of Congo - for trading purposes from 1456 on. However, there are also reports from Portuguese missionaries giving evidence that local manillas were exported to more northerly Portuguese trading stations and indeed even to the Portuguese royal court. On the basis of currently available sources, the question of whether the money manillas were primarily a Congolese product later copied by the Portuguese for the same purpose due to their desirability among the other West-African ethnic groups, or whether it was the Portuguese manillas which were copied by the Congolese craftsmen, will have to remain open. No details of the early Congolese manillas have been handed down, other than a weight for which there is no evidence and a statement that they were made of good copper.

There is evidence that Portuguese manillas were produced in Germany and Belgium. The form of these manillas, known as *tacoais*, is known from manufacturing specifications which also, if indirectly, enable their weight to be calculated. The three-dimensional representations on the so-called Benin bronze plaques or ceremonial gongs of the rulers of the Kingdom of Benin and on the ivory carvings of the Bini give us an exact picture of the early *tacoais* manillas exported by the Portuguese. These are massive open hoops with trumpet-shaped, thickened ends. Marine archaeological research and objects excavated from previous centuries have confirmed the shape of the Portuguese manillas and have also produced individual weights. There are very few test results available on the metallic composition. Most manillas were made of bronze or brass type copper alloys. There were no high proportions of lead (less than 12 %) and the proportion of zinc was about 20%. However, these were always individual results, which is why metal analyses on a larger scale would be desirable.

The Portuguese manillas were also used by the other European nations trading on the West African coast to buy gold, ivory, pepper and later also for slaves, although the Portuguese preferred to retain control of this commodity themselves. The local ethnic groups were willing to accept *tacoais* manillas in payment from the Europeans, but they probably used them mainly as raw material for their own craftwork and not as payment in transactions among themselves. This may also explain why, although the manillas were imported in large numbers, only individual pieces remain.

As far as the shape is concerned, the so-called *popo* manillas could well derive from the *tacoais* manillas, even though they only weigh just over half as much. There is a gradual transition in weight from the *tacoais* manillas to the *popo* manillas. All the *popo* manillas I examined had casting seams, while the few *tacoais* (or similar) manillas I examined myself showed no signs of casting seams. Metallic analysis carried out on the *popo* manillas showed that they were predominantly made of copper, but also contained more than 25% lead, about 3% tin, around 5% antimony and traces of iron. Here again the number of the *popo* manillas analysed is too small to make general statements.

Most *popo* manillas are found on the Ivory Coast, but individual typical *popo* manillas with a casting seam are found time and again in the fetish houses of the Igbo in southern Nigeria and in cargos brought up from recovered shipwrecks. Their increased incidence in the areas of French influence in West Africa lends support to the sparse indications that manillas were also produced in France. It is not possible to determine when and where this possible transition from *tacoais* to *popo* manillas took place. The first reports with definite evidence of the existence of *popo* manillas on the Ivory Coast date from the year 1885 (Zay 1892:247).

There are a number of reports on *popo* manillas being used by the indigenous population. It is important that these manillas, which were always imported by the Europeans, were not only used by Europeans to buy West African products, but that they also served the native peoples as a means of payment. This is also confirmed by the fact that the local population had their own names for the manillas (see above) and did not adopt the term “manilla”. The *popo* manillas were put out of circulation as a currency by a decree of the French colonial government in 1915.

The English Birmingham manillas were not used everywhere along the West African coast, but were widely spread in the eastern Niger Delta region, in the southern Igbo area and in most of the Ibibio areas. Owerri, the former capital of the Republic of Biafra and the present seat of administration of Imo, a federal state of Nigeria (see maps 20, 28), was a centre for manillas. Naanen speaks of the *manilla belt* (1993: 430).

Of the so-called Birmingham manillas, only the early forms still look as though they might be related to the *tacoais* manillas. The two have in common that they were made in Europe for trading with the indigenous population of Nigeria. However, it was no longer a question of offering the Africans a good product, but merely of producing regionally accepted, cheap “coins” for buying goods (palm oil, ivory, slaves). It is not known why the English Birmingham manillas were so popular with the tribes of southern Nigeria. This type of manilla was certainly not suitable for further processing, nor could it be worn as jewellery. At present, due to the discovery of a clay mould in Exeter, the beginning of manilla manufacturing in England can be dated as being prior to 1645, although written documents giving a description of the Birmingham manilla mould do not predate 1732 (Barbot: *Description*)

The weight of the Birmingham manillas was usually below 100 g and varied between ~43 g and ~175 g. There are a few rare, particularly heavy examples weighing up to ~270 g. These big pieces include the *mkporo*-type Birmingham manillas (which fit the mould in Exeter!) with a visible casting seam which in shape have the greatest similarity to the Portuguese *tacoais* manillas and which were used almost exclusively for ceremonial purposes, while the smaller types formed an important currency on the internal markets of the country.

According to the metallic analyses at present available, a high lead content of over 25% was characteristic of the Birmingham manillas. However, there are no corresponding results available for the bigger and heavier *mkporo* type. It would not be surprising if their lead content was well below 20%. One peculiarity was manillas made of iron which were produced in England with the intention of reducing costs. They turned out to be a flop as the Nigerians rejected the iron copies.

In the literature on the subject there are various names listed for a great number of Birmingham manillas, but these cannot be verified replicably with the material at hand. Weight and outward form together do not permit the manillas to be typed. As early as 1991 and 1996 Baker wrote:

There were so many varieties of manillas in use at various times over several hundreds of years that no one can now catalogue the full range. (1991: 95; 1996: 306) This still holds true today.

The Birmingham manillas were changed into English money in a compulsory and comprehensive campaign in 1949. People were allowed to keep only 200 pieces each for ceremonial purposes, e.g. for the bride price.

The so-called king and queen manillas were not produced in Europe, had no function as currency, nor could they be regarded as big pieces of Birmingham manilla money. They served exclusively as ceremonial objects for the Igbos and Ibibio. The king and queen manillas were produced by indigenous craftsmen and had a high copper content. Metallic analyses show no relationship to the Birmingham manillas.