

Red-Gold

for Dunja Herzog

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The pieces of jewellery are part of an on-going process, resulting in different artworks produced in West Africa, and based in a research that seemingly always ended there as if drawn to and connected by multiple interests and questions. It maybe even started there. Her biography links the artist to Cameroon, where she spent childhood years with her parents, who, coming from Switzerland, worked as doctors in a catholic hospital. The underlying questions in this work are thus also biographical, and they know about the privileges of a Swiss citizenship, which, while helpful for unrestricted travel and the financing of the project, places the bearer in the history and ensuing position of a country, known for its liberal trade rules, and all their disputable elements. These questions are also reflections on art itself, its production, its notion of authorship, and its attributed exchange and usage value in different societies.

This working process spans different places, Fumaban in Cameroon, where the main idea of producing wearable pieces was developed, and the production proved to be challenging, Berlin, where the artist lives, Basel, where the money came from, and Benin City, where the jewellery was then produced, together with the family run workshop of Phil Omodamwen, a local 7th generation bronze caster. The material used is a locally available copper alloy, some of it recycled from electronic waste. The models presenting the pieces are friends and people met during the process of conceiving and producing the jewellery pieces.

If we want to find a starting point for the journey of these jewellery pieces, we could start with Manillas, ancient bracelets-like objects made of copper. Investigating their history soon made it clear that they were not innocent objects of beauty, since they proved to be a crucial element for understanding the history of relations between Europe and Africa. They stand for a trade model between their former respective elites. A model built upon the life of Millions of people, who were sold, dispossessed, and killed. Who profited in this were the intermediaries, the traders, who, from the beginnings, in the 15th century, developed the emerging system of global trade, based on local desolidarisation.

Selling the jewellery in an online store today is another one of these invisible and visible links opened up by the Manillas. Their basic element, copper, valued in West African societies once even more than gold, for its power through transmitting energy and fighting off evil, is now predominantly traded via companies placed in Switzerland, one of them is Glencore, Switzerland's largest company, according to latest figures. But, as is the rule of international trade, copper rarely touches Switzerland, and if so, it comes mostly in electric and electronic devices, where it is used, again, for its high inductiveness. It is therefore already here, in the computer, and in the wires providing its connectivity.

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The jewellery has been produced in the Nigerian City of Benin, the capital of ancient Edo, a West-African kingdom famed and mystified during the middle ages in Europe, for its riches. In late 19th century the Kingdom of Edo also entered the western art history, when the so called Benin-bronzes were displayed, for the first time in Europe, at the British museum, after the British had invaded and looted the city-state in 1897, following the closure of their trading posts by the king of Benin, who sensed that trading had become a pretext for colonial ambitions.

The traditional Benin bronze casting process uses wax moulds in a "lost form" process, similar to the traditional bronze casting process in Europe. The same process was now used for the production of the jewellery. Even with a broken lineage due to the devastation of local economies, bronze casting still exists in traditional man-only guilds in the city of Benin.

The story of the Manillas

Manillas, copper rings with flared ends resembling open bracelets, and sometimes also worn like this, are known to be, along with copper rods, the first metal currency in West Africa used as a means of trade, as well on local markets as between local kingdoms and other societies. They existed before the beginning of direct trade between Europe and Africa in the 14th century. Their design may have come via the ancient Phoenician trading routes, since similar bracelets are known elsewhere, or it may be of local origin. Manillas, as currency, were always also decorative objects, made out of copper alloys. They had different forms and weight in different regions of West Africa, and were not always interchangeable. The older currency Cowri shells was mainly used for buying small goods, Manillas were used for more serious business. When worn, they showed wealth and status.

In the beginning of the direct overseas trade between West Africa and Portugal, at the end of the 15th century, it was not easy for European merchants to meet the needs of their African customers, from whom they wanted to buy gold, ivory, and spices for the European and Asian markets. Copper, in the form of household devices like urinals and bathing plates, as pure material in barrens or rods, as wire, and in the form of Manillas, proved to be the most reliable trade ware, since copper was not as sensitive to water damage as fabric, and in higher demand. The African trade partners were very conscious about quality and design of imported copper ware. The sound of tapping two Manillas against each other was a proof of quality. European Manillas, solely produced for the African markets, were first traded via Venice, then trade shifted to Antwerp in the 16th century, due to the rise of the South German trading houses like the Fugger. They were mainly produced in England, while the copper in the beginning came from Central Europe; mining then shifting to the Americas. Even before the establishment of trading posts and shipping routes, Europeans also traded in humans from Africa, who were sold to European courts. This gained momentum after the Spanish crown had sent Christopher Columbus to explore new market possibilities, resulting in the European discovery that the Americas exist en route between Europe and Asia, where the ships were heading to. The ensuing triangular business between Africa, Europe, and the newly founded colonies in the Americas saved and then sustained the broke European courts, which were participating either directly or via trade, regulations and taxation in the trade with humans throughout the roughly 350 years of transatlantic slave trade, a term

veiling the violence of miserable life and death of estimated 40 million people. Their exchange value was fixed in Manillas, making them commonly known as slave money. With the high influx of currency in form of Manillas from Europe, Manillas, already in the 16th century, became inflationary on the African market, which proved a problem for the European customers. Regulations of prizes by the Portuguese king (1 slave should maximum cost 40 Manillas) resulted in a shift from trading to bribing with Manillas. It also resulted in a golden era of the Benin bronze sculptures. It can be shown that they were commonly produced out of smelted or recycled Manillas from Europe.

In the beginning of the 20th century, after military interventions ended the West African kingdoms, Manillas were prohibited as money by the authorities, in order to promote their respective currencies. *Operation Manilla* in the beginning of the 20th century was an attempt by the British to buy back Manillas from the African market. The English taxpayers bought 2,464 tons of copper in the form of Manillas (with a loss of half a Million Pounds, compared to the material value), ending their history as official currency in 1948.

One may wonder with Eugenia W. Herbert, who researched on the history of copper, published in her book *Red Gold of Africa*, where all the rest of the huge amount of copper shipped into Africa is now, and an unbelievable huge amount it has to be, she calculates. She assumes that it must be buried in millions of places in the soils of Africa.

The story of copper

Copper had been mined for in Sub-Saharan Africa before the direct encounters with Europeans, the biggest exploitation sites, until today, in the Congo and in Zambia. Internal copper trade routes must have existed as the Benin bronzes had been cast hundreds of kilometres away from mining areas. Gold, which is relatively frequent in Africa and easier to smelt, and iron had been mined for as well, but decorative objects, jewellery, ritual objects, grave goods (and the mixture of all these) in most sub-Saharan African societies were made out of copper. Like everywhere, its exchange value was strongly linked to mythology, ritual, and magic. European, Asian, and North African mythology linked gold to the sun and the gods. The devil, as was thought in Europe, and seemed proven in the Judas legend of the Bible, could not touch gold and had to pay his villains in silver. Copper in African societies was said to transfer energy and build up barriers to evil. The main traditional use for copper in West-African societies was the production of art, parallel to the use of gold elsewhere; even today 60% of the gold exploits go into the production of jewellery and art objects, and only the rest into money reserves.

The exploitation of copper in Africa was limited to the locally available supply of energy, mostly charcoal. When Europeans started to engage with mining in Africa, they met the same problem. It proved easier to bring in copper, first from Europe and later, with exploitable copper sites in Chile and Mexico, from the Americas via England, which became the biggest Manilla producer, due to the British marine power, established in the late 16th century through piracy linked to the name of Francis Drake.

In the first fifty years of the 16th century, Portuguese traders shipped 45 tons of copper every year to Africa, and this amount does not include the imports from other countries. Eugenia Herbert estimates that minimum 20,000 tons of brass, alone from England, were exported to Africa between 1699 to 1863.

The main European copper mines were in Spain, Austria, Hungary, and Sweden, where the Swedish king, in the 16th century, in order to finance his expansion wars, with the help of the

Fugger trading house from South Germany, stepped into building up the small ancient Swedish copper industry. In the 17th century, two thirds of European copper came from Sweden.

The high demand for copper, destined for the intercontinental trade, resulted in a shortage of copper, and therefore material for cheap money in Europe, which impoverished the European middle classes and the poor.

In the last decades the price of copper has risen, though remaining highly volatile, with the importance of the electric and electronic industry. The copper price is seen as an indicator for the global economy. Copper is mainly traded via Switzerland, holding 60% of the metal trade worldwide, with Glencore, the largest Swiss company, as the biggest trader.

The story of the Fuggers

The Fugger started as weavers and merchants of cloth in Augsburg. They very early were invested in the trade with Italy, and then in the transcontinental trade with Asia. They had stepped into mining in 1485, when the Habsburgs, then the ruling house of Spain, Austria, and the Netherlands, whom they had supplied with cloth, gave them the use of mines in Tyrol in exchange for money lent. In a partnership with the Portuguese crown and its tradesmen in Antwerp, which the Fugger had helped to establish as commercial hub, weakening the position of Venice, they provided copper and silver for the Portuguese trade with Asia and Africa. Another business was money lending on a high scale, which may now be called banking, ensuring the trading house its interdependency with the ruling class. Jakob Fugger "the Rich", in 1520, financed the campaign for the election of Karl V, the Habsburg candidate to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire. Once elected, he granted them trading privileges and territories, even when now and then they had to remind him of the their rendered favours: *„Es ist auch wissentlich und liegt am Tage, dass Eure Kaiserliche Majestät die römische Krone ohne mein Zutun nicht hätte erlangen können...“*.

Having been assigned the exploit of the mercury mines in Spain, the Fuggers were in the position to supply a necessary agent for the silver smelting process; a method, discovered in Mexico, unhealthy for the workers, but highly profitable. A position that put them at a crucial point within the trade between Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas. Meanwhile they were also researching on mercury for curing Syphilis, which was the disease brought from the new world by sailors, who had in reverse brought illnesses to the Americas leading to the death of 95% of the native population in the first 100 years of contact. The resulting lack of workers for the silver and copper mines, started the transatlantic slave trade. They tested the mercury cure in their social housing units—the famous Fuggerei in Augsburg being the oldest of its kind still existing today—with the same rules of conduct and requests for demonstrative gratitude which impoverished people are subjected to until today. The Fuggers didn't have foreign trading posts in Asia or Africa, besides of a short lived one in Goa, and their direct transcontinental contacts were very sporadic, but they had the means and methods, including their own internal newspaper, to play out different political interests, social systems, and personalities of rulers, with the main aim of accumulating money. In his book *Aufbruch ins globale Zeitalter*, Markus Häberlein argues that the patriarchal Fugger family stands at the beginning of a globalized economic system, which it was actively developing. The main systemic components of this emerging world economy were the privatisation of resources with the help and policing of authorities; a profit in intermediation between different social systems, whose asynchronicity one serviced as long as it was profitable, and lead to wars

when it became troublesome; an indifference towards conditions of production, since one was detached from local communities, even the ones one was based in, and this included a patronizing charity system which subjected pauperised former neighbours to demonstrative gratitude, and an art system built on patronage as a means of communication between the rich and powerful. It is interesting to see this principles, in the different names of liberalism, active until today.

The Fugger trade was shut down in 1645, mainly due to the Thirty Years War, a war they had helped finance by building up the mining business in Sweden. The Fugger stayed a wealthy family, owning land and being part of the nobility they were rewarded with by Karl V in exchange of their services.

The story of waste

Recyclable copper mostly comes in wires. The easiest way to extract copper and its alloys from waste is to throw cables into an open fire to free them from the plastic mantling, which emits hazardous and carcinogenic fumes. This procedure is limited, similar to the production of copper in earlier times, by locally available energy resources, scarce in Nigeria, as well as in most developing countries.

The UN estimates that 44,7 Million metric tonnes of E-waste were produced worldwide in 2016, with a rising tendency. The term E-waste is not clear, it may include appliances that have been trashed, or appliance that are broken and not repairable. Europe collects and recycles about 35% of the E-Waste probably discarded. The rest is either exported, scavenged, simply trashed on dumping sites, or burnt in incineration plants.

Since it is difficult to determine where the E-waste ends up, an experiment by scholars in the US, who placed GPR trackers in discarded devices, serves the United Nations as an indicator. This experiment showed that 97% of the US E-waste leaves off-shore.

Another case study was conducted in Nigeria by people overseeing and classifying the cargo that reached Nigerian ports. 71 tons of E-Waste reached Nigeria in 2015/2016 via the two ports in Lagos. 69% were imported in form of cars and busses via roll-on, roll off, the rest came in containers. Next to all of the vehicles were imported from the European Union, 27% from ports in Germany, then the UK, Belgium and the Netherlands. The waste in containers came mostly from Asia and the US. 19% of the products were not functional, mostly TV screens, refrigerators, and air conditions. This contradicts an earlier estimate that 80% of the E-waste reaching the African West coast is trash and ends up in land fills. The huge portion of imported E-waste is re-sold on the secondary market, adds to the low air quality and low energy efficiency of cities like Lagos or Accra, and then sooner or later becomes trash there again.

Mining E-waste is supported by organisations and individuals arguing that it is more sustainable than traditional mining. It is not as profitable though, and poses comparable health and environmental risks, even under legal conditions.

The jewellery is partly produced out of metal recycled from E-waste that has, in one way or the other, reached Nigeria. Its yellowish shine indicates a high amount of zinc in the raw material and distinguishes the objects' materiality from traditional bronze and other alloys of copper that came through trading with the Europeans in former times. It will, like the ancient objects, darken in time.

The story of time

The stories told in this text are fragments. They connect, and they separate again, but altogether they seem to be the stories of male actors. Silvia Federici has researched in her book *Caliban and the Witch* how at a point in history, directly linked to the history of trade, briefly touched upon in this text, women as juridical and social subjects were dispossessed, to the extent that they didn't even own their own bodies, which were policed, researched, and put on display by male actors. Trying to understand how at a historic point parallel to the beginning exploitation of other continents, European women in millions had been tortured and executed as witches, she shows how local societies, generally dependent on solidarity for their own survival, were brutalized to a point that they became indifferent about their weakest members. The witch who could have been a female acting figure was in historical truth the impoverished neighbour in a society, that had pauperised and starved the multitude of its members. Quarrels over land-ownership were the main motifs for the denunciation and prosecution as witches, and are until today, for example in Nigeria.

The historic dispossession of women resulted, among myriads of other historic aberrations, in the importance of jewellery as sole personal item women were able to possess, to be sold in dire times. The ensuing strategy of pressing jewellery out of the propertied class can thus also be seen as an element of resilience and survival.

Ariane Müller, 2018

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