

MUSIC IN TRADITIONAL EXCHANGES IN NORTH VANUATU

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Music is a social phenomenon allowing the possibility of indefinite recreations. Depending on the cultures, places, and times, musical exchanges have been locally managed in various ways. Today the rights to copy a particular music are a sensitive topic of current international interest because of the development of the music industry. In Vanuatu custom, a principle close to the concept of intellectual property rights has existed for centuries for music or other intangible knowledge. Traditionally, not everyone has the right to hand over certain parts of this knowledge; complex rules must be observed. Although for most sets of music anyone who knows a song can sing it, a certain number of sets are governed by precise rules of transmission. Through examples of ceremonies and specific cases observed in northern Vanuatu, I present various ways in which music can be circulated and exchanged with other valuable objects of traditional currency or even coins of modern currency.

Introduction

IN VANUATU, during public performances of traditional dances, it is sometimes possible to hear people from a community other than that of the performers object: "this was our dance, they have stolen it," "this drum is from our place, they have taken it for themselves." At other times, however, the origin of a dance or a musical instrument may be explained by a story recounting an exchange between two people, families, or communities. Sometimes the names of the owner of the dance and of those who have obtained it may be quoted. Traditionally, borrowing part of a dance, an

instrument, songs, or a whole dance is a common practice subjected to specific local rules.

The ownership principle over music and dances has often been observed in Melanesia. In 1922, Malinowski wrote:

The other type of transaction belonging to this class, is the payment for dances. Dances are "owned"; that is, the original inventor has the right of "producing" his dance and song in his village community. If another village takes a fancy to this song and dance, it has to purchase the right to perform it. This is done by handing ceremonially to the original village a substantial payment of food and valuables, after which the dance is taught to the new possessors. (Malinowski 1922, 186)

More recently, and more specifically in Vanuatu, Lindstrom explained the continuing practice of these rights and the consequences that failing to comply with them could cause:

Traditional copyright, or patents, protect valued knowledge, including songs, myths, histories, genealogies, and herbal cures, as well as artistic motifs and carving designs. Only people who possess a copyright can make legitimate public use of copyrighted knowledge, whether this is a public repetition of a lineage's genealogy, the performance of particular song, a beating of the slit-gong rhythm, or the reproduction of a carving motif. A dance team celebrating feast, for example, must ask permission to sing a song that belongs to a neighbouring group. If someone misuses copyrighted material (for example, appropriates someone's kava magic), copyright holders may protest and demand compensation. (Lindstrom 1996, 127)

Thus a principle very similar to intellectual property, applying to songs, dances, and other kinds of knowledge has existed for centuries in Vanuatu.

In Oceania, music belongs to the vast field of orality, because it is transmitted by word of mouth and is never written. Oral knowledge like music, dances, myths, tales, legends, magic formulae, genealogies, sand drawings, names, know-how, etc., represent "living traditions" that are handed down from generation to generation, with a certain openness to variations, transformations, innovations, and borrowing. Because of its immaterial nature, an oral knowledge is never entirely given, it always remains known by the original owner. Therefore, it is both transmitted and kept at the same time.

While focusing on objects rather than on orality in her research, Weiner noticed the inalienable character of these intangible assets:

Scattered in the ethnographic literature are examples of myths, genealogies, ancestral names, songs, and the knowledge of dances intrinsic to a group's identity that, taken together as oral traditions, form one basic category of inalienable possessions. . . . Of course, words and objects are not always mutually exclusive, for objects may have oral histories transmitted with their ownership and myths may be related to geographical landmarks, giving material authenticity to words. Because inalienable possessions succeed their owners through time, transferability is essential to their preservation. In many societies, oral traditions have great longevity and, especially among groups where durable objects are scarce, texts as inalienable possessions are guarded and carefully transmitted from one generation to the next. But words can be altered and reframed; what one person says can be paraphrased by another resulting in vastly different meanings. Some people forget or deliberately tamper with parts of text whereas others may die before the entire corpus of their knowledge is given to their successors. (Weiner 1992: 37, 38)

Studying inalienable assets, Weiner (1992) and Godelier (1996) draw upon the same idea: "keeping-while-giving" or "keeping for giving." However, keeping-while-giving in the case of oral knowledge is of a different and separate nature than that of the objects themselves, because these intangible assets can be kept as well as given at the same time. Passed-on knowledge can still remain in the memory of the persons who transmit it until their death. However, because in certain cases some of the knowledge depends on property rights, the person who transmits it must pretend afterward that he has forgotten it and no longer has the same rights, even if he has actually internalized this knowledge.

When transmitted, music becomes part of a system of exchanges involving material objects. Pigs are valuable objects exchanged in all the islands of the archipelago.¹ Besides pigs, other objects, whose nature varies from one region to another, are exchanged for all types of goods and services; at the same time they constitute a unit of measurement for the value of all objects exchanged. Thus, they possess certain characteristics of a currency. On the islands of Pentecost, Ambae, and Maewo, the inhabitants exchange mats made of pandanus leaves dyed in red (Fig. 1) and further north, in



FIGURE 1. Exchanges of Red Mats on Pentecost Island.

the Banks Islands, ropes of small beads made from shells. These “currency” objects, as well as pigs, are used to pay for a musical element, a song, a dance performance, etc.

Melanesia and its exchanges have fascinated anthropology for a long time. Thus were born some true anthropological masterpieces: Malinowski’s descriptions of *kula* (Malinowski 1922) and Mauss’s “*Essai sur le don*” (Mauss 1923, 1924) were commented on and developed by great researchers such as Lévi-Strauss (1950). Later, Weiner discerned keeping-while-giving possessions and emphasized the importance of inalienable assets (Weiner 1992). In the same way, Godelier (1996) has explained why and how some things can be kept and given and others not. It is precisely this idea of keeping-while-giving that is interesting for the topic of this article, all the more so because as far as I know, this notion has never been applied to oral knowledge and more particularly to music.

The different ways in which music circulates in the traditional system of northern Vanuatu (Penama and Torba Provinces; Pentecost Island to Torres; see map in Figure 2), in particular on Pentecost Island, will be analyzed to show the important and specific part played by music and other knowledge in customary exchanges.



FIGURE 2. Vanuatu Map. ©A. François, CNRS.

Music as a Paid Service

The first exchange involving music is of a very simple nature: It is the purchase of a service, the payment for a dance performance. The service rendered is paid for immediately after the performance: The woman leading the dances for a marriage is rewarded by a mat; the drummers are paid during or after the ceremony; a man possessing a form of magic knowledge (often comprising an incantation or song) is compensated for his services, etc. (as seen in Fig. 3). The owner of a song can also be rewarded in exchange for the right of performance of his/her dance or song.² All these cases concern a simple, immediate exchange involving no debt on either side. It is a commercial form of exchange because it is the performance of music that is alienable in this case but not the “music” itself. However, as Godelier (1969: 138, 139) has very rightly pointed out, although this type of service is compensated, it involves more than just the economic aspect of the service: The performers are looking for recognition of their talent, for fame, and the organizers hope to increase their prestige through well-performed ceremonial dances and music. Music, in these cases, constitutes a service conferring prestige on everyone, both on the organizer of the ceremony, on the musicians, and the dancers.

Transfer of Rights

In Vanuatu, some people are recognized as song specialists, a kind of composers. Although they do not write in the strict sense of the term, they “compose” songs, memorize them, and pass them on orally (today, they sometimes use a cassette recording). Indeed, alongside the repertoire considered as ancient and anonymous, new compositions are constantly



FIGURE 3. Circular Exchange of Music Performance.

innovating music, which is called “traditional” (*kastom musik* in Bislama).³ Maurice, an elderly composer from the Wutsunmel region (center of Pentecost Island), explained to me that, if someone commissions a song from him, he composes it and gives it to the person in exchange for a payment. The composer himself must forget the song, because, henceforth, it belongs to the person who commissioned it. This explanation of the “forgetting” composer is very explicit concerning the existence of rights to music. In this case, the music is, in principle, alienable.

There is a close connection between spirit entities and composition. Most of the time, people believe that a song or dance was brought to the living by the ancestors’ spirits in dreams while asleep or walking alone in the bush. The composer plays the role of “receiver” of songs (Ammann 2008, 2012) or of mediator between the spirits and humans. This supernatural origin of songs is an important element in the conception of rights because it plays a large part in the protection of songs. When someone wants to acquire a song, in return for payment, the composer gives that person the whole performance and transmission rights. Magic ensures that this rule is respected. Geismar (2005) explains how the people from the island of Ambrym use their magical knowledge to protect their artefacts from the international market. Indeed, if a person appropriates a form of oral expression without having given something in exchange, that person would be exposed to sickness or even death caused by the spirits’ harmful action. A song, the rights to which have been given, may sometimes tell the story of the family behind it. Sometimes the composer remains known throughout his life and that of a certain number of subsequent generations. The language of the song may also identify the community from which the song comes: a legend may recount the history of the song; the lyrics of a song can tell the story of the person who ordered it as well as the story of that person’s family, etc. The origin of a song, therefore, remains explicit, at least for a certain period of time; it is only the right of use that is transferred. The origin (the composer–mediator, the family, or community from which the song stems) can be said to remain attached to the work in circulation. This paternity is inalienable and remains known, while the right of use, once it has been paid for, is transferred (alienable) and can continue to circulate. The idea of a gift from the ancestors’ spirits is very important here, because, on the one hand, it is very close to the inalienable sacred objects Godelier (1996) describes. On the other hand, it involves supernatural power or even magic as the element guaranteeing the respect of ownership rules. In this case, it is more a question of precious objects both kept and given (alienable while inalienable) in the manner explained by Godelier: Rights of use are indeed given, but the identity of a song remains known

and inalienable. This memory of the origin of a song signifies the esteem attributed to the composer, of the community or the region from which the song comes, or the person who ordered the song. A song can also testify to the history of the social relations that gave rise to it, for instance the relationships between the person who ordered a song and the composer, or between two communities that had exchanged their musical repertoires. Ammann even evokes the possibility of using a song about immigration as an evidence of the ownership of a piece of land (Ammann 2012, 44).

As Godelier himself says, it is not necessarily the nature of the object that determines whether it belongs to inalienable, sacred objects or to valuable ones that can be given and kept but the sociological context.

Transmission of Inalienable Oral Knowledge

In the case described above, music can be classified, according to Godelier, as a precious possession both given, through the transfer of rights, and kept, through what could be termed its paternity, its origin. However, cases are also found in which music circulates as a totally inalienable object, owned and transmitted only within a specific group of people. In these contexts, music may be part of inalienable, sacred objects. In the following cases, music is considered as very old; a priori its composer or mediator is unknown, but it possesses an even more sacred dimension because of its connection with the ancestors.

Transmission of Inalienable Repertoires within the Context of Kinship

As documented by Tattevin (1928), magic songs belonging to specific clans in the south of Pentecost Island make it possible to influence the weather, tides, etc. Only the initiated members of the clan have the right to use them, but anybody can ask these initiates to do the magic and reward them with a mat or coins. Although the service can be rendered to anyone, the magic repertoire itself is transmitted only within the clan in return for payment and through initiation. Therefore, it is knowledge made sacred by its power and ancestral origin; it has an identity and so represents an inalienable repertoire. This is the same case as mentioned above when a song testifies to the ownership of a piece of land. This type of song can only be transmitted inside a group along specific kinship relationships and is kept secret within this group (Ammann 2012).

Thus, secrecy protects the power of some people over others. Knowledge belonging to one group of people—genealogies, family histories, artistic knowledge, magic learning, etc.—gives this group of people a common

identity and, as it were, a certain prestige over others who do not share this knowledge.

Transmission of Inalienable Repertoires within a Hierarchical Context

In the north of Vanuatu, in the Banks and Torres Islands, there is a musical repertoire surrounded by taboos and secrets and governed by very specific rules of transmission. In the Banks Islands, when dancing the *Neqet* on Mota-Lava or the *Utmag*⁴ on Mere-Lava (Fig. 4), the initiates dance to the rhythms of rattles worn on their feet and beat bamboo drums, but the inaudible songs are performed only in their heads so as not to reveal them. In the Torres Islands, during the *Newet*⁵ dance, only the soloist knows the song. He performs it in the middle of a circle formed by the other musicians who beat different drums and sing a repetitive *hocket*⁶ to cover the solo singing. Thus, the music is constructed so that the audience and those who do not own the rights cannot hear these songs. The singer acquires his knowledge by “getting into custom” (*go insaed long kastom*), a Bislama expression used to explain that a person has gone through the traditional initiations.⁷



FIGURE 4. *Utmag*: Dance of the Spirits, Mere-Lava Island.

The knowledge of these dances, the right to participate in them as well as the emblems, masks, decorations, is acquired through the initiation to the *tamate* of *salagoro*⁸ (Vienne 1984, 329).

Thus, the “taboo” repertoire is acquired in different initiation systems: secret societies or hierarchical grade systems. The analysis of a few examples from Pentecost Island can show more precisely how this takes place.

In northern Vanuatu, there is a hierarchical grade system based on political and economic competition. To move up through the grades, a man or woman has to acquire a certain amount of traditional insignia (pigs, mats, shell necklaces, finery, knowledge, songs, rhythms, etc.). Each grade entitles its holder to rights to a certain reserved musical repertoire.⁹ Promotion to a higher rank is finalized through an important celebration during which goods are exchanged, pigs killed and shared along with food among the participants while numerous dances are performed. These ceremonies confer prestige on those who organize them and allow the organizers to show their hierarchical superiority to the public. As Ammann (2012, 229) says, these ceremonies also allow those who hold the secret to publicly show that they have access to this secret knowledge.

To illustrate this, a *havva*¹⁰ dance (Fig. 5) performed at the male *tungoro* grade-taking ceremony; part of the *bolololi*¹¹ system will be



FIGURE 5. *Havva*: A Women's Dance from North Pentecost Island.

described here. The women's havwa dance is not requisite to move up to this grade. However it gives great prestige to the ceremony, to the man being promoted, and his to family, as well as a specific status to the girl responsible for the dance. The candidate for the grade must ask one of his biological or classificatory "daughters" (*nituku*¹²) for the havwa dance. She approaches the other women to organize the dance and to enlist their participation, and she (with the help of her family) pays them for this service. However, to have the right to organize the havwa, the daughter herself must be graded and have previously acquired all the feminine attributes giving her this right. The dance must be prepared long in advance. After the last rehearsals, an important ceremony during which gifts are exchanged takes place. The girl organizing the dance kills a pig and receives mats and pigs from her parents. Today, it is also possible to see cloth and cash circulating. As Figure 6 shows, several kinds of wealth are, thus, spread out over the central village square (*nasara*) and then distributed to the women who will later participate in the dance.

Then gifts are also distributed to their paternal uncles (father's brothers whom they call by the same name as the latter [*tata*] and paternal aunts [*fafa*]¹³), so that those receiving these gifts will encourage them during the dance. A few days later, at the tungoro grade-taking ceremony, after the



FIGURE 6. Mat Payments for a *Havwa* Dance.

first song of the dance, the grade-taking candidate (the girl's "father"—biological or classificatory) publicly offers her a pig categorized *livoala*.¹⁴ This is the pig with the greatest value¹⁵. The havwa dance brings considerable prestige to the woman who has organized it until the end of her life; it gives her the highest hierarchical status. Moving up to a new grade allows a man to increase the prestige of his whole family who have also helped him pay for and organize his new grade ceremony. When a woman who has acquired the havwa dance dies, the rhythm played on a wooden drum announcing her death is followed by the rhythm of this dance. Thus, the hierarchical system provides an opportunity for passing on specific rhythms or songs, strictly reserved to and transmitted within each grade-taking. In the bolololi system in the north of the island, or the *leleutan* one in the center, the specific rhythms attached to the different grades must be purchased along with other items such as mats, belts, armbands, bracelets, names, leaves, etc. Each of these rhythms must be bought with a pig with tusks of different lengths.

In the central (Apma) region of Pentecost Island, the *raka*, the second female grade, provides the opportunity not to buy a rhythm but to acquire the right to the *Sawan* song. It is a girl's father who decides to move her up the female ranks. For this, he must seek the help of one of his sisters (or parallel female cousins) who have already attained this grade, because they alone have the power to confer this status on her.

The ceremony is preceded by a ten-day reclusion period (today this has been reduced to 3–4 days) for the grade-taker. The *Sawan* song is interpreted several times during the ceremony; it corresponds to the time the girl comes out of the reclusion hut to warn people of her presence so that nobody sees her. Also, it is especially performed to accompany the girl during the final ceremony. The girl then pays for the attributes attached to her grade, including the *Sawan* dance; she will then be able to interpret it with other women who have already reached this rank and to receive payment for this dance from new candidates to the grade. It is strictly forbidden for anyone who has not made this payment to interpret this song.

As seen in Figure 7, here the exchange appears as pyramidal. The rhythms that correspond to the different grades in the men's ranking system follow a similar pyramidal system. Graded people who transmit musical expression keep it at the same time. They can give this musical expression several times without ever losing the right to it. Thus, they keep while giving. Whoever receives it may, in turn, pass it on according to specific rules, comprising limits imposed by both kinship and the hierarchical system. This is the right to share: the rights remain collective—they are the

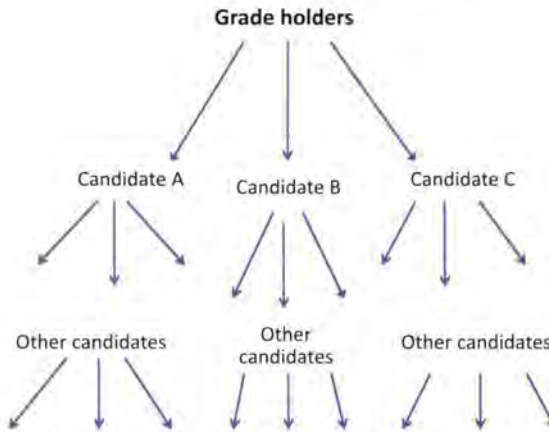


FIGURE 7. **Pyramidal System of Music Transmission.**

specific attributes of a group of people sharing the same status—but not just anyone can become part of this group at any time, because very strict rules must be respected. It is important to note that in this case it is the hierarchical system that manages the rights to perform a musical repertoire, because music is an integral part of it. Knowledge—music, names, dances, etc.—is prestigious and requisite to access a social and political rank. It is the accumulation of the rights associated with this knowledge that opens the possibility for a person to acquire the related grade.

Conclusion

Music in the islands of central and northern Vanuatu plays a very important role in exchanges. Because of the property rights governing it and the payments necessary for its acquisition, we may say that economic aspects and values are combined to confer prestige on those who perform it or even on those who pay for its performance. Music is coveted like precious goods and has value because it is not easy to obtain. The giver is in a position of superiority. As Harrison (1992, 233) states, following Lowie, in these contexts, knowledge is cultural and economic wealth. Prestige, reputation, political influence, and the necessary economic means led the author (Harrison 1992, 235) to compare the situation with the “social capital” described by Bourdieu (1980) concerning access to culture in French society. According to Bourdieu:

Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential,” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them. (Bourdieu, 1986)

Therefore, the exchanges, of which music is part, are also an important way of consolidating social relationships. An individual relies on his/her relationships to directly access different kinds of knowledge and hierarchical grades implying them. Following the acquisition, this person shares this secret knowledge with a specific group of persons; thus, it is preciously kept within the group. Ammann (2012, 298) remarks that the notion of secrecy allows a difference to be maintained between the “initiates” and the “noninitiates” and that the possibility to publicly demonstrate a right to perform, for instance a secret song, confers greater prestige.

This analysis has emphasized three types of transactions involving music in northern Vannatu. The first is the simple exchange of one performance for tangible goods (traditional wealth or, more rarely, modern currency). The second concerns the purchase of all the property rights (rights of use), but with the identity of the song, its origin always remains known and brings fame and prestige to the person or people who created this music. Thus, the identity of the song is inalienable, although the rights were transmitted. The last is a pyramidal transaction in which the giver loses none of his/her rights while the acquirer obtains the same rights as him/her. Therefore, these rights are in a way shared by all of those who have gained access to them. Thus, music can have three economic forms: a commercial object (or service); a precious object, the right to which is given but whose origin remains fixed; and an inalienable sacred object. The sacred nature of music also stems from its relationship with the supernatural world: music is brought to humans by the spirits, is often sung in a language no one understands (one often recognized as that of a founding hero), and, in many cultures, is used to communicate with the ancestors and may have magic powers. Thus, depending on the social context, music can have the three characteristics of Godelier’s classification: it can be commercial, precious, and sacred (Godelier 1996, 132). As Godelier said, exchanges make the reproduction of social relationships possible but they also enable the transmission of traditions such as know-how and knowledge; they have a preservation role within a community.

In Vanuatu, music can be treated differently depending on the repertoire and socio-cultural context. Traditionally, all repertoires do not have the same rules of acquisition. With the development of technology—recordings, the media, internet—and the world music industry, festivals with their craze for the remotest music and the search for “exoticism,” the protection of rights has become a sensitive and complex international issue. How can this music, some of which still possesses today its own traditional laws, be both promoted and protected? Such laws are connected to social relationships, prestige, politics, religion, etc., existing within local cultures. The internal system of management and circulation of knowledge is today confronted with the problems of social change that find expression notably in a “democratization” of knowledge (Carneiro da Cunha 2004). If, on a national scale, certain societies manage to handle their knowledge by combining several systems (Geismar 2005), it is on the international level that the question is most problematic. In Europe, the original aim of copyright protection was to protect authors and promote creativity. Today laws are increasingly concerned with economic and commercial aspects to the detriment of authors, creativity, distribution, and exchanges. Even in Western countries, where this system originated, debates on copyright seem insoluble in the face of technological progress. Imposing Western laws without taking into account local situations, with all their variants or existing systems of intellectual property rights, will not only fail to protect these repertoires in the context of the global market but could also radically alter the whole specific systems in these areas. If today the local systems are in fact not capable of protecting their cultures from the abuses of the great global market, this is also the case for the system proposed by WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) (Forsyth 2003), imposed from outside and from above on these new nations. A more direct dialog is needed, one that would take greater account of the existing systems and would consult the local actors. Such an approach might give these local actors the possibility to express themselves freely, rather than under the influence of economic pressures.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article is based on some aspects of my PhD thesis (Stern 2002) directed by François Picard. He inspired many of the ideas that I present here, and I would like to thank him. I am also indebted to Deborah Pope, Virginie Bernard, and Sue Farran for correcting and rereading my English.

NOTES

1. In 2007, during a project on *kustom ekonomi*, a bank using traditional currencies was even created on Pentecost Island.

2. The fact that the organizers of a ceremony and dance would include somebody else's song has at least two explanations. First, during certain dances one song cannot be performed twice; thus, if the organizers do not have enough songs, they have to "borrow" some. However, a song considered as beautiful can bring more prestige to the dance and its organizers.

3. This is the lingua franca of Vanuatu, one form of Melanesian Pidgin English.

4. Neqet and Utmag are the men's mask dances connected to grade-taking societies or secret societies.

5. Newet is the men's most popular dance from the Torres Islands.

6. This is a vocal technique in which at least two singers or a group of singers (or musicians) alternate sounds and silences so as to form a continuous sound.

7. Certain knowledge is acquired in stages during different initiations.

8. The primary meaning of tamate is "dead" or "ancestor." Salagoro is a system of the Banks Islands' secret societies. The salagoro initiates intervene as tamate, "dead-ancestors" (Vienne 1984: 321, 322).

9. Geismar (2005, 39) makes the same remark about the grades on Ambrym Island, which give access to sculptures corresponding to the different grades. Ammann (2012, 202) evokes an Ambrym hierarchical society where men buy the right to make and wear certain hierarchically classified masks during the Rom dance.

10. Havwa is the women's dance from the north of Pentecost Island. As explained above, to have the right to organize it, special conditions are required.

11. The name of the hierarchical grade system of the Raga (North) region of Pentecost Island; the system of the central region of the island is called leleutan.

12. Daughters of a man, his brothers, or parallel cousins (Raga language, North Pentecost).

13. It is interesting to mention that as it is a matrilineal society, the havwa dance, which implies exchanges among a daughter, her father, and her father's lineage (his brothers and sisters), thus, consolidates the relationships between father and daughter and both their lineages.

14. In Vanuatu, pigs are categorized and valued according to the specific curve of their tusks. In the North of Pentecost Island, a livoala pig is the pig of which the tusks pierce the jaw bone and form a complete circle.

15. Pigs whose tusks exceed one full circle are extremely rare.

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