

Rai stones on the Island of Yap

The island of Yap is a small island in the Pacific Ocean near the Philippine Islands (see the map below). This island is best known for a traditional currency called “rai stones”.

Rai stones are donut-shaped rocks carved out of limestone with a large hole in the middle of the disk.

The five major types of rai stone monies are: Mmbul, Gaw, Fe' or Rai, Yar, and Reng.

The size of the rai stones varies. The largest stones are 3 meters (10 ft) in diameter, 0.5 meters (1½ ft) thick and they weigh about 4 tons (8000 lb).



A large rai stone in the village of Gachpar

The value of a specific stone is not only dependent upon the size and craftsmanship going into the carving of the stone, but also upon the history of the stone. For example, the value of a stone is affected by how many people may have died when that specific stone was transported to the island, or whether some well known person (sailor) brought the stone to the island.



These rai stones were used in social transactions like marriages, inheritance, political deals or negotiations, as compensation for damages suffered by a particular individual, transfers of land title, or in exchange for food. Visitors to the island find the stones placed in front of or alongside meeting

houses or along certain pathways. Ownership is transferred without physically relocating the stones as it is rare to actually move any of the stones.

Although western-style money has replaced the rai stones as everyday currency, these stones are still exchanged in traditional ways between the inhabitants of Yap. The stones are also a national symbol and included on the island's license plates.