The MicroSDs of Solomon Islands

An Offline Remittance Economy of Digital Multi-Media

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Abstract

Based on twelve months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, this article investigates the offline circulation of digital media files in Solomon Islands. It explores how circular temporary labour migration drives the acquisition, movement and consumption of digital media, and how these media files contribute to moral controversies. Before the rapid proliferation of mobile phones in 2010, people living in rural environments had limited access to electronic media and the male village elite controlled access to this media, especially foreign movies. Mobile phones, on the other hand, are individually owned and encourage private consumption of media files. At the same time, migrants living in urban areas can easily obtain digital media files and have started integrating them into remittance networks. Access to electronic media in rural areas has exploded. Because foreign visual media are associated with urban, morally ambivalent lifestyles, this proliferation has also fuelled moral uncertainties among rural residents. This article suggests that to understand these moral controversies, and their significance in contemporary Solomon Islands, it is crucial to account for the mobility of digital media files offline and alongside the movements of temporary labourers.

Introduction

Located in the Lau Lagoon on the north eastern tip of Province of Malaita in Solomon Islands, a small islands developing state in the South Pacific, the village of Gwou'ulu is crossing the digital divide. In 2010 mobile phones started to trickle into the village, and by the time of my fieldwork (February 2014 to February 2015) they were nearly omnipresent in daily life. In 2014 Gwou'ulu was home to some 250 adults who owned approximately 100 mobile phones, at least seventy of which were Internet-enabled smartphones.[1] This sudden proliferation of digital information communication technologies (ICTs) can be linked to the arrival of a second

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1   The number of functioning mobile phones in Gwou'ulu fluctuates significantly. They break relatively easily and repair options are limited to urban centers (cf.

telecommunications company, Bmobile (since mid-2014, Bmobile/Vodafone), that ended the monopoly of the national telecommunication provider, OurTelekom. The cost of producing these and auxiliary technologies such as solar power units dropped at around the same time. This confluence of factors allowed for a variety of mobile phones to become more affordable and therefore more accessible, from basic handsets to the smartphones preferred by younger generations, with all phones sharing three core features: they allow for making phone calls, for texting, and for consuming and at times producing multi-media files (photographs, videos and music).

Mobile telephony has become integral for maintaining kinship networks, for coordinating shipping and travel between village and town, and for keeping the family informed of the welfare of family members living in both urban and rural settlements. But these activities cost money for minutes, texts and data, and Gwou'ulu residents have little access to the cash economy. Most families rely on self-provisioning activities. Men fish in and beyond the adjacent lagoon. Women grow root crops such as cassava and exchange the fish caught by men at regular "bush markets," often directly for food crops or for money that is then immediately spent on food sold at the market. To access more flexible cash, e.g., to pay for school fees or to buy mobile phone minutes, some villagers operate small canteens (selling rice, canned tuna and sugar). Others run small tobacco and betel nut stands, or sell baked goods. However, the most reliable source of cash is domestic remittances from urban relatives or temporary labour migration to town, plantations and canneries. Villagers often use remittances to purchase mobile phones, but, as I explain in more detail below, they rarely cover usage costs. Thus villagers' access to calling, texting and online activities is limited, engendering what Jonathan Donner calls "a metered mindset" (2015: 123–126): mobile phone users actively calculate when to use their phones and for what purposes in view of the complex economics and cost structures that surround users' access to the cash economy including to mobile phones.

This "metered mindset" limits villagers' use of mobile phones *as* phones. Instead, mobile phones are, on an everyday basis, largely used as (free) multi-media devices. Women watch movies on mobile phones while taking a break from garden work or while waiting for the rice to boil. Men often watch movies in the evening when waiting to go night fishing, which is the most effective method to obtain enough fish to exchange at markets. Parents will entertain and distract children by playing movies on their smartphones, and so do babysitters. In fashion of a flâneur (cf. Coates 2017), especially adolescent boys stroll through the village, playing music on their phones, frequently to the discontent of (working) adults disapproving of this blatant display of leisure. In addition, villagers of all ages experiment with the camera functions of their phones. Teenagers and young

G. Hobbis 2017a: 158–173), but they are also popular gifts from urban visitors, or purchased anew whenever possible.

unmarried adults may pose on the white sand beach mimicking what they had seen on images or in videos produced abroad (e.g., in Rihanna's "If It's Lovin' That You Want"). Married adults with children most commonly take pictures and videos during family events such as baptisms, or during political events such as the 2014 National Election.

Local and international popular music and foreign movies abound on villagers' microSD cards, complemented (yet not dominated) by home pictures and videos. There are too many different movies, music videos and other media files on the 50 microSD cards that I surveyed. Yet, some general observations can be made: the vast majority of digital media are produced outside Solomon Islands (and Melanesia at large). This is especially true for movies. Movies produced in Asia were popular in town, but I did not encounter any on Gwou'ulu microSD cards. Instead, these cards were filled with Hollywood productions, mostly Westerns[2] (e.g., *3:10 to Yuma* [2007]) and action movies (e.g., *Blood Diamond* [2006], *the Expendables* [2010]) which dominated men's microSD cards but could also be found on those of women. Particularly popular on women's phones were cartoons such as *Tom and Jerry* (1940-) or *Finding Nemo* (2003).[3] Music files and music videos were often more diverse, including a wide mix of local and foreign artists, from ABBA's "The Winner Takes it All" to Chris Brown featuring Keri Hilson's "Super Human" to English-language gospel songs (e.g., "His Name is Wonderful") to songs from Malaitan artists, Gwou'ulu's own "White Sand Beach" as well as groups such as the Rainboy Boyz and the E. M. Children's Choir.

Most of these files – at least of those produced outside Solomon Islands – have been downloaded off of the Internet, but *not* in the Lau Lagoon itself. In 2014, Gwou'ulu was serviced by a spotty 2G network. I was able to read my emails on my smartphone, however, this was a costly affair which afforded a great deal of patience. No one I talked to in Gwou'ulu ever went online. In the words of Mark, a 30 year old subsistence gardener and fisherman, who regularly travels for temporary employment: "I do not check 'my line' [in Gwou'ulu]. In Honiara [the capital

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2   For a discussion of the overwhelming popularity of Westerns or "cowboy movies" see G. Hobbis (forthcoming).

3   I did not find a digital copy of *The Lau of Malaita* – an ethnographic film produced by Granada Television under their Disappearing Worlds Series, with filmmaker Leslie Woodhead and anthropologist Pierre Maranda – on Gwou'ulu microSDs. While several Lau I talked to expressed interest in a copy of the file, they had been unable to procure one and only very few had ever had the opportunity to see the film. I was also unable to find the file online during multiple trips to internet cafés. The only copy I found was a non-digital VHS tape owned by the National Museum in Honiara. I also did not find any other documentaries on villagers' microSD cards. Most indicated that they had simply never been offered any by villagers returning from town with multi-media files. A young man in his 30s explained that he had watched some during stays in Honiara, but his English had not been good enough to adequately follow the description of events.

city], I use it every day, nearly on a full-time basis. Coverage is a problem [in Gwou'ulu]" (Interview, 18 October 2014). Mark, and others, did however, "bring the Internet" to the village, or at least some of the many multi-media files that can be found there. The same land and sea routes that connect the movement of goods and people between the village and Honiara also facilitate the movement of digital data, offline, in the form of microSD cards which are now also carried through this system. In this case, the village is connected to the World Wide Web by an eight hour truck ride to Auki, followed by a six to eight hour ferry ride to Honiara (assuming a direct connection is available), where microSD cards are fitted into SD card adapters and inserted into a desktop computer at the various urban Internet Cafés and filled with the newest music videos, Hollywood films and at times also memes and pictures more generally, e.g., those portraying famous soccer players.[4]

In the following, I explore this movement of digital multi-media data, alongside the movement of temporary labourers. In my analysis I focus in particular on how the mobility of labour and data, and their interdependency, are entangled in moral debates and how they are possibly transforming social relationships in Gwou'ulu, in dialogue with urban environments and movements. I begin with a brief historical introduction to the role of temporary migration and moral uncertainties. I move from there to a more detailed discussion of the interconnectedness between remittance networks and multi-media files. In the final section of this article I examine how these rapidly proliferating multi-media files, in particular foreign movies, are integrated into everyday village life, social relationships and their complex moralities.

I build on David Morley's (2009) call for a materialist, non-media centric approach to Media Studies that takes into account movements of digital files, online and offline. Rather than dividing media into "new" and "old," Morley suggests that we "need to investigate the continuities, overlaps, and modes of symbiosis between old and new technologies of symbolic and material communications and the extent to which material geographies retain significance, even under changing technological conditions" (ibid: 115). The anthropology of technology that informed my research in Solomon Islands offers a complimentary approach (cf. Coupaye 2013; Lemonnier 1992). It situates an individual's understanding of a given technological system in its broader social, cultural, historical, economic, political, religious as well as environmental and material contexts. By accounting for, in Morley's words, "material geographies" (Morley 2009: 115) it is possible to develop a better understanding of the choices users (are able to) make in view of the constraints that they face – in the Solomon Islands case severely limited access to the Internet in rural

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4   There are also Internet Cafés in Auki. However, Internet access is never the sole reason for going to town, and Honiara is more comprehensively useful (e.g., better health services, cheaper goods, more likely to have relatives there that one could stay with etc.).

areas combined with a flourishing remittance economy and temporary circular labour migration between rural and urban areas.

Methodologically, this article is based on twelve months of multi-sited ethnographic field research (see Marcus 1995). I spent a total of eight months in rural Gwou'ulu and four months in urban Honiara, regularly travelling between the two sites with temporary migrants and the digital technologies and media that they carried, thus both "[following] the people" and "the thing" (ibid: 106). By moving between the urban and the rural, spending time with families from Gwou'ulu in both sites, my goal was to develop a better understanding of urban-rural differences, similarities, and connections in the ways individuals use digital technologies. In addition to participant observation, the core of my data is based on an interview protocol adopted from Heather Horst and Daniel Miller's (2006) research on mobile phones in Jamaica. I implemented this protocol near the end of my fieldwork in Gwou'ulu, after having developed a more concise understanding of the everyday prevalence (and absences) of mobile phones and digital technologies more broadly. With the help of a Lau-speaking research assistant, I interviewed one hundred adult villagers (between ages 18 to 75, men and women) about their mobile phones, their call histories, phone books, application usage as well as the contents of their microSD cards. Interviews were semi-structured to collect comparable data sets, while allowing for enough flexibility to encourage broader discussions with respondents, often about the perceived moral dimension of mobile phones and mobile multi-media files. During my stays in urban areas I completed complementary interviews with executives of the two telecommunication providers. I also talked to owners and users of Internet Cafés and more broadly surveyed the multi-media infrastructures available to urban residents and rural visitors. For example, there were several stores in Honiara that sold copies of Hollywood movies on DVDs, even offering to transfer them directly to USB sticks and microSD cards for easier consumption of these movies on mobile phones.

A Brief History of Malaitan Labour Migration

Temporary labour migration constitutes a cornerstone of Malaita's integration into, but also growing dependency on, the global capitalist economic system. When European traders arrived with goods such as steel tools and guns in the nineteenth century, Malaita had few of the natural resources that traders desired, such as sandalwood or bêche-de-mer. To access European goods Malaitans instead relied on their labour power, or "Malaitan muscle" as it is often called. According to Clive Moore (2017: 86), between 1870 and 1911 Malaitans made up around 58 per cent of all Solomon Islanders working on plantations in Fiji and Queensland. Within the plantation system of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) established in 1893, Malaitans constituted around 68 per cent of all labourers before the outbreak of the Pacific War (ibid: 86). The Lau were particularly well

integrated into the labour trade. They offered not only what Corris describes as "probably the largest single source of labour in the group" (1973: 32), but they also served as so-called passage masters or middlemen between inland or "bush" Malaitans and European ships (cf. Corris 1973).

As Malaita (and Solomon Islands) were further integrated into the British Empire, so grew Malaitans need for cash and thus their dependency on indentured labour as the only – somewhat – reliable way to access cash. Especially once the colonial authorities implemented a Head Tax, nearly every young adult man participated in the migratory labour trade, often to obtain the necessary cash income for extended families including older men.[5]

World War II disrupted the labour trade which had already crumbled, e.g., alongside falling copra prices, with the Great Depression (cf. Akin 2013: 94–101). Even more so, the war further nurtured Malaitan discontent with British rule and the dependency on labour migration that it entailed. *Maasina Rule*, an anti-colonial Malaita-wide movement, emerged. One of its primary goals was to refocus Malaitan labour to economic activities on Malaita. While Maasina Rule achieved some of its goals (cf. Akin 2013), it failed at ending Malaitan dependency on labour migration. Even with independence in 1978, temporary labour migration has continued to serve as primary means for Malaitan participation in the cash economy; though Malaitan mobilities have been increasingly confined to the territory of today's Solomon Islands – the international diaspora is nearly negligible.

Large scale development projects remain conspicuously absent from the province. Simultaneously, dependency on cash to buy processed foods, especially rice, instant noodles and if possible canned tuna (cf. S. Hobbis 2016: 124–128) is on the rise. Combined with population pressures, overfishing of coastal areas, and overutilization of garden land, self-provisioning and small-scale trades at bush markets are no longer sufficient to meet everyday needs. Malaitans, above all young men, increasingly *have to* work in the canneries, large-scale logging and plantations located elsewhere in the country. Malaitans have also found employment in the emerging urban core of Honiara on the island of Guadalcanal, where they have come to dominate in both the unskilled and skilled employment sectors (Moore 2007). A growing number of these Malaitan men have been bringing their families to Honiara, sometimes permanently.[6] However, many others leave their families behind, often for several months each year and at times for even longer periods; or they are joined by (some members of) their (nuclear) families for a limited period of time, also to obtain secondary or tertiary education, or to access

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5   See Keesing (1978) and Akin (2013) for a more detailed discussion of some of the controversies and continued political legacies of British violent enforcement of the Head Tax.

6   Malaitan migration to and dominance in Honiara have been identified as one of the so-called root causes of a civil conflict (1999–2003) that led to the near collapse of the Solomon Islands state and capitalist economic enterprises (cf. Moore 2007).

better medical facilities (e.g., the only x-ray facilities of the country can be found there). What Murray Chapman (1976) suggested in the 1970s remains true today: in many cases Malaitans, especially those working in unskilled, temporary positions, are first and foremost circular migrants, moving back and forth between their home villages and sites of capitalist production.

In this context of prolonged engagement with and dependency on migratory labour, the (domestic) remittance system has come to define Malaitans engagement with the foreign goods and services as increasingly necessary but continuously distant. The same can be said about Malaitans' encounters with foreign values. In response to Malaitans' dependency on temporary migration, those left behind (as well as, at times, those migrating) came to question the morality of migratory lifestyles and the new behaviour and ideas, including religious beliefs, that returnees bring back. Around the turn of the nineteenth century indentured labourers in Queensland and Fiji were exposed to Christian missionaries. Some converted. Some even became missionaries, challenging, upon their return to Malaita, the ancestral beliefs that formed the foundation of the local sociopolitical order.[7]

Urbanization has posed a similar challenge. Honiara, in particular, has come to be viewed as "the opposite of 'home' *(hom)*" (Berg 2000: 6–7), a place where it is possible for young migrants to be "free" from the social norms of rural communities. From the opposite perspective, Honiara has come to be viewed a place of moral decay. Migrants are often accused of being sexually promiscuous, of wasting the money they earn on alcohol and women rather than contributing to the needs of their families "at home." On a larger scale, especially skilled and more permanent urbanites are often accused of shifting their allegiances away from their kin-networks towards the needs of their work or school colleagues (cf. Berg 2000; Gooberman-Hill 1999).

In the following I outline how Lau conceptualizations and usages of mobile phones and digital multi-media files fit into, and are shaped by these migratory histories, the complex town-village relationships and the moral debates that surround them.

Mobility and Remittances in the Mobile Phone Age

Reciprocal exchange networks are foundational to many Malaitan (and Melanesian) societies. For example, reciprocity is the foundation for the bridewealth system. The groom, often with significant contributions from his extended family, provides a series of goods such as pigs and shell money (and increasingly cash)

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7   The consequences, and some of the ongoing tensions, surrounding the spread of Christianity in Malaita has been discussed in detail elsewhere (for Lau cf. S. Hobbis 2016; Maranda 2001).

to the family of the bride whose members redistribute the bridewealth among each other. Bridewealth thus reaffirms commitment to reciprocal belonging, in addition to symbolizing the coming together of two families and the shift of a woman's lifeworld to that of her husband's family (cf. Ivens 1930). On an everyday basis and especially in shared spaces, such as village communities, these networks are maintained on a daily basis, for instance by sharing tobacco or freshly caught fish.

Also migratory remittance payments are more than financial contributions to the needs of one's nuclear and extended family. In Malaita as in other areas of Melanesia, remittances are integrated into networks of belonging that transcend the unidirectional flow of cash. While urban-based villagers are expected to send money and goods back to the village, and are frequently called upon to do so, rural residents often supply "home food," *hom kaikai* in Solomon Islands Pijin. The sharing of food, in particular food grown in ancestral soil, is recognized as an important means by which relationships between migrants and villagers are strengthened and a sense of a shared identity rooted in place is reaffirmed (cf. S. Hobbis 2017; Petrou and Connell 2016). Similarly, though disconnected from place, by sending back cash, and at times goods such as rice or mobile phones, migrants restate their commitments to their village-based families and the lands on which they live.

However, a desire for *hom kaikai* is met by a growing dependency on cash to meet everyday needs. The bidirectional remittance system is getting increasingly skewed. More and more pressure is placed on migrants to send cash home, to send more cash home and to send cash more frequently. Mobile phones have complicated this already complex relationship. Mobile phones allow for communicating remittance requests to migratory labourers quickly and, if necessary, repeatedly. Before the arrival of mobile telephony, remittance requests were often only sent through private messengers who travelled between village and town. This long and comparatively expensive trip would never only be taken for the sake of conveying a message. Also not everyone travelling between village and town was deemed a trustworthy enough messenger. Within existing reciprocal exchange networks anyone involved would be entitled to a "cut" from the requested and received remittances. An unreliable messenger may tell others about the possible remittance payment, thus triggering a flood of requests from others. This was also the reason why the two-way transceiver radio that one of Gwou'ulu villagers' owned was rarely used to communicate remittance requests. Many did not trust the operator, and were uncertain as to the operator on the receiving end. In other words, before mobile phones, remittance requests could not be communicated easily, or at least not *that* easily, being predominantly limited to the infrequent travels of trusted individuals.

Many of the temporary (and more permanent) migrants I talked to complained that since the arrival of mobile phones, remittance requests had gotten "out of control." To regain control, Lau migrants have started developing mobile phone-

based avoidance mechanisms. Avoiding giving is nothing new. One of the first Lau phrases I was taught was *sui na*, meaning "finished" or "I am out," a common response to requests for tobacco or other common everyday exchange items. *Sui na* is a polite way of saying no, as long as the tobacco is inside a bag and not visible to the person asking. Migrants may use *sui na,* or similar excuses to avoid mobile phone-transmitted remittance requests, but just like a person is likely to ask for tobacco again on the same day, or the next, so would another phone call often follow not long after.

Similar to the mobile phone-based avoidance strategies that Steffen Dalsgaard (2013) observed in Manus Province, Papua New Guinea, my respondents often reacted by managing their SIM cards and thus the phone numbers that they could be reached at. One man reported to me that he was so frustrated with the calls he received from the village that one day he opened his device up and threw out the SIM card, to get a new one and not share it with his village-based relatives for some time. Another, more seasoned urbanite showed me how he maintained seven different SIM cards, each one for a different social network. This urbanite would only use his "family SIM" when he wanted to call them; otherwise, he attempted to keep, e. g., his "work SIM" secret, and thus disconnected from remittance requests.

The most common mobile phone-based avoidance strategy was to refuse to pay for mobile phone credit for their village relatives, so that they were unable to call in the first place. In addition to a shortage of cash for credit in villages, there was, in 2014, no location in Gwou'ulu or the immediate neighbourhood where villagers could buy mobile phone credit. The only in-village option was to give the money to members of Jehovah's Witnesses who visited Gwou'ulu once a week and who could, in another village they visited, purchase credit and thus top up Gwou'ulu villagers' mobile phones. In this context the ideally most reliable source for mobile phone credit is the very migrants who prefer not to receive continued phone calls with remittance requests from their relatives; and accordingly, the most effective avoidance strategy for migrants is not to recharge their relatives' mobile phones or do so only so rarely that villagers, in their "metered mindset," save the available credit to call only in times of emergencies.

However, these avoidance strategies harbour risks for migrants. Most migrants intend to return to the village, for example because they left their wife and children behind, to visit parents at Christmas, or to retire in the village after an urban-based career. To be able to return, it is crucial for migrants to maintain positive relationships with their rural kin (cf. Dalsgaard 2013). In Gwou'ulu, as in most other parts of Solomon Islands, land is communally (clan) owned, and any visit or settlement requires clan approval. Participation in reciprocal exchanges is key to living in rural areas, and to returning there. Networks of belonging need to be maintained. And, as networks of belonging, their continuation is often far more than a "need;" it is desired and at the heart of migrants' sense of self and self-worth.

While the telephonic capacities of mobile phones vex this problem, the multimedia functions provide an answer. Instead of "gifting" credit, migrants bring back,

or send back with someone else, multi-media files that villagers enjoy consuming on their mobile phones as a "free" way e.g., to spend time, to relax or to "distract" children. As villagers desire multi-media files, but cannot obtain them without help from urban residents, they are a valued gift that does not come with the immediate "dangers" of mobile phone credit. Urban residents go online, commonly at an Internet Café. There they download movies, music files and at times images and convert them to a file type that can be played on most standard mobile phones. One DVD shop further offered a USB-based movie downloading service. The clerk would turn the desktop monitor to face the shopper who would point to images of movie posters. After paying the SBD 20 fee per download of one movie the shopper was then told when to return to collect the USB drive (depending on the size of the file and Internet speed). This kind of download service is occasionally also advertised on Facebook Groups such as "Buy and Sell in Solomon Islands."

These files are eventually moved to microSD cards, and from there typically transferred via Bluetooth to other mobile phones (and their microSD cards). These files are easily brought into the village. Once obtained, they are free to copy and redistribute, and they can be transmitted by anyone travelling to Gwou'ulu. There is also ongoing demand. Villagers' microSD cards are limited in their storage capacities. To save new movies, old ones are deleted; or a movie or music file may be deleted to take family pictures. MicroSD cards also get lost. As a result, multimedia files are, but also need to be frequently replaced. This fuels a multi-media-based remittance economy that is deemed beneficial by anyone involved, at least at first sight. With multi-media files being folded into mobility patterns the village has experienced an explosion in the consumption of music and movies. The offline social life of these files in Gwou'ulu has become a new source of friction and moral controversy.

The Moral Ambiguities of Offline Digital Media

The offline circulation of digital files has led to an unprecedented access to foreign visual culture. While access to movies, for example, has existed in North Malaita since at least the 1970s it had never been reliable, and it has been controlled by a handful of predominantly male, adult villagers. Now many if not most of Gwou'ulu residents have access to movies (and other multi-media) in the palm of their hand; and many different types of movies are being watched by many different groups of people. With mobile phones movies can be watched privately and by audiences that may not be deemed appropriate. In the following section I briefly outline the historicity of consuming multi-media files with a focus on foreign movies. Then I go on to introduce some of the moral controversies that surround the rapid proliferation of (urban) visual media by focusing in on how foreign movies are used to raise boys to become temporary labourers (and beyond).

From the *Muvi Haos* (Movie House) to Private Viewing

There is a small grove of coconut trees along the side of the school's soccer pitch in Gwou'ulu. It was planted in late 1980s and early 1990s by school boys, who were caught going to the neighbouring village of Mana'abu to watch movies. Mana'abu had a *muvi haos*, a purpose built structure for screening movies with the help of a projector system. The structure was enclosed and a fee for admission was charged. Viewing was primarily restricted to men. While, as Christine Jourdan observed in Honiara, a woman would not be harmed if she attempted to attend a screening, "she would be frowned upon by the men and would most likely be driven away" (1997: 147, note 14). Watching movies was a male prerogative, and the movies chosen were deemed those most interesting and morally acceptable to a male-only audience: commonly Westerns or action movies such as Rambo.[8] Boys were allowed to attend, but their attendance was more controversial. The then-principal of Gwou'ulu Primary School thought watching movies was a distraction from school work and punished whomever he caught with the job of planting a coconut tree.

Gwou'ulu got its own *muvi haos* around 1997. It was owned and operated by an enterprising man who would later become one of the village's more powerful chiefs. Technology had advanced since the Mana'abu *muvi haos* was set up. The new one in Gwou'ulu had a VCR player connected to a television screen. This was also an entrepreneurial scheme that required the control of space. The audience sat on a sand floor, some on a few benches, while they watched the screen in a leaf house with tarpaulin walls. The soon-to-be chief collected a small group of senior men in considerations of censorship, much like had been the case of the Mana'abu *muvi haos*. Their selection similarly favoured action movies and Westerns, with restrictions placed on most sexually explicit material including all movies that were predominantly about love or romance; and their selection was similarly meant to target male-only audiences, this time including boys.

By 2014 the *muvi haos* in Gwou'ulu only existed as a memory amongst adults, having been fully replaced by mobile phones. Ultimately, projectors, VHS and DVD player systems proved too challenging and costly to maintain in the maritime and tropical conditions of the lagoon. In 2014 there was one type of *muvi haos* left near to Gwou'ulu. With a guest house for foreign tourists, Uru'uru Village has a satellite connection, and the guest house operators occasionally facilitate, for a small entry fee, social viewing of live television broadcasts such as the 2014 FIFA World Cup. The Uru'uru *muvi haos* does not show any movies, such as Rambo, that villagers can watch on their mobile phones for free. In comparison to the mobile phone, a *muvi haos* is not versatile enough and too costly to maintain. Besides, because there are plenty of mobile phones redundancy is high; it is easy to watch a movie on a friend's phone, or to obtain a new one through remittance networks.

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8   Rambo has been recognized as popular movie across Melanesian societies (cf. Wood 2006).

The widespread presence of mobile phones as multi-media players has radically changed the audience experience in Gwou'ulu. What once used to be male-elite-controlled and (semi-)public is now an individualized, privatized experience that includes both men and women – during my fieldwork about half of all mobile phones in Gwou'ulu were owned by women. At the same time, the small screen and individual ownership of mobile phones, microSDs, and digital media does not only favour private viewing, but it also allows for viewing materials that may (or may not) be controversial. In Benjamin's words, a divorced man with two children, "because we now have mobile phones and they have memory cards, you can put all [kinds of] movies inside without someone finding them [...]" (Interview, 7 November 2014). Impossible to control by the male-dominated village elite the private viewing of a wide range of content has become a village-wide controversy.

This individualized control over content is what makes mobile phone movie watching so contentious. Movies are felt to extend the reach of the immorality that is associated with the urban, modern lifeworlds of temporary (and more permanent) migrants who, after all, also choose the movies that they download in town and bring to the village. In turn, villagers worry that movies extend the reach of the "freedom" of town. They worry that the movies bring sexual promiscuity and possibly also a move away from commitment to the village community vis-à-vis individual interests and needs.

This uncertainty in the offline circulation of digital multi-media and its rootedness in migratory movements are particularly reflected in debates about what kinds of movies children should or should not be watching. Especially controversial is this debate for boys who are raised not only to become villagers but also for joining the migratory labour trade. In the following, I briefly introduce this controversy to further highlight the importance of studying the integration of foreign audio-visual media in everyday life and mediated by the domestic remittance economy. This discussion is by no means meant to be exhaustive, in particular not in its treatment of the complex uncertainties that surround broader societal transformations, e.g., continued tensions and negotiations between Christianity and remnants of the ancestral religion.

Raising Boys through Foreign Movies[9]

Shortly before our interview Lucas, a 28 year old father of two boys, had watched *Prince of Persia: The Sand of Time* (2010). The movie features the struggles of a warrior and a princess to defend their kingdom with a magical dagger that can

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9   I focus on foreign movies as they were most frequently used to nurture desired personality traits in boys, unlike, for example, music videos. Music and music videos open up additional intriguing questions about the role of digital media that go beyond the scope of this article.

control time. Lucas thought *Prince of Persia* was a great movie, and a perfect learning exercise for his sons.

I like all kinds of war movies, war movies with different clans [...] The custom stories that those movies tell, that they show in their acting are somewhat similar to my custom stories. Exemplary are the wars in *Prince of Persia*. They make me think back to all my custom stories [...] I like it because of how the man acted; he is a man who struggles. He struggles and fights for the victory of his people [...] It is a nice story and a helpful one. My mind tells me that it helps prepare for the future of my children. This is my own thinking. This is the reason why I choose this kind of story, why I show it to my children, for the future of my children (Interview, 7 November 2014).

Jason thought *Blood Diamond* (2006), a movie about the violence of the diamond trade during Sierra Leone's civil war, is excellent viewing material for his son and nephews. Jason showed his copy of *Blood Diamond* to a continuously growing number of young boys, and willingly shared his digital copy of the movie with anyone who wanted it. According to Jason, *Blood Diamond* instills the importance of fighting for one's family, and to be prepared to do so at any time, in young, male audience members.

Whatever my brother does outside the village, if he comes here we have to face who he is facing. I must help my brother, if I am strong, [I must do so] together with our other brothers to decrease the demand made by the others [my brother is facing]. Therefore, I must learn how to fight; my children [sons] have to learn how to fight (Interview, 1 November 2014).

Like Lucas and Jason, a majority of Gwou'ulu villagers are confident that children directly learn from what they see in movies, that they will mimic the moralities that are displayed. Hence, caregivers are concerned with identifying movies that they deem to reflect "good" moralities. This is true for all children. However, it is especially true for boys as the historically more significant target audience of foreign visual media, and as preparation for boys eventual encounters with "modernity" during labour migration. The personality that Gwou'ulu men, as experienced temporary labourers, deem to be most appropriate for labour migrants is that of men with aggressive temperament, similar to the war leaders of the past (cf. Ivens 1930). Priest-like personalities, "quiet, dignified, even-tempered, and knowledgeable" (Ross 1973: 55), are those of educated men and deemed the most desirable, but only ideally so. Many of my respondents insisted that few of their sons would be able to obtain adequate education and/or a position as skilled labourers. As adults their sons were more likely to spend time in temporary positions, and they needed to be prepared for this eventuality.

Unskilled labourers spend much time "hanging around" in urban environments. Often they join a *gen* (gang), a support network of similar-aged man who would spend time together without, at least not necessarily, becoming criminals.

According to my respondents, members of a *gen* are increasingly from across Solomon Islands provinces,[10] and they are "recruited" for the personality traits that are most frequently associated with their provinces of origin. Gwou'ulu men are confident that as Malaitan members of any *gen* their sons will be expected to assume a warrior-like position, to be fierce and to serve as protectors for other members. Indeed, Malaitans are often hired as security guards because of their reputation as "warriors." As Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2001) notes, this stereotype is widespread and accepted (though not necessarily true) by Malaitans, other Solomon Islanders and even the international news media.[11] Gregory, a Gwou'ulu man in his late 30s, who had spent many years as temporary labourer in urban areas, explained that "[you have to be] like a *ramo* [a warrior]. If there is a fight, if someone wants to beat your friend, you can help, you can fight. This is a Malaitan man" (Interview, 4 November 2014). Men like Gregory, Lucas or Jason thus show their sons violent movies to prepare them to live up to this Malaitan ideal of warrior-like masculinity on the move.

In addition to violent movies, Gwou'ulu men also deem it appropriate to show their sons movies with explicit sexualized content, most popularly *Titanic* (1996). While sexual activity outside of marriage is frowned upon in many Malaitan societies – even a "criminal" offense that can lead to violent repercussions and demands for compensation – being sexually promiscuous during stays in urban areas is recognized as another core component of Malaitan masculinity, at least by men. Many of my male respondents consider sexual activity and aggressive temperaments complimentary personality traits for migratory labourers. These traits will have to be tamed with marriage and growing maturity (and a more permanent return "home"). However, they are also thought to be crucial to get a start in locations like Honiara, to cement one's position in a *gen* as primary social network away from reliable kin, and thus to "make it" away from home to successfully participate in the remittance economy.

This being said, many women and some of the male village elders frown upon exposing boys to movies with violent and sexually explicit content. While many acknowledge the appropriateness of these personality traits for temporary labourers, they worry that these movies and their moralities increasingly influ-

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10 Often members of a *gen* are from one language group or province. However, my respondents emphasized that this is changing rapidly, e. g., a *gen* might form because of joint religious affiliation or shared experiences as day labourers, rather than kin networks.

11 Kabutaulaka's discussion directly relates to the civil conflict between 1999 and 2003, which centered around two militias, the Malaita Eagle Force and the Isatabu Freedom Movement, representing the provinces of Malaita and Guadalcanal respectively. Notably, in this context, both groups (not only Malaitans) embraced the warrior "ideals" represented in movies such as *Rambo* which had been popular in Solomon Islands before the conflict (cf. Jourdan 1997; Woodhead and Maranda 1987).

ence life in Gwou'ulu, blurring the lines between village and town further. Indeed, it was not uncommon for young men to knock on my door at night. They would ask for a movie with romantic contents, explaining that they use these movies to seduce women, sometimes their wives but many times not. These nightly requests for romantic movies are exemplary for how sexual promiscuity appears to be seeping into the village alongside digital multi-media. Boys have also been caught punching holes through house walls after watching martial arts movies, thus bringing what some described as "migratory" aggressiveness to rural environments.

In response, mothers and village elders who are predominantly based in Gwou'ulu – in comparison to many of the male caretakers – fight with men about the movies that they show to boys; and they attempt to undermine men's influence by exposing boys to competing movie-based narratives. Women in particular collect cartoons such as *Finding Nemo* (2003) or *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) on their microSD cards for the purpose of instilling a non-violent and family-oriented morality in boys (and girls). *Finding Nemo* portrays a natural environment comparable with the Lau Lagoon, emphasizing a positive, collaborative relationship with one's home. *The Prince of Egypt*, on the other hand, furthers Christian values and ideals among their audiences – at the time of my research a vast majority of Gwou'ulu residents were active members of the Anglican Church. Women also go through their male relatives' microSD cards and delete particularly controversial movies or music videos that are "too" sexually explicit to counteract their redistribution to boys.

Despite their efforts, none of these groups, women, men, elders (and others) are able to fully control what movies boys (as well as girls)[12] are able to watch. This is the case due to the technological tendencies of mobile phones – the privacy and mobility that they encourage – and the particular socio-cultural and economic context that fuels the rapid proliferation of digital media – the dependency on temporary labour migration and the significance of reciprocal remittance networks described earlier. For example, files that women delete are often quickly obtained again, possibly directly from another villager or if necessary via request from urban residents. The offline circulation of digital media, as a way to maintain social relationships between villagers and labour migrants, has then created new, controversial links between urban and village environments. It has become a growing source of uncertainty and conflict among village residents. This is especially true as they look into the future and imagine what this future may hold for their children, the personalities they should develop and the roles that foreign movies play therein.

These concerns about the possible moral consequences of consuming foreign visual media echo Brian Larkin's (2008) observations in Kano, a Hausa city in Nigeria, and those of Marie Gillespie's (1995) among Punjabi families in Southall, London. My findings in Gwou'ulu re-reveal how foreign visual media have the potential to "[catalyse] [...] processes of cultural change" (ibid: 76) when audiences

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12   For a discussion of the moral uncertainties surrounding the raising of girls cf. G. Hobbis (2017a: 223–251).

mimic some of the (controversial) practices that they observe on their screens such as "Western" dating practices; and they re-emphasize the significance of accounting for the particular sociotechnical systems and "modern" anxieties in which media practices and the controversies that surround them are fashioned (cf. Larkin 2008). The brief ethnographic snapshot presented here is merely, if at all, the tip of the iceberg, best understood as a call for further research on how foreign visual media are connected to historical and contemporary conceptualizations and transformations of masculinity, femininity, youth cultures, and Lau personhood more broadly.

Conclusion

There is a growing literature on the proliferation of digital technologies, particularly mobile phones, in Melanesia. This literature has offered important insights into the ways individuals use digital technologies, how these usages are situated in their respective socio-cultural contexts, and the moral uncertainties that these technologies foster. However, existing research has predominantly focused on urban contexts, and thus on contexts where access to cash and paid mobile phone usages is more widespread. As a result, research has highlighted the telephonic capacities of mobile phones and the controversies that surround them. For example, in urban Papua New Guinea (Andersen 2013), Vanuatu (Servy 2012) and Solomon Islands (G. Hobbis 2017b) mobile phones have been found to be used to find new sexual partners through cold calling, further nurturing narratives that connect urbanity, mobile phones, and sexual promiscuity.

Far less attention has been paid to the integration of mobile phones in villages, and even less attention has been paid to their non-telephonic usages and to how moral concerns about mobile phones in town may (or may not) seep into rural environments.[13] This article attempts to begin filling this gap in ethnographic knowledge on digitization processes in Melanesia. It highlights how even if villagers cannot easily use mobile phones for telephony, texting or Internet access, "free" multi-media usages are similarly imbued with potential for moral controversies, especially so as digital multi-media is increasingly popular. The moral controversy that I briefly outlined here – the question if boys should be shown violent and sexually-explicit movies – is but one example for the uncertainties that surround the presence of digital media in Gwou'ulu as well as the broader links between digital media and "modern" anxieties in Gwou'ulu, the Lau Lagoon, Malaita and Solomon Islands. Others controversies that require further research and analysis include the relationship between religion and digital media – does digital media

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13 Village-based research has more strongly focused on if and how mobile phones are used to improve access to social services and, more broadly, how they are integrated into existing communication technologies (cf. Watson 2010; Watson and Duffield 2016).

decrease Church attendance? How does it affect the authority of the priest and other church leaders? How and to what extent does it fuel tensions between Christianity and ancestral belief systems? – the morality of sexually-explicit visual materials more broadly – should men (and women) be allowed to watch it? What are the consequences? – as well as a more concise understanding of differences between the types of foreign visual media that are being consumed – What, if any, are notable differences in localized adaptations of movies produced in Hollywood, China, Nigeria or elsewhere (cf. Larkin 1997)? To what extent are music videos conceived of differently than feature films, accounting also for the increasing local production of music videos? Each of these questions, and many more, require elaborations and research in comparable settings to tease out the extent to which these moral controversies may be transforming everyday (rural) life over the long term and how they link to broader sociocultural, political, economic and religious changes and struggles in the Lau Lagoon and elsewhere in Solomon Islands.

Building on Morley's (2009) call for a move beyond a media-centric analysis towards one that looks at media alongside the movement of people, I argue that these controversies cannot be understood without accounting for how digital media files find their ways into the village and what this movement of files represents. I have shown how moral uncertainties are directly intertwined with the reciprocal exchange networks that form the foundation for Malaitan labour migration; and how a growing need for cash and thus growing demands on labourers have encouraged migrants to develop different kinds of remittance strategies. These strategies include gifting of digital media files instead of complying with more costly demands or instead of avoiding remittance requests altogether. While the gift of digital media allows migratory labourers to maintain networks of belonging they are, however, also an important source of friction, at least in Gwou'ulu. The rapid proliferation of foreign digital media represents a growing linkage between urban and rural areas that, so it seems from a village perspective, brings some of the moral uncertainties of urban lifestyles to their rural homes.

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