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The Shifting Moralities of Mobile Phones in Lau Communicative Ecologies (Solomon Islands)

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ABSTRACT

In the past decade, digital technologies and especially mobile phones have spread rapidly across the Solomon Islands. This process has been surprising not only in how quickly many Solomon Islanders have become digitally savvy, but also in rapidly emerging moral debates that pit the ability to stay in touch with family and friends against the dangers of immoral behavior, especially sexual promiscuity, and of malevolent sorcery. Based on a communicative ecology approach, this paper identifies the proliferation of mobile phones as a critical juncture with temporal and spatial ramifications in its double-bind. That is, mobile phones are increasingly recognized as needed to maintain social networks, but they are also seen to harbor the potential for accelerating immoral sociality by increasing the potential for privacy in information-communication through the associated collapse of space and time.

Keywords: Solomon Islands, Mobile Phones, Communicative Ecology, Space and Time, Morality, Sociality, Sexuality, Sorcery

INTRODUCTION

The Solomon Islands are crossing the digital divide, the inequity of access to digital technologies experienced in the Global South (see Guillen and Suárez 2005) and the economically underdeveloped areas of the so-called First World (see Norris 2001). In the Solomon Islands, a telecommunications monopoly ended in 2010, and the affordability of mobile phones increased rapidly. Mobile phones spread quickly throughout the urban center of Honiara and the rural hinterlands. Up from a meager 2.21 per cent in 2007, mobile phone subscriptions reached 77.66 per cent in 2015 (International Telecommunication Union 2016). In this paper, I enquire into this rapid spread and adoption of mobile phones in the Solomon Islands, and specifically among the Lau people of Malaita Province and Lau villages, like Gwou'ulu, where I did ethnographic fieldwork from February 2014 to February 2015.

[Figure 1 Solomon Islands and North Malaita¹]

The approximately 12,000 Lau-speakers primarily live on the northern most tip of the island of Malaita in the eponymous Lau Lagoon and in the urban capital, Honiara, on the island of Guadalcanal. Subsistence horticulturalists and fisher folk in their ancestral home, the Lau Lagoon, the Lau are sufficiently removed from the centers of urban and peri-urban development. Road connections are unreliable and sea transport is expensive. Access to wage labor is, for the majority, unattainable outside the urban core and there are no amenities such as electrical or plumbing grids, landline telephones or a postal service.

Despite this distance from infrastructures that make the use of digital technologies 'easy', or at least 'easier', digital technologies, mainly in the form of mobile phones, are widely present in the Lau Lagoon. For example, among the approximately two hundred and fifty adults living in Gwou'ulu, I counted over one hundred mobile phones spread

comparatively evenly between the women and men of the village. To charge their mobile phones, villagers rely on small solar power units (on average around 20W) and diesel generators. To top up the accounts of their phones, they depend on micro-economic activities such as selling betel nut, tobacco or fish, especially at local markets, or on the generosity of urban relatives.

[Figure 2 Gwou'ulu villagers owned a diverse set of mobile phones, from simple 'straight' phones such as the Bmobile branded 1TOK phone to the Jenny TV from Blu which allows owners to access analogue television broadcasts to smartphones]

I focus my analysis and discussion specifically on the use of mobile phones for their telephonic capacities rather than, e.g., as a movie watching device or as a way to go online.² I argue that, from an analytical perspective, the rapid proliferation of digital technologies and especially mobile phones across Oceania can be examined as a critical juncture. As Philipp Schorch and Arno Pascht suggest in the introduction to this volume, the concept of 'critical juncture' allows for studying the historicity of (possibly) significant socio-cultural transformation and the imaginative or creative agency of individuals who are faced with the potential of such transformation. The rapid spread and proliferation of mobile phones is pregnant with the potential for such transformation. Residents of urban spaces, as well as villages like Gwou'ulu, are faced with moral ambivalence and uncertainty as to the long-term consequences of integrating mobile phones into existing information-communication infrastructures and, as I detail in this paper, mobile phones differ fundamentally from the information-communication technologies (ICTs) that are otherwise available to Solomon Islanders. Mobile phones have the potential to shift communicative acts from the public sphere and control of community leaders to the private sphere and to individuals. At the same time, mobile phones, unlike the majority of other ICTs available to Solomon Islanders, 'collapse', 'shrink' or 'compress' space and time. Geographical distance remains the same – a

kilometer is still a kilometer – but mobile phones move the sensorium of the human body through cables and radio waves in such a way that, within a short period of time, geographical distance is temporarily (e.g., during a phone call) overcome (see Allen and Hamnett 1995:1-9). In so doing, mobile phones harbor, from an analytical perspective, significant transformative capacities.

However, as I further describe throughout this paper, the transformations that mobile phones may bring remain uncertain. Digital technologies and mobile phones in particular are changing the Solomon Islands but Solomon Islanders are also changing digital technologies, making them their own. Heather Horst and Daniel Miller argued that ‘far from the homogenization that might be expected from the global appropriation of new technologies, ethnography reveals considerable variation in what technologies have become in different regions’ (2005:755). This statement resonates with my ethnography of mobile phones in the Solomon Islands, which reveals what Arjun Appadurai calls a ‘plurality of imagined worlds’ (1996:4-5), and shows how the uncertainty of what a future with mobile phones may bring is, among my Lau respondents, seen as a double-bind. In the following, I demonstrate how mobile phones are recognized at once as comforting but also as a potential source of immoral behavior.

To investigate how the Lau living in Gwou’ulu Village and Honiara conceptualize the dangers and benefits of the ‘Oceanic digital revolution’ (Cave 2012), I begin with a discussion of the local communicative ecology from which the use of mobile phones emerged and in which they are embedded. By doing so, I account for the impacts of mobile phones on social hierarchies and the strengthening of the private vis-à-vis the public sphere. Secondly, I illustrate how mobile phones are caught in a moral double-bind, that is, how they are desired for their capacity to maintain social relations over long distances, but how they are also feared because they are felt to exaggerate behavior that many Lau deem to be immoral, such

as adultery. I focus my analysis, above all, on the benefits and pitfalls identified by my local respondents as most significant for their attitude and understanding of the telephonic capacities of mobile phones as a dominant digital technology.

LAU COMMUNICATIVE ECOLOGY

To understand the moral implications of mobile phones in the Lau Lagoon and in Gwou'ulu in particular, it is first necessary to consider the 'communicative ecology' (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003) in which mobile phones are embedded. Tacchi, Slater and Hearn (2003) define 'communicative ecology' as the totality of communication channels irrespective of their designation as 'new' or 'old' (see also Horst and Miller 2006; Madianou and Miller 2012; Watson 2011). The point of communicative ecology as an analytic frame is that considering only one channel of communication, when others are used, obfuscates instead of clarifies the range of communication practices employed by people in a given society, such as that of Gwou'ulu, Lau or the Solomon Islands.

This said, I focus here on four common types of non-digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) typical in Oceania rather than on '*everything* that could count as a medium of communication' (Tacchi, Slater and Hearn 2003:16). These four types – slit-gong drums, conch shells, messengers and the more contemporary transceiver radios – are, in addition to mobile phones, the most frequently used in Gwou'ulu for 'one-to-one', 'one-to-many' or 'many-to-many' communication across a distance (in contrast, for example, to the indirect information communication of multi-media technologies such as VHS players and tapes).

In my description, I outline how technology-based communication has, before the introduction of the mobile phone, remained rooted in authoritative systems wherein few individuals controlled the flow of information with the primary goal of ICTs being to

communicate important information to the community rather than to individuals.

Understanding the continuing significance of authoritative and community-focused systems of communication permits better understanding of how mobile phones engender moral uncertainties; and it allows for situating the transformative potential of mobile phones in the historical context of Lau communication practices. In their telephonic capacities, mobile phones are private, long-distance communication devices that decentralize communication. Anyone can communicate with anyone about any topic without anyone else knowing. This constitutes an important break with other ICTs prevalent in Gwou'ulu during my fieldwork.

Slit Gong Drums and Conch Shells

Slit gong drums are made using a single piece of tree trunk left closed at both ends but hollowed out through a slit carved on top. The slit gong creates sounds as an idiophone, rather than as a 'true' drum that relies on the use of strings or membranes to create sound. Depending on the size of the slit gong, the thickness of its walls, the width and lengths of its slit, different tones can be created. Slit gongs are widely spread throughout Oceania (as well as Africa), and in rural Melanesia they continue to be used today (see e.g., Watson 2011). The persistent and prevalent use of slit gongs as a means for communication points to their utility as well as the relative isolation from the technological developments that have been experienced elsewhere.

In Gwou'ulu, the slit gong is central to everyday community-focused communicative events. The only slit gong in the village is owned by the Anglican Church and used to call villagers to the daily church services and to announce the start of more exceptional events, such as feasts. Only a few of the Gwou'ulu residents are authorized by the village priest to use the slit gong, and they are only allowed to do so when the priest instructs them to. I did not record a single case when this rule was not followed—not even the many children who

were always open to committing a prank dared to disobey the rule. In other words, the slit gong is essentially authoritative and controlled by the most influential village leader, the priest.

The conch is directly comparable to the use of slit gongs. Conch shell bugles, also used throughout Oceania (McLean 1999), are made from the shell of the Triton's trumpet (*charonia tritonis*) that are commonly found by fishermen in or not far outside of lagoons such as the Lau Lagoon. Conch bugles are 'end-blown', which means their tip is removed to create the instrument. The conch shell is fusiform, or spindle shape, with a pointed spire and large body whorl. This constitutes the material affordance for the production of a sound that is loud and robust enough to traverse geographical distance, making the conch useable as communication technology within village boundaries but also between two villages. While popularly called a 'trumpet', it is more appropriately categorized as a bugle because the conch has no piston valves, no moving parts.

Similar to the slit gong, the conch is a community ICT that is controlled by a village leader and, as such, it is essentially authoritative in its use (see also McLean 1999). Gwou'ulu has a conch hung on the outside of the village house of the titular Head Chief of the Village. Thus, it is easily accessible in the case of emergencies, such as (very rarely nowadays) to warn of an attack on the village, or (more frequently) to signal the death of a villager. In addition, every Tuesday morning, the conch is blown to signal the start of community work, such as weeding the tarmac road on the edge of the village or maintaining the grounds of the church. This work is typically done by women and those men who are not afraid of the stigma of doing what is considered women's (domestic) work. Like the slit gong, in recognition of its communal importance, no one in the village could recall a time when the conch was blown frivolously. The concept of doing so seemed alien to those I interviewed.

The slit gong and the conch are examples of Indigenous ICTs that have a long history of use in Gwou'ulu and the Lau Lagoon more broadly. For example, Walter Ivens, the first ethnographer in Lau, noted that 'the sound of the shell conch [denoted] that the people were at war' (1930:180). Historically, the conch was also blown whenever a white canoe (*barukwaoa*) was first launched for formal visits to other islands, customarily on the occasion of the death feast for a chief. According to Ivens, 'the conch is formally blown at the landing-place, and the local people come down carrying presents of shell-money or porpoise-teeth which are handed to the chief' (1930:233).

During my fieldwork, the conch was no longer used for either purpose. The last *barukwaoa* was launched in 1968, witnessed and recorded by Pierre Maranda, who executed ethnographic research in the Lau Lagoon from the 1960s to 1980s (Personal Correspondence, June 17, 2012). Inter-village conflict still exists; however, a conflict that would warrant the blowing of the conch has become increasingly rare. For example, after the results of the 2006 elections were announced, Gwou'ulu was attacked by a neighboring village and several huts were burnt down due to a dispute over the election results. In my conversations, villagers could not recall if the conch was blown in 2006, though they considered it a likely possibility.

Despite declining usage, the conch and the slit-gong drum are recognized for their ability to authoritatively mobilize the village community at large and they remain an important part of Gwou'ulu's communicative ecology. They are controlled by central village leaders, the priest and the titular head village chief, and they are only used to communicate public information that concerns the village as a whole. In comparison, messengers and more recently a two-way transceiver radio were used for private communication, though as I show in the following, the radio was also authoritatively controlled while messengers were recognized for being limited in their ability to quickly spread important information across distances.

‘Private’ Messengers and the Two-Way Transceiver Radio

Messengers are the most basic long-distance communication system for the transmission of complex messages and, like the conch and slit gong, messengers are a historically significant type of ICTs in Malaita. For instance, the presence of messengers, as well as their functions and significance, was evident during the anti-colonial Malaita-centric Marching Rule or *Maasina Rule* movement between 1945 and 1950 (see Akin 2013). The leaders and supporters of *Maasina Rule* aspired to develop an alternative, centralized *Malaitan* (rather than British) governance system. Faced by strong opposition by the British colonial administration, effective, efficient and, in as far as possible, confidential communication between the leaders of the movement spread across Malaita was indispensable. Messengers were especially significant and frequently used to facilitate the coherence of the movement across Malaita and to coordinate responses to British suppression of *Maasina Rule*. Kaakalade, one of two messengers for ‘Oloburi Full Chief Geni’iria, a *Maasina Rule* leader, described how the messenger system worked:

Suppose there was an announcement for a meeting at Kiu [Nono’oohimae’s home in west ‘Are’are] and the message was sent today. By tomorrow it would have reached north Malaita already. A man would carry the message from Kiu south to Maro’u [Takataka] and then up to Maro’upaina, and another duty there would bring it to Maanawi, and then to ‘Oloburi and put it in my hand. Then I would take it to the Sinalagu duty Mai’a, and he would carry it on to Uru and their clerk Jason Frankie (Akin 2013:170).

Though not as systematized and rigorous as during *Maasina Rule*, messengers continued to be relied upon as a source of information into 2015 when I conducted my fieldwork.

Frequently villagers themselves became ad hoc messengers, relaying information gathered

while travelling to and from markets in Lau Lagoon and neighboring To'abaita or, on their way to and from Honiara, through kin and clan networks inside the village.

While more private than the conch or slit gong, the fidelity of the privacy of the information transmitted through messengers hinged on the trustworthiness of the human intermediary, which is also the case for a 'newer' type of messenger, the operator of two-way transceiver radios. With the introduction of the two-way transceiver radio, the communicative potentials of slit gongs, the conch and the messenger were extended. The radio allows for communicating information across larger distances in a shorter period of time. In other words, time and space were compressed beyond the capacity of previously existing ICTs. For example, the radio made it possible for rural villagers to communicate with relatives in faraway Honiara. This said, the radio did not challenge the role of the slit gong or the conch because it was of no use for short-distance communication – from Gwou'ulu, the next two-way transceiver radio was based in Malu'u, the closest township that is located about two and a half hours from Gwou'ulu by dugout canoe.

The transceiver radio in Gwou'ulu was obtained in 2010. The Member of Parliament representing Gwou'ulu gave a transceiver radio, one of his campaign promises, to one of the Gwou'ulu chiefs. Tobias,³ the chief's cousin, was appointed to the position of radio operator, a job of great power and influence. During our interview, just four years later, Tobias pulled the Icom IC-78 HF Transceiver from its storage place, dropping it out of a rotted, plastic rice bag along with a band of cockroaches that scattered off on the sand. It was a sad looking thing. Its casing was broken and filled with sand. The aluminum die cast heat pocket, originally meant to keep it cool, was corroded with salt that had eroded the steel parts and the handset cord was cut just before the jack which, Tobias explained, he had broken in a moment of exasperated rage. Finally, the radio's interface was covered with cartoon stickers,

declaring the radio a children's toys, further evidence of it being dead to its once esteemed purpose.

The glory days of the radio had not lasted long but during those three years, Tobias was an important person. It was an exciting time for his household. With the radio, Tobias had something everyone needed – a way to quickly obtain information from beyond the village and its immediate environs – and he was the only one able not only to transmit that information long distance via radio, but also to provide that information within Gwou'ulu on a day-to-day basis. The radio was powered by a dry battery and ready to receive messages from Honiara or elsewhere twenty-four hours a day – messages that he would write down and pass on to the intended third party. Receiving a message was free but sending one through Tobias cost the sender SBD 5 (USD 0.64), the equivalent of five cigarettes.

The money was a boon to his household, but what Tobias said he liked most of all was that the radio allowed him to know all the village news. The two-way transceiver radio was a hierarchal information communication structure and Tobias, as the sole radio-based messenger, sat at the top of the pyramid and controlled the choke point of the information flow. The defining feature of the radio is that it was not only authoritatively controlled, like the conch or the slit gong, but that it was used to communicate both public and private information. Like the conch or the slit gong, most messages communicated through the radio were of importance for the village as a whole, such as, for example, announcements that a dentist would be available at the closest health center, Malu'u Hospital, on a particular day in the upcoming month. This was critical information since, on a regular basis, only general practitioners were available at the health center and villagers had to travel to the provincial capital at Auki for specialist treatment.

However, beyond these communal messages, urgent private messages such as about unexpected income from temporary labor in town, which previously would have been

communicated by messenger or not at all, could now be communicated through the radio as well. Information about unexpected income was commonly kept 'private' because the moment it was known, those who knew could ask for a share as a gift within reciprocal exchange relations or as repayment for a debt owed. This created a conundrum among Gwou'ulu villagers as the radio was a convenient means of communication, but they also had to decide if they trusted Tobias as the intermediary of this communication. The radio as a more efficient messenger system, then, necessarily made information public that was not supposed to be public, at least insofar as villagers could not choose between messengers.

The radio fit existing authoritative communicative systems because Tobias (and in extension the chief who entrusted the radio to him) controlled it. At the same time, the radio partially broke with the pre-radio communicative ecology by 'centralizing' the role of the messenger. Tobias was faster and more efficient than non-radio-based messengers but villagers also had no choice but to use him if they wanted to communicate important information across a distance. The radio in this case constituted a rupture in the history of Gwou'ulu. It foreshadowed the double-bind that, as I show in the following, the collapse of space and time through mobile phones has brought afore. Concretely, the radio required villagers to take a risk, to trust Tobias with information that they may not have shared with him in another context, while not relying on Tobias, and instead sending a messenger by foot, canoe or truck, was likely to delay the transmission of important information.

During my fieldwork, no transceiver radio was in use in Gwou'ulu. When the radio broke in 2013, Tobias no longer considered it worthwhile to invest in its maintenance. The radio had become obsolete in the wake of the sudden and widespread adoption of mobile phones, including many smart phones, to which I turn now.⁴

MOBILE PHONES AS DOUBLE-BIND

The Helpful Mobile Phone

When Jane was close to giving birth, her family took her to the hospital closest to Gwou'ulu in nearby Malu'u. At this time, the road between Gwou'ulu and Malu'u was not passable. Bad weather had washed out one of the bridges and the crossing had to be done by fiberglass boat with an outboard motor engine, an expensive undertaking now limited to daylight hours because of the cost of petrol, the high tide and rare windows of calm seas. There were complications with Jane's pregnancy and she had to stay in hospital for a week. Mobile phones allowed her family, distributed between the Lau Lagoon and neighboring To'abaita on both sides of Malu'u, to organize the logistics of her care.

Hospitals often only cover some of their patients' daily needs, e.g., even meal services are unreliable. Jane's family had to arrange for the delivery of food from her family's gardens in the villages, including Gwou'ulu, as well as for the movement of currency in order to purchase food from the shops near the hospital. Mobile phones also proved useful in arranging for any one of her relatives to travel to Malu'u whenever Jane's laundry needed to be done. Meanwhile, her family members had to attend to their responsibilities in the village, fishing and gardening, in order to provide the food she and the rest of the family needed. Mobile phones allowed this kin network, distributed around Malu'u, to work together to help Jane and her newborn who eventually left the hospital in good health and returned to Gwou'ulu.

Jane's experience shows how the telephonic capacity of mobile phones allow, to some degree, for the mediation of 'isolation', including the distance from reliable infrastructures and social services, as well as for mediation of the shortcomings of these services in as far as they exist. Without mobile phones, villagers explained, Jane would have not been able to stay for this long in the hospital unless at least one of her female relatives could be spared from

daily garden work to stay with her. If no full-time caretaker had been found, Jane's life and that of the child would have been in danger. In a context wherein daily food needs are dependent on daily labor in gardens, Jane's relatives explained that this used to be, before mobile phones, a choice that had to be made. Mobile phones allow splitting the help Jane needed between multiple families and across different villages, and responding quickly to any unexpected developments. As a result, mobile phones have increasingly become indispensable, at least in emergencies.⁵

Some of the women I talked to further emphasized that mobile phones allow searching for and coordinating opportunities to escape from violent husbands (or other men). Historically, women would marry outside their natal village and move to their husband's family's home upon marriage (see Kōngās Maranda 1974). When suffering from too much spousal abuse they could and would return to their natal homes where they received protection from their clans; and it was common for their male clan members to demand compensation from their abusive partners and his family. However, marriages between men and women from the same village had become commonplace by the time of my fieldwork. In order to escape an abusive spouse, women frequently find themselves in a situation wherein their male family members prefer to 'keep the peace' within the village community than to confront the abuser. To achieve a degree of physical distance, these women have to locate potentially supportive relatives in other villages or urban centers.

With non-mobile phone ICTs this search is difficult. For example, if women chose the wrong messenger and their search became known to their husbands, these women would likely be exposed to further violence. Mobile phones, on the other hand, allow women to directly contact trusted relatives and to do so privately. During my fieldwork, one woman was able to coordinate a place for her to live in Auki with her sister. She was furthermore able to arrange for a pick up by one of the flatbed trucks moving copra and people along the

North Road and, again by calling her sister, to ensure the truck drivers that her sister would be able to pay for the cost of transportation upon her arrival.

The significance of this capacity to coordinate evading spousal abuse cannot be overstated. According to the Solomon Islands Family Health Safety Study commissioned by the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (2009:3), 64 per cent of women aged fifteen to forty-nine who have been in a relationship have experienced physical or sexual partner violence. In Honiara, some facilities are available for victims of domestic abuse such as *Seif Ples* (Safe Place), a comprehensive first response service for female victims of sexual violence; however, no comparable service exists outside the capital. Women living in rural or other (peri-)urban areas *have to* rely on their kin networks to mediate the violence, and mobile phones have proven indispensable for this purpose.

Villagers used the telephonic capacities of mobile phones for a myriad of other reasons as well, and many of them were deemed both necessary and morally desirable. Over the course of one hundred semi-structured, open-ended interviews with mobile phone users in the village, people told me time and time again, each and every single one of them regardless of age or gender, that one of the great benefits of mobile phones is that it allows one to keep in touch with each other, e.g., with relatives living and working in town. This sentiment was corroborated on countless occasions during my eight-month stay in the village as well as the four months I spent in the capital.

The most common type of phone call people received, as declared by the people themselves and witnessed by me, was from family members checking up on life in the village. Family members connected with each other via mobile phones in order to communicate information pertaining to the welfare of children, such as their life at school, or to keep up with the wellbeing of family members, specifically the elderly and those known to be in poor health. Calls between family members were also made to request money or

specific goods, like a mobile phone, from urban salaried relatives who were expected to make a visit to the village, or who could send things with other people expected to make a trip to Gwou'ulu in the near future.

It is clear that the ability of mobile phones to collapse space and time and to allow for private communication does make a difference in the lives of the Lau, and especially in the lives of the more vulnerable members of the population, such as victims of family violence. In this my research confirms, among others, that of Amanda Watson and Lee Duffield (2016), who highlight how mobile phones in Papua New Guinea are above all valued for their ability to extend and maintain social networks across time and space, and more pragmatically as a means for more effectively dealing with emergencies.

At the same time, as I demonstrate in the following section, mobile phones are felt to fuel and exaggerate immoral behavior that is, historically and today, the primary reason for intra- and inter-village conflict – ‘the seduction of an unmarried girl, adultery, sorcery and murder’ (Hogbin 1939:99). In other words, the sociality mobile phones encourages is not always or necessarily recognized as moral by Gwou'ulu villagers, and the consequences of immoral mobile phone use are potentially dangerous and essentially disruptive to individuals, their families and the village community at large. Herein, the messiness of the transformative potential (Schorch 2013) imbricated in the adoption of mobile phones is revealed.

The Problem with Mobile Phones and Sexual Promiscuity

Max, an unmarried man in his early twenties, was caught having sex with a woman on a beach close to the village. Like many other young men I met during my fieldwork, Max enjoyed the occasional sexual encounter and was not (yet) interested in settling down. When Max refused to marry the woman he was caught having the affair with, her family demanded a grown pig as compensation. He did not have a pig and had to rely on his uncle's help with

the matter. Max's uncle had planned on selling the pig to pay for his children's school fees though, if Max and his family wanted to avoid violent repercussions for the affair, they had to pay. Max's family and the village community at large scolded him for his reckless behavior. He agreed that his behavior, and sexual relationships outside of marriage, were immoral and explained, with no hesitation, that if his sisters were caught having extra-marital sexual relations he would insist that compensation be paid and that some form of punishment would have to be found for his sisters as well. Still, so Max noted, he would continue to look for sexual encounters without obligations; he would just attempt to not get caught again.

Max, and other young men and women I met, were struggling with this double standard, but they were also embracing it as part of being young. This confirms findings by Holly Buchanan-Aruwafu and colleagues (2003). Based on an analysis of pre- and extra-marital sexual relationships among young urban Malaitans in Auki, the provincial capital of Malaita, Buchanan-Aruwafu and colleagues (2003) argue that Auki's young people struggle with the multiple identities that they have to assume – that of sexual desire and that which views such desire as immoral. Reflecting Max's experience, this struggle was recognized for causing 'conflict, personally, with their families or in the wider society, as they juggled *kastom* and [Christian] religious moral standards that they could not or did not live up to' (Buchanan-Aruwafu et al. 2003:231).

As I already shortly alluded to, Hogbin (1939) suggested that historically pre- and extra-marital affairs were a primary reason for warfare and described, among others, an instance where approximately one hundred people were killed after 'some...visitors...transgressed the rules of good behaviour, during the time of a dance, by making free with the wives and daughters of the chiefs' (188). During the time between Hogbin's and my fieldwork, the likelihood of lethal violence in response to sexual promiscuity had decreased but not disappeared. Though widespread, extra- and pre-marital

affairs were a continuous source of friction in rural as well as in urban areas (see also Buchanan-Aruwafu et al. 2003).

Mobile phones further exacerbate this struggle. The morning after I arrived in the Solomon Islands, I found myself drinking tea on the verandah of a home-stay on Leo Ridge in Honiara overlooking Iron Bottom Sound.⁶ Upon asking me what my research was about, the female head of the house plunged into a passionate exposition about the evils of mobile phones. She provided an example. Men go to bars and clubs, get drunk and get 'hot', that is to say sexually promiscuous. Men here have always had mistresses, she told me, commonly called 02s (second 'wives') and perhaps 03s (third 'wives'), but before mobile phones they were not so easy to contact. Chances were the man would get too drunk to find his mistress and end up coming home to his wife. Now, all a man has to do is take out his mobile phone and he can immediately find his mistress. Similar to Horst and Miller's (2006:169-170) observations about mobile phone use in Jamaica, mobile phones in the Solomon Islands are locally perceived to make adultery very easy, and therefore to increase the temptation.

Without mobile phones, a man and his mistress may have arranged a meeting place that became unusable, perhaps there was a traffic jam in the way; or maybe when they arrived at the place they saw a person in the area who might report back to the wife causing them to abort their plans. Mobile phones, on the other hand, allow the man and his mistress to rapidly change plans according to the multitude of exigencies that may arise and which would have been absolute barriers in the past. Before mobile phones, villagers also often had to rely on friends to help them facilitate extra- or pre-marital sexual encounters. Tim told me the story of a time he and a friend were visiting another village for a festival. He met a woman and asked his friend for help in finding a private meeting place nearby. The friend obliged. However, after some time rolling around on the ground of a plantation, wrapped in the throes of passion, Tim and his partner realized they were in the men's toilet area, smeared in

evidence of their entanglement. His friend had played a prank. Luckily for Tim, no one noticed and he did not have to pay compensation to the woman's family.

Moreover, not only can mobile phones be used to arrange meetings with already known sexual partners, but also to find new ones, specifically through the practice of cold calling. When I first arrived in Gwou'ulu, there had been a death in a nearby village. I interviewed the widower, Luke, about six months after the death of his wife. By then Luke had amassed over one hundred phone numbers of women he thought might be interested in having sex with him. He obtained the numbers through random dialing. Luke only saved the successful numbers, which he defined as (1) if the woman answered his call; and (2) if the woman did not immediately hang up on him but engaged in a conversation.

Most of the Solomon Islanders I talked to noted that they pick up random calls for the pragmatic reason that calls from unknown numbers are nothing unusual and often originate from family and friends. Phones and SIM cards are frequently lost, damaged, stolen or simply thrown away, for example, because someone undesirable had obtained the numbers. Numbers (or rather SIM cards) can also 'expire' if they are not recharged soon enough. Accordingly, people's phone numbers change all the time, and not picking up an unknown number is often felt not to be an option. Unknown numbers are also responded to if there is a romantic interest, not only for an affair but perhaps a potential spouse. This is true for men and women alike. Exemplary is the following story by one of Gwou'ulu villagers (in his mid-thirties) about the time he received a random phone call from a woman while staying in Honaira:

This is a true story [short pause]. When I used my previous phone, an unknown number called me...The phone number called me over and over again, even at midnight. The voice asked, "Where are you staying?" I did not disclose the place where I was staying for my own safety, to avoid that this woman or anyone else causes any problem...So the voice said, "Where are you staying?" "I stay in

Lengakiki.” “Oh, I stay in White River.” “Where should we meet?” “In Chinatown.” The girl arrived the next morning. She said “I will meet you next to a second hand store [explains directions]”... She said “You must come.” “Ok, I will come.” Then I told the [minister’s] driver, because he is my [cousin] brother. “Oh a girl will meet me at this and this place, but for my safety [can you drive me], because your car is the car of the minister it has dark tinted windows?” So we left together. She said, “I am here now.” I was not afraid. We arrived and I called her. When I called, the girl picked up and asked, “Where are you?” “I am on my way,” but I was already looking for her, but I did not know how she looked like. So I said, “What kind of shirt are you wearing? What kind of skirt are you wearing?” So she explained what she was wearing. I looked for her. “Oh, this is her.” I did not go to her. I said, “Oh I think I am busy and cannot come.” She looked far too big [laughs]. She was far too big. So I said “Oh I am busy and cannot come.” From there onwards I was offline. I did not like to answer to that phone number [again] (Interview 10 November 2014).

This kind of random calling is not unique to the Lau or to the Solomon Islands.

Anthropologists have reported people calling random phone numbers in Melanesia and elsewhere (see Andersen 2013; Kraemer 2015; Kriem 2009). Daniela Kraemer (2015) argues that random calling and texting⁷ in Vanuatu has become a means to expand social networks rather than merely keeping in touch with existing contacts. Through random calling, she suggests,

new relationships are made by asking strangers whether they “have a mobile,” by asking friends to ask a stranger for their phone number, by calling and texting numbers from their friends’ contact lists, and through a practice of calling random phone numbers (Kraemer 2015: 6).

In the context of my research, random calling, and closely entangled arrangements of sexual encounters, was similarly recognized as a means for making new relationships and thus extending social networks. However, at least if the goal of these new social networks centering around potential sexual encounters is not marriage, the morality of cold calls is questionable at best and a source of friction, one that is fraught with danger, for the individual involved in the encounter but also for his or her extended family, clan and village networks. Mobile phones have not challenged the morality of extramarital sex but merely extended the possibilities of acting on immoral sexual desires. When caught, the relationships of the culprits with their immediate families and clans are often strained, especially when young adults such as Max are involved, as they commonly do not have the resources to pay for compensation themselves and have to rely on the generosity of, and become further dependent on, their relatives.

The Problem with Mobile Phones and Malevolent Sorcery

Beyond sexual promiscuity, the practice of calling random numbers has become associated with malevolent magic, violence and death. Anyone who answers a call from an unknown number is susceptible to such violence. The caller can use the mobile phone as a medium for malevolent magic, e.g., to send a *ramo* (warrior) spirit who will immediately kill the person on the other end of the line. The premise behind the existence of sorcery is centered on the continued presence of ancestral spirits in the Solomon Islands.

When villages and clans convert to Christianity, individuals (mainly elders) who once followed the ancestral religion in Malaita reveal the secret names of their ancestors, and the locations where they are buried are 'cleansed' through Christian rituals such as exorcisms (see White 1991:107). Ritual expiation has a long pedigree in the history of the country, going back at least until 1907 in Santa Isabel (White 1991:104), and is an ongoing practice in

North Malaita. Geoffrey White notes that ‘more often than not, Christian practices are combined with, rather than substituted for, *Kastom* measures’, and that ‘European missionaries tended to see Christianization as replacement or substitution for traditional practices, whereas Indigenous specialists see a confluence of models and methods’ (1991:114). The case I encountered in Gwou’ulu was somewhat different insofar as the village’s priest shared the European priest’s goal of substitution of, not confluence with, *kastom*. However, villagers did not necessarily share this view. After revealing shrines and names of some ancestors, there were crafty elders who kept one or two of the more powerful ancestors hidden from the Christians for future needs, both defensive and offensive. This way, if the clan is in peril or there is otherwise some advantage seen in calling forth the ancestor, the spirit can still affect things in the material world, for example through mobile phones.

At markets stories were circulating – and retold to me – about men in Fatalake, just south of the Lau, who were dropping dead after answering their mobiles. Tony, whose father was born in Fatalake, received a mysterious call one day and these stories from his ancestral land were on his mind. The man who called him was a stranger but pretended not to be. He mispronounced Tony’s name, which he saw as an ill omen. The topic of the conversation was a business proposal, but the caller evaded providing the specifics – he said he would do so in person, at Point Cruz in Honiara the following morning at 9:00 am. Tony agreed to the meeting with no intention whatsoever of attending. When the conversation was over he made the sign of the cross over the screen of his phone, blocked the number and then deleted it. He had no intention of going for two reasons: he thought it was a trap and it was physically impossible since the trip from Gwou’ulu to Honiara would have taken at least twenty-four hours, if not longer. It troubled him greatly that the caller presumed he was in Honiara, how else could he show up to Point Cruz that quickly? The night was restless for Tony. He stayed

on the hammock underneath the house, on guard for malevolent supernatural forces moving in the dark. It was not until 9:00 am came and passed that he was able to breathe easily and calm his nerves over tea at my house while he analyzed the event.

Mobile phones are increasingly viewed as a means by which violence can be enacted through supernatural forces not only in Gwou'ulu but elsewhere in Melanesia (see Andersen 2013; Taylor 2016). For example, and beyond Melanesia, Ulrika Trovalla (2011:99-102) describes reports of 'killer calls' or 'satanic calls' that emerged in Nigeria in 2004. She noted that the rumors became so widespread that she received a text message from her telecommunication provider assuring her 'that the rumour about an evil GSM number is unfounded and scientifically impossible. Please disregard this rumour. Thank you' (Trovalla 2011:100). Tony's fear of having contracted a malevolent force via the mobile phone call is thus not exceptional, but indicative of the various ways in which the dissemination and adoption of new technologies has the potential to nurture moral uncertainties. In the case under scrutiny here, this uncertainty is so pronounced that irrespective of the benefits that mobile phones may bring to the Lau, the dangers that they are associated with may dominate their perception and possibly also their use. The future of mobile phones in the Solomon Islands, the changes they may bring and how they may affect as well as be affected by wider socio-cultural and political historical processes, remains uncertain, from a Solomon Islander, as well as an analytical perspective.

CONCLUSION

The telephonic uncertainty and fear faced by mobile phone users in Gwou'ulu and the Solomon Islands fit into a pattern of moral uncertainty surrounding the adoption of new technologies in Melanesia (see Andersen 2013; Lipset 2013; Taylor 2016). Academic and popular literature on technological adoption often bifurcates into a debate that pits

technophiles, those who advance a utopian narrative, against technophobes, who advance a dystopian narrative (Lipset 2013:335). Reality is much more nuanced than this simplistic binary. Because mobile phones collapse time and space and allow for changing plans privately and swiftly, they strengthen existing social relationships. However, enmity between individuals can also become more entrenched and users of mobile phones express a moral ambivalence in the process of adopting this new technology (see also Lipset 2013).

Acknowledging this ambivalence is significant in developing a better understanding of how mobile phones can both contribute to moral uncertainties and be absorbed into existing communicative ecologies. It further allows, from an analytical perspective, to more comprehensively grasp the way in which individuals shape and are shaped by the technological change and accompanying socio-cultural transformations. Speaking more broadly, the process of collapsing space and time through mobile phones and the ways this affects and is affected by social life in the Solomon Islands can be examined as significant in its transformative potential, in its ability to constitute a critical juncture in Lau lifeworlds.

Digital ICTs, mainly mobile phones, have an information architecture that is radically different than the other ICTs in Gwou'ulu's communicative ecology. The difference is that while non-digital ICTs are authoritatively controlled and have a community or public focus, mobile phones are more egalitarian and controlled by villagers acting as individuals, and the information communicated is more easily kept private. A messenger system was already extant for individual communication; however, mobile phones make this process immediate in its collapse of space and time. This acceleration of social interaction creates a double-bind of using but increasingly also 'needing' something that is comforting but also dangerous, thus affecting a response of a moral ambivalence.

I have shown this double-bind of mobile phone usage in three case studies. The first pointed to the desire for mobile phone users to maintain social relationships and act in the

case of emergencies. The next two case studies considered the negative side of mobile phone usage insofar as it is seen to facilitate immoral behavior and render users vulnerable to witchcraft. What we have seen here are the reasons why villagers adopt a moral ambivalence to this new technology. But it may also represent, for the Lau, a critical juncture, a transformation with broader socio-cultural consequences, as it has the potential to undermine existing communicative structures that focus on the community and that are under the control of community leaders, rather than individuals and the private sphere. Mobile phones have thus the potential to facilitate the renegotiation of the status quo, though not without also constituting a source of ‘friction’ (Tsing 2005). In particular, in view of their rapid integration into daily life they are fraught with uncertainties, which are closely entangled with an acceleration and exaggeration of social correspondence through the collapse of time and space. This uncertainty is coupled with the open question of what the future will bring as a result of digital artifacts (re)shaping the communication ecologies of Solomon Island lifeworlds.

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ENDNOTES

¹ This map – (1) Solomon Islands and (2) Language Groups of Malaita – is based on two maps obtained through CartoGIS, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, under a Creative Commons license. I cut the map on the language groups of Malaita to focus on the northern parts of the island and inserted the location of Gwou’ulu Village. I then merged it with the map focused on Solomon Islands. No other changes were made.

² About 70% of phones owned by Gwou’ulu villagers in 2014 were Internet-enabled. Several villagers used this function during visits to urban areas, but no one I talked to did so during village stays. Going online was theoretically possible via a 2G network; however, my respondents noted that costs were too prohibitive to do so.

³ All Lau names in this text are pseudonyms.

⁴ I was unable to obtain a concrete date for when mobile phone reception first reached Gwou’ulu. However, Gwou’ulu villagers insisted that no one resident predominantly in Gwou’ulu owned a mobile phone before 2010, and that mobile phones rapidly proliferated in the village around 2012. This timeline can be explained by the decrease of prices with the arrival of Bmobile/Vodafone in 2010, in addition to a continuously weak OurTelekom signal in the village (including in 2014).

⁵ For further discussions about the significance of mobile phones in emergencies in Melanesia see Watson (2010, 2012).

⁶ The stretch of water between Guadalcanal, Savo and Florida Islands that has been named Iron Bottom Sound by Allied soldiers during World War II because it is scattered with ship and plane wrecks from the Battle of Guadalcanal (1942-1943).

⁷ I do not discuss texting in Gwou’ulu since few of my respondents used their phones this way. The most common reason cited for their reluctance to do so were associated costs. On average a text cost SBD1, the same as the average cost for a one minute phone call. As a result, many of my respondents found calling to be more effective, allowing for a more elaborate exchange of information. My respondents did not consider texting to be any more or less private than making a phone call. While phone calls can be overheard, text messages that have not been deleted may be read by anyone who is able to access the phone. Indeed, villagers suggested that when Bmobile/Vodafone offered free texting for a short period of time, the amount of marital disputes increased because of ‘suspicious’ texts. My respondents also explained that this was the reason why Bmobile/Vodafone discontinued the service. My

interviews with Bmobile/Vodafone revealed that this was not the case, instead the free service was cancelled due to the strain the over-use of texting caused on the telecommunication system.