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Drinking Money and Pulling Women: Mobile Phone Talk, Gender and Agency in Vanuatu

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Abstract

This paper examines aspects of gendered discourse around mobile phones in Vanuatu, focusing especially on the talk of high-ranking men from the northern Raga-speaking region of Pentecost Island. Rather than being restricted to the technologies or their direct capacities alone, it is argued that the local reception of new technologies such as mobile phones should be contextualised in terms of broader dialogues of change, and should also take into account the visual and discursive expressions of culture that accompanies them, including in the form of marketing. Examination of the 'impact' of such new technologies should also include taking account of broader local meanings and messages that become associated with them. As the ethnography presented here suggests, while mobile phones themselves certainly provide a useful tool for furthering positive social change, such as in the empowerment of women, the meanings and narratives that surround them may by marked contrast entail more negative entrenchments of unequal relations of power.

Keywords: Mobile Phones; Melanesia; Gender; Discourse; Agency.

Since the mid 2000s, the rapid spread of mobile phones across the Pacific has entailed significant transformations to everyday life. An emerging body of development industry research has focused on the practical ‘net effects’ of this phenomena (for Vanuatu, see especially Sijapati-Basnett et. al. 2008; O’Connor 2011), focusing especially on the ‘impact’ of mobile phones and the opportunities they afford in terms of providing enhancements to community and individual livelihoods; for instance in providing greater access to healthcare, contributing to more effective disaster preparedness and response (Samarajiva and Zuhyje n.d.; Noske Turner et al, 2014), contributing to ‘good governance’ programs and the empowerment of women (Cave 2012; Khosla 2013). Anthropological work, which has been somewhat slower to emerge, has by contrast focused on the ways in which mobile phones have been ‘domesticated’ within local social contexts and systems of meaning. As such, while development literature has tended to rely heavily on narratives of radical transformation and practical benefit, anthropologists have affirmed a comingling of rupture and continuity alongside a more generalised sense of ambivalence, both in the uses to which mobile phones are put and the moral values that have become associated with them (Lipset 2013: 346; Andersen 2013; Kramer 2013; Telban and Vávrová, 2014). Across both sets of literature, gender and sexuality looms large as a central site of concern. This paper contributes to both sets of literature by examining gendered aspects of mobile phone-related discourse and practice in the Melanesian Island nation of Vanuatu, focusing especially on adult men in positions of chiefly authority in the Northern region of Pentecost Island (see Taylor 2008). It also extends this discussion to what is, for the Pacific at least, a hitherto little examined but highly significant aspect of mobile phone ‘impact’; namely, the rich and vibrant visual culture of advertising mobile devices, such that often implies the promise of new ‘modern’ lifestyles of freedom and gender-based equality. Taking into account the messages of such images, I assert here that it is not just the practical capacities of mobile phones as technologies of communication that matter to everyday social life. Understanding how mobile phones and their capacities enter public discourse is also important to assessing their effects in local context. Indeed, as this paper shows, while the practical effects of mobile phones may be largely positive in nature, the discursive meanings associated with them may come to reflect more negatively entrenched gender-based values and stereotypes.

As Arendt noted (1998), the stories we tell ourselves and each other, about ourselves, events past, and the things we engage with in everyday life, form an essential component of identity-making, including by constituting and transforming the sociality of private and public life.

The mobile phone-related narratives explored here represent just such complex, socially and historically embedded expressions of relational agency. In the examples discussed below, talk about mobile phones and their capacity to facilitate particular forms of gendered mobility are considered within the context of masculinity and gender relations. Mobile phone talk is found to represent a fertile site for the performance of hegemonic renditions of masculinity. This includes mastery of mobile phones themselves through their incorporation with broader expressions, contests and negotiations of male power. Taking place across complex fields of relational agency, therefore, discourse around mobile phones and their various capacities among older men in particular not only reflects ‘moral panics’ about sexual activity seemingly familiar everywhere (Cohen 1972; Goggin 2006; Bennett et. al. 2008). Male mobile phone talk relates to a broader discursive context by which men express and exert agency in such a way that entails curtailing and controlling the agency of women, their sexual agency especially (compare Taylor and Araujo n.d.). Within such discourse the control of female agency is not only achieved through the threat of physical, social or moral retribution. As also demonstrated below, in some cases it may also be affected through the harnessing of sacred power, such as in the form of ‘cursing’.

Taking note of the broader telecommunications-development nexus through which the push for mobile phone expansion has taken place, the observations concerning gender-based mobile phone talk made here are also considered in light of the gendering of mobile phone advertising (compare Horst 2014). This includes in the ways that, running against generalised themes of ‘modern’ gender-based freedoms, the imagery and messages of mobile phone advertising potentially reinforces rather than challenges such hegemonic norms. In sum, the ethnography and analysis presented here suggests that accounting for the ‘impact’ of new technologies should not be restricted to their direct capacities alone. They should also take into account the broader cache of visual and discursive culture that accompanies or intersects with such introductions. This includes paying attention to the meanings and messages produced as a part of marketing practices, in development-related discourse, as well as the local meanings and messages that become attached with such technologies as a part of everyday talk.

Vanuatu and the ‘Mobile Revolution’

Vanuatu is located in the South East region of island Melanesia, with New Caledonia to the south west, the Solomon Islands to the north, and Fiji to the east. With a population of around 250,000 (VSNO 2009), it is a country of celebrated cultural and linguistic diversity (Bonnemaison et. al. 1996). Formerly called the New Hebrides, since gaining independence from a joint French and British administration in 1980 English and French have maintained their status as the primary languages of formal educational instruction, while a dynamic creole called Bislama provides the almost universal *lingua franca*. At the same time, over 110 indigenous languages are recorded as being spoken among a population that is highly dispersed across over 60 inhabited islands. Even so, the majority of people reside on several of the larger islands, as well as being concentrated in the urban centres of Port Vila (approximately 50,000), the nation’s capital on the south-central island of Efate, and Luganville (approximately 15,000), on Espiritu Santo to the North.

Relatively isolated in geographical terms, as with most other Pacific nations Vanuatu does not possess a strong commodity economy, and with the exception of tourism-related revenues especially, relies heavily on foreign aid. Across the islands there is a marked contrast between rural and urban livelihoods. Rural settlements typically consist of dispersed hamlets of around 50 to 300 people, with subsistence agriculture representing the primary economic activity supplemented by cash incomes typically derived from copra, timber, cocoa, or kava production. Those living in the two main urban centers of Port Vila and Luganville rely much more heavily on the cash economy. Indeed, for most urbanites participation in wage labor and entrepreneurship is vital given that most do not own land in town, a situation which not only entails paying rent for housing, but also a relative lack of access to garden land to provide for either subsistence and supplementary incomes. With jobs remaining scarce for those outside the public sector, and with an increasingly educated and youthful population, this is a highly competitive sphere of economic engagement compared to the rural outer islands. Even so, given the highly mobile nature of many ni-Vanuatu, it is misleading to distinguish too heavily between urban and rural settings, and in both contexts new spheres of hierarchy and inequality relating to urbanization, the indigenization of the state and capitalist enterprise articulate against longer standing ones, such as those relating to the hierarchies and exchange mechanisms of church and, more especially with regards to the later, *kastom* (loosely, indigenous knowledge and practice). Indeed, there is much traffic of people, goods and remittances between the islands, often based on loosely language-based identity affiliations

that are glossed in Bislama by the term *man ples* (literally, ‘man place’). Thus the Pentecost Islanders at the heart of this study though residing on Pentecost Island are in almost daily contact with family and extended kinship relatives in Port Vila, Luganville, and elsewhere.

Given the above-mentioned demographic dispersal, connectedness of identity and linguistic diversity, it is perhaps not surprising to find that *toktok* (talk) and *storian* (conversation or spoken discourse) provide especially vital sources of human creativity, as well as sites of contestation and sources of power across Vanuatu (Lindstrom 1990; Rodman 1993). This emphasis on the power of talk coupled with the relatively dispersed nature of ni-Vanuatu kinship, social organisation, and interrelated systems of formal and informal exchange across urban and rural settings has arguably lent a particular vitality to the unusually rapid uptake of mobile phones. Indeed, much advertising has capitalised on this conjuncture early on, for example in the TVL slogan, ‘*Life Blong Mi Hemi Storian*’ (‘My Life is Conversation’), and by frequent allusion to the dual meanings in both English and Bislama of the notion of ‘*netwok*’ (network), and thus of the importance of the infrastructure of mobile telephony to maintaining dispersed social relationships and organisational networks. Even so, significant gender difference exists with regards to talk, especially given the way the gender roles have been configured along dualistic sex-based lines in the colonial period and after (Jolly 1997, 2000; Douglas 2002). As noted by Jolly (1991), previous social arrangements were significantly redefined into ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, with the distinction between house-centred ‘wifely domesticity’ and the physical labour undertaken by men on plantations being crucial to this process. Concurrently, as with elsewhere in Melanesia, an invidious positioning of women as embodiments of either good Christian and/or *kastom* values or as dangerously progressive, ‘modern’ and mobile (Jolly 1997; Macintyre 2000) stands in contrast to that of men. By contrast to women, physical mobility and travel for men is generally ascribed a more positive value. Indeed, men are often expected to straddle the discursively separated but in practice vitally overlapping spheres of *kastom*, Christianity and ‘modernity’ much more easily (Taylor 2008). Talk and the power to speak in particular contexts is also highly gendered on these terms, with adult men being able to speak more freely than women in public settings and chiefs being afforded the right to what is referred to in Bislama as *las toktok*, or the ‘final say’. The gendered nature of mobile phone use reflects these broad distinctions, as demonstrated below. To provide one telling example that relates directly to the discussion presented here, during the mobile boom of the late 2000s, female students from the Central Pentecost secondary school of Ranwadi were banned from using

mobile phones completely, whereas male students were not. The male school headmaster's stated reason was that such a ban would stop female students from using the phones to enter into sexual relationships, activities for which male students were by contrast not considered morally responsible (Andrew Gray, pers. comm.).

The digital infrastructure for mobile information and communication technologies (ICTs) was introduced to Vanuatu as early as 2002. This capacity was for several years restricted however to the urban centres of Port Vila and Luganville, and in terms of affordability to an affluent minority. Then, during the later 2000s there occurred an especially rapid uptake of mobile phones across the general population, from some 4.8 percent in 2004 to well over 75% percent in 2009 (O'Connor *et al.* 2012, 14). This uptake was facilitated by the geographical expansion of the existing infrastructure, as well as by a significant lowering of prices, both of call costs and the handsets themselves (AusAID 2009, 34–35). Such 'drivers' were in turn made possible through the governmental implementation of broadly neo-liberal market reforms, supported by major international development agencies and foreign aid programs. More especially it was occasioned by the 2008 arrival of multinational giant Digicel, along with its self-proclaimed 'Bigger Better Network' and 'Digicel Revolution'.

As vividly depicted by Digicel in the widely publicised coverage maps, by 2008–2009 all but some of the remotest—and poorest—regions of the archipelago had access to mobile phone coverage. As well as vividly suggesting the ways in which the promise of a new mobile modernity presented a more realistic prospect for some than others, coverage maps published by both Digicel and TVL also reflected the unprecedented penetration of a more specifically visual arena of competition associated with mobile phones to Vanuatu's lived environments—advertising. Significantly, these marketing strategies not only capitalised on the new technology's tendency to evoke ideas of modernity and progress (Vanudeputte-Tavo 2013, 172), they also emphasised the link between their product and its capacity to deliver national and community 'development'. As a key component of mobile phone marketing both Digicel and TVL sought to engage with communities through strenuous and highly visible strategies in 'corporate social responsibility' (CSR). This included especially in providing donations for community projects, the sponsorships of sports teams and community events, and in financing civic activities. The combination of these marketing strategies with a more generalised use of billboards and buses made a tangible impact on the urban environment. Albeit to a lesser extent, a widespread distribution of t-shirts and other smaller and more portable media ensured that this was present in the rural context also. In

town the festive bicolour of red for Digicel and orange for TVL also appeared in the brightly coloured umbrellas of the numerous mobile ‘top-up points’ that often set up shop immediately next to each other. More conspicuously, the concrete walls and pillars of public buildings and other structures, such as sports stadiums and the busy downtown markets of both Port Vila and Luganville, were brightly coated in red or orange paint. These often changed dramatically from one to the other overnight. Overall, the visual impact of the mobile phone advertising war in Vanuatu appears similar to that described elsewhere in the developing world, especially in Port Vila. There, as Horst and Miller (2006, 162) describe for Jamaica, ‘it was as though almost every billboard and available advertising space were given over to their rivalry’, and every sporting event or philanthropic announcement was ‘ beholden to these two giants of the capitalist world and the largesse that results from the market-centred competition between them for the hearts, minds, and above all wallets’ of the general population. Given the close link of their product to ideas of community development and national progress, however, such promotional strategies did not appear as solely driven by profit. Rather they appeared as a kind of altruistic capitalist paternalism.

As depicted in the many billboards and other advertisements that by 2008 decorated the landscape from village to town, the ‘Digicel Revolution’ especially promised a bright and continually smiling future of youthful ‘freedoms’, including especially from social, economic and geographic constraints of traditional gender norms and poverty: the image of a sexy and carefree young women strolling a deserted beach under the tantalising slogan ‘Freedom to Roam’ suggested the arrival of new forms of gendered equality and mobility. Likewise a seemingly endless stream of advertisements relating to the many cash prize games on offer, such as those featuring fantastic images of money streaming magically out of mobile handsets, much to the delight of a lucky winner, suggested a world of boundless prosperity based on individual monetary wealth. In sum, the visual content of mobile phone advertising in Vanuatu depicted a sparkling, magical world of physically mobile, globally connected, fashionably modern and always happy and carefree young people. It was also a highly aspirational world of upward-looking economic mobility and opportunity, or as it is put in the *lingua franca* Bislama, *janis* (chance) or *laki* (luck), words that were frequently incorporated in the constantly offered ‘text and win’ games. Despite the suggestions of gender-based freedoms, especially for women, the advertisements were nevertheless highly gendered in content: a survey of content including individual young people (which made up the vast majority of ads) showed that while images incorporating young men as the sole or focal

subject predominantly associated economic success with sexual flirtation, in the case of women romantic love comes to the fore, with ‘love hearts’ presenting a frequently occurring motif. The implication, of course, is that the magic of mobile technology comes money, and with it romantic love for women and sexual conquest for men.

As is the case with many new technologies, the rapid spread and uptake of mobile phones was viewed locally in both positive and negative terms. As explored here with regards to adult male discourse, this was reflected in much everyday talk including as communicated through the phones themselves. As an example of the ambivalence that surrounded not only the phones, but more particularly the corporate power behind them, Kraemer reports that during this period a highly popular text was circulated proclaiming, ‘Digicel – Devil Is Getting In Control of Everyone’s Life’ (Kraemer 2013: 186). On the island of Pentecost, while people were quick to point out the tremendous practical benefits of mobile phones, I also frequently heard older and younger people alike bemoan the fact that ‘ol mobile I stat blong kakae yumi’ (mobiles are starting to eat us).

Much of this ambivalence is reflected in an extremely thorough ICT social and economic impact report for the period, titled *Net Effects* (O’Connor *et al.* 2011). As this report suggested, the practical capacities of mobile phones can demonstrably be seen to have made a tangible yet varied impact on social-cultural, political and economic life in Vanuatu during the late 2000s. Differences to infrastructure and use across urban and rural divides were especially noted, with use in urban contexts being demonstrably higher than in rural ones. Fundamental positive impacts included ‘enabling frequent contact with family and friends and increasing the speed of communication’, as well as facilitating better access to health care and other specialised services, and in contributing to an overall sense of ‘increased social support’ (O’Connor *et al.* 2011, 7–8). However, as the report also makes clear, there were also significant ‘barriers’ to uptake and use, including the price of mobile phone credit, but also a lack of access to reliable and cheap sources of electricity. In this way, just as the spread of mobile phones promised a significant closing of the ‘digital divide’ on global and national terms (Ling and Horst 2011, 3), looked at locally they can also been seen to have represented an index of inequality between haves and have nots. One important yet somewhat contradictory insight to that presented above regarding social support—and perhaps reflecting the general themes presented here—was that the arrival of mobile phones were also often perceived locally to cause a ‘breakdown in social relations and divergence from traditional behavioral norms’ (O’Connor *et al.* 2011 2–3). Considered overall, however, while presenting

extremely detailed statistical data important contextualising qualitative insights, by focusing primarily on questions relating to the positive and/or negative ‘impact’ of ICTs across comparative demography little detail emerged regarding the precise nature of such perceptions of ‘breakdown’ and ‘divergence’. Further, in being sharply focused on the immediate interface of mobile phone ‘impact’—as defined especially by the presence or absence of that technology—and by focusing sharply on the ‘newness’ of ICTs, little consideration was made of the degree to which such transformations corresponded to social processes already occurring, and thus of related perceptions of breakdown or divergence in parallel or overlapping contexts. Indeed, as argued here, rather than being solely responsible for creating novel transformations or perceptions of sociality, in many respects the new technology simply provided the latest index through which to think about, debate and express what were in fact much longer-standing concerns.

Like other commodities or activities that enter popular discourse as potent symbols of modernity, mobile phones became one of several focal metaphors through which people were able to express a broader coming to terms with transforming social and economic geography within contemporary modernity in Vanuatu. This included most importantly those relating to transforming expressions and relations of gender and generation. The emphasis on gender-related concerns was especially heightened given the intense visual focus on expressly ‘modern’ forms of gender-based expression that characterised the marketing of mobile telephony during this period, as described above. In this way discourse surrounding mobile phones closely mirrored pre-existing contexts for debating moral frictions surround social change. This includes those longer standing concerns of female mobility and transgression of traditionally male spheres relating to the consumption of the locally popular psychoactive drug kava (*piper methysticum*) (see Lebot, Merlin and Lindstrom 1992), especially within the urban commercial context of *nakamal* (‘kava bars’) (Taylor 2010a). They also mirror concerns over social decay that Cummings (2013) discerns in the context of ni-Vanuatu involvement in the RSE international labour scheme to New Zealand. Through the both symbolic and technological medium of mobile phones, such concerns were however both felt and expressed in newly inflected ways. This was seen most especially in that mobile communication technology itself was understood to carry the capacity to enhance the mobility of people and knowledge to dangerously high degrees, especially with regards to the physical mobility of women (for Papua New Guinea, compare Andersen 2013).

Overall, concerns emerged surrounding the new technology's capacity to generate potentially problematic social excesses, while at the same time facilitating sometimes dangerously secretive expressions of agency. While such concerns are examined in more detail below, complaints were raised for example about the capacity of phones to spread information too quickly and over vast distances, both physical and social. This was resulting in unmanageably large numbers of people attending *kastom* ceremonies and community events, including especially at deaths, and thereby placing unnecessary strains on the resources of localised kinship groups. Similarly, as demonstrated in one 'tragic case of 'village justice', in which two brothers accused of sorcery and 'posen' (the traditional practice of subtle murder using local toxins) were tracked from their home village of Kaiovo on Maewo island to Lolowei hospital on neighbouring Ambae island' through the use of mobile phones (McGarry 2012), the speed by which information could now be communicated was considered to have negative as well as positive social effects. Further, and as in one example given below, concerns were also expressed that mobile phones were being used to facilitate esoteric forms of agency, such as those relating to *nakaemas* (loosely, sorcery and/or witchcraft). As also reported by Kraemer (2013: 178), such fears led to many women to turn their phones off at night for fear that they might be used as a conduit for magical attack. Likewise, along with more mundane concerns such as the cost of credit and the seemingly uncontrollable spread of gossip, people began to complain of phones being used by young men to 'pull' young women across the archipelago by using beguiling love magic of *swit maot* (literally, 'sweet mouth'), of people using *blak masik* ('black magic') to siphon credit from one phone to another, or in the use of phones to utter and convey curses. As explored elsewhere (Taylor and Araujo n.d.), such discourses amongst men similarly tended to reinforce gender-based norms and unequal relations of power.

Masculinity, Mobiles and Gendered Agency.

As the final points regarding sorcery and sacred power indicate, mobile phones have slotted neatly into indigenous cosmological frameworks in Vanuatu. This demonstrates an instance of relative ontological continuity rather than of radical change or rupture. Indeed, in a cultural milieu in which material objects such as stones or houses may be sentient and agentive (Bonnemaison 1985; Taylor 2008), during my research mobile phones were often spoken about in such a way that suggested an agency that extended beyond their immediate

capacities as devices of telecommunication. Speaking more generally, and reflecting ‘moral panics’ familiar elsewhere, concerns were also raised regarding the capacity of mobile phones to extend the agency of people in ways that were especially difficult to monitor. Of particular concern were the apparent capacities of phones to facilitate and even instigate sexual liaisons among young people and to bring about extramarital affairs.

Given that such activities often entail economic and juridical negotiations relating bride price, and in cases of adultery especially, the payment of fines under *kastom* law, such issues were of particular concern to men in positions of chiefly authority. In both urban and rural regions a system of legal pluralism operates (Forsyth 2009), with *kastom* law presided over by local chiefs operating alongside albeit ultimately under state law. For North Pentecost men living in town and island alike, as with elsewhere in the region of northern Vanuatu (Blackwood 1981), a key mechanism for attaining chiefly authority is a system of named grades. Upward movement through this graded hierarchy is achieved by participation in a competitive system of exchange and ritual porcine sacrifice, called *bolololi*. In some cases, however, men may come to be considered chiefs (or in the language of North Pentecost, *ratahigi*) without taking part in this arena of exchange, but rather are recognized as such through demonstrating strong leadership qualities. In all cases, chiefs must exhibit a wide range of requisite skills, including especially of decision-making, dispute resolution, an ability to instigate and carry to fruition successful community-oriented projects, and strong oratory skills.

Before going on to discuss examples relating to these concerns of female sexual agency and mobility as expressed by North Pentecost chiefs, it is first worthwhile noting the ways in which mobile phones were from the outset harnessed as an accessory to expressions of male authority, including in everyday performances of status contestation. An extract from field notes written on North Pentecost in 2006 demonstrates this. These notes describes a younger chief, here called Joseph, recounting an episode in which he utilized his phone within the context of a complex dialogue of intrigue and chiefly etiquette with another older and more senior chief, Silas (both pseudonyms). This competitive interaction revolved around Silas’ apparently deliberate failure to pay appropriate respect to Joseph’s status as the holder of a customary right, in this case to officiate and ‘speak’ at a particular male initiation ceremony involving the sacrifice of chickens, called *gonata* (see Taylor 2008), a customary right not held by Silas despite his chiefly seniority. Notably, this episode, that had occurred some days before, was described to the delight of a group of six other older men at Joseph’s home village, with Joseph pulling his phone out of his pocket to use it as a prop at relevant points of

the narrative. Thus, in this episode we see that it is not just the use of phones themselves and devices of telecommunication, but also both actual and discursive demonstrations of the mastery of that technology that emerges as important to understanding the role of mobile phones in gender based performances:

[[Joseph is the holder of the right to speak for 100 chickens at *gonata*, a fact that is well known since he performed the rite several years ago (along with killing several peregrine falcons). A few weeks ago Joseph got word that Silas was going to perform the ritual, but that those involved in organizing were not intending to ask Joseph to officiate. On the morning of the ritual, which was to take place later in the afternoon, Joseph was scheduled to teach a class on *kastom* at the nearby Lini Memorial College, and so he decided to deliberately walk past Silas's village so that he would be seen. As expected he encountered a great many chickens tied up along the roadside by the *nasara* [ceremonial meeting ground and space of ritual performance]. While he had both credit and battery power on his phone, he purposefully turned it off, knowing that he would be sighted walking by and that his presence would be reported to Silas and the other organisers. Also, knowing that the ceremony would be completed by the time he finished teaching his class, and not wishing to give them the opportunity to contact him, he purposefully kept his phone switched off.

Later in the afternoon, after his class and also, he assumed, the completion of the ceremony, he turned his phone back on and discovered as expected a series of missed calls from Silas and the other organisers. Still, he chose not to return their calls, and instead walked back along the same road, once again deliberately passing the *nasara* that the ceremony had been held at, knowing that by now they would all be preparing and drinking kava in the *nakamal* ('men's house') facing the road. As he had hoped and planned for, Silas emerged from the *nakamal* and approached Joseph on the road, explaining,

"Now I see you, I'm ashamed".

Joseph replied, in a half joking way, "I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't think you really are ashamed. You could have easily contacted me before the ceremony".

"But I did", replied Silas, "I tried to call you on your mobile, but it was switched off."

Joseph replied, "Yes, but that was only this morning, after you saw me walking past here."

Silas then pulled a further trick in the mobile phones repertoire, explaining, “No, I’ve been trying to call you for weeks, but I’ve had my phone switched to ‘private’ (so the receiver does not receive notification of the missed caller’s details), and I only just realized”.]]

[[At this point both Joseph and Silas tacitly conceded that an exchange of deception was taking place, but that neither was in a position to prove their relative righteousness. In any case, ultimately, given Silas’s seniority Joseph would be taking a considerable risk if he were to escalate the relatively minor issue into a fully blown dispute over customary protocol. So, laughing and slapping hands, Silas invited Joseph to join the group in the *nakamal*, thereby ending the matter in a jovial and amicable way. (Transcribed from field notes, and adapted slightly for clarity: June 2006)]]

As this example demonstrates, by adding a new and complex technology of communication (and in this case deliberate non-communication), mobile phones have enhanced the way in which men in Vanuatu negotiate authority and status. Indeed, mobile phones are routinely praised by such men for facilitating the complex exchanges of pigs and other forms of wealth that take place at male grade-taking ceremonies, just as they are appreciated within the context of capitalist entrepreneurship. As already mentioned, however, the increase of physical mobility that mobile phones appear to have brought about—of objects, capital and people—is also a subject of chiefly concern.

The following quote is taken from an interview with a local businessman and chief whose store and guesthouse in North Pentecost is a major supplier of both mobile phone credit and generator-supplied battery power for the area in which he lives. Occurring just before the ‘Digicel Revolution,’ it also demonstrates the way in which as a medium for enhancing the concealed agency of young people in particular, the new technology was already being seen by many to have caused female mobility to spin out of control, creating problems of social instability:

[[‘Yes, regarding mobile phones, it’s another new development in Vanuatu today, and another development in Pentecost. And it’s a new development that is completely different for all communities and people. And you will find that people on Pentecost talk on mobile phones more than any other island! Just about everyone on Pentecost, from small small boys

upwards, hold mobile phones. And my questions is, “what are they talking about every day?” You will see that people listen, people talk, but I ask, “what are they dealing with inside these mobile phones every day?” I even asked this question in the *nakamal*, to all they young men, “You talk all the time, you must be saying many many things on these phones”.’]]

[[‘Many talk with girls. Many just send texts. Many talk with their friends. Many just play around and joke with their friends, they ring, and then stop their call. Many just play games with them.... But you will find that many women of Tanna, they all fly to Pentecost, because of a mobile phone. Women of Ambae, they take ships up because of mobile phones. They have never seen the face of the man, they just talk through the mobile phone, and all these girls come.’]]

At this point I interjected, ‘But where do they find their phone numbers?’ To which my interlocutor replied:

[[‘Many times you will find a missed call. Mistakes. Ok, someone makes a missed call—a mistake on their call—and a boy will say, “this is a girl”. And then he’ll pass the number all around. Sometimes, another young man knows the number of this girl, and he passes it to another one. They pass it, pass it.’]]

[[‘Even couples, they perform adultery through them, and they have broken many homes. And another issue, they make it so that they pull a girl from another island, which makes it hard work for the Father to pay the girl’s family for her, or for her to go back’ (Interview recorded July, 2007)]]

Intersecting thematically with the advertised image of mobile phones as fonts of wealth and enlightened social and gender-based freedoms, such observations suggest that mobile phones are perceived, by men in positions of authority at least, to have contributed to the disruption of existing mechanisms of kinship and exchange, and in doing so increased financial burdens. Echoing the image of the ‘Digicel devil’ (Kraemer 2013: 186), one man described mobile phones to me in such a way that suggested an ever-hungry predator of human life. As he put it:

[[‘Spend more money to charge batteries. Spend money to fill up your mobile phone, because mobile phones drink money more than anything... This means there is no more money for kerosene, no more money for soap, and then it asks for recharge too! All the boys and girls

don't see that this thing is starting to eat us (*i stat blong kakae mifala*)' (Interview recorded July, 2007).]]

At the same time, through mobile phones both knowledge and people were perceived to have become dangerously and unpredictably mobile, with unfettered female mobility arising as a particular concern. In the context of talk about sexual liaisons and female mobility especially, phone numbers (rather than the phones themselves) become an index of girls or women who are 'passed' between young men. As mentioned above, such notions related to generalized cultural notions regarding gender based mobility. As has often been pointed out (Bonnemaïson 1985; Jolly 1994, Taylor 2010a), across Vanuatu the idea of *man ples* (place-based identity) and of being firmly rooted in the land like a banyan tree is highly valued. Related to this, while purposeful journeying is positively valued, aimless wandering is generally deplored and considered both unhealthy and dangerous. This is especially the case for women, whose movements and actions are for the most part much more closely monitored and curtailed than those of men. More specifically, such talk about the sharing of phone numbers relates to the way in which young women are also 'shared' or exchanged amongst groups of young men in Vanuatu, often following kinship lines. This is especially seen in so far as groups of same-moiety kin members, often brothers, broker the sexual capacities of young women over whom they are able to exert control, including especially close same-moiety kin such as categorical sisters or mothers (for a discussion of North Pentecost kinship, see Taylor 2005).

Observations such as those presented above reflect widely held views that along with increasing modernity, life in all its many facets is spinning of control. This includes in social contexts of kinship and sexual norms, but also with regards to spiritual concerns around the interlinked 'sacred powers' of Christianity and *kastom* (see Taylor nd.a). Reflecting the previous example, in the following interview a high ranking North Pentecost chief explained what he considered to be the key issues emerging from the rapid introduction of mobile phones, including especially with regards to gender-based relations, sexuality, and social governance. This was prompted by a question about what in the indigenous language of the region, Raga, is called *serava*. This word, translated as *grip* ('creeping') in Bislama, describes the secretive practice of young men going in search of sexual liaisons at night:

[[‘This is worse than what I was just talking about [the financial drain caused by mobile phones]! Because now you can be anywhere, and you can *serava* now. Before, *serava* was hard, but now it is no longer hard’ (Interview recorded July, 2007).]]

Wishing to relate these issues to his work as a community leader, I asked, ‘are there any cases where a chief has taken a phone of someone to find out if someone has sent a text, for example a bad text?’ His reply included a detailed description of an incident in which the capacities of mobile phones and sacred power—in this case Christian ‘cursing’—became entangled in a complex turn of events involving a married woman and a member of the Anglican Church’s Melanesian Brotherhood, a monk-like sect known locally as ‘Tasiu’ (Taylor 2010b, 2015). This conflict, which emerged from a misunderstanding caused by a missed call and borrowed phone, also centred around the transgression of norms of gender, sexuality and hierarchical power, and the linkage of this to the dangers of unfettered talk:

[[‘Yes, there have been cases. Just yesterday or the day before yesterday [I adjudicated a case involving] a girl from Loltong [who] spoke inappropriately to a Tasiu. This happened some months ago. The Tasiu was looking after the phone of another boy. But this boy; he’d tried to phone this woman, even though the woman was already married. Ok, so the woman rang the Tasiu. The Tasiu answered, “hello”, and she asked, “why have you rung me? I have a man already”. Then she swore at him and verbally reprimanded him.’]]

[[‘After this the Tasiu said, “No, this is not my phone. It’s the phone of my friend”. But the woman didn’t believe that this was the phone of another man, so she continued to swear at and reprimand the Tasiu. As a result, the Tasiu became offended, and began to speak to her with powerful words. He said, “Ok, this is a Tasiu that you are talking to. If you want to come and say sorry to me, you must do so quickly. And I don’t want you to talk to me by way of the phone. If you don’t come to see me now, you will start going around with all the boys. When you finish with one, you will go and be with another one...”’]]

As he continued his narrative, the chief explained to me how the Tasiu’s words had carried the implication of a curse. This dictated that:

[[‘If she doesn’t come as instructed, she will go and see another boy today. If she doesn’t sleep with her own husband one night, she will go and sleep with another man. And so it was that his words to this woman became true. The woman did it repeatedly, and as a result her husband assaulted a man almost to death, and he is recuperating in Vila [hospital] right now.

Ok, the woman's family all came yesterday and they said sorry to the Tasiu, and the Tasiu prayed for her, and forgave her' (Interview recorded July, 2007).]]

Clearly this discussion relates closely with the previous one, with the curse of promiscuity, of "going around with all the boys", one to another, reflecting in abstract terms the passing of phone numbers. In both cases the sexual agency of women comes under the control by men. There is also the articulation of a moral double-play in that, while such situations may lead to social or economic tension or unrest, including in the form of violence, or as in the previous example, concern over bride-price, it is ultimately women who are considered morally responsible for such negative outcomes. Thus, within the context of such discourses and practices, not only are women's actions—in this case involving sexual behaviour especially—controlled by men, but they must also face or otherwise live out the moral consequences of such actions.

Conclusion

Novel technologies like mobile phones are highly prone to gathering symbolic elaboration relating to narratives of modernity, such that frequently entail an ambiguous positing of positive and hopeful visions of progress alongside negative 'moral panics' of social decline. Similarly, in his analysis of the moral ambivalence surrounding '*mobail*' technologies in peri-urban Papua New Guinea, David Lipset argues that the rapid introduction of such technologies 'neither dissolve[s] the old nor constitute[s] the moral world anew' (Lipset 2013, 335). Indeed, as Maggie Cummings has pointed out, while they are essentially forward looking, narratives of modernity are also always 'grounded, necessarily, in the conditions and knowledge of the present' (2013, 383). In a context in which the concept of *kastom* (loosely, traditional knowledge and practice) is of such central importance, they are also deeply rooted in understandings and concerns for the past. For this reason the masculine mobile phone narratives presented above speak not only of future possibilities, both positive and negative, but also more nostalgically of perceived socio-cultural losses, including as relating to the romance of the 'men's house' and of declining chiefly authority. In this sense the promises, possibilities, hopes, desires, ambivalences and anxieties of global and local 'flow' (Appadurai 2010) that surround mobile phones closely mirror those that Cummings (2013) discerns in the context of ni-Vanuatu involvement in the RSE international labour scheme to New Zealand. They also correspond in key aspects with gendered meanings associated with that most

ubiquitous marker of ni-Vanuatu masculine *kastom*, as well as of national modernity, kava (see Taylor 2010a).

As demonstrated here, the translation of mobile phones and their meanings into local discourse and practice is both complex and fraught with anxiety. Indeed, the globalising and localising processes of technological reception, articulation and translation described here cannot be characterised in simplistic terms of change or continuity, or of empowerment or disempowerment alone. Rather, in broadening the analysis of the interface by which such technologies are introduced to include wider ethnographic and historical contexts and voices, a more nuanced picture involving currents and crosscurrents of fluency and friction emerges. The present critique of cell phone culture is not meant to suggest that the ongoing push for information and communication technology (ICT) development in contexts such as Vanuatu should be roundly decried for their negative effects. Indeed, I would agree with the majority of ni-Vanuatu and development industry commentators who reckon that the ‘net effects’ of ICTs are more positive than negative—including in contributing to important gender-based shifts, increasing access to essential services such as healthcare, and in creating new economic opportunities. What remains largely unconsidered in the ever-growing development and academic literature on ‘mobile phones for development’ (M4D) (Shade 2013), however, are the ways in which discourses that uncritically promotes the positive effects of increased ‘digital democracy’—such that envisage a ‘ICT revolution’ transforming the Pacific into a sea of ‘digital islands’ (Cave 2012)—present a striking mirror to the images and narratives depicted in commercial mobile phone advertising. Indeed, if the particular modernity presented therein is of a win-win world of boundless economic prosperity, this is particularly so for corporations such as Digicel who profit not only from their own products, but also from their position as both harbingers and recipients of foreign aid and development resources.

Similarly, the analysis presented here is also not meant to suggest that the concerns of chiefs are either illegitimate or founded in unreality. As Daniela Kraemer, in her study of young people in Port Vila shows, young people are indeed employing mobile phones in creative ways. This includes in ways intended to expand their relationship networks beyond more traditional kinship ties, such that might be perceived to ‘erode’ previous institutions (Kraemer 2013: 39). Similarly, and unsurprisingly, as Kraemer describes (2013: 177), ‘the mobile phone, with its capacity for private and concealed communication has been quickly adopted by youth as a useful instrument for facilitating secretive affairs’. Indeed, according to her

analysis the giving out of phone numbers by young women to young men especially is typically considered indicative of sexual interest (Kraemer 2013, 178). Tellingly, also, as Kraemer reports (2013: 190), a marked spike in births at the Port Vila Central hospital from 2008 to 2009 became widely referred to as the ‘Digicel Baby Boom’.

The present discussion suggests that the local reception of new technologies such as mobile phones should be contextualised in terms of broader dialogues of change. As such, understanding the ‘impact’ and ‘net effects’ (O’Connor *et al.* 2011) of new technologies such as mobile phones should not be restricted to the technologies and their direct capacities alone. It should also take into account the broader cache of visual and discursive expressions of culture that accompanies them. That culture includes the meanings and messages produced by corporate advertising and marketing strategies alongside development-related discourse and practice. It also includes the local meanings and messages that become attached with such technologies, including through dialogue with existing cultural patterns and social concerns. Indeed, as the ethnography presented here suggests, while mobile phones themselves may indeed provide a useful tool for social change, such as in the empowerment of women, the meanings and narratives that surround them may by marked contrast entail much more negative continuations of already existing relations of power and inequality.

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