An ethnography of deletion: Materializing transience in Solomon Islands digital cultures

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the fragility of digital storage through a non-media-centric ethnography of data management practices in the so-called Global South. It shows how in the Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province, Solomon Islands, the capacity to reliably store digital media is curtailed by limited access to means of capital production and civic infrastructures, as well as a comparatively isolated tropical ecology that bedevils the permanence of all things. The object biography of mobile phones, including MicroSD cards, typically short, fits into a broader historical pattern of everyday engagements with materializations of transience in the Lau Lagoon. Three types of visual media are exemplary in this regard: sand, ancestral material cultures and digital visual media (photographs and videos). Ultimately, Lau experiences of transience in their visual media are located in their visual technological history and the choices they make about which materials to maintain or dispose of.

Keywords

Deletion, digital media, ethnography, Melanesia, Solomon Islands, storage, transience, visual culture

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Introduction

There is a common myth that considers data as 'divorced from the everyday dirt and matter of daily life' and 'accessible everywhere yet located nowhere in particular' (Bollmer, 2015: 66). This article builds on Grant Bollmer's (2015) call to move beyond this myth and uncover the fragility of data storage 'as something that has direct effects on our ability to record and understand our history and our present' (p. 67). We argue that this myth is a product of what David Morley (2008) describes as a media-centric Media Studies that has too often focused on the virtual rather than material dimensions of the digital while, as Raka Shome (2019) elaborates, nearly exclusively accounting for experiences in the so-called Global North. This article responds to this dual shortcoming by addressing the fragility of data management through a classically conceived, anthropological ethnography of everyday media practices and their materialities in an emerging digital society and culture on the 'wrong' side of the global digital divide: in Solomon Islands, a least developed state in the southwestern Pacific on the margins of global capital. As Shome (2019) argues,

> If it is the case that we study media to understand the social dimensions of the lives that engage with media, as well as the kinds of communities that media enable (or not), then we have to recover other histories of being with media that may not have entered – at least in any comprehensive way – our narration of media history in the (Western) academy. (p. 2)

These are some of those stories.

Not long after arriving in Solomon Islands we had the opportunity to observe local digital data management practices. Staying at a rented house on the outskirts of Honiara, the capital and urban centre on the island of Guadalcanal, we quickly immersed in the emerging digital material culture of the country. On the concrete-surfaced social space under the raised timber house, our first morning was spent sipping sugary coffee brought by curious neighbours. Sitting around chatting, it was not long before Ian, a man in his early 20s, produced his mobile phone and casually motioned an invitation for Geoffrey to look at his screen. A family photo album. He clicked through the pictures of weddings, children playing at his home village and portraits of family members. As Ian surfed through the images, Geoffrey noticed an extra thumb movement; he was deleting many of the files after he had shown them to Geoffrey. When asked why he deleted the images, Ian merely shrugged: he needed room for new pictures, and he took this opportunity to go through them.

Ian's indifferent attitude towards the deletion of multimedia files, in particular of family and social events, is by no means unique. We also witnessed Marvin, a man in his late 60s, removing pictures of his granddaughter's baptism to allow him to take photos during campaign events for the 2014 National Election. He, in turn, deleted the campaign pictures when two of his nieces asked to borrow his phone for a 'photo shoot' for which they would pose 'like tourists' on the local beach. On another occasion, Stephanie also uncovered a story of deletion when Jennifer, a woman in her mid-20s, excitedly presented her newest music files, mainly songs by Rihanna, that she had obtained from one of his cousins visiting our rural fieldsite from Honiara. Only a few days earlier Jennifer had complained to Stephanie about her MicroSD being filled to the brim. When Stephanie asked how she had solved this

problem, Jennifer answered with laughter. She had simply removed the videos she had taken during the Saints Day (St. Michael's) celebrations some weeks earlier. Jennifer explained further that it had been fun recording the videos and watching them with others, often during breaks when working in the gardens or while chatting after evening meals. However, she could not miss out on new music from one of her favourite artists. Besides, she continued, other villagers, including herself, had retold enough stories about the celebrations. Barely anyone wanted to see her videos anymore.

We repeatedly witnessed similar acts of deletion throughout our fieldwork, both in rural and urban environments and by mobile phone users regardless of gender or age. This compelled us to seek answers to the questions that lie at the heart of this article: how is it that so many of the Solomon Islanders we talked to have such a casual relation to what an outsider might presume to be valuable data, photographic images of family members for instance? And, how do Solomon Islanders choose which files to delete and which ones to keep? A first clue lies in the broader circumstances that shape the proliferation and adaptation of mobile phones in Solomon Islands and that provide the necessary backdrop for a subsequent more detailed discussion.

In Solomon Islands, mobile phones, including many smartphones, started spreading across the country in 2010. This technological 'revolution' (Cave, 2012) is attributable to a confluence of events that also contributed to the proliferation of mobile phones elsewhere in the Pacific (e.g. see Cave, 2012; Horst, 2018). First, a telecommunications monopoly ended. Bmobile, a Papua New Guinea–based telecommunications provider, entered the market as a competitor to OurTelekom. Second, the cost of manufacturing smartphone handsets radically dropped and, third, access to efficient, small-scale solar power units increased. While in 2010 only approximately 20% of the population had access to a mobile phone, mobile phone penetration had climbed to 54% in 2014 and reached a whopping 78.2% in 2018 (Telecommunications Commission Solomon Islands, 2019). Already during our fieldwork in 2014 and at least in our primary research sites in Honiara and the rural Lau Lagoon, Malaita Province, a vast majority of mobile phones were individually owned. Mobile phones were often made available to members of the same household for phone calls or multimedia consumption. Nonetheless, each phone that we encountered had a clear owner who had control over its usage as well as the numbers and multimedia files stored on the particular phone, as well as both its SIM and MicroSD cards. Despite significant controversies and conflicts surrounding women's and men's respective usages of mobile phones (Hobbis, 2017a, 2018b), we did not notice significant gendered divisions in mobile phone ownership. Both men and women individually owned them, often primarily depending on who had been able to afford, or been gifted, one.

Still, the continued proliferation of mobile phones and their reliable use faces significant hurdles, in particular for Solomon Islands predominantly rural horticulturalists and fisherfolk (about 80% of the population). Purchasing the handsets and using them for telephony or data is difficult at best, considering that both require reliable access to cash incomes. One of the least developed countries in the world, approximately one-quarter of Solomon Islanders live below the international US$1.90 per day poverty line. Nearly 60% of the population lives on less than US$3.20 per day (World Bank, 2018: 1). Especially rural populations are only sporadically involved in cash-generating activities. Instead, most cash available to them arrives in villages through the domestic remittance network (Hobbis,

2017b), circulated through small-scale economic activities like canteens and market stalls, and primarily used to meet daily (food) needs and for emergency funds, for example, to pay for school fees. Mobile phones are obtained in similar ways, often by leveraging remittance networks, while activities with pay-per-use costs, such as telephony, are rarely afforded outside of emergencies (Hobbis, 2017a).

In this context of a 'metered mindset' (Donner, 2015: 123), the primary use of mobile phones is, as Geoffrey has argued elsewhere (Hobbis, 2017b), for their multimedia functions. The inbuilt camera feature is used to take digital pictures and videos in abundance, while inbuilt audiovisual players are most frequently used to consume local and foreign-made music, and movies and still images from around the world. Especially foreign multimedia files are highly prized. They are used, for example, to combat boredom or even as 'babysitters' to keep children busy throughout the day (Hobbis, 2017b). However, these files are also relatively difficult to obtain. Again, with no direct, reliable access to the Internet in rural environments, villagers depend on their remittance networks to acquire digital files. Even so, not every town-based relative is willing to share foreign multimedia with their rural kin. Such reticence is the result of periodic moral controversies that have, for example, arisen from watching movies that depict sexual relationships outside of marriage (Hobbis, 2017b). Thus, some files are more difficult to obtain than others, complicating the decisions that Solomon Islanders have to make with regard to managing the data that they store on their MicroSDs.

Moral controversies are also a threat to the survival of mobile phones themselves. Jealous partners regularly smash them because they suspect mobile phone owners of having used their phones, for instance, to coordinate extramarital affairs (see also Hobbis, 2018b; Mantz, 2018). Additional problems arise from the tropical and maritime environment to which mobile phones are exposed. Sand gets into the casing. Humidity smears the screen. Some are soaked, forgotten in the shorts pocket of a person plunging into the ocean. In this volatile context, important files are stored on multiple, sometimes many, MicroSDs, taking up more space and needing more of the less essential files to be deleted. Many of our respondents' seemingly casual attitude towards deletion, thus, appears to be closely linked to Solomon Islands tropical ecology on the margins of global capital. This article discusses these processes of deletion in Solomon Islands tropical ecology and the broader long-standing complex of constraints that this has imposed on the long-term survival of locally and externally produced (visual) materials.

An ethnography of deletion

Our findings are based on a classically conceived ethnography. Solomon Islanders divide themselves into groups based on shared languages and ancestral homes. We completed most of our research among the Lau people who live primarily in the eponymous lagoon in rural North Malaita and in Honiara's settlements. Between February 2014 and February 2015, we conducted multisited ethnographic fieldwork in both urban and rural contexts, spending approximately 8 months in Gwou'ulu Village in the northern Lau Lagoon and 4 months in Honiara. We also moved frequently between the two sites following the movements of the Lau themselves who travelled as part of temporary labour migration, to access health care and education, visit family and much more. As classic ethnographers, we tried

to live as the Lau live, eat what they eat, work how they work, sleep like they sleep, play as they play and a whole range of other daily life experiences. In addition, we surveyed and experienced through participant observation the digital technologies and their infrastructures available in both rural and urban environments, from mobile phones to Internet Cafes and the solar systems powering them.

We also completed a series of open-ended interviews about Lau life with digital technologies and beyond, for example, about political and economic change, gender relations and kinship. Most significantly, during our 8-month stay in the village of Gwou'ulu, we deployed a mobile phone research protocol. Building on Heather Horst and Daniel Miller's (2006) approach in Jamaica, we conducted object-centric interviews focused on individual villagers' mobile phones. During each of these semi-structured interviews, we discussed the life history of the phone in question and all previous phones owned by the individual. Then we went into the phone itself, going through each of the functions. After that, we focused on the SIM card and its telephonic data of call histories and contact lists. By studying the technology of SIM cards, understanding is generated of how social relations here are being rematerialized in digital visual media (see Hobbis, 2017a). In the same way, by studying the sociotechnical system of MicroSD cards, we were able to learn how visual media is being digitally rematerialized.

What we found on these MicroSDs was, as already indicated in the three brief introductory examples, a preponderance of multimedia files, with a majority of them produced outside of Solomon Islands: Hollywood movies, especially Westerns (see Hobbis, 2018a), foreign music, from ABBA to Rihanna to English gospel songs, as well as various types of images, often religious memes and pictures of celebrities such as soccer players. Songs were also commonly found, sourced from across Solomon Islands, many of them digitized versions of analogue recordings, such as 'Reggae Ina Solomons', a CD recorded in 1998 at Reggae Parrot Studio, Honiara, and including Lau bands such as 'White Sand Beach' and 'Sounds of Manaoba'. Across the 50 MicroSDs that we collected and that we discussed with their Lau owners, approximately 95% of the storage capacity was taken up by files not produced in the Lau Lagoon. They also included, on average, 20 pictures and one video taken in the immediate surroundings and depicting the owner of the respective MicroSD card or someone from their social networks.

Over time, we noticed that this distribution of files, the prioritization of foreign multimedia content, was closely linked to priorities about which files to delete at moments of shortage in digital storage. The pictures and movies downloaded from the Internet and transported to the village seem to be more treasured than the vast majority of family photos as well as videos. This was the case irrespective of if they were taken informally or at more formal events like a wedding. Family photos and videos seem to be disposable, a matter to be shrugged off. In comparison, foreign-produced images are carefully stored and actively restored in the totality of the digital storage capacity – the MicroSDs and inbuilt memory of mobile phones – of the village. Looking for an explanation of the difference between these two types, our investigation here focuses on the sociotechnical systems of visual media.

'Disposability' and consumption in Solomon Islands

The question is: what exactly, if anything, is new about this valuation in Solomon Islands life? Foreign, mass-produced, consumer goods have been shipped into Melanesia on a

semi-regular basis for decades (see Foster, 2002). Digital technology is only the most recent in a series of these industrially manufactured goods to sweep the country. On the margins of global capital, Solomon Islanders have long been active consumers creatively undertaking 'the selection, manipulation, and transformation of objects or of parts of objects' (Küchler, 2014: 533). T-shirts, second-hand shorts and a type of sarong named lavalava have almost wholly replaced previous modes of dress such as skirts and sporrans made of grasses. However, in many other cases, traditional and new technologies exist together. Fibreglass boats powered by outboard motors exist side-by-side dugout canoes. Mobile phones have been integrated into a communicative ecology, including conch bugles and slit gongs (see Hobbis, 2017a).

Christine Jourdan, who has worked extensively with urban and rural Kwaio of Central Malaita, previously investigated the incorporation of non-digital, foreign, mass-produced consumer goods in Solomon Islands with a focus on perceptions of their perceived 'disposability' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 60). In brief, Jourdan argues that Solomon Islanders do not treat the increasing number of foreign goods that enter Solomon Islands differently from locally produced goods. Both are considered ephemeral, which is the norm in this tropical ecology where 'the virgin forest and the sea provided . . . all [local goods], and still do' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 59). Just like houses made from pandanus leaves, also foreign goods, from bush knives to gas stoves to TV sets, are ultimately said to be recognized for their transience in Solomon Islanders' lives. They rarely last long. If they do, longevity ultimately depends on notable efforts to maintain these goods as they are exposed to the heat, humidity, sand and mud that define Solomon Islands corrosive tropical ecology. In this context, most local and foreign goods become part of everyday life with an expectation of eventual, often rapid, breakdown, and they are 'used in excess', commonly 'treated roughly' and eventually 'junked [not maintained]' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 61, 62).

This raises the question as to which goods Solomon Islanders treasure to such an extent that they are maintained or at least not 'treated roughly' and eventually abandoned. Jourdan argues that replicability, for example, how expensive a new mobile phone would be, and the functional[1] value of these goods only play a secondary role in decision making. Instead, she contends that Solomon Islanders consume (and, if possible, maintain) particular goods, first and foremost, for their 'symbolic value' and especially so for their 'exchange value' and the possibility for 'collective insertion' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 60) of these materials within processes of social reproduction that serve, above all, the goal of fixing, preserving and strengthening social identities and relations. Both local and foreign goods are, thus, above all, said to be valued for their differing, and often temporally situated, ability to materialize social relationships and abandoned, disposed of, 'junked' or deleted, when they no longer serve this purpose. The question is then not why there seems to be a casual relation to the deletion of (some) digital files. Instead, we ask how Solomon Islanders integrate particular multimedia files into processes of social reproduction. We need to know the conditions under which a specific digital file loses its value in comparison to other files and how this links to the broader tropical ecology in which they are used. In the following, we look to the anthropology of technology to answer that question.

An anthropology of technology involves an investigation into material constraints and perceived choices by examining material culture, techniques and sociotechnical systems – 'the system of material resources tools, operational sequences and skills, verbal and nonverbal knowledge, and specific modes of work coordination that come into play in the fabrication of material artefacts' (Pfaffenberger, 1992: 497). Sociotechnical systems are 'the distinctive technological activity that stems from the linkage of techniques and material culture to the social coordination of labour' (Pfaffenberger, 1992: 497), a process that we explore here through maintenance activities, 'the most widespread forms of technical expertise' (Edgerton, 2008: 80). Importantly, we move beyond Pfaffenberger's focus on labour towards a more holistic perspective. We do so by considering technological usage in the context of everyday life (Coupaye, 2013) and also by moving beyond a simplified and possibly unnecessary distinction between 'ritual' and 'mundane' objects (Lemonnier, 2012).[2] By paying attention to the choices and constraints that lead to particular acts of (digital) deletion, it becomes possible to develop a better understanding of how, when and why the Lau recognize particular visual media for their ability to contribute to social reproduction effectively.

The sociotechnical system of visual media in the digitizing Solomon Islands will then be explored here through the central theme of Jourdan's 'disposability' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 60) or what we refer to as the technological materialization of transience, or ephemera, as a quality of life in this tropic ecology at the margins of global capital. This is especially visible when moving beyond digital technologies and objects to consider the media ecology into which these new artefacts have been embedded. This allows for detailing the material conditions that constitute the realm of possibilities beyond mobile digital media, focusing on how they constrain, but also facilitate, particular sets of choices regarding the use of visual media for social reproduction.

Lau visual media ecology

A media ecology approach builds on Tacchi et al.'s (2003) concept of 'communicative ecology'. This approach places a holistic emphasis on the relationship between all mediated modes of communication regardless of materials or historical usage and facilitates a comparison with more historical, non-digital forms of information sharing, storing and deleting. At the same time, it keeps the analysis firmly situated in the everyday relationships the Lau have with (digital) visual materials. Sand and some ancestral material cultures are two types of visual media that are exemplary of existing sharing, storing and deleting practices, each shaped by strategies of flexibility linked to materializations of transience. Treating sand and ancestral artefacts as objects (Edwards and Hart, 2004), we show how together they are part of a broader visual media ecology. This ecology speaks to the ranges of uses, as well as the perceived relative benefits, in which digital visual media are incorporated into daily life.

Sand

For many in Solomon Islands, Gwou'ulu is synonymous with sand, specifically, white sand, owing to the village's location beside a long stretch of pristine beach. Framed by a

coral reef, this beach is over 2 km long and in some places several hundred metres across. It marks the north-western extremity of the Lau Lagoon, presenting a sense of the idyllic (see Baldacchino, 2010). More than nice scenery, the sand is used throughout Gwou'ulu as a domesticating material (Chevalier, 1998) that shapes the contours of the village and the social relationships it entails. Villagers regularly bring 'fresh' (clean) white sand up onto the village to cover its surface. They use it as flooring in the kitchen, where it absorbs kitchen mess, and under the *falangi*, a leaf sided and roofed building raised above the ground on piles driven into the sand.

Under the house, family members chat and neighbours visit, in many ways comparable to the North American practice of porch sitting. People gather underneath the *falangi* like they would around the stoops or front porches of private residences, both for incidental and purposeful social interaction (see Donlon, 2001). However, dogs, cats, children and all types of animals urinate and defaecate into the sand. Adults will dig a small hole with their hand and spit betel nut stained saliva into it, covering the hole up with more sand. Over time, the sand darkens, mixed with dirt from the jungle surrounding the other side of the village. Rain carries the sand back to the beach. All of these forces require villagers to replenish the sand. As a form of sand maintenance, women sweep the sand around their houses daily. At least every other month, greater efforts are required. Older children are tasked to organize brigades of younger children who carry bags of 'fresh' sand from the beach to particular households. This labour is highly valued. Maintaining the sand entails maintaining the ultimate space for everyday Lau sociality. Houses and households without sufficiently clean sand are often avoided and quickly become the centre of village gossip – why had residents stopped maintaining the sand? What had happened? Did somebody fall ill? Was there a marital dispute? Hence, sand exemplifies the strategic curation of particular materials that are, within this tropical ecology, essentially ephemeral and that require continued maintenance just like the social relationships that they entail.

Ancestral material cultures

In some ways similar to sand, ancestral material culture helps Solomon Islanders to navigate day-to-day life (Burt and Bolton, 2014). Things like war canoes, clubs, shell money and valuables, stone and wood carvings like statuettes are often valued variously as currency, heirlooms and commodities as well as for the properties of mana, or power, as well as beauty and sanctity. Above all, they are central for strengthening social relations (e.g. see Maranda and Revolon, 2013). For instance, they play a crucial role in bridewealth exchanges and mortuary rituals which remain cornerstones of social reproduction (e.g. see Akin, 1999). Because of this, the life of these ancestral materials that, like sand, otherwise decay quickly within this tropical ecology is extended through maintenance practices, described vividly in one of Jourdan's ethnographic vignettes:

> Solo often looks over his shell necklaces lovingly: he unwraps them, rethreads them if need be, examines them again and again, and finally puts them back in their place when he has satisfied himself that everything is in order. Solo takes the same intensive amount of care of the *subi* (ceremonial club made of hard wood) which he inherited from his father and which bears a famous name. (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 59)

This said, ancestral material culture is also exemplary for how goods can become, at least for some Solomon Islanders, 'disposable'. Within the context of Christian conversions, for instance, ceremonial clubs, like the *subi* Jourdan mentioned, have been actively destroyed in acts of ancestral iconoclasm. By destroying ancestral artefacts and sacred sites, Solomon Islanders aim to demonstrate, and finalize, their embrace of the Christian god by altogether abandoning ancestral ways (e.g. see McDougall, 2015; Ryuju, 2012; White, 1991). As Debra McDougall (2015) suggests, in particular, indigenous missionaries were committed to permanently transform ancestral spaces to curtail the dangerous powers that they entailed. This transformation of space, in turn, is deemed most effectively achieved by 'junking' ancestral artefacts through ritual pollution, for example, by a potentially menstruating woman touching it, through 'acts of "blessing," "anointing" and "baptizing"' (White, 1991: 108), or by leaving them exposed to the environments, throwing them into the sea or even selling them to tourists. In the eyes of these Christian converts, ancestral materials have lost the ability to materialize desired social relationships. They have shifted, in the language of sand, from white to darkened and thus become disposable and in need of replacement, often through Christian artefacts.[3]

Sand and ancestral material cultures are but two examples for how the sociotechnical system of visual materials in the digitizing Lau Lagoon is defined by a strategic curation of visual media that both environmentally expects and creates ephemerality. Digital multimedia files are another. Digital multimedia files and the choices made about their storage or deletion are embedded in comparable processes of valuation for their contributions to social reproduction while being similarly and fundamentally constrained by the tropical ecology in which they operate.

The materialized transience of Lau digital visual media

Mobile phones, specifically Internet-enabled smartphones, are increasingly widespread and have become interwoven into daily village life across Melanesia. While many note the pragmatic value of keeping in touch with kin telephonically (Lipset, 2013), a handset's primary use, at least among the Lau, is as a multimedia entertainment device (Hobbis, 2017b). Representing unprecedented access to the means of producing, storing and consuming visual information, mobile phones are, however, also subject to the same harmful forces existing in the non-digital visual ecology. Of the 100 mobile phones in our research protocol, the vast majority had been purchased in the previous year, frequently as a replacement. The ability to fix problems with mobile phones in the village is limited to simple repairs like taping a broken plastic cover that had lost the tabs that affix it to the handset. None of Gwou'ulu villagers or residents of neighbouring villages had the skill set required to repair mobile phones that had, for example, a broken screen.

Beyond a trip to town, the only solution is preventive maintenance. This includes diligently keeping sand from entering the internal mechanism. It also means avoiding aggressive hand gestures that can easily snap the backplate even through a gentle operation of the buttons on both the interface and the internal mechanism. Connecting the MicroSD and SIM cards to their respective ports requires patience, given the frailty of the system. Knowledge of how to safely remove and insert SIM and MicroSD cards and

of how to fix the mechanism used to keep the two cards in place is widespread in the village. Paul, a villager in his late 20s, provides an exemplary description:

> The place where the MicroSD card goes sometimes breaks, or does not work well [makes gesture that demonstrates how to put in and take out a MicroSD card]. It has a buckle that comes out easily. So sometimes you have to put a piece of paper on top of the MicroSD card to keep the memory card in place, so it can be read by that particular phone, so that the memory card does not move. We know about this based on our own experience, . . . if you put that memory card in without any paper it would move [and, therefore, not work].

Another challenge lies in the 'shareability' of digital media. Digital media is overexposed, contained on and, more dangerously, shared across many storage devices. A vulnerability facing Solomon Islands Internet is exposure to computer viruses transmitted by exchanging files between 'offline' mobile phones. Data are generalized for redundancy because computer viruses move alongside the files, also flowing into and through the villages. A tropical pathology of computer viruses plagues these remote ecosystems of digital storage capacity, isolated from updates for anti-virus software. The presence of computer viruses in the offline system amplifies until, at one point, even high-performing anti-virus software cannot prevent a computer crash. When doing the mobile phone research protocol, Geoffrey inserted MicroSD cards into his laptop, and his anti-virus software would do its best to clean the card. Anywhere from one up to 67 viruses were cleaned at a time; so many that, on one occasion, Geoffrey's computer crashed. The biography of mobile phones and their components is thus a new iteration of the previously detailed long-standing complex of constraints linked to its tropical ecology on the margins of global capital.

In addition, a significant constraint to viewing as well as producing both still and moving images is the limited storage space of MicroSD cards which in 2014 Gwou'ulu ranged between 125 MB and 2 GB storage capacity. MicroSD cards are often full, and while some villagers can afford multiple cards, these too are often full. Inevitably, people are forced to delete files. This creates the paradox that while digitalized information is typically more durable than information recorded through analogue techniques (such as a compact disc which is easily scratched), the digital information stored in Lau MicroSDs is ephemeral, constrained by the limitations of digital storage.[4] We found this limitation actively curtailed the production of digital files by villagers, as they often prioritize music, movie and video files sourced from town.

So, what explains this hierarchy of digital media files? Again, the value of different files for social relations stands out. All multimedia files are freely shared, looked at and discussed with anyone expressing an interest in them. In the social spaces on the white sand, people would occupy their time with small talk, card playing and surfing the media files of their phones. A group of men might sit around a mobile phone discussing a picture of a soccer player using it as stimulation for wider-reaching discussions about the sport. Sometimes women watch secretly in their kitchen away from men who may not approve their media choice, frequently romantic movies (see Hobbis, 2017b). Similarly, some adults watch privately in the middle of the night away from the prying eyes of children. Other times families, and really anyone walking by and interested in the movie

shown, squeeze together jockeying for a sightline to the screen. Movies are often, and on mobile phones increasingly, watched in some privacy. Still, foreign media, especially movies, have become common topics of discussion and conversation among villagers, when washing laundry, paddling to gardens or relaxing on the white sand beach. As such, they have become central to everyday sociality and social reproduction.

For example, one night, we found ourselves in the midst of a large group of men from all age groups. We were watching a copy of Sylvester Stallone's *The Expendables 2*, featuring an ensemble cast of action heroes from the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. The crowd was brimming with excitement. Different audience members blurted out the names of their favourite heroes, from Chuck Norris, who was particularly popular among the older audience members, to Jet Li, who had a stronger following among Gwou'ulu youth. Viewers shared when, where and with whom they had watched other movies with these actors. They explained what they liked about this or that movie and why others should (or should not) be watching them as well. They were even more excited when it turned out that someone had a digital copy of one of the talked about movies. Quickly space would be made on a MicroSD card to transfer the new movie via Bluetooth. They deleted anything that was deemed less important, often, images and videos taken in Gwou'ulu or its environs. These newly obtained movies were then watched over the next days and weeks, individually and in newly formed groups, talked about again on the white sand beach and shaping many conversations in the village. In the end, the shareability, or 'exchange value', of particular files and their role in maintaining and strengthening social networks made them so valuable that they were stored to the detriment of other files.[5] Indeed, these foreign files did, as Geoffrey argued elsewhere (Hobbis, 2017b), become so significant that they are increasingly part of remittance networks. They even serve as a quasi-replacement for sending more expensive goods, from a sack of rice to cash itself.

But what about locally produced pictures and movies? What about their shareability and significance for social relationships? Anthropologies of photography in Solomon Islands (Wright, 2004, 2013) and beyond (Deger, 2016; Edwards, 2012) suggest that photographs 'cannot be contained in the relation between the visual and its material support but rather through an expanded sensory realm of the social in which photographs are put to work' (Edwards, 2012: 228). Photographs materialize forms of attachment, '[retaining] a physical, bodily connection' (Wright, 2004: 76) and linking families across time and space, even beyond death. In the words of Makoni, a Western Solomon Islander interviewed by Christopher Wright (2004),

> After he had died I looked at that photograph and my father was still alive. When I look at the photograph I say 'that is my father'. It is him. It is the paper shadow [*maqomaqo*]. It is his soul [*maqomaqo*]. (p. 75)

Also among the Lau, family photographs are treasured for the social relationships that they contain, signify and deepen when they are shared and even individually consumed. This is, to some degree, reflected in Jennifer's story of deletion, briefly outlined in the 'Introduction' section. She only deleted the videos of the St. Michael's celebrations after she had remembered the event with her family and others keen to watch and discuss the

videos. Only when interest in, and the attachment to, this shared experience vanished, did she choose to delete and replace these files. A perhaps even more apparent and significant example is Marvin's decision to delete the pictures of his granddaughter's baptism. In his case conversion of the picture, from digital file to a printed, laminated photograph preceded the deletion. His daughter-in-law, and mother of the child, now carefully stores the printed photograph in her Anglican prayer book and often revisits for its social significance, for example, by discussing it with other churchgoers.

The transformation from digital to print photograph and its links to Solomon Islands tropical ecology help explain why digital family pictures (and, though less apparent, videos) are at least digitally more 'disposable' than foreign multimedia despite their materialization of social relationships. Villagers rarely store pictures that truly deserve maintenance digitally because they deem digital storage more transient than their non-digital alternatives. Printed pictures, especially without lamination, are subject to environmental damage from heat, water, the sun, sand and so on. The Lau often also have a highly physical relationship with printed pictures manifested in frequent tactile encounters. All human hands are oily and leave a contact residue that, over time, creates a sort of patina that obfuscates the image, eventually erasing them (Wright, 2013). However, once laminated (a service offered by most stores in Honiara that also print pictures), the photograph is more resistant to this tropical ecology. It can survive for years unlike the ephemeral digital materials that, as previously described, can die quickly, for example, exposed to one of Solomon Islands various computer viruses.

Conclusion

In Solomon Islands tropical ecology at the margins of global capital, many local and foreign materials struggle for survival, materializing transience as a particular quality of Solomon Islanders' lives. Even sand needs to be maintained, at least when it is central to the social environment of a village environment. Digital technologies and media are no different. They suffer from all kinds of ailments, from sand, humidity, mechanical failure, viruses, to, in terms of storage, the limited storage space of the MicroSD cards available and affordable to the majority of Solomon Islanders without regular access to a cash-based income.

These tropical constraints require Solomon Islanders to make choices about which materials they choose, or at least attempt, to maintain, even if they have to go through tremendous effort to do so. Crucially, these choices are not, or not as much, based on replicability or functionality but on their role in the public sphere, their 'exchange value' and potential for 'collective insertion' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 60). In other words, depending on their ability to materialize social relationships, materials are maintained, and in the case of digital media files either stored or 'used in excess', 'junked' (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996: 61, 62) and deleted. This is visible in some Solomon Islanders' decision to destroy ancestral artefacts that are no longer deemed important and possibly counterproductive to social reproduction. It is equally visible in Solomon Islanders' decision to delete some digital media files at the expense of others.

The digital files that our interlocutors treasured the most *as* digital files are foreign multimedia. These files have become central to processes of social reproduction as they

are integrated into reciprocal remittance economies (Hobbis, 2017b) and the everyday socialities of village environments. Foreign audio-/visual media files are widely shared, frequently discussed and often communally watched. In comparison, pictures and videos produced by the Lau themselves appear to be digitally less valuable. Villagers also share and publicly discuss such files. Still, they are often less significant for maintaining everyday social relations and not as exciting over extended periods. Hence, villagers delete them at the expense of foreign audio-/visual media as the most essential *digital* material. Family pictures, on the contrary, are so significant within processes of social reproduction that some of them are, in the end, 'rescued' from digital environments by being printed and laminated. In this tropical ecology at the margins of global capital, digital storage is, thus, neither recognizable for its ubiquity nor its reliability. Instead, it constitutes, above all, another materialization of transience in this visual technological history.

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Notes

1. Pierre Lemonnier (2012) complicates this more simplistic distinction by highlighting how most objects are part-functional and part-non-functional. However, the basic tenants of Jourdan's (Philibert and Jourdan, 1996) proposition remain valid from this conceptualization. Lemonnier (2012) also emphasizes the centrality of these part-functional and part-non-functional objects for the stability and reproduction of particular sociocultural configurations.
2. Jourdan makes a distinction between everyday and ritual materials by placing them along a nature–culture continuum. We agree with Lemonnier (2012) that this creates an unnecessary and partially problematic binary.
3. The destruction of artefacts under the influence of Christianity is not omnipresent, with notable differences depending on Christian denominations. For example, McDougall (2015) suggests that while Seventh Day Adventist converts often embraced a comprehensive cleansing of ancestral powers, the Methodist Mission more frequently sought to marginalize rather than destroy them.
4. The storage capacities of MicroSDs have, to some degree, become less significant since we returned from the field. In mid-2015, Gwou'ulu got more regular (yet still interrupted) access to more affordable Internet and especially Facebook. After a brief flurry of Facebook activity, most villagers now use the platform to store some of those family photos that they previously

deleted. However, based on our now frequent, Facebook-based interactions with Gwou'ulu villagers (see also Dalsgaard, 2016), even the existence of family photos on Facebook is transient. Most of our Gwou'ulu Facebook friends' accounts are ephemeral. Facebook accounts are deleted all the time. Often this happens because Facebook is deemed to disrupt social relations, for example, because, similar to mobile telephony (see Hobbis, 2017b), they are said to lead to extramarital affairs. Another problem is lost passwords. Some of our Gwou'ulu Facebook friends have a cascading number of accounts that they can no longer access and that linger, lifeless, among our list of Facebook friends.

5. It was also common to delete foreign movies, images and music files that had fallen out of popularity, not only by the person who stored them on their MicroSD card but also, if not more importantly, by others with shared interest determining the extent to which files would be maintained (in as far as possible).

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