

Geoffrey Hobbis (2020). *The digitizing family: An ethnography of Melanesian smartphones*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 220pp. ISBN: 978-3-0303-4928-8. Hbk: €75. Pbk: €50. E-book: €43.

This book reports on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by the author in 2014 in Gwou'ulu, a village in Malaita Province of Solomon Islands, a small archipelago state in the Pacific. After an initial period of six months during which the male author undertook activities such as fishing with male villagers, while his wife spent her days engaged in women's activities, the author turned his attention to the use of mobile telephones.

The author introduces and refers to mobile telephony literature on Melanesia in a comprehensive manner. He includes studies from the neighbouring small archipelago state of Vanuatu and those from Papua New Guinea. The author argues that many of these studies were focused on urban or peri-urban communities. He suggests that his study makes a unique contribution because it presents in-depth understanding based on lengthy immersion in a rural community. Indeed, a number of previous assertions about uses of mobile telephones play out differently in Gwou'ulu. For instance, earlier studies have described Melanesian uses of cold calling techniques for expanding contact lists, making new friends and searching for romantic partners. In Gwou'ulu, by contrast, this behaviour was not evident. Having reviewed the call history in one hundred mobile telephones as part of a research interview protocol, the author established that Gwou'ulu villagers rarely make telephone calls. When they do make calls, these are brief, involving relatives, and usually related to emergencies or important life events.

A gradual change that has occurred in Melanesia over the past decade or so has been an introduction of internet-enabled smartphones. Of the 100 mobile telephones examined in detail in Gwou'ulu in 2014, fifty were smartphones. The remainder would have been basic or feature handsets, although the author does not confirm this. The book includes a helpful description of the two mobile network operators and the accessible stores, as well as the views of villagers about the available services. Villagers express a preference for having two SIM (Subscriber Identity Module) cards in order to have network access when the other network is down. There is a fascinating description of the hazards that mobile telephone handsets face in this tropical, coastal setting, such as sand grains, colonising insects, or even water infiltration: for instance, if someone is using a telephone in a canoe or outboard motorboat, and a wave washes over the craft. While half of the telephones are smartphones, no-one in the village used the internet on their handset while in the village.

One of the chapter titles in the book is 'The babysitting smartphone'. Here, the author explains that marriage is occurring at a younger age than it did in earlier times, the villagers no longer adhere to post-coital taboos and contraceptives are not available. Coupled with decreases in childhood deaths due to illnesses for which there are now treatments and vaccinations, these factors and others have led to a substantial increase in the number of children in the village. Therefore, child care is a time-consuming chore that interferes with other adult tasks such as gardening and cooking. Enter technology. With movies on MicroSD memory cards that are brought from the capital city Honiara, smartphone screens are used to occupy children while adults attend to other matters.

Another valuable contribution of this book is the description of the interplay between sorcery and mobile telephones. Concepts of malevolent sorcery and love magic are explained in a straightforward manner. In particular, the explanation of contagious magic and how it is believed to work over distance using mobile telephones is insightful. Unlike homeopathic magic, contagious magic is based on the premise that whatever is done to an object impacts a

person who has had contact with the object in the same manner. Similarly, mysterious telephone calls may cause the recipient to die, if not for counter measures, such as making the sign of the cross on the handset.

The book includes colour photographs, the presentation of which is challenging for the reader because the references to them in parentheses seem to be in many cases in the wrong position. On frequent occasions, there is a reference to a photograph that seems irrelevant to the text. Although in some of these cases, subsequent text explains the relevance of the image, this is a distraction to the reader that could have been addressed. A glossary or list of local terms would also be a welcome addition.

The title of the book, headings and the text frequently refer to ‘smartphones’. Given that half of the handsets examined closely were not smartphones, the use of this term could have been replaced by the more accurate ‘mobile telephones’.

The book is a valuable and welcome addition to the literature on mobile telephones in small island jurisdictions. It presents insights into villager uses of handsets, accompanied by descriptions of contact lists and call histories in handsets, views about use, and village happenings.

An advantage of the selection of the research site is that other anthropologists wrote about the society and culture in the area decades earlier. The author compares what he found to what earlier anthropologists found in that location and similar settings, showing change over time. For example, attitudes, beliefs and practices around taking children to the garden have changed, as well as those regarding physical punishment of children.

There are captivating sections in this original book that shed light on the incorporation of portable digital devices into village life in the Pacific region. For instance, there is a detailed explanation of the movie preferences of the church, the school, women and men. Tensions arise because the views of these four groups differ. Like other analyses in the book, the description of these tensions is handled by the author with sensitivity and considered thought.

The book will be of interest to several types of scholars, in particular those focused on Melanesia, and those interested in technology and social change.

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