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A Handset Dangling in a Doorway: Mobile Phone Sharing in a Rural Sepik Village (Papua New Guinea)

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Figure 4. Aimiru performed in Darapap village to welcome the author

Source: Photo by David Lipset, 2014

In August 2014, I hired a small boat to travel east along the 65-kilometre stretch of coast from Wewak town to the Murik Lakes, a rather remote and undeveloped region where I have done fieldwork since the 1980s. After three hours or so on the ocean, the boat entered one of the two openings into the lakes, which are a large coastal system of mangrove lagoons at the mouth of the Sepik River, and drew up to the lakeshore at Darapap village (see Figure 5).¹ A small welcoming ceremony was underway for which a handful of men and women had adorned themselves with shell ornaments and red body paint. Just below the front of the Men's House, they were performing Aimaru, the dance that features a fish-spirit figure on a pole encircling the troupe as its holder bobs it up and down (see Figure 4; see also Lipset 2009). On the boat, a villager from Wewak town, who was with me to witness the little spectacle, wondered out loud, in a tone of mild exasperation, whether someone had died. As we climbed out of the boat, a middle-aged woman, whom I had known for many years as an older sister of my ex-wife, came and took my hand and led me through the thick, wet mud to shake hands with everybody: the dancers, the chorus of men with hand drums, as well as a few spectators who had turned up to watch.

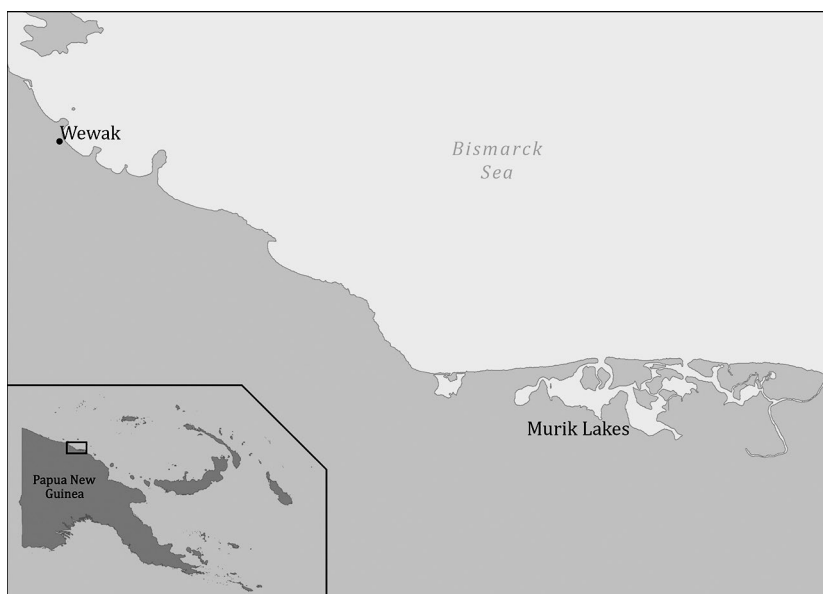


Figure 5. Wewak town and the Murik Lakes

Source: David Lipset, U-Spatial, University of Minnesota

1 My first visit to Darapap village took place in 1981 and my last visit was in 2012. This was my 11th visit.

Now, aside from my fellow passenger's uncertainty about what it meant, the successful coordination of urban–rural time and space upon which the preceding scene had been contingent was based on mobile communication, the moral economy of which I propose to explore in this chapter (Ling and Campbell 2008). Although the Murik communities, and the Lower Sepik region more generally, were not then served by Digicel, villagers knew of certain spots where rather unreliable signals could be received and sent from handsets. Signal strength, although never very strong, was known to fluctuate at certain times of the day. In Darapap village, signal reception is located at a particular stretch of beach for an hour or two at and after dawn, or in a doorway of a house.

In this instance, the village councillor, who was then in town, had alerted folks back in Darapap via a handset dangling in the aforementioned doorway that I was in Wewak and was intending to make my way yet again to the village, arriving around midday the following day. I am viewed there with some equivocation, I must say, partly as adoptive kinsman and a 'Darapap son' and, inevitably, as an elite dignitary. But, apparently, there was some sentiment among men in my age cohort to honour my arrival with a welcoming ceremony (which had never been staged for any other of my returns).

In the event, my fellow passenger's irritation had apparently arisen from the moral economy that the performers took for granted. The dance was a gesture of hospitality for which he said he felt unprepared and therefore humiliated. Having not been told about it, he had not prepared anything for me to reciprocate the dancers, the conventional counter-gift being an 18-kilogram bag of rice, a case of tinned fish and a carton or two of beer, which I should have deposited in the middle of the dancers' circle.

Mobile phone communication of the sort I found going on between town and the Murik villages may be positioned in between digital piracy and Grameen-like, village phone sharing (Cohen 2001).² It is not part of an illegitimate economy because its relationship to the corporate

2 The Grameen model refers to a payphone system in rural Bangladesh under which micro-entrepreneurs, who are mainly women, borrow money for a special landline configured for multiple-user accounts and rural access via powerful antennas. The entrepreneur purchases minutes in bulk, which she resells to customers in her village. She gets a livelihood and her village gets connectivity. The approach has been assessed not only in terms of business efficiency, scalability and sustainability, but also in terms of gender empowerment and social transformation (Aminuzzaman 2002; Aminuzzaman, Baldersheim and Jamil 2003; Bayes 2001).

infrastructure is not illegal. In order to make calls from serendipitous spots where a signal reception takes place, Digicel credit units must be used. Moreover, the reception of the calls is not the result of any kind of bypass or siphoned-off solution that is accessed outside legal structures. Legal rights are not infringed. Civil society is not contested via the use of unauthorised media connections. Mobile phone use outside the network is not an illegitimate double, like Nigerian bootleg copies of feature-length, Hollywood films (Larkin 2004). Rather, its similarity to piracy consists in the way in which the network has exceeded its boundaries, the degradation and technological irregularity of its quality outside of those boundaries and, lastly, in the avid interest of a population living there to link their peripheral community to kin in the Melanesian modernity emerging in Papua New Guinea. So, rather than corporate piracy, the main purpose of the mobile phone sharing that I found on this periphery was moral. It was collective. It was meant to integrate dispersed kin across time and space in the nation-state.

Mobile Telephones in Urban Melanesia

Since the 2005 decision of the government of the then prime minister Michael Somare to deregulate competition among information and communication technology (ICT) providers in the country, and the entrance of Digicel into the mobile phone market two years later (see Stanley 2008: 26), attitudes about and expectations of the impact of mobile phones in Papua New Guinea have been lively, to say the least (Temple 2011: 59). Government officials hoped that modernity in Papua New Guinea was now only a phone call away. When introducing the new PNG National Information and Communications Technology policy, then minister for public enterprise, information and development cooperation, Hon. Arthur Somare, saw ICT and was consumed with longing. ICT, he declared, had done nothing less than:

transform ... the rest of the world, providing opportunities for businesses, opening access to the global marketplace, delivering a wealth of information, enhancing social interaction, enabling greater community participation and bridging the digital divide that may develop as a consequence of the advancement of technology over time. (Somare 2007)

Grey literature from The Australian National University predicted that ICT in Papua New Guinea would increase information flows and make government more transparent by allowing bloggers to expose corruption and demand accountability (Logan 2012). Mobile phones would also increase women's access to education. In a working paper on money transfers in the Asia-Pacific region, Singh and Nadarajah (2011) predicted that 'mobile money' – transferred via mobile phones – would facilitate payments for cash crops, such as coffee, and benefit Papua New Guinea's remittance economy. Notably, major banks (Tainda 2011; Bank of the South Pacific 2011) began targeting rural customers in the country to whom they referred as the 'unbanked'. One bank partnered with mobile communication service providers and the sole power company in the country, the state-owned PNG Power Ltd, to enable consumers to purchase electricity using mobile phones (Robby 2012).

Research also extolled its contributions to healthcare delivery in the new modernity. Au (2009) studied 'telehealth' in several provincial hospitals and found that young male physicians and paramedics used ICT resources to better their knowledge and skills. Yamo (2013) did a subsequent project on the impact of mobile phone use in healthcare services in the Western Highlands. He interviewed a health officer who described the delivery of a twin baby in a breech position via instructions given over a phone, which avoided the necessity of a caesarean section. Suwamaru (2014) found the following principle uses of mobile phones in urban Papua New Guinea: for business purposes; as an Internet portal; to maintain contact with, enable remittances to and exchange phone credit with kin and friends; and, lastly, to contact healthcare services and schools. In particular, many people praised the 'instant contact' that ICT allowed with kin.

Generally speaking, official attitudes and academic research acclaimed mobile phones for facilitating rational communicative action – to evoke Habermas's notion of modernity (1984). But purposes that defy rational incorporation have also been noticed. Simmel (1978) and others (Goffman 1967; Berger 1979, 1992; Giddens 1990, 1991; Seligman 1997) argue that modern pluralism and anonymity permit the self to initiate autonomous relationships with the other; for example, in courtship and friendship. At the same time, such independence raises a problem of trust in modern relationships, with trust referring to the moral expectation of reliability and honesty in dialogue. Now it is true that I, as well as others, have argued that forms of dissimulation (Lipset 2013), or what Andersen has called 'lies and trickery' (2013), preceded modernity in PNG societies (see also Kulick 1992). But mobile telephones seem to

have enabled the development of peculiar forms of moral economy. I am referring to *gesfaia*, which is Tok Pisin for random phone calls made by anonymous callers – strangers who may be either men or women, but are mostly made by men. These calls are made to unknown people with whom lengthy conversations are then conducted, ‘phone friendships’ may then evolve in which gifts of phone credit are transferred (Andersen 2013; Jorgensen n.d.).³ Andersen’s informants, who were young women in a nursing school in a Highlands town in 2011–12, took pleasure from such conversations by answering their anonymous callers, whom they presumed were lying about their marital status, with no less made-up stories about their own status. In other words, the *gesfaia* calls enabled by mobile telephones disembedded voices of the young in particular, from moral time and space. They suggest the rise of a decidedly Melanesian form of individualism, one that is free of social constraints imposed by kin and foreground the ambiguity of contemporary urban life.⁴ Mobile phone calls refer to the self rather than to place and its moral community. They create a version of privacy in which the self prefers morally ambiguous relationships with the other to social isolation.

I also want to draw attention to a couple of other intriguing and relevant uses of mobile phones by youth in the capital of nearby Vanuatu. On the one hand, inboxes and outgoing call logs on mobile phones have become a record of licit and illicit intimate moral interaction – thus becoming a legible kind of gossip. On the other hand, however, young people are known to deliberately turn off their phones in order to ‘disconnect’ from the other. They do not seek solitude or privacy. They do not seek to preserve a communicative space for an individuated self, but are rather motivated by a desire to ‘manipulate their partners’ emotions, hoping to rekindle [their] ... feelings of love, need or attachment’ (Kraemer 2017: 50; cf. Archambault 2013).⁵ In the world they inhabit, where the love, care and support of kin is often lacking, the agency to turn off the new technology is not meant to give rise to independence from society, it is rather symptomatic of the precariousness and *anomie* of urban life. They try to maintain personal relationships above all else, for all of their social and material values, as they may be.

3 Andersen (2013) also claims that Digicel representatives were among the first to engage in *gesfaia* calls to young women giving them phone credits to encourage consumer uptake.

4 Similarly, Kraemer reports that ‘young people often’ ask strangers whether they ‘have a mobile phone’ by way of seeking their permission to call or text them at some point in the future (2015).

5 Women also expressed concerns that mobile phones were used for sorcery and/or witchcraft, fears that led many of them to turn their phones off at night (Kraemer 2013: 178).

Mobile Telephones in the Rural Melanesia

Thus far, I have discussed the ethnography of mobile phone technology in Melanesian cities, where the infrastructure of the postcolonial state is evident, if rather unpredictably so. In many rural villages, as I pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, not only is infrastructure, such as electricity and water, lacking, so is signal reception. What is not lacking is a keen desire for connectivity. Writing of a remote people living along the Upper Frieda River, who were on the verge of hosting the construction of a major gold mine, Sullivan reported that they ‘explicitly asked to bring in towers’ (2010: 3). Likewise, Watson (2011) found that, after Digicel’s mobile coverage rollout in the first years after 2007, basic mobile handsets sold out in Madang Province to excited rural people who barely knew how to operate one. In no-service areas, rural villagers search for or unexpectedly come upon random spots where signal reception, although weak, may be accessed – in trees, for example (Telban and Vávrová 2014). Who do they want to call?

The few reports we do have about rural mobile phone use emphasise its embeddedness in social structure and cosmology and, willy nilly, its relationship to modernity. In a Vanuatu-based case, we hear of an overriding wish to stay in touch with kin (Lindstrom 2011). In another, mobile phones are said to aid chiefly claims in ritual status competitions. ‘Mobile phones are routinely praised by ... men for facilitating the complex exchanges of pigs and other forms of wealth that take place in male grade-taking ceremonies’ (Taylor 2015: 8–9). Likewise, in the Southern Highlands province of Papua New Guinea, Macdonald has discussed contemporary tribal warfare among Kewa people that had been suppressed by the Australian administration in the mid-20th century but re-emerged in the 1990s in a more deadly, yet recognisable, form. Now armed with powerful modern weapons and new motives, warriors sent texts to coordinate fighting, the phone credit for which was supplied to them by middle-class Kewa elites (Macdonald and Kirami 2016: 113–14).

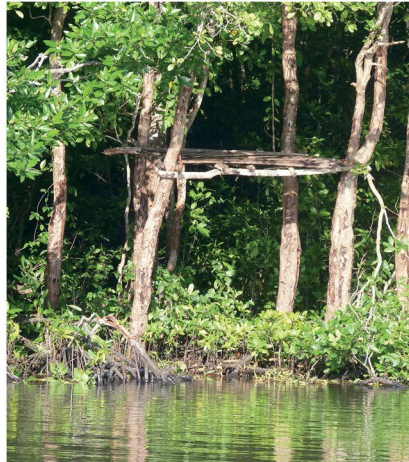
Two practices among a remote Upper Sepik River community shed more light on the embeddedness of mobile phone use in social structure and cosmology. Lacking a signal in the village, Ambonwari people turn on phones at the end of a 10-hour trip downriver to the district seat, where there is reception. They call kin in town with a heads up about their imminent arrival – and to ask for phone credit. Once in town, they turn

speakers off and leave them off, except in the company of kin. They also refrain from giving out phone numbers. When their numbers become too well known and they start receiving ‘suspicious ... calls, they ... buy a new SIM card and get a new number’ (Telban and Vávrová 2014: 228). Certain phone numbers, moreover, have to be kept absolutely secret because they are understood to be a way to speak to the dead – deceased sons, in particular – who could make bank deposits on behalf of parents and give them access to ‘goods and ways of life which are typical of otherwise hidden realms inhabited by the dead and white people’ (Telban and Vávrová 2014: 237). In other words, in their transition to town, Ambonwari mobile phones enter modern spaces of anonymous sociality and resources – modern spaces of which they are both distrustful yet which inspire desire. And this is the point I foreground in this chapter: how the new connectivity is informed by the moral economy that predates it and thus constitutes an emergent Melanesian modernity. As described in my introduction, I encountered a relatively clear-cut, although rather differently toned, expression of this kind of vernacular modernity in 2014, upon my return to the Murik villages.

Phone-sharing in a Lower Sepik Village

In addition to being a zone of no economic development, Papua New Guinea provides no infrastructure to the Murik Lakes, other than the occasional outboard motor and boat, money and primary education. There are plenty of commodities in circulation around the villages, however, ranging from bags of rice, fishhooks, second-hand clothing to radios, generators and wristwatches, amongst much else. But the Murik small-scale fishery has struggled to find its market in recent years, particularly in light of increasing costs of fuel. The moral economy combines reciprocities among kin and mini-market exchanges; also among kin, a combination of local and modern values and norms that, by contemporary standards, might equate to a kind of poverty. People go on living in bush material houses, doing subsistence fishing on a daily basis and buying processed sago flour and garden produce from hereditary trading partners – purchases that are also meant for subsistence consumption. There is no electricity, no water and no sewage. The Digicel coverage map shows a gap in the service it provides: its network extends to perhaps 60 per cent of the province, but excludes both the Murik Lakes and the rest of the Lower Sepik. People have radios and, therefore, they do not entirely live off the

grid. They listen to the state-owned National Broadcasting Corporation, which broadcasts from Port Moresby and from its regional satellite station in Wewak, the capital of the East Sepik Province.



Figures 6–8. Some spots where signal reception was possible in the Murik Lakes

Source: Photos by David Lipset, 2010–12

But villagers have a strong desire for ‘perpetual connectivity’ with kin. Indeed, the force of what might be called their collective id in this regard is inexhaustible. To access the network, I have seen ladders propped up

against trees, platforms built in mangrove trees, as well as people standing on particular spots of beaches at odd times of the day (see figures 6–8). In each of these places, mobile signals are said to be momentarily, but unpredictably, accessible and individuals with power in the batteries of their handsets and credit units to burn, repair there and try to call kin in Wewak town or elsewhere in the country. In 2014, a handset hung by a line in an interior doorway of a small house in Darapap village. The venue was the private residence of a young married couple, Venis and Erik, who lived there with two children. During early mornings, late afternoons and at night, a signal reached this distinctively van Gennepian spot (1960), and incoming calls were received from kin living in Wewak town. Here, in the space in between a kitchen and a bedroom, was a portal to and from urban modernity (see Figure 9). What was the relationship of the device to village society? What concept of ‘public’ did it constitute in a kinship-based community? And what impact did it have on rural time and space?

While Venis admired how the dangling phone enabled communication over long distances (Ling and Yttri 2002), she also pointed out that, on occasion, it gave rise to confusion over physical and social space. When she went to town, and brought her phone with her, sometimes people called expecting to have reached the village. ‘Should somebody ring while I am in town [with my phone], I will say, “Sorry, I am not in the village”, and they don’t call back.’ In other words, the dangling phone does not enable the kind of anonymous calls to which I referred above. It is a link to another kind of modernity.

When I asked how she and her husband managed the only working phone in Darapap, Venis phrased her answer in terms of the gift – for example, in terms of a moral economy of sentiment and generalised reciprocity – rather than in terms of a commoditised service (Sahlins 1974). She viewed phone access as the provision of a collective service. She and her husband had turned the dangling handset, whose battery she recharged with a solar panel,⁶ into a phone booth for which she served as intermediary. ‘Whatever kind of call comes to the house,’ she allowed, ‘I take a message to whomever it is meant for.’ She elaborated a little about what she meant

6 The provincial government started a fisheries project a few years earlier for which it had erected small freezer houses with solar panels and batteries in each of the Murik villages. The project never got beyond this point, however, and the equipment was eventually dismantled by villagers and the solar panels were put in use as their ‘owners’ saw fit.

1. A HANDSET DANGLING IN A DOORWAY

by the phrase ‘whatever kind of call’: they might be angry, or they might be open-ended. But they were all personal in nature. That is, giving voice as they did to kin living in a particularistic social order, they were made in a space that was both public yet private.



Figure 9. A mobile phone hanging by a doorway in Darapap village

Source: Photo by David Lipset, 2014

She did not sell flexcards, she went on, and did not charge people to use their phone. 'It is just free,' she said. 'If somebody gets upset or concerned about something here in the village, I ... help them with my own phone credits. I ... help them call.' Some people, she added, buy their own SIM cards and have their own credits and go ahead and use her phone, again at no charge. But she and her husband ask 'people in town to ... transfer [credit] units to ... [their phone] in return for helping them ring their kin'. In addition, the schoolteachers use the phone and give them 'a unit or two in return'.

I asked Venis to keep a list of incoming and outgoing calls over a three-day period and then discussed the calls with her. Several found the intended recipient unavailable for one reason or another. Only two outgoing calls were made during this interval: a brother made one to his sister in town to confirm that the boat taking me to the village had indeed departed and the other was made by a husband to his wife to confirm that he had given two bags of rice to her kin in the village. Most incoming calls also expressed ordinary concerns and interests of kin for one another. One of Venis' sons called to ask how she and the rest of the family were doing. A female in-law of one of the schoolteachers called to report that one of her 'aunties' was ill. A call came from the wife of my research assistant to check whether he had given some bags of rice she had sent with him to her kin living in the family fishing camp in the lagoons at a distance from the village (Lipset 2014). A husband called regarding his wife's health and asked Venis to check on her wellbeing. A young woman called to inquire about the whereabouts of her boat and outboard motor and got angry when Venis told her that it was not in the village but was docked at a Lower Sepik River village. Another call came from a relative of Venis to say that a boat on its way to Madang to deliver betel nuts to Highlands buyers would stop off to pick up her husband and take him to market fish there. A woman called asking whether her husband, who had also left the village on a betel nut boat, had returned. My research assistant's wife texted him to call her back because she wanted to confirm that the boat to pick us up and take us back to town would be arriving shortly. He called her back but the connection was weak, which Venis blamed on the high tide. She called back later, but he was no longer near the phone. Venis answered the phone and told her, 'The network is weak. Excuse us!' The battery then died and had to be recharged, which took the rest of the available daylight.

In addition to these incoming calls, the deaths of two young men, Wesley and Frankie, which had recently taken place in Wewak town, was the topic of several calls. Three calls, again from my research assistant's wife, the second from the son of a father's brother of one of the two young men, and the third from a granddaughter of another father's brother, all confirmed the deaths. One of the deaths, it was reported, had not been expected. While Frankie, it was explained, had been unable to keep food down for a period of time, Wesley's death apparently happened out of the blue. A son of Venis called to update his mother about plans for the transport of the two bodies back to the village. They were to be returned for separate funerary rites and burials (Lipset 2016). A brother of Wesley called to dispatch somebody to an inland village where kin lived who would give them sago flour for the funerary feasts. Another brother then called to say that a coffin was being finished and that the body was expected to be taken back to the village the following day. The councillor called twice more. He sent messages to his brother that the latter man's wife would boat down the coast that night and would explain how they wanted to organise the funeral; they must wait before opening the 'death house' to mourners to start their all-night vigil. Instead, the elder brother of Frankie should paddle to the neighbouring village of Big Murik, where the corpse would first 'overnight' so that family there might grieve.

Clearly, this three-day 'sample' of incoming calls does not exhaust the uses to which the one phone in Darapap village is put (much less elsewhere in rural Papua New Guinea). But I think that several generalised points about the relationship of mobile telephony to rural society may reliably be read in these data: 1) mobile phones expand the physical, and, more importantly, the moral space of kinship; 2) they enable space-time compression; for example, a coordination and simultaneity over distances for individual actors in the moral community; 3) the dangling handset is private property but it is not a private device – it does not create privacy. It is not used for duplicitous purposes of an immoral self in an immoral network. While it links this rural village to town and thus, by implication, to the nation-state, its predominant use is not personal but social, inclusive and situational in a decidedly ordinary sense; which is to say, 4) mobile phone sharing in this venue is minimally linked to modernity, to the

marketplace, anonymous modernity and ego-centred interests and desires. Rather, it expands space and time informed by normative, kinship-based values and the moral economy of the gift.⁷

Conclusion: Mobile Phones and Melanesian Modernity

Regimes of capital, broadly defined, were once seen to depend on state-based infrastructure to provide the preconditions for the circulation of commodities, energy, information and so forth. Today, in an increasingly neoliberal political environment, state-based infrastructure no longer integrates diverse places into temporal and spatial relationships, but is supplemented by private, corporate institutions. Infrastructure, however, is created that includes elites and townspeople while it marginalises rural folk. The present case, signified by a mobile phone hanging in a doorway, is clearly one of the latter communities, one that barely straddles the digital divide. Corporate infrastructure, the Digicel network, has not integrated nor excluded Darapap village in any unitary way. Deeply contradictory, the communicative world of Digicel, at least from the viewpoint of this remote village, adheres neither to logics of legitimate micro-enterprise nor piracy. It enacts no narrative of utopian transformation or defiance. It has rather produced a paradoxical partnership with modernity that is both inside and outside, connected yet detached.

People, ideas and capital crisscross nations, regions and the globe at large in this day and age. I think that the mobile phone might be viewed as emblematic of anytime, anywhere communication that brings the ubiquitous quality of movement characteristic of this historical moment into experience. The mobile phone does indeed make the flow and friction of information across spatio-temporal boundaries concrete in everyday life, but this does not necessarily mean that the devices transform existing places, temporalities or moral identities beyond recognition. To the extent that the new order may involve the enlargement of social scale,

7 De Souza e Silva (2007) reported that, in Brazilian *favelas* (slums), where infrastructure was also lacking, similar informal appropriations of the new technology have occurred wherein people put shared mobile phones to work for whole community use (see also Castells et al. 2007).

however, in this chapter I have shown that it may also be associated with the maintenance of moral networks linking rural communities and places with their urban diasporas.⁸

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