On June 27th 2004, “Bollywood” became “Pollywood” when a team made up almost entirely of Polynesian girls won an Indian dance competition held for Auckland secondary school students. Their performance drew not upon classical forms of Indian dance but reflected the popular tastes of the Indian diaspora living in New Zealand, including Fiji Indians, long established Kiwi Indians and more recent professional migrants. The Tangaroa College girls won the contest on the strength of a Bollywood-inspired number. While the win seemed to surprise and amuse Indian journalists, the appeal of Bollywood films among Pacific Island communities and in their island homelands has been a relatively open secret.

Despite widespread popular recognition that many Pacific communities are avid Hindi cinema fans, a cursory review of regional journals confirms that its influence in the Pacific is a phenomenon that has attracted relatively little attention among scholars. This oversight might be partially accounted for in terms of how anthropologists working in the region have historically constructed Pacific communities as objects of study and islands as sites of research. These constructions have tended to privilege indigenous communities over non-indigenous communities. In accordance with established methods of ethnographic methodology anthropologists have typically focused intensively upon single or unitary sites for observation and participation. Additionally, transnational media pose particularly thorny and vexed methodological problems for anthropologists accustomed to less mobile, transitory and potentially idiosyncratic cultural formations. Marcus (1995) suggests that one response to these conceptual and methodological challenges has been for research about transnational cultural formations to progressively migrate out of disciplines such as anthropology into interdisciplinary (or as he suggests “anti-disciplinary”) fields such as media studies. While such a response may have occurred in other regions, Pacific media studies scholars have also paid little critical attention to the influence of phenomena such as Bollywood. Their apparent disinterest can be partially traced to preoccupations with cinematic
modes of indigenous self-determination and national cinemas (Douglas 1994, Mawyer 1998, Teaiwa 2007). Much of the very limited research to date privileges motion picture production rather than its consumption (Hereniko 1999). While there are justifiable reasons to emphasise production, particularly in a region that has been significantly disadvantaged by Western media hegemonies, established models of core/periphery cultural flows in terms of media distribution and consumption appear to have undergone recent transformation.

This article looks at the popularity of Bollywood films in Nuku’alofa, examining the textual and aesthetic elements that allow Hindi cinema to “crossover”. It also traces the informal, grassroots and “disjunctive” circuits of exchange (Appadurai 1996) that make Bollywood popular among Tongan audiences. These circuits of exchange and textual affinities are not restricted to Hindi films. Recently, dramatic television serials from the Philippines such as Gulong ng Palad have supplanted Bollywood in the hearts and minds of Tongans (and Fijians and Samoans). This transition not only exemplifies scalar disjuncture in the global cultural economy but it attests to changes in the intensity and speed with which contemporary media appetites are changing in the contemporary Pacific.

Bollywood’s popularity in Pacific sites such as Tonga has in large part been overlooked because there has been relatively little interest in the cultural influence of South Asians on Pacific communities generally. In a recent article Katerina Teaiwa observes that Pacific Studies scholars have neglected the cultural interaction between South Asians and Fijians because they have either been consumed “with rearticulating indigenous frameworks for knowledge and practice in an attempt to throw off the psychic shackles of western colonialism” (Teaiwa 2007: 223), or they have been distracted by the “intense media, scholarly and policy focus on the discursive dynamics of Fiji history…” (Teaiwa 2007: 195). If the influence of Indians in Fiji has been under-acknowledged then their impact in Tonga, which has a significantly different colonial past and no large Hindi-speaking community, may have seemed fundamentally counterintuitive. However, indifference to intercultural relations between Indians and Fijians is not the only reason phenomena such as Bollywood have been disregarded. Popular culture has also been relatively marginal in Pacific research. Teaiwa suggests that social anthropologists working in the region have been slow to embrace the popular, preferring to focus upon “the perceived authentic practices of pure local linguistic and cultural communities” (Teaiwa 2007: 202).

Cinema and media studies researchers working on Bollywood and Pacific film and media acknowledge the popular but appear to pursue lines of inquiry that conform to established ethnic, social and historical boundaries.
For example Pacific-oriented Bollywood scholars tend to explore Hindi cinema’s role in articulating the aspirations, imaginations and identities of the Fiji Indian experience (Mishra 2002, Ray 2000). They chronicle Hindi cinema’s ability to supersede the regional, religious and caste divisions of successive waves of Indian migrants to Fiji between 1879 and 1930 (Ray 2000). They also discuss Bollywood cinema’s role in providing Fiji Indians with a crucially important, albeit highly romanticised, image of India around which contemporary Fiji Indian identities coalesce.

Pacific film and media scholars also tend to overlook phenomena such as Bollywood because they conceptualise screen production in the Pacific as made by indigenous Pacific directors about Pacific subjects (Douglas 1994, Hereniko 1999, Howard 2006, Mawyer 1998). Implicit in this conceptualisation is a primordial ethnic politic and a tendency to privilege textual and criticism-led approaches to cinema studies, both of which figure significantly in “national cinema” frameworks. Criticism-led approaches invoke the “terms of a quality art cinema, a culturally worthy cinema steeped in the high cultural…heritage of a particular nation state” (Higson 1989:37) whereas textual approaches seek to ascertain “to what extent are [films] engaged in exploring, questioning and constructing a notion of nationhood… in the consciousness of the viewer” (Higson 1989: 36). Although the concept of nation remains highly problematic in terms of Pacific screen production, not least because many if not most of the films considered “Pacific texts” are actually made in metropolitan centres such as Auckland or Honolulu, Pacific film scholars nevertheless remain committed to regarding these films as expressing authentic cultural (rather than national) sensibilities. These films are also considered strategically counter-hegemonic, and quite rare, therefore bolstering their art cinema status. Alan Howard’s (2006) article on the Rotuman feature film *The Land Has Eyes* exemplifies this approach. In addition to documenting the film’s positive reception on Rotuma and among off-island Rotuman communities who attested to its authenticity, Howard painstakingly chronicles the film’s official selection at international film festivals thereby reaffirming its critical success.

Comparatively speaking, Pacific film and media scholars have expressed relatively little interest in consumption-led studies among island based Pacific communities. However, two research projects about cinema spectatorship in the Pacific have been conducted in Tonga. Gailey’s (1989) research found that Tongans were active and perhaps even oppositional spectators who effectively localised and re-historicised “their interpretation [of Rambo] to fit their own political context; shifting the backdrop of the film from Vietnam in the 1960s to the Japanese-dominated Pacific Islands in the 1940s” (Pack 2003: 172). Tongans effectively rewrote the film with Rambo helping Tongans defeat the Japanese
Imperial army. Hahn had a comparable perspective. She observed that Tongans adopted an openly creative and performative approach to cinema spectatorship. Rather than subverting or transforming the encoded messages in Hollywood cinematic texts, she found that they were likely to integrate movies into oratory and storytelling as well as “the larger context of various ʻaiwa (dance, music, poetry)” (Hahn 1994: 104). Audiences would enthusiastically interact with characters on the screen and narrators would often improvise commentaries bearing only tangential relation to the film’s intended narrative.

Both of these studies implicitly and/or explicitly critique models of communications research that view subaltern encounters with Western cultural products as yet another instance of media imperialism. Despite their critique, their focus upon the uses and gratifications Tongans find in relation to Western and particularly American films nevertheless reinforces core/periphery models. Indeed one of the inspirations for this article, Pico Iyer’s Video Night in Kathmandu, reiterates how Hollywood commonly remains “ground” rather than “figure” in cross-cultural media studies. He prefaces his quest to “…find out how America’s pop-cultural imperialism spread throughout the world’s most ancient civilizations” (Iyer 1989: 3) by documenting the explosive impact of Rambo: First Blood in East and Southeast Asia. The very framing of his quest reflects an overriding preoccupation with the influence of American cultural products in far off places. To be fair, the American popular cultural dominance in Gailey, Hahn and Iyer’s writing emerges out of a particular historical moment in which American products tended to monopolise theatrical distribution in much of the developing world. Takeuchi’s 1970s survey of commercial cinemas in the Pacific observes that “…the communication media are only part, albeit an important one, of… overall pattern[s] of dependence” (Takeuchi 1979: 11). Hahn corroborates Takeuchi’s findings when she notes that in the 1980s most of the films in Tongan theatres were sourced “from U.S. distributors via New Zealand with a small remainder of martial arts films coming from Japan and Hong Kong via Fiji” (Hahn 1992: 355).

In the last chapter of Hahn’s PhD dissertation, she documents the advent of videocassette recorders in Tonga and observes the rapidity with which Tongans adopted them between 1983 and 1985 (Hahn 1992). Home video-viewing patterns at that time appeared to generally parallel theatrical patterns in terms of preferences for American action genres and East Asian martial arts films subtitled in English (Hahn 1992). Whereas theatrical films were subject to substantial censorship, rented videos proved to be virtually impossible to monitor and Hahn notes the increasingly availability of inappropriate material such as pornography. Nevertheless, Tongans generally elected to rent films that families could view together, placing a premium on clean movies defined
as those that contained no explicit sexuality. Clean films would ensure cultural protocols governing brother-sister avoidance could be observed, particularly in relatively intimate domestic settings (Taumoepeau 2004).

In spite of Hahn’s insight that Western media studies privilege text over context in ways that fail to accurately account for Tongan media consumption, textual elements are part of Bollywood’s allure. In addition to lack of explicit sexuality, the overriding primacy of family and kin groups and deference to elders in these narratives are cited as highly attractive. Language does not seem to have negated their appeal either. The early tapes would not have been subtitled, intended as they were for a Hindi-speaking audience in Fiji. With their emphasis upon visual spectacle and their aversion to kissing, let alone anything else, Hindi films seem like an obvious choice for Tongan audiences, but they did not figure at all in Hahn’s study of Tongan media-consumption practices.

It was on the basis of this apparent omission, some anecdotal evidence from my South Asian colleagues and corroboration by my Tongan colleagues that I went to Tongatapu in 2007. Anecdotal evidence indicated that Tongans were initially exposed to Bollywood by Indo-Fijian expatriates, probably through informal lending practices (Khaiyum 2004). The popularity of Bollywood in Tonga, however, can hardly be attributed to the presence of a few Indo-Fijian cultural brokers. Tonga TV currently schedules Bollywood films regularly. Affluent Tongans have access to three dedicated Bollywood channels on the basic Pacific SKY subscription package and the video shops in Nuku‘alofa such as “Sam’s Club” have Indian sections.

One of my colleagues, who was living in Nuku‘alofa, arranged for me to talk to a group of young girls about their interests in Bollywood. When I arrived, she warned me that a few months before my arrival, Bollywood had fallen somewhat out of favour. I failed to appreciate just how rapidly the media-scape had changed until I embarked upon my interviews and was confronted with palpable disinterest; Bollywood was clearly “so last year”. Nevertheless, these interviews suggested that Bollywood films appealed particularly to young women who empathised with narratives featuring patriarchal control and filial submission. Opinion was divided over song picturisations (referring to the use of actors who lip synch recordings made by others). Some were passionate about them while others resented the narrative disruption. Favorite films included the global mega hit *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) starring Shahrukh Khan. Bollywood dance was recognised as a legitimate and popular form in local talent quests. Several winning performances in Nuku‘alofa the previous year had been Bollywood inspired, echoing the Auckland schoolgirls’ victory. The young women interviewed confirmed that older Bollywood films articulated Tongan values of deference, respect and above all family, but noted
that some of the more recent films featured unacceptable representations of sexuality. Whereas Tongans were mildly uncomfortable with the “wet sari” well-known device, which technically preserved an actress’s modesty while being sexually suggestive (Morcom 2007), Tongan audiences have found more recent displays of overt sexuality in Hindi films increasingly awkward to watch in mixed company (Guttenbeil-Likiliki 2007).

As my work progressed, it became increasingly clear, however, that Bollywood was no longer popular in Tonga. *Gulong Ng Palad*, known locally as “Luisa” after the title character, was introduced in August 2007, either from Fiji or possibly by expatriate Filipinos working in Nuku’alofa’s finance sector. In a soon to be much repeated pattern not only in Tonga but also in Fiji and Samoa and even New Zealand, audiences were utterly captivated by the epic 32 hour series. Over the next year and a half, on various blogs and social networking sites, such as Bebo, spectators reported that they were unable to tear themselves away from the soap despite school and work commitments. In addition to its highly addictive nature (some viewers report being unable to sleep they were so hooked), viewers commented on the series’ excessive emotion, its immoderate melodrama and overt dramatic manipulation. One blogger advised viewers to keep tissues or a toilet roll handy (Allen 2008).

Originally a 1950s radio drama, then a 1980s television hit, and most recently re-produced again in 2006 as a television series, *Gulong ng Palad* centres around star-crossed lovers, Ricardo and Luisa. Ricardo (aka Carding) comes from a family of wealth, prestige and influence, whereas Luisa’s mother works as a domestic in Carding’s family household. Structured much like Mexican telenovelas, *Gulong ng Palad* articulates class differences, rewards moral virtue and punishes naked self-interest. Its themes centre squarely upon familial relations and status difference. In this respect the series is comparable to many if not most Bollywood narratives. It has the added feature of dispensing with unmotivated and narratively unintegrated musical numbers. Viewers tend to describe the series as more wholesome than American fare. A youth group leader in Nuku’alofa endorsed the series as appropriately educational as well as entertaining. While the series does not appear to be explicitly educational in a developmental sense, this leader’s comment seemed to refer to the series’ Christian sensibilities.

In addition to the narrative, aesthetic and affective appeal of Bollywood films and Filipino soap operas in Tonga, both phenomena offer specific opportunities to reconceptualise disjuncture and cultural flows in Pacific media-scapes. In the 1980s Hahn stressed the role of metropolitan centres such as New Zealand in circuits of distribution that privileged American film. Bollywood films and Filipino soap operas appear to have followed a significantly different set of vectors. Introduced perhaps from a singular event such as informal borrowing,
and aided by the relatively widespread availability of home computers to rip disks for either personal or commercial use, pirated DVDs are shared from household to household, sold for a few pa’anga in markets or sent to extended family overseas. In fact Gulong ng Palad was introduced to New Zealand from kin in Tonga, reversing traditional media flows. The circulation of these disks exemplifies models of global flows that stress decentred, diffuse and unstable networks (Tomlinson 1997). These models typically refer to more formal institutional systems of media distribution such as broadcasting. Yet the popularity of Gulong ng Palad convinced Mai TV, a fledgling Fijian free-to-air television broadcaster, to air the series (just as the popularity of Bollywood films prompted Tonga TV to televise them), suggesting that informal grassroots networks are instrumental in developing appetites that in turn influence formal institutional distribution.

The performative and subjective influence of Filipino soap operas is not yet apparent. It has been suggested that Tongan performances of Bollywood musical numbers in talent quests may ultimately have less to do with cultural empathies and more to do with the fiercely competitive nature of dance in the Pacific. Maybe this is a case of Tongans just wanting to prove that they can outdance the Indians (Teaiwa 2007: 205).

Certainly the most unexpected aspect of researching video night in Nuku‘alofa was the rapidity with which Bollywood was supplanted by Filipino soap opera. The disjunctive scalar nature of information flows needs to be considered in conjunction with accelerating velocity and re-conceptualisations of distance, isolation and marginality. Tonga and Tongans sit in a differently configured network of media flows than they did 20 years ago. Instead of getting American films and television shows years after their primary release, Tongans now receive them days after, if not days before. The same may be the case for the latest Filipino and Korean melodrama serials. I strongly suspect the next time I go to ask questions about soap operas, someone will sigh apologetically and say, “that was so last year”.

The case of Bollywood and Gulong ng Palad in Tonga illustrates not only how informal networks engender formal media distribution in the region but also suggests that contemporary Pacific identities and cultural practices need to be considered in relation to rather than in spite of Asian and Southeast Asian influences. Historically, Pacific communities have been conceptualised primarily in terms of indigeneity. Contemporary political struggles for self-determination or ethnically-based political control have exacerbated this trend. When external cultural influences have been documented, those originating in first world metropolitan centres have been privileged, reinforcing cultural dynamics that move from centre to periphery. These modes of thinking about Pacific communities and global cultural flows inhibit if not actually preclude
important lines of inquiry about the emergence of new cultural formations and subjectivities in the Pacific, many of which are mediated. Teaiwa who is of Banaban, I-Kiribati and African American descent asks the key question: “[W]hat would Pacific identities look like if we pay attention to the ways in which Asian [and] South Asian… presences in particular transform our own sense of identity and belonging?” (Teaiwa 2007: 195). It is a question that needs more concentrated and varied investigation.

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