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Christine Ward Gailey

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Article abstract

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"RAMBO" In Tonga: Video Films and Cultural Resistance in the Tongan Islands (South Pacific)

Christine Ward Gailey
Northeastern University, Boston

Video films and VCR's have widespread popularity in the kingdom of Tonga (South Pacific). Based on field research in urban neighbourhoods, the author argues that local interpretations of videos can vary markedly from dominant meanings, but at times parallel them. Discussion of the distribution, ownership, video genres available, and viewing patterns - as well as shifting land rights, cash income needs, and international labor migration - provides the context of audience interpretations. The basis for congruence or difference in interpretation is sought in local view of Tongan history and of changing socioeconomic conditions. The Tongan case has significance for contemporary debates about cultural hegemony and resistance in neocolonial developing countries.

Les films vidéo et les magnétoscopes jouissent d'une grande popularité dans le royaume de Tonga (Pacifique Sud). Se basant sur une recherche sur le terrain dans des quartiers urbains, l'auteur soutient que les interprétations locales des films vidéo peuvent s'écarter de manière significative des interprétations dominantes tout en restant quelquefois très semblables. Une discussion sur la possession, la distribution et les types de vidéos disponibles ainsi que les habitudes de visionnement - ceci relié aux droits fonciers en butte à des changements, aux besoins d'argent liquide et à la migration internationale des travailleurs - restitue le contexte permettant de comprendre l'interprétation des spectateurs. La raison de la divergence ou de la conformité au modèle dans les interprétations doit être cherchée dans les opinions locales sur l'histoire de Tonga et dans les conditions socio-économiques nouvelles. Le cas de Tonga est représentatif des débats contemporains sur l'hégémonie culturelle néocolonialiste et la résistance qu'y opposent les pays en voie de développement.

Video movies and video cassette recorders (VCR's) are inundating the South Pacific islands. Tonga, an independent kingdom southwest of Samoa and east of Fiji, is no exception. For several years, commentators have noted the impact of the new media on neocolonial societies (see, e.g., Callimanopulos, 1983; Combiér, 1983; Houlberg, 1983; Lent, 1983), but the sources and extent of cultural resistance to the hegemonic forces represented by video media have remained largely unexamined. Here the focus is not only on the impact of video and VCR's as commodities on producing people and their communities in Tonga,¹ but also on interpretations of imported video movies by local people. The analysis draws on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), but suggests that his presentation of the creation of hegemony—a consensus to domination forged as the ruled internalize ideological presentations from above—does not leave sufficient room for alternative or oppositional meanings created locally.

Discussing video films and television programs with Tongan viewers dispels the extraordinarily ethnocentric and class-biased image of the "native" who is ignorant of and, thus, uncritically receptive to the values presented in imported media. This view persists even though analysts of the media in indus-

trialized societies have, more or less, abandoned the image of the passive audience (excepting oftentimes audiences of working class people). True, the people do not control the production or dissemination of the new visual media,² but they can and do create alternative interpretations. Put differently, there is a global capitalist market, but it does not determine local culture. The terrain on which cultural values and meanings are forged shifts, but people bring to their commodified lives histories and meanings that are not reducible to the logic of capital.

To distinguish this argument from ones presented of "cultural differences" shaping interpretations of a text, I suggest that the Tongan interpretations I heard are shaped by local practices—as distinguished from reflexes of the "traditional" culture (cf. Bohannan, 1966). Thus, they include recent socioeconomic changes and efforts to continue certain practices considered to be traditional.

The interpretations of "Rambo," kung-fu, ninja, and other film genres also differed from critical interpretations of mass media in U.S. society, and from and the images of Tongan culture as a unified whole depicted in much of the ethnographic writing about the Islands. The Tongan case has implications for the push throughout the neocolonial world for a "new information order" aimed at decentralizing hegemonic control over mass media; for prevailing views of the impact of video, film, and television on working class people in industrial capitalist countries; and for discussions of culture that present interpretation as either idiosyncratic or derivative of a cognitive structure uninfluenced by agency.

There are two dimensions to the impact of video in Tonga. First, video and VCRs are commodities, influencing income disbursement, a need for cash income, etc. Second, messages are received and permuted by various audiences. To gain a sense of the duality of impact, then, we need a sense of how widespread VCR ownership is, who watches the videos, what kind of videos are preferred, audience composition—in short, the social patterns of video consumption.

Distribution and Ownership

In the 1986 survey I took in a neighborhood of commoners³ in the capital city, Nuku'alofa, VCRs with television monitors ranked fifth in people's priorities for home improvements, after indoor flush toilets, shower rooms, refrigerators, and stainless steel kitchen sinks. The technology also has reached the major port town in the northernmost island group, Neiafu in Vava'u.⁴ As yet, however, only wealthier households in Vava'u have VCRs; the

large, foreign-owned tourist hotel has one and charges admission to nonguests. Youths often attend video movies at the local public movie house on the weekends and after school. In the capital city, residents said middle income households have purchased VCRs since 1983.

As in other island countries of the neocolonial world, particularly the Caribbean, people acquire VCRs mostly through relatives who have been working overseas. When migrants return home, many (about 30 percent in the sample of 65 households) bring with them entertainment equipment as well as home improvement fixtures and furniture. One reporter claimed a video player arrives on every flight into the islands—at least one every working day (Tu'itahi, 1986:8). These imported items would cost more than twice as much if purchased in Tonga, leaving aside the dramatic discrepancy in monthly incomes in Tonga compared with the countries where Tongans migrate for work: New Zealand, the United States, and Australia.

Some Tongans, civil servants for the most part, can save the money for purchasing one through overseas relatives. One woman, who worked in a government agency, used her year's "windfall" earnings from consulting for an international aid program to purchase a VCR and television monitor. She bought the outfit when she visited her overseas husband, and brought it back with her.⁵

Since 1983 VCRs have replaced radio-tape players as the most desired overseas luxury item; by now the radio-tape players are ubiquitous. Radio Tonga is well-established and very popular, broadcasting discussions of Tongan culture, Tongan and imported music, and local news from dawn until late evening. There is a government television station, broadcasting a local news show and interviews with prominent Tongans; British, Australian, and American documentaries on Pacific culture (but rarely politics); as well as taped news, entertainment, and evangelical broadcasts from the United States. Television viewing is not as popular, however, in part because of the expense.⁶ One must rent the television with access to the government channel and free servicing for thirty *pa'anga* (Tongan dollars) per month (about US \$20.00 in 1986). Purchases of televisions, therefore, indicate VCR viewing.

In the capital city, the survey indicated an average of one VCR for every twenty-five houses in neighborhoods at the center of town. The estimate for the kingdom is about 1 for every 1,000 (Tu'itahi, 1986:8), but most of these are in the capital. For a town of 40,000 people, there are ten video rental stores. The neighborhood *falekoloas*, the small, fam-

ily-run "corner stores" that dot the neighborhoods, usually offer a few purchased or pirated tapes for rental. In addition, some households have a supply of videotapes (from five to fifty) brought when some relative returned from working abroad. Women in these families rent the tapes to neighbors at very low cost (about one-third the shop price) or lend them to friends and relatives.

In one household, the rental records were kept by an adolescent girl, the sister's daughter of the woman who owned the tapes. Before renting a video, a neighbor would engage in a lengthy discussion with the owner about the film: the plot, the relative action and gore, amount of English dialogue (the less the better for entertainment purposes in a country where English is the school language), and suitability for mixed-gender audiences. When the film was returned after three to ten days (depending on the closeness of relationship), another discussion would ensue about the film's quality vis-a-vis other films in the owner's collection, videos available in town, and so on. There was never a "rush" about these conversations—some took an hour and a half.

Viewing Patterns

The pattern of viewing recalls that in the United States when television was first introduced as a popular commodity. At that time (late 1940s to mid 1950s, depending on region and neighborhood affluence), a household with a television became a gathering place for others in the apartment building or neighborhood. People of all ages would drop by after dinner to watch, and audience commentary during the shows was typical. The only obvious difference in Tonga was the taboo between brothers and sisters being in the same room after puberty. Who watched the film or television that night was settled by priority of arrival or sibling seniority; it was negotiated informally and was not a matter of contention. In one case, the older brothers of a pubescent girl asked their mother and aunt to decide who should stay. At this time, viewing video or television alone or as a nuclear family is unthinkable. As one woman explained to a reporter,

Once our set is on in the evening, our neighbours flock in. I cannot turn them away. That would be very un-Tongan of me. (quoted in Tu'itahi, 1986:8)

In the neighborhood where I lived, children often would gather after school to watch a film at a friend's house, especially after playing outside for a time and prior to the beginning of dinner preparation. After dinner, which could range from six to nine

o'clock in the evening, depending on how hungry the major preparers were, neighbors of all ages would gather again to watch either Tongan television or a video movie. The pattern was not much different from adult patterns of visiting neighbors after dinner in the northernmost island, but it was quite different from the evening activities of adolescents and young children in non-video areas. In areas like Vava'u, children after dinner would regroup outside near their homes to play, often until ten-thirty or eleven o'clock.

In areas with video, neighborhood children still gather, but are more apt to be in a group including adults, watching the nightly movie or TV shows imported from the United States. Several adults told me that they wanted a VCR, or had bought one, in order to keep their adolescent children home or in the neighborhood at night, without exercising weighty parental authority. Since there is little adult supervision of children's play after school, the "babysitter" role noted in other countries⁷ did not seem pronounced in Tonga.

Parents exercised relatively little censorship. I asked one grandmother, who had been a domestic worker for three years in Honolulu, whether she thought children should be allowed to see films like "Bronx Warriors," a particularly gory urban-savagery video. She replied that she thought it was all right if they saw it. "It's good they don't think America is heaven. They'll probably have to work there someday," she said flatly. "Those films are bad," she added, "but bad things can happen to you when you live overseas." She went on to say how afraid she had been to go out at night in the neighborhood where she lived in Honolulu, because of the youth gangs.

For the month I lived in the capital, I spent virtually every night watching video movies in various neighbors' homes. Since audiences are far from passive in Tonga, I felt free to ask viewers what they thought of the film, why they liked or disliked it, what they thought the filmmakers wanted to convey to viewers, and how they would rate the film with others I knew they had seen. I asked people of both genders and all ages, from four to eighty years old, although most of those interviewed were twenty to forty-five years old. I also answered any questions I could about Hollywood, filmmaking, whether the film viewed was popular in *Amelika*, and the like.⁸

Video Genres

What videos are available in the Islands? The estimated 10,000 available in the Islands fall into a

few distinct genres. In 1986, kung-fu films made in Hong Kong, Singapore, or Taiwan were most numerous: karate and ninja imports from Japan are popular, but less popular than kung-fu videos. Adventure films, especially police, military or paramilitary ones imported from the U.S., like "Missing in Action," "McQuade," or "Miami Vice," are also prevalent; the most popular ones in Nuku'alofa in late 1986 were "Rambo" and "Commando," followed closely by "Conan the Barbarian," "Delta Force," "Blade Runner," and "Mad Max." Chuck Norris films are ubiquitous—all the children know his name. The third major genre is comprised of low-budget vigilante, motorcycle gang, or related urban-jungle violence films, replete with blood galore, rape, murder, torture, and the like: "Bronx Warriors," "Cut and Run," "Hands of Steel," "Wheels of Fire."

As in the Caribbean, Tonga and other Pacific islands are recipients of a range of pirated and low-budget videos, and box office bombs dropped to recoup losses (reminiscent of multinational corporate pesticide and pharmaceutical dumping in the neocolonial world). In addition, they receive videos of films produced in East Asia for distribution in the Pacific Basin (Armes, 1987). The Tongan market differs somewhat from other Pacific islands; unlike Fiji, which has a significant Indo-Fijian population, there are few "Hindu romance" films.

The churches have expressed disapproval of the new media, except for educational purposes. One Wesleyan Methodist newspaper article stressed the deleterious effects of video on "traditional" values (*Tohi Fanongonongo*, November 1986). The Roman Catholic newspaper warned of the "unsavory guests" people invite into their homes via video movies (*Taumu'a Lelei*, December 1986). It appears that the churches have not succeeded in reducing Tongans' enthusiasm for video-watching, although they have influenced governmental restrictions on importing pornographic videos.

While they are far from prevalent, sexually explicit videos as a genre ("action-adult") are available in the rental shops, in spite of church protests. There were rumors, spread by government censors and local police, that two pornographic videotapes had been made with Tongan participants. But few people in the neighborhood ever rented such tapes because, according to one married man, there was no guarantee of single-sex viewing.

A typical audience—young and old, women and men, married and unmarried—would react to sexually explicit scenes with embarrassment, two unmarried men told me. Perhaps so, but the emba-

rassment was not necessarily silent. One video I saw in the lounge on the overnight interisland ferry, starred Catherine Deneuve and involved female nudity, beating, and rape. These scenes sparked wisecracks and laughter among the women and men, about the insanity of *palangis'* (the generic term for white people) sexual preferences. On another occasion, in a home, I saw a pirated video of "The Thornbirds," a made-for-television mini-series about the love affair between a woman and a priest. During the soft-core sex scene, a married woman in the audience drew sympathetic comments from the other adults when she derided the priest for not making up his mind between church and sex, for "wanting his cake and eating it too" (a phrase she used in English). A teenage girl then informed the others that the heroine would get pregnant, and the priest would leave her without knowing about the pregnancy. At this, a respected grandmother, who had had two children prior to her marriage, made everyone laugh by saying, "That's right. The girl loves truly, and the missionary runs away to his church—after he has his vacation!"⁹

The leading secular newspaper, *The Tongan Chronicle*, ran an article on the controversy over video movies and morality which stressed state and parental responsibility for monitoring the quality of videos (Tu'itahi, 1986:8). Perusing the video rental shops, it was tempting to see the avalanche of militaristic and violent films as undermining the remaining communal values in Tongan culture.

Certainly, as an appealing but expensive commodity, VCRs and television monitors compound an already considerable need for cash income. They accelerate the growing involvement in capitalist relations of work and further marginalize the sphere of production for use. Producing people are to some extent complicit in this process, but the lure of entertainment is not causative. Regardless of stimulated desires, Tongans do not, after all, subject themselves to the bureaucratic entanglements of acquiring a work permit, or the indignities of illegal migration, minimum wage jobs, substandard housing, cultural isolation, and racial discrimination abroad in order to get VCRs. The cost of living in Tonga, including the need to import housing materials, to pay school fees, and to purchase capital equipment, is what drives Tongans to migrate for work (Gailey, in press). But the expectations of generosity, of largesse, of bringing modernity home may lengthen the stay abroad.

With this background about the distribution of the VCRs and video movies, local viewing patterns, and video genres available in the Islands, we can

consider audience reactions to “Rambo” and two of the most popular kung-fu videos in the neighborhood. It should be noted that the participation of the viewers in accepting or revising the content of visual media was also evident while we were watching the packaged television programs from the U.S. on the Tongan network.¹⁰

“Rambo” as an Anti-Imperialist Film

The prevailing view of Tongan commoners, among the Tongan elite and foreign social scientists, is that they are apolitical (cf. Gailey, 1987b). During a four month stay in the Islands, I heard few explicitly political conversations in the course of everyday life. But watching video movies was the occasion for discussing, often metaphorically, national problems and international politics.

I saw “Rambo” as a home video twice in a mixed group of neighborhood children, adolescents, adults, and grandmothers; and once in the afternoon after school, with a group of relatives and friends, nine boys and girls under the age of twelve. I did not know, when one evening we sat down to watch “Rambo,” that most of the audience had seen it several times before; I had never seen it. Sensing my discomfort after the first half hour, one of the adolescent sons of the family with whom I lived, asked me why I didn’t like the film. I replied (having read interviews with Stallone when the film came out) that it was made to rewrite the history of the Vietnam war, to make people think the U.S. was right to fight in the war, that the North Vietnamese were evil, and that the reason the U.S. lost the war was because the politicians and military officials would not support the soldiers in their fight. I said I did not like the way people might be fooled by the movie into thinking that was the truth.

Then a number of the adults, men and women, began to speak in English and Tongan. One woman, the owner of the VCR, said, “Oh, we know this is only a film—in Hollywood they make up stories all the time. Don’t worry, we don’t believe it.” Her sister added, “We like the film for different reasons—it doesn’t have much talking—Tongans get tired of hearing so much English in movies!” A young man from next door said, “We like it because the land looks like ours and there’s a lot of action.” Then a woman about eighty years old spoke. “Those Hollywood storytellers don’t know about Tongans at all, so what do we care about them? We make up our own stories for the film.” At that point, I asked what “Rambo” was about for them. The discussion became animated, with everyone, including children, participating in Tongan and English. A con-

sensual plot line emerged during the next half hour, while the film played in the background.

Several people commented that they knew little about Vietnam or the Vietnam War. One young man commented, “How could we? The government censors all the news from outside!” and most people mumbled in agreement. One woman added, “That’s right, but who tries to find out anyway? We only get involved in international things when it affects us. I don’t think that helps us.” There ensued a discussion of isolationism, Pacific Basin politics regarding nuclear weaponry, ending with general agreement among the adults that New Zealand was speaking for most Pacific Islanders when it barred the U.S. warships. When I told them about the repeated constitutional elections in Palau as a Free Associated State, they expressed sympathy for their efforts to prohibit nuclear storage or waste sites on their islands. One older man grumbled in a low voice, “The King [of Tonga] would never do that, but we all know who would allow it if he saw money in it for himself and his friends!” This was a veiled reference to the Crown Prince; it is illegal, subversive, to criticize the royal family.

When conversation resumed some seconds later, another older woman stated, “You see Vietnam in Rambo, but what do we know of Vietnam? For us they are Japanese. They invaded many islands in the Pacific in the war [World War II] and Tongans had to fight them.¹¹ There was an American base here then, and we liked the Americans.” Another woman added, “They were very generous, not like the Australians.” The audience had shifted “Rambo” from Vietnam in the 1960s to the Japanese-dominated Pacific Islands in the 1940s. The relationship between Rambo and the Vietnamese woman-guide was cause for comment. One woman said, “We like Rambo. He knows he won’t marry the girl, but he respects her. He doesn’t just use her and leave, like so many *palangis*.” Others assented, “Ko ia [That’s right]!” They explained that Rambo was helping the local people to defeat the (Japanese) imperialist army. They liked several of his qualities: he didn’t chatter, unlike most *palangis*; he didn’t kill for pleasure, but only to save others; he was loyal to his friends and helped them even at the risk of his own life; and he was healthy and strong, like a man should be. At this point, a girl injected in Tongan, “But he should bathe more! He’s so dirty!” and everyone laughed.¹²

They liked his anti-authoritarian behavior a great deal. There were a range of comments about government corruption, including the then-current lawsuit against the Tongan Parliament that charged

various nobles, ministers, and representatives with gross mismanagement of funds. The overall impression was that the officers Rambo was attacking were using the war to profiteer. There was no sense of undercutting the footsoldiers' efforts for ideological reasons or lack of "national will." One young woman said that Rambo had uncovered the secret warehouse where the officials stored all the goods they stole from the local people and the shipments from overseas, and that was why the officer wanted him dead and why he attacked the officer at the end of the film.

During the screening I saw with the schoolchildren, I was sewing in one corner while they chose the video and sat or reclined to watch. They drifted in and out of the room. Several left to join a neighborhood girls' basketball game; others got involved in playing ball, or went outside to see what other kids were doing. After the film, some of the boys and girls painted tattoos on themselves with red and blue pens, tied scarves around their heads, and acted out parts of the film. Significantly, none of the violent scenes were acted out, although hitting one another is not uncommon among children. They focused instead on the stealth scenes, where the group of prisoners of war cooperated to avoid detection while sneaking through the jungle. A local family's parked truck became the rescue helicopter. They mixed the play with practicing kung-fu kicks and shouts. Drawing the tattoos was clearly the highlight of the play time, and some of the children drew others the next day after school.

Kung-Fu: Resistance as a Video Genre

Two kung-fu films were especially popular with the people in the neighborhood: "Black Eagle" and a film everyone called "Little Monkey" after one of the minor characters, a mischievous little boy. I saw each at least five times, since "Little Monkey" was a favorite with the children. (One ten-year-old boy was nicknamed "Little Monkey" by the other children—and eventually by everyone—because he resembled the character physically and in behavior.) In these, like the eight other kung-fu films I saw during the month, the audience expressed sympathy with the oppressed people helped by the hero. In "Black Eagle" and "Little Monkey," the stories concern the struggles of an *ad hoc* group of young orphans, street urchins, to get justice for the neighborhood people, who are at the mercy of a major landlord/merchant with ties to both the government and the underworld. Some of the street children know kung-fu and teach the others. They work together to try to make a living through honest

effort, such as begging or forming an acrobatic troupe, and through quasi-legal cunning—tricking wealthy people or criminals. They are aided in their struggle by an itinerant, quiet, handsome, strong-but-gentle kung-fu expert or in some variants a troupe of a father-daughter, cruelly orphaned brother-sister duo, or poor-but-honest, outlawed men, each practicing a particular form of kung-fu, when they meet through a range of contingencies typically occupying the first third of the film, and band together.

Unlike the discrepancies in Tongans' interpretations of "Rambo" vis-à-vis dominant interpretations, the audience recognized the themes of vengeance against landlords, who are also loan sharks and protection racketeers, and their kung-fu expert protectors. Both adults and children said they liked the action and the minimal dialogue; while most people knew some conversational English, they did not consider films with intense dialogue entertaining. One teacher complained that she bought the VCR to help the children learn English and these films were not much help—at the same time as she allowed the children to watch whatever they wanted.

Some adults commented about how the people were small and frail-looking, a debility in Tongan eyes, but despite that were strong and agile. People seemed to enjoy kung-fu fight scenes far more than any other film genre. One teenage girl told me, "The fights are like dances, and we Tongans truly enjoy dancing." The choreography of kung-fu fights is intricate. The fights are graceful, with emphasis on small but meaningful shifts of gesture, balance, and control—and aside from the bloodshed, similar to emphases in Tongan dance, as local women tried to teach me.

The appeal of kung-fu films to Tongans, I think, parallels their appeal among urban working or would-be working people in many other parts of the world, including black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York. The heroes and heroines are poor but have strong and sustaining values at odds with those of the dominant class. In the films watched repeatedly local people said the values were like their expressed images of *faka-Tonga*, the "Tongan way" or culture: sharing of resources and work, caring for *all* children—not just one's own—, respect for those with deeper experience, kinship beyond biological connection, a sense of fairness and compassion, and a wish to lead productive lives in a close-knit community.

In the films bonds of loyalty are created through shared conditions of oppression, and the sources of oppression are personified in the immediate extrac-

tors of surplus: landlords, merchants, the police, politicians, racketeers. In this world, stealing to eat is not theft. When Little Monkey tricks a boy-stranger (later his friend) into giving him a free meal, one older Tongan woman said, "Someone should have given him food if he was hungry. He did the right thing. No one should be hungry, especially not a child."¹³

Once, "Little Monkey" sparked a discussion about the growing problem of children from outlying islands being sent to live with distant relatives in the capital, in order to attend better schools or because the parents are overseas working. "They are like orphans," one woman commented. She did not use the terms for adopted or foster children, the two customary forms of extending kinship or sharing child care. A teenage boy said, "They get in trouble, they hang out downtown all the time." Another woman complained that some of the "relatives" use the children as servants and don't take adequate care of them. People in the room then agreed that the main problem was having to migrate for work, the conflict for parents between taking care of children's futures (financial support and education) and socializing them properly. Of the married people in this audience, only one couple resided together: the other four had husbands or wives working overseas while they cared for children.

But unlike poor and marginal working peoples in the U.S., Tongans still retain some access to subsistence resources. In Tonga, the dominant sources of extraction for local people are the nobles, who act as landlords and patrons, and the foreign and indigenous merchants, who are the only on-island sources of certain necessary foodstuffs and supplies. As in the kung-fu films, many Tongans are marginalized small farmers or artisans, who face dispossession by some of the noble landlords interested in leasing to larger commercial farmers. They also face replacement of their handmade goods by merchants' wares that are cheaper. As a result, there is growing need for wage labor in Tonga, and increasing un- and underemployment, creating a structural similarity to underemployed sectors of industrial capitalist countries.¹⁴

Exported kung-fu films appear to have their greatest popularity in sectors dominated by mercantile capital and tenancy relations. The overarching political economy may be industrial capitalist and characterized by wage labor, but for reasons of uneven development—either a resilient subsistence sector or, more often, dispossession and chronic unemployment—, regular paid work is not characteristic of the audiences. In addition, the heroes and

heroines, as well as the immediate enemies, are not white, that is, they do not share a perceived imagery of the dominant culture.

The content of these films is not anti-imperialist, but stresses solidarity and class-based antagonism. Justice in these films is always won through removing the landlord or merchant, and freeing peddlers or squatters from rent or credit obligations. In kung-fu films, there is often an heroic individual, but unlike the Rambo-type hero, he is not doomed to isolated struggle. Typically, at the end, the hero does not disappear into the sunset. Instead, having joined with others to root out corruption and injustice, the heroic individual may remain a wanderer, but he merges with a group of similarly dedicated people to engage in making an honest living, generally through using their own bodies. There is a romantic glorification of cooperative, nonexploitative production.

By way of contrast, the karate and ninja films coming out of Japan were not nearly so popular; neither were the U.S.-produced ninja-type films. The theme of this genre is that of either an assassin by hereditary occupation, or a loyal subject of a ruler or religious official, who takes vengeance for the overthrow or murder of his patron or the subject's immediate kin. Tongans—particularly married adults—complained that they were "too bloody," "just lots of killing," and that they could not tell the hero from his enemies. Only teenage boys expressed interest in the genre, but they, too, preferred kung-fu films when they chose the video.

Hegemony and Resistance

Talking with viewers of films and videos produced in a different culture supports the contention that media alone do not shape consciousness or radically alter culture (except, of course, as commodities). In situations where people retain some control over their conditions of life, as among farmers and artisans in Tonga, a range of values associated with that kinship-organized sphere of production for use can be reproduced locally (Gailey, 1987b), regardless of the messages being presented on screen. The central dynamic is the extent of commodity production: where this is limited, albeit temporarily, audience interpretations can be at decided variance with the plural messages created in a society where this is rarely the case. The influence of local interpretations of history, and the ways in which class relations have emerged and are mediated in Tonga as elsewhere, preclude a wholesale adoption of the value structure from either industrial capitalist countries producing most of the mili-

taristic and urban violence films or the semi-industrialized neocolonial countries producing the kung-fu films.

Where there is a coincidence of values, or an adoption of values, it is not caused by the media, but reflected in them. The enormous popularity of kung-fu films challenges the hegemonic messages of the U.S. films directly. U.S. videos are more readily available, but Tongan audiences prefer kung-fu films, where the everyday life of the marginally employed or chronically unemployed people is portrayed as heroic. I compared what people described as happening in the films with discussions we had at other times about problems in the neighborhood and country and in countries they had visited.

In the films, corruption and criminal activity endemic in poor neighborhoods is displayed, but the source of the problem is attributed to difficult conditions, not to poor values. The ultimate source of criminality is presented as those who exercise significant and capricious control over people's lives. Through banding together even with strangers (so long as they share a commitment and a similar life-history of unjust marginality), through human action—in kung-fu films, literally with the body itself—oppressors are deprived of their power and people prosper from their own endeavors. The seeming passivity of audience interpretation in this case reflects parallel values and lived-through experiences.

The relationship of mass media to cultural values was a major concern of the Frankfurt school in the 1930s (Adorno et al., 1980). Brecht (1980) and Benjamin (1969) portrayed mass media as a means of mass mobilization and as both potentially repressive and potentially revolutionary in their technical capacity to democratize art. Their cautiously optimistic vision was not shared by Adorno (1984) and Horkheimer (1982), whose presentation of the audience as uncritically receptive to ideological manipulation echoed their frustration and fear of the pseudo-community values they witnessed the Nazis creating in the populace through orchestrated spectacles and other mass media. In the wake of the Third Reich, the latter view prevailed—monolithic control of consciousness by the corporate and state structures

In the 1960s, Marcuse (1964, 1978) revived the issue of audience passivity for the New Left. Sontag's essay on photography (1977) and her later work on interpretation (1978) examined the problem of reification and representation, inauthenticity and control, in the manipulations of visual imagery for

public consumption. Growing out of a renewed interest in Gramsci's (1971) concern with hegemony and in Althusser's (1971) concern with ideological apparatuses of the state, in the past decade Marxist scholars have reconsidered the influence of mass media on consciousness. In general, Marxist works (Ewen and Ewen, 1982; Williams, 1975, 1977; Dorfman, 1983) have allowed little room for spontaneous, critical evaluation or ambiguous messages to be interpreted creatively and potentially counter to the hegemonic content by the viewers.

The portrayal of producing people as passive recipients of the dominant culture also can be seen in the work of some symbolic (Geertz, 1980, 1983) anthropologists who present culture as created from above, by the institutions of state or the elite. Alternatively, certain structuralists (e.g., Sahlins, 1981) present culture as apart from human agency, a set of practices derived from a cognitive code beyond any particular group's manipulation. Interpretation from below becomes epiphenomenal (Sahlins) or a variation on the dominant theme (Geertz).

Certain postmodern views (e.g., Baudrillard, 1983), by way of contrast, would support interpretive democracy, but without relating interpretation to conditions of everyday life, the frames set by domination, or other socially constructed meanings. The democratic imagery—presentation of interpretation as available, subject only to individual will—ignores the influence of corporate or state domination of ideological structures (cf. Althusser, 1971; Rabinow, 1986). It also ignores the unevenness of capitalist development, and thus, the uneven quality of individualism. In these theorists, reasoning from contexts of dramatically alienated individualism, there is the denial of shared meaning, an anarchy of interpretations. The implicit argument is that everyday existence, the "post-modern condition," fosters the "democratic" vision of reality as mutable text. No interpretation is any better or worse than any other. The views expressed by the Tongan audiences are quite different. There was a clear search for a consensual meaning of the text, distinct from the state and elite views, on the one hand, and inclusive of particular persons' views, on the other.

We might well ask, how shared is this so-called post-modern condition? In poor neighborhoods in industrial capitalist countries, for instance, where whatever welfare payments are inadequate to sustain life, the individualism, the "beggar thy neighbor"—where the oppressed come to exploit one another—, described by Scott (1987) as the "fondest hope" of hegemonic structures, is accentuated. But cross-cutting this alienation is a pooling born of

necessity, if often accompanied by resentment: pooling of childcare, of income, of housing, of work (Valentine, 1978; Susser, 1982). It is not, therefore, a uniform alienation, but one complicated by strands of connection forged by historical conditions of domination: class, race, kinship, gender. In the juxtaposition of alienation and necessity of social connection in the contrary dimensions of everyday existence, there are commonalities that shape interpretation.

These commonalities of existence are all the more accentuated in less uniformly capitalist situations as in Tonga, where kin-based communities—and earlier forms of hierarchy, such as estates—have not been completely eroded in the class and state formative processes catalyzed by colonialism. Shared interpretations, spontaneously and consensually created, interpretations, are evident. The position taken here, in contrast to some postmodern writers (in this case, Clifford, 1986), is that practical activity, the conditions of existence, are primary and define the range of possible interpretations of any representation, visual or written. Further, these interpretations have political importance as expressions of people's experiential resistance to dominant ideologies (see, e.g., Patterson, 1988; Gailey, 1987b).

If consciousness derives from conditions of life, at least obliquely, there is room for interpretation, for active filtering of messages by the "passive" viewers. This argument has been made by Gray (1986) for viewers of U.S. "black" situation comedies and by Hebdidge (1979) for the rise of punk among downwardly-mobile working class youth in Great Britain. At the same time, the degree to which these conditions are consciously shared facilitates critical or anti-hegemonic responses. Gray and Hebdidge explore the complex influences of racism and class hierarchy on the formation of anti-hegemonic responses in Western capitalist societies.

For neocolonial societies, these factors are compounded by cultural differences created or heightened through the experience of precapitalist class or other hierarchies, missionary proselytizing, and capital penetration both during and after the colonial era. In Tonga, for instance, the "conditions of life" now include massive temporary migration for work overseas and, at home, the persistence of a marginalized but substantial sector of subsistence agriculture.

As in most of the neocolonial world, changing considerations of kinship and class, as well as the heritage of colonial domination, influence world view. It is not simply a question of "traditional" values under fire. The transformations of social

relations during the last two centuries—missionaries, commodity production, class and state formation—have altered values substantially (Gailey 1987a). Certain values upheld by producing people—sharing, helping one another (*fetokoni`aki*), showing compassion (*ofa*), and so on—are rooted in the precolonial society. Their persistence reveals the functional persistence of certain material conditions and social relations from that time. Primary among these precontact conditions is access to land through cognatic kin connections. Cognatic use-rights are illegal, but local people continue to exercise them. Legal use-rights are hereditary through tenancy, available only through patrilineal primogeniture or clientage, largely excluding women. But in the past twenty years especially, Tongans have experienced an unprecedented shift from subsistence-oriented production to commodity production. Landlessness is increasing: What had been a legal issue—many people had informal use-rights, but not officially registered plots—is now a social problem.

Cognatic access to resources is becoming difficult as certain noble landlords withdraw unregistered plots from small tenants. The remaining small tenant farmers have difficulty making improvements because they cannot get credit, since they do not own land. The need for wage labor has grown accordingly. But jobs are not readily available, particularly for those who have little education, and all secondary education is tuition-based. So people migrate abroad, often overstaying their visas, obtaining poorly paid and insecure work, living in substandard housing, saving money to build a house, or to purchase tools or a taxi or truck in order to support families in Tonga.

The shifting land tenure system, coupled with a rapid integration of producing people into a pool of potential laborers, provides a commonality of condition that fosters the appeal of kung-fu films. The history of colonialism,¹⁵ coupled with the specific experience of World War II and local reservations about the Tongan government, provides a commonality of experience among viewers that allowed an interpretation of "Rambo" at odds with the prevailing views of the film in the country of origin. These local views are not idiosyncratic; neither are they shared throughout all sectors in Tongan society. Certainly they are not reducible to the manifest or latent content of the mass media.

Instead, the interpretations are rooted in the specific history of the society as experienced differentially by people, depending in this case, on their class, estate, and region. The various facets of the social division of labor will continue to generate the

conditions for different, sometimes antagonistic interpretations. Indeed, assertions of hegemony or radical postmodernism—that U.S. audiences either share a common view of “Rambo” derived from the filmmaker’s, or hold a cacaphony of interpretations—, require demonstration. Such assumptions inhibit us from framing important questions about the audience.

It is at best arrogant and at worst, racist to assume similar reactions to similar film genres globally. Yet to deny the possibility of shared meaning is to deny parallels in historical experience, to deny communication among similarly situated people. We should at least notice that shared meanings do appear in seemingly disparate cultures, that there are spontaneous and shared interpretations, whether in keeping or at odds with the dominant ideology. We need to ask why such commonalities exist, and more importantly, we need to listen to the answers people provide.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the College of Arts and Sciences, Northeastern University, for funding the fieldwork in Tonga. I would also like to thank the Tongan women and men who generously allowed me to write about their views and conversations. Leland Donald, Herman Gray, Alan Klein, Jean-Claude Muller, Tom Patterson, Betty Potash, Michael Ryan, and Ara Wilson offered helpful comments.

2. I cannot consider here the uses of videotaping by Tongans. At present, few families can afford video cameras, but in those families, young men seem to be the exclusive filmmakers. When people can afford to do so, video tapes are made of funerals and weddings, to record the presentation of mats and tapa, those who attended, the procession, ceremonies in the church and at the gravesite, and feasting. Videotapes, of funerals especially, are then shown later to visitors and those who could not attend. The situation recalls Benjamin’s (1969) observation in the 1930s that photographing family events represents the attempt to keep art embedded in its ritual origins—a moment in the transformation of art into a mass commodity.

3. Stratification in modern Tonga is complex: a precontact estate structure (now nobility and commoners) overlays classes, which did not exist at contact (Gailey, 1987c). In addition, there is a configuration of nobles and commoner business and professional people who constitute an economic and political elite. The current parliamentary structure disenfranchises most sectors of the population, excepting the nobility and, of course, the royal retinue.

The neighborhood consisted of commoner families engaged in some combination of subsistence and cash cropping, temporary or permanent wage labor, part-time or full-time wage labor, or petty entrepreneurship. Several households included members who were teachers, health

professionals, or small-scale businessmen. Most households were technically nuclear families, but operationally extended families with overlapping membership in three cognatic kindreds.

4. I lived for three months in a farming and fishing neighborhood in Neiafu, Vava’u, prior to residence in the capital.

5. Observing the arrival of planes from New Zealand, Australia, and the United States (Hawaii) at the Nuku’alofa airport gives one a keen sense of how much people bring with them when they return home. In a planeload of fifty people from Honolulu, all but three of the adult Tongan passengers had at least one large carton in addition to two oversize suitcases and burdensome carry-on luggage. I was informed by the men unloading the luggage that clothing and housewares were the predominant items in the cartons, followed by television sets and VCRs.

6. I was told by several adults that it is commonplace that, as with telephones, some families rent the television from the government, fall behind in the monthly fees, and have it repossessed.

7. The role of television in childcare has been discussed as a social problem in the United States and in other industrial capitalist societies lacking significant state support for working mothers. It has been raised as a critical issue in the new Cuban cinema movement.

8. The discussions and group interviews took place in either Tongan or English or a combination, depending on group composition at the time. For that reason, narrative portions are translated into English. The translations from Tongan are not literal, but have been made to catch the connotations and idiomatic sense.

9. Tongans are widely regarded as religious Christians. Most attend church weekly and make regular donations. But the video certainly elicited general anti-clerical sentiment, not limited to the Catholic church.

10. At least five local people told me that Tongan television was senseless, a rehash of the U.S. government view of world events, and situation comedies about African-Americans or the love-affairs of the rich. Men in particular commented about Tongan government censorship of Pacific programming—“All we see is wrestling [Tongan wrestlers are prominent in the U.S. professional wrestling circuits and a source of local pride.], hula dancing from Hawaii [Tongans do not do hula-type dancing], the ‘Karate Kid II’ [repeated at least three times during the month in question], and the Miss World pageant! How can we know about nuclear waste in the Pacific?”

Teenagers—girls and boys—enjoyed mimicking the newscasters on the American news programs, laughing particularly at the sound and appearance of Peter Jennings on “ABC Nightline.” An older man asked facetiously if most U.S. television shows were about blacks. One young man in training to be a teacher said he thought it was racist that the U.S. package of entertainment programs included primarily sit-coms about American black people. We both thought the assumption made was that Tongans would identify with African-Americans, an assumption not

borne out by audience responses. He was not clear whether the program selection was due to government officials or U.S. television executives—the racism could come from either group, he shrugged.

11. World War II was the first foreign war in the recent past in which Tongans were combatants; material remains from the war—aluminum pots and pans, steel road grids—are still used by Tongans, parts of the latter as fencing or barbeque armatures. The wars of the nineteenth century were domestic, over political centralization and Christian conversion.

12. Tongan adults are fastidious about personal hygiene and consider most *palangis* underwashed.

13. Early European travelers, such as James Cook, reported that Tongans tolerated, or even admired, people who were light-fingered; they considered undetected theft a sign of cleverness, rather than criminality. Despite a hundred years of missionary proselytizing and the imposition of legal-judicial structures, petty theft is still dealt with informally.

14. The Tongan state provides low-cost medical and primary health care, as well as free primary education. In theory, eldest sons are eligible for life-long leases to a subsistence plot and a house-plot at minimal rent from either the government or a local noble who has hereditary rights to a state-owned estate. In reality some nobles neglect to register such plots and extort hefty annual rents from tenants. Tenants usually have to cultivate patron-client ties to nobles in order to have stable rent relations.

15. Technically, Tonga was a British Protectorate and not a colony.

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