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Salay, S;Day, J

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# Overlapping Land Tenure Stories: Ambiguity in Port Vila's Urban Precarity

Sebastian Salay  | Jennifer Day

University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

**Correspondence:** Sebastian Salay ([sebastian.antoine@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:sebastian.antoine@unimelb.edu.au))

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## ABSTRACT

Migrants to Port Vila from elsewhere in Vanuatu and the customary owners of the land to which they move make agreements about land tenure. However, land can hold multiple meanings which can both support and undermine attempts to create durable agreements. We apply concepts of ambiguity and urban precarity to land in Vanuatu, which itself is already polysemic, to argue that ni-Vanuatu people perpetuate and negotiate multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings, to fulfill their various interests. Drawing on interviews with migrants and customary land owners, we demonstrate how people can benefit from a social context that allows for multiple narratives to coexist, even when they appear to contradict each other. However, this anthropology of ambiguity shows how it can also create new ways for disputes to occur and for powerful people to assert control.

## 1 | Introduction: Encountering Ambiguity in Port Vila

On a humid afternoon under the shade of a *natangura* thatched roof, Chief Joseph<sup>1</sup> mainly told me (author Salay) uncontroversial stories. He explained how his community came to live on the outskirts of Port Vila, Vanuatu, after their village on another island was destroyed by a volcanic eruption. I had not heard the details before, but the story followed a common pattern replicated among many migrant communities to the capital who made customary agreements with a local *landona* [landowner] to live on land in the rapidly expanding city. However, near the end of our talk, he said something that I was not expecting at all. He completely contradicted a story I had heard the week before and challenged how I thought land worked in the city. It showed me that it was not only possible for land to have multiple meanings, a well-established aspect of Melanesian land (disputes), but that stories could overlap and help people pursue their various land use goals.

I asked Chief Joseph to describe the community's current relationship with the land. I wanted to test two categories about migration that I had learned the previous week from the chiefly council that manages the land on which Chief Joseph's migrant community was built. The council had offered two descriptions of the kinds of relationships they had with different groups of migrants on their customary land: "illegal immigrants," who make direct agreements with individual *landona* and bypass the chiefly process, and "adopted communities," who have established relationships with the chiefly council. I put these categories to Chief Joseph, in what I thought was a simple question with a straightforward answer. I expected Chief Joseph to be eager to assure me, in line with the story he had been telling me, that his community were not illegal, rather they had done things the right way and, therefore, had been adopted by the host community as legitimate residents. The question was not necessarily aimed at understanding the Chief's position, instead, I was mainly interested in knowing how widely these specific terms were used, given I had only learned about them the week prior.

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What I was not expecting, was the loud guffaw that escaped him. His eyes twinkled, he grinned at me, and replied:

We are none of those things. We are now *man ples*  
here

-Chief Joseph

The contradictory perspectives between a longtime migrant community and the customary *landona* about the *stret* or true meaning of their land is a common experience throughout Port Vila. Perspectives change over time, and people involved in land agreements often have markedly different perceptions of their relationship, even to the point where they seem incompatible. At the beginning of our fieldwork, we wanted to uncover the true stories of different parcels of land in Port Vila by sifting through the multiple and sometimes contradictory stories that people told us about land. After hearing many and getting no closer to an objective version of events, we realized that, in fact, the more interesting puzzle was the persistent presence of these different perspectives.

This paper explores what happens when people think different things about the same piece of land. We focus on the experiences of *man kam* migrants from Vanuatu's islands to Port Vila and the *man ples* who are autochthonous *landona* of Port Vila and with whom they make land tenure agreements (Day 2023; Lindstrom et al. 2024). We argue that the presence of multiple and sometimes contradictory narratives creates an atmosphere of ambiguity which can be useful for different actors involved in land disputes. Thinking with the concept of ambiguity and its relationship with the broader precarious urban context suggests that divergent narratives about land form a shared, discursive social technique that helps people pursue their interests in a context of urban precarity. Ambiguity enables the coexistence of people with contradictory interpretations by allowing each to hold tightly to their own version of events while decrying other people's stories. At the same time, we show that ambiguity can enable political domination because some actors can assert their interpretation over the interpretations of other people. Recent work by Alimardanian and Heffernan (2024) developing an anthropology of ambiguity proves useful in analyzing the overlapping stories in Port Vila, and our application might be instructive to ethnographic analyses of other cases. Thinking with ambiguity offers a methodological and conceptual remedy to understanding complex social systems by drawing attention to how contradictions are negotiated. It asks us to step backward and see the system as a whole rather than attempt to reconcile stories that overlap or contradict.

We offer a new application of an established theoretical approach to the analysis of an aspect of urban social life: power relationships on urban customary land. Conceptually, the paper brings together two related theoretical debates, urban precarity and ambiguity. Using these bodies of theory, we propose a conceptual model that frames ambiguity as a social tool that can be useful to people navigating contexts of urban precarity. As well as offering a new explanation for how the enduring presence of multiple stories about land interacts with the durability of customary land tenure agreements, this

paper demonstrates a new way of interacting with contradictory ethnographic data. We focus on the overlapping stories themselves, rather than attempting to test each story's veracity. This conceptual approach may be useful in other contexts where multiple narratives abound, especially in urban contexts and places where customary land management processes invite multiplicity.

## 2 | Encountering Migrant Settlements in Port Vila

The ethnographic fieldwork underpinning this study has been underway since 2015 when Day began studying urban evictions in Port Vila. This study draws from data assembled via four fieldwork waves which began in February 2021. I, with a team of research associates and field workers, conducted 139 interviews of people living on customary lands and likely vulnerable to eviction in Port Vila. In those interviews, people were asked to tell the stories of their customary tenure arrangements and how they were established and maintained over time. Then, in June and July 2023, collaborator Vivian Obed and I interviewed a series of chiefs and customary *landona* to understand their version of the tenure stories. In November 2023, we conducted joint fieldwork, seeking to understand how people make and maintain customary land agreements via participant observation and semistructured interviews. This paper's opening vignette came from this round of discussions. Finally, in July 2024, Salay continued ethnographic fieldwork with different communities, seeking to understand the stories behind people's tenure arrangements. Most of the conversations we had with migrants took place in settlement communities. These range in age and permanency reflected in the material structure of homes and gardens. Generally, settlements are constructed of lightweight materials that can be easily relocated in case of an eviction (see Figure 1). Corrugated iron walls and rooves are common, fastened to wooden frames. Concrete structures, like foundations or blockwork walls, are rare in most settlements because they are a relatively expensive investment that cannot be removed. Where they exist, it signals that the community is confident in the longevity of their land agreement.

Evictions are an increasing risk in urbanizing Port Vila. They occur when a customary agreement between landowners and residents breaks down. This could be for a range of reasons, but most end in an eviction order issued by the court system. The order is then enacted by Sheriffs accompanied by bulldozers which clear migrant communities and their infrastructure (see Figure 2). Customary land tenure agreements are sometimes not well recognized by the courts, and the Constitution and legislation aim to protect customary owners' control over their own land. In some recent evictions, the courts have ordered that customary owners compensate residents for losses associated with evictions like trees or infrastructure, though this is not guaranteed. Evictions occur when there are competing claims over land. Customary owners might seek to lease land on which they have previously allowed migrants to live in order to make more money. Migrants rarely pay formal rent, and businesses wanting to establish a factory or resort can afford to pay customary owners more money. These evictions occur in the context of an expanding city



**FIGURE 1** | A corrugated iron house in a migrant community neighborhood. Fencing is made from wire, wood, metal, and hedging. *Source:* Sebastian Salay.



**FIGURE 2** | The aftermath of an eviction. These residents could not carry all the materials from their homes. *Source:* Sebastian Salay.

economy and in a location with limited usable or desirable land. Other pathways to evictions derive from contested customary ownership. One claimant might have made an agreement with a community, but if the other claimant is recognized as the legitimate landowner, they might want to assert their newfound control by evicting a community that has a long-term relationship with the previously recognized customary owner.

Through these waves of engagement in Port Vila, we learned about the land tenure experiences of migrants to the city, known

in the national lingua franca Bislama as *man kam*, and the perspectives of customary owners of land around Port Vila, known as *man ples*. Port Vila continues to grow rapidly as ni-Vanatu people from the country's other 82 islands elect to move to town. Urbanization has occurred rapidly in Port Vila, especially in the decades since independence in 1980. For example, Port Vila's population increased by 50% between 1999 and 2009, with the largest proportion of growth in areas on customary land beyond the municipal boundary (Beca, GNS Science, and National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research 2015,

14). Urbanization and the expansion of migrant settlements in Port Vila are part of broader patterns of migration throughout Oceania (Kraemer and Stern 2022, 68; Foukona 2015, 516) and, indeed, across the globe. As in other capital cities, people migrate to Port Vila to access opportunities and resources in the city that are not available on the mainly rural islands. Migrants are drawn to the city to pursue further education, participate in waged labor, and as a stepping stone to join international labor mobility schemes in Australia and New Zealand. Residents on customary land tend to live in communities organized around their island of origin, though some communities are mixed. Living in town provides greater access to imported goods and other trappings of “modernity.” Migrants we spoke with are employed in a range of sectors including the airport, tourism industries, and various nongovernment organizations. Others have their own bus business or do odd jobs like laboring or construction. However, many migrants find it difficult to gain paid employment, so they might maintain a garden instead.

The Bislama terms “*man kam*” and “*man ples*” are central to structuring social life in Port Vila and the way these categories are understood and challenged is key to this paper’s analysis of ambiguity. *Man ples* is used to describe people who belong to a particular place in a pattern of “symbiotic attachment” (McDonnell 2023, 73). The importance of Indigenous people’s connection to land, with its attendant rights and responsibilities, is closely felt in Vanuatu in the decades after the independence movement coalesced around the movement to return alienated land to Indigenous owners (Van Trease 1987, 213). In Port Vila, people are usually described as *man* or *woman ples* if they are born into one of the five communities on whose land the city now stands: Mele, Ifira, Pango, Eratap, and Erakor. *Man* and *woman kam*, on the other hand, tends to describe people who belong to another place, generally identified by the island they or their forebears are from. For these migrants in Port Vila, as elsewhere in the country, “almost everyone has an agreement that they have entered into that allows them to live on the land” (Regenvanu 2017, xiv).

However, in the contemporary city, after generations of migration, some people are challenging the distinctions between “migrant” and “local.” For example, Daniela Kraemer (2020) describes how young men who are born in the city and who have limited connections with their mixed families’ multiple home islands are ‘planting roots’ in Port Vila based on their connections and knowledge of that place, becoming the “‘urban autochthones’ of the nation” (Kraemer 2020, 42). In a similar strategic move, Chief Joseph uses the category of *man ples* to assert his community’s durable customary right to the land that they were bequeathed under custom at the time of their migration, generations earlier. Finally, not all *man ples* are chiefs in Port Vila, nor are all *man ples* “customary owners” of land. In general, land is allocated to specific members of the landholding group to manage on behalf of the group. The emic terms *kastom ona* [owner] or *landona* describes these land management practices of custodianship of group landholdings. Not all chiefs and *man ples*; some migrant communities have chiefs who have responsibility for communities in town based on their shared location in the city and/or a shared island of origin (Lindstrom 2011; Rousseau 2017; Lindstrom et al. 2024). Conventionally, chiefs can mediate disputes, including land disputes, but recently,

some *landona* have bypassed chiefly governance structures to make direct deals with migrants which curtails chiefs’ ability to mediate or enforce agreements (Day et al. Under review).

We noticed during fieldwork that narratives about land agreements were regularly understood differently by the people involved (Day 2023). This could occur on a wide spectrum from a slight linguistic reframing to a complete contradiction. We would hear one version of the story on 1 day and then hear a different version the next. We had been attempting to uncover the history of specific land agreements, but only succeeded in uncovering proliferating interpretations. We found that “[t]he mere *accumulation and evaluation of information* [did] not render the world more knowable, nor [did] it reduce ambiguity” (Alimardanian and Heffernan 2024, 242). At some point, we realized that the interpretations themselves and their proliferating ambiguity were the more interesting phenomena, and analyzing ambiguity itself would bring us closer to understanding the social dynamics we encountered in Port Vila.

Here, we analyze two examples of when land holds multiple meanings to understand how ambiguity shapes social relationships and access to customary land in urban Port Vila. We choose to analyze only two examples of ambiguity to explore the significance and complex dynamics of each case in sufficient depth. We do not claim that these cases are representative of every land arrangement in Port Vila; rather, we focus on these examples because they offer an insight into how ambiguity can emerge and shape these social interactions. Our approach mirrors anthropological accounts which “explore wide-scale social transformations as they manifest intimately within one or a few lives” (Dawson 2022, 10; see, e.g., Biehl 2013; Farmer 2009).

### 3 | Ambiguity and Urban Precarity in Vanuatu

This section places notions of urban *precarity* in dialogue with *ambiguity* to assemble our conceptual approach. The broader context of this project is concerned with the increasing specter of evictions of migrant communities in Port Vila, calling to mind a material precarity described by political philosophers Hardt and Negri (2004), and by philosopher Judith Butler (2006, 2009). Anthropologist Anna Tsing posits that “precarity is the condition of our time” and encourages scholarship that focuses on “precarity [and] indeterminacy” to understand the intricacies of social relationships today (Tsing 2015, 20 emphasis in original). Partly in response to that call, Brian Campbell and Christian Laheij developed the concept further, with a focus on precarity in cities, culminating in a proposed concept of “urban precarity” (Campbell and Laheij 2021). They identify three aspects of precarity theory that could structure analysis of precarity in urban contexts. First, they point to the wholistic analytical approach that considers precarity as more than just material scarcity (Campbell and Laheij 2021, 289). This includes, for example, discursive, epistemological, and ontological multiplicities, in other words: ambiguities. Precarity here is an “ontological condition” rather than simply a material problem (Kasmir 2018), encouraging analysis of perspectives alongside studies of material conditions. Second, Campbell and Laheij point to the possibility that precarity has “enabling aspects” along with its typically theorized “destructive and disruptive” side (Campbell and

Laheij 2021, 289). This approach broadens the scope of conventional approaches in response to the range of evidence that precarity, particularly in the city, can generate new ways of being and, in some cases, “spaces of hope” (Harvey 2022). Finally, the concept suggests that the dialectic between the destructive and constructive potentials of precarity creates unique forms of “experimentation and improvisation” (Campbell and Laheij 2021, 290). In precarious contexts, people craft viable lives and challenge the precarity itself. This conceptualization of urban precarity extends a typical concept of precarity which focuses on its negative impacts and the way people and communities find ways to endure (see Ortner 2016).

Our use of the term ambiguity starts with the encouragement of urban precarity to consider uncertainties beyond the material world, the first of Campbell and Laheij’s proposals. Ambiguity, in this sense, appears as an overlapping of ontologies which extends a typical reading of precarity as uncertainty. Ambiguity is a way of conceptualizing multiple meanings of land in a way that avoids the negative connotations associated with uncertainty and refocuses attention onto overlapping multiplicities. Ambiguity allows for multiple actors to be certain about their position while the broader context can be understood as ontologically precarious. In that vein, our conceptualization of ambiguity draws on three bases: previous anthropological work on land in Vanuatu by Bob Tonkinson, Mahnaz Alimardanian, and Timothy Heffernan’s recent call for an anthropology of ambiguity in their edited book of the same name (2024), and anthropological studies of ambiguity in Oceanic contexts. First, Tonkinson’s analysis of the village of Mele Maat, known as Maat Efate during his fieldwork, uncovers an irreconcilable but entirely useful paradox for the villagers: the village both “is and is not an Ambrymese village; it is and is not a permanent resettlement” (Tonkinson 1977, 263). The argument shows how land in Vanuatu can hold multiple meanings and shows how this apparent paradox is valuable to the people who hold them.

The second framework of ambiguity that informs this paper is the set of concepts in the edited volume *Anthropology of Ambiguity*. For editors Mahnaz Alimardanian and Timothy Heffernan, and echoing part of Tonkinson’s conceptualisation of the term, ambiguity is a “magic... force that can break the chains of constraints or create new ones” (2024, 241). Their interest in an anthropology of ambiguity derives from its presence as a widespread and enduring feature of social life and that it especially “emerges amid disruption and disjuncture” (2024, 241), precisely the kinds of situations that could be described as urban precarity. Ambiguity is generative, it can be used by people to “drive transitions and transformations” because it “can hold the inconsistencies of people’s lives... without needing to ameliorate these inconsistencies” (2024, 241). Ambiguity offers a conceptual tool with which to understand the multiple, competing, and sometimes contradictory narratives we heard about land.

Third, and finally, ambiguity has been used by anthropologists as an analytical device to understand productive contradictions in Vanuatu and elsewhere in Oceania. Drawing on her anthropological studies of Ambae, Vanuatu, Margaret Rodman argues for a meaningful engagement with the idea that land has a tremendous capacity for polysemy, the possibility of having multiple meanings at once. She compares land to voices which are understood

to be multiple: we need to understand “that places, like voices, are local and multiple” (Rodman 1992, 643). This approach to land, taking seriously the idea that it can hold multiple meanings, extends on Rodman’s earlier reflections on customary land: “anthropologists encounter a similar [difficult] situation in trying to categorize customary land rights: the presence of simultaneous interests, dynamic layers of rights that co-exist with regard to a single land parcel” (Rodman 1987, 32). That land can have multiple meanings, enhances rather than diminishes its importance to ni-Vanuatu people. Their personhood is co-constructed with place because “in most parts of the region indigenous systems of language, knowledge, and practice involve strong affiliations to place, locally understood and constructed” (Bolton 2003, 68).

Like land, the truth in Vanuatu can be multiple and debatable. On the island of Tanna, in the country’s south, Lamont Lindstrom shows how processes for dispute resolution are based on “existing discursive orders [which] often comprise multiple lines of power that allow contradictory truths” (Lindstrom 2000, 122). People play with contradiction to augment their argument in an attempt to straighten out “tangles of contradictory claims” to produce a consensual decision about the truth: “straight’ talk” (Lindstrom 1990, 373, 2000, 103). Lindstrom’s analyses suggest that the ambiguity and flexibility occurring in Port Vila discussed in this paper have deep, traditional roots in managing interpersonal disputes. On the other hand, however, overlaps and differences can “often lead to conflict and confusion,” as in the case of the dual customary and state-based land governance systems (Naupa 2017, 309). Further, Naupa warns that a “hybrid system” that can develop in these circumstances poses the risk of embedding “the marginalisation of women in land matters” (Naupa 2017, 310). In Vanuatu, the relationship between people and land has been described as analogous to a kin relationship: like “a mother... to a baby,” in Sethy Regenvan’s words (1980). The concept reflects ni-Vanuatu ideas of reciprocity, connection, and responsibility.

Elsewhere in Melanesia, studies have explored the prevalence of multiple narratives about urban land. Joseph Foukona shows how urban Solomon Islander landowners and settlers put forward alternative narratives as a strategy to make their respective “entitlement and exclusion claims,” drawing on a “moral discourse” to augment their legitimacy (Foukona 2015, 515). Rebecca Monson shows that land claims negotiate “multiple, overlapping arenas, norms and institutions emanating from kastom, Christianity and the state” (Monson 2017, 384 emphasis added). In Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Michelle Nayahamui Rooney shows how urbanization leads to a prevalence of overlapping and competing claims to the same piece of land, in which migrants and landowners draw on historical provincial connections and deploy an ideology of citizenship of the state and attendant concepts of a human right to shelter (Rooney 2017, 136). These examples show some shared experiences across Melanesia of people negotiating multiple narratives and sources of legitimacy for land tenure claims, although specific strategies and histories might be context-specific.

#### 4 | Overlapping Narratives Creating Co-Existence

Ambiguity can be useful for people interested in maintaining a status quo, especially in negotiations around land. Ambiguity,

specifically the presence of multiple, overlapping interpretations, allows people with competing positions to co-exist in relative peace in the city. In this sense, ambiguity is a technique of power that curtails conflict by creating conditions for compromise, a social practice which is broadly valued in Melanesia. Accepting ambiguity encourages flexible actions that can maintain a status quo that is mutually acceptable, if not ideal, for parties to a land agreement. Ambiguity aligns with customary values of flexibility and compromise. In the context of urban precarity (Campbell and Laheij 2021), ambiguity is generative; it produces creative ways of living together in the city. This understanding of ambiguity echoes Bob Tonkinson's concept of how ambiguity at Mele Maat was socially and politically productive because it allowed land to mean multiple things at the same time (Tonkinson 1977). This section returns to the opening vignette to describe a relationship involving ambiguity that has been allowed to persist and sustain a land relationship between groups. This case shows how multiple perspectives are useful to different actors in land tenure negotiations and the value of allowing them to co-exist to maintain a status quo.

The week prior to the opening vignette of this paper where Chief Joseph laughed at idea of “adopted community,” I attended the regular nakamal of the group on whose customary lands Chief Joseph's community is built. There, I heard from Chief Palani and his chiefly council about the ways they characterize migrants on their customary lands in relation to the legitimacy of their customary tenure. These categories imply relationships of power that allow the group to retain their primacy as autochthonous customary owners of inalienable land. The nakamal was held in the center of the village, which is about 20 km away from the center of Port Vila. It is a large and ordered village, among the largest on the island. It is characterized by a neat, gridlike pattern of narrow paths. They are wide enough for one vehicle to pass through, though most are formed from dirt and are incredible bumpy, meaning cars and buses pass at walking pace. The nakamal began in a large banana-yellow building, resembling a chapel in its rectangular shape and organization of chairs facing a raised section at one end. Surrounding this building was a tidy office. Oddly enough, I noticed a letter from the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong, thanking the Chief and his council for hosting her earlier in the year, reflecting the community's strong and enduring political influence at the (inter)national level. It was in this office that the chiefly council introduced me to their way of conceptualizing migrant communities in Port Vila. They distinguished between “illegal settlements” who have, ostensibly, skirted necessary customary processes and, on the other hand, “adopted communities” who have, by contrast, followed custom processes so have a level of security. A community in the former category had recently been evicted by a customary landowner. The details of the eviction were unclear, but the fact that the agreement had not come through the nakamal meant that the chiefly council had no power to mediate the dispute between the residents and the individual landowner. On the drive out to this meeting, I was astonished to see the piles of building rubble, freshly flattened plants, and large tracks carved deeply into the soft soil. Six months later, I saw the land transformed into active building sites where workers erected concrete walls for warehouses and stores facing the busy island ring road.

The invocation of kin relationships in the term “adopted” is significant in this context because it reflects the establishment of reciprocity and responsibility involved in proper customary relationships when land is granted (Van Trease 1987, 10; Lindstrom et al. 2024, 2). The term “adopted” is also a politically strategic term because it reinscribes an unequal power dynamic between the original villagers (the adopters) and migrants (the adoptees), echoing Day's conceptualization of the relationship between *man kam* and *man ples* as one of “nonequivalents” (2023). People from Chief Palani's village retain the power to choose to adopt certain migrants and not others. In this case, categorizing migrants as “adopted,” even those who have followed all the customary processes correctly, is a reminder that they have come from elsewhere. Arrivals might become adopted “kin” with all its attendant rights and responsibilities, but power remains with the customary owners. This intentional hierarchical relationship retains the original villagers' position as *man ples*, autochthonous and inalienable *landona* under *kastom*. They aim to incorporate new migrants living under the local governance structures (Day 2022b). The set of discursive categories acts politically to reify villagers' position as the final arbiters of the meaning of land.

However, this ostensibly straightforward version of the story was challenged by my encounter with Chief Joseph some days later. I drove back out of town, passing Chief Palani's village on my way. Further along the road sits Chief Joseph's longtime migrant village. I talked with Chief Joseph, the grandson of the man who originally organized the settlement and made an agreement through *kastom* with the original *landona*. We spoke in the shade under the eaves of the church he had built out of *natangura* (woven palm leaves), listening to the sounds of the creek, chickens, and the nursery school in the background. I noticed the *natangura* was constructed from multiple, neat, and overlapping layers of woven material, held fast to a grid of branches (see Figure 3). He explained the many steps along the process of securing this land, involving dealing with the French plantation owner, the Condominium government, and conducting a *kastom* ceremony with the village chiefs. His assertion, amidst the laughter, that the descendants of the migrants had become *man ples*, as described at the opening of this article, implies that they are now engaged in immutable relationships of stewardship and responsibility for the land. The concept of *man ples* is politically potent because it entails a claim to identification tied to a particular place and a set of rights and obligations in relation to that land. Chief Joseph asserts that it is due to the long duration of his ancestors' life in Efate that they now have the right to the category of *man ples* and its protections. Over three generations of continuous residence and investment in infrastructure and environmental projects like diverting the river, the community has built strong relationships with the land to the point that they feel it is, customarily, theirs. Like Rooney's Oro province interviewees who have moved to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Chief Joseph's claims is founded on historical relational identity and connection to this specific place (2017, 124). The two leaders' statements are equally political, if contradictory, because one asserts that the two communities are on equal footing, challenging the other's idea of a relationship of benevolent adoption and the hierarchy that it implies. The invocation of the term *man ples* is highly symbolic and a political strategy. In Vanuatu, *man ples* are reified as the holders of *kastom* for their particular *ples*



**FIGURE 3** | Natangura roofing made from woven palm leaves. *Source:* Sebastian Salay.

and their rights to control activities on their land are favored by courts and empowered to govern land through the Constitution.

The contest between the host village and the migrants' descendants conceptualizations of the identity of land is a significant contradiction. However, it forms ambiguity which is socially valuable to both groups. Rather than a dispute, which implies the eventual victory of one perspective above the other, thinking about these multiple narratives as ambiguity is more accurate to reality: the narratives are overlaid on land. The ambiguity comes from the presence of two interpretations of land which is socially legitimate; the land is “polysemic,” in Rodman’s terms (1992), in that it has multiple voices and means multiple things. The category that Chief Palani uses, “adopted community,” and Chief Joseph’s assertion of “*man ples*” are fundamentally incompatible. The former asserts autochthonous villagers’ exclusive customary control of the land, whereas the latter suggests that the migrants’ descendants have established their own, inalienable customary relationship with land. The fundamentally diametric opposition of these terms ought to result in significant tension between the groups. Although there has been some stiffness between the groups over the many decades of co-habitation (see Tonkinson 1968), their present relationship appears to be based on mutual respect. While each group maintains that their perspective is correct, they understand that an alternative view exists. Each interpretation serves a purpose for the group espousing it: Chief Palani asserts ultimate control over customary land, while Chief Joseph benefits by strategically staking his community’s claim to the land. It is important to note the tension between the confidence with which each speaker stated their perspective and the inherent contradiction between them. Both Chief Joseph and Chief Palani believe that their interpretation is correct. Both interpretations coexist and offer something useful to the people involved, even though they appear to be in intractable contradiction.

While ambiguity can be created by people presenting and insisting on multiple perspectives, existing ambiguity can also be further perpetuated by actors who benefit from this kind of scenario. In a context where ambiguity enables peaceful coexistence, efforts to elevate one perspective above the other can be damaging. For example, a census conducted by Etas community leaders in 2018 collected new information about man kam residents (Day 2022a, 22). The community and Day discussed the possible dissemination options and their implications and ultimately decided to keep the census private. As Day outlines, releasing the results of that census would expose details about the community to others, including customs *landona* and the state. Keeping the census private represents a people refusing to be specified, in terms of James C. Scott (2009). The choice to keep the census hidden means that a range of other narratives about the size and makeup of the community can endure. Chiefs Joseph and Palani create ambiguity by putting forward two contradictory propositions about the meaning of the land and its relationship with people. Although the ambiguity is useful to them both in reducing the risk of competition, they both are certain of the legitimacy of their own perspective. By comparison, the Etas census is an example of a group deciding to refrain from introducing clarity to discussions to retain a level of ambiguity. This allows all interested parties to have confidence in their own interpretation of the Etas.

So far, we have described how ambiguity in land agreements can be useful to some people because it allows them to hold onto their own interpretation of the agreement while allowing both to exist contemporaneously. The context of urban precarity is partly responsible for creating fertile ground for the presence and social acceptance of ambiguity. As Campbell and Laheij point out, the complexity of the city and its dynamic instability creates the conditions for innovative and creative social techniques (2021, 290). Ambiguity is one of these techniques because it allows people to create good lives for

themselves and their communities within the context of tenuous and sometimes challenged land agreements. Ambiguity can therefore be a useful social tool for people navigating urban precarity. People value it and generate it because it creates flexibility and can reduce the negative effects of competition. The presence of multiple possible interpretations means that each person can hold onto their own perspective and land tenure claim. However, ambiguity in Port Vila has a longer history in customary consensus-making dispute processes (see Lindstrom 1990, 2000) and, therefore, is not solely a reaction to the advent of urban precarity in post-independent Port Vila with its increasing connections with international late-stage capitalism. Ambiguity in Port Vila draws on longer histories of flexibility of *kastom* and unique layered colonial history which have created puzzles for anthropologists for many decades. The overlapping of meanings of land reflects, in some ways, the presence of different ways of life in colonial and postcolonial Vanuatu as described by Bumangari Kaon of Bunlap to Margaret Jolly (1994, 21). The European influence of *skul* and the Indigenous practices of *kastom* are sometimes simplistically presented as dichotomous ways of living on ni-Vanuatu land, but, in fact, each “road” transforms the other in productive ways in a dialogic relationship (Jolly 1994, 21). In Port Vila, then, ambiguity is improvisatory not because it is new, but because it is an active and intentional response that draws from broader cultural patterns and expectations to deal with new forms of urban precarity. In other words, ambiguity is so politically and socially effective because it derives from and relates to a cultural context that already features flexibility, polysemy, and the careful management of multiple ways of being.

## 5 | Clarity Emerging From Polysemy

Complex and precarious urban systems create ambiguity in which clarity can emerge. Alimardanian and Heffernan describe this in terms of ambiguity “resembling a holding place,” implying a temporal element to a transformation from ambiguity to clarity as well as a spatial metaphor: a single clarified narrative is elevated above multiple others; clarity is relational in that it derives from and relates to the prior ambiguity (2024, 1). In Port Vila, the emergence of clarity is not necessarily the emergence of a single truth that reveals alternative narratives as false, but a political elevation of one of many narratives above other legitimate ones. This means that the emergence of clarity is a relational and political move. People in Vila use their position or political capital to assert a particular perspective over others when negotiating land tenure agreements.

This section shows the effort and techniques required to undermine extant ambiguity to assert a single perspective over others: “a holding place from which clarity can emerge” (Alimardanian and Heffernan 2024, 1). We offer an example of how a customary *landona* disrupts an ambiguous land tenure relationship which has materially endured in one form for decades. The example shows how the presence of multiple interpretations creates a field of action and contest. In other words, ambiguity creates a new battleground for narratives to contest each other in what Alimardanian and Heffernan describe as ambiguity being “utilised to... pursue certain agendas” (2024,

241). This section argues that it takes concerted effort for an actor to assert one interpretation over another, particularly when that interpretation alters the existing order and “drive[s] transformations” of social relationships (Alimardanian and Heffernan 2024, 241).

In an area in the north of Port Vila, Margaret explains how her longstanding agreement began to unravel after the original customary *landona* died and the land was inherited by his son. This story shows how, in an urban context of multiple stories, it is possible for someone to change the agreement:

The landowner.... told my father.... that people from Tanna had come here and died here during World War Two. Because of that, he told my father: “you come and live here”. And he told me that I would live here now. And now I live here. What I mean is that this place here is mine and I cannot be told to leave. When [the old landowner] died, his son Noah came to see me and he told me that I would have to leave this place because he sold the land and that he would give another piece of land to me. In Noah’s father’s time, he didn’t tell me to *pem graon*, but I just lived here and give him some small things—a bit of money, some cigarettes because he smoked—because I was glad for being able to live here. But in Noah’s time, he came to say that I have to *pem graon*. Sometimes I pay him, sometimes I don’t pay him because I say that this place is mine now. And when he came to give me a letter to make me leave, I know that I will have to move, because he gave me the letter. Many times when he has come here we have argued because he knows that his father and I had a different arrangement.

- Margaret, Tannese migrant resident of Port Vila

This disagreement between a longtime customary tenant and the landowner, about the true story of their land, is a common experience throughout Port Vila. Arrangements change over time and people involved in land agreements often have markedly different perceptions of their relationship. In this case, both the resident and new *landona* acknowledge that alternate interpretation is possible. The longtime resident recognizes that the new *landona* may have the legitimacy to reinterpret his father’s agreement, even though it disadvantages her tenancy, by sometimes paying him rent. This has the additional effect of maintaining the social reciprocal relationship between the two of them.

On his part, the new *landona* recognizes the resident’s position and recognizes he must send a formal letter in order to change the existing relationship. He acts like a “gamechanger,” an emic concept describing a customary *landona* who shifts the rules of the game (Day 2023). The son inherits the land from his father but demonstrates that he does not want to inherit the associated land use agreements. The use of the letter, a more formal communication mode than their usual in-person arguments, suggests that he acknowledges that he is, in fact, changing the nature of the

agreement rather than enforcing what had already been agreed. In the Vanuatu context, a written letter has symbolic significance. It is a deliberate move beyond a *kastom*-based approach to dispute resolution: the letter involves only Noah and Margaret, intentionally excluding the broader chiefly council which represents the broader group's collective interest in the land. The letter evokes Western legal concepts and, since the message is written and not spoken aloud, it appears as if it were final and uncontested. To use the terms of Campbell and Laheij (2021, 289), the letter is an experimental and improvisatory tool used by an actor to advance their interests in a context of urban precarity. It takes a different form than previous communication (written rather than spoken) and brings a new social system into the dialogue by making an appeal to the legal system. What makes the letter effective in convincing Margaret that her land agreement is finished is that the letter pushes the boundaries of what has come before, it is experimental and transforms the coexistence of overlapping stories. In addition, the letter reflects the kinds of discourse Lindstrom witnessed during a dispute resolution process on Tanna Island. Like the disputants, Noah plays with the present contradictions and “strove to establish the truth of what [he] said,” not in terms of a “local island discourse,” as is the case Lindstrom analyses on Tanna, but in the context of a hybrid model of land governance that is emerging in the city that incorporates customary and state-based legitimacy (Lindstrom 2000, 103; Naupa 2017, 310). The result is that one of the stories, regardless of its relation to the existing arrangement and its relative recency, gains value and power.

Until the letter was sent, Noah and Margaret operated in a fluid space where both interpretations of the land agreement were legible and acknowledged; there was ambiguity over the nature of the land in that there were multiple, overlapping narratives. This is signified by Margaret's irregular payments to Noah, which reflect her acknowledging his position while holding onto her own; she made irregular exchanges with Noah's father, too. However, the letter changes things and demonstrates how people can leverage their power to assert an interpretation that suits them. The trajectory of Margaret and Noah's relationship signals how ambiguity can enable co-existence and also create the conditions for one interpretation overcoming others. The fact that multiple interpretations are plausible means Noah can alter the conditions of the land agreement by elevating one of the existing stories. Drawing on the polysemic nature of land in Vanuatu that allows for divergent socially produced meanings of land (Rodman 1992), Noah can assert his own preferred view among other equally legitimate ones. In this case, his socially legitimized power as a customary *landona* enables him to change the nature of agreements. Here, ambiguity creates a social context in which people can exert their influence to change a status quo defined by multiple overlapping stories by elevating one of those above the rest. Alimardanian and Heffernan (2024, 1) suggest that “clarity can emerge” in ambiguous contexts, and this example shows how “emergence” might sometimes entail deliberate political assertion, rather than a wholly organic process that “emergence” might imply.

The eviction of Margaret from land for she had made a customary agreement exemplifies the complex ethical dynamics in Port Vila. From her perspective, the eviction is unjust because

the customary agreement was intended to be enduring, beyond the life of Noah's father. Or at least this was the understanding Margaret had of the agreement. From this perspective, the letter that changed the terms of agreement is unjust and points toward the danger of urban precarity creating destruction and disruption (Campbell and Laheij 2021, 289). On the other hand, Noah is the true and socially recognized customary owner of land and has the inalienable right to make decisions about his customary land. Margaret's eventual acquiescence to the letter that changes the terms of the agreement suggests she recognizes his ultimate authority as customary *landona* and the political systems in place that will support him if she attempts to take the dispute further. Noah's intention to remove Margaret from the land is productive for him because it allows him to use his customary land for another purpose which may generate more capital, in any form, for him. Here, ambiguity in narratives about land contributes to making a change in the tenure agreement which is neither uniquely destructive nor totally productive. The eviction is, ambiguously, both at the same time.

This case shows the role of ambiguity in disrupting existing customary land tenure agreements. The presence of overlapping meanings of land creates the possibility that powerful people can elevate their preferred interpretation above others, even when this implies changing or breaking the agreement. It is precisely because there are multiple ways to understand the land and its associated customary agreement that it is possible to introduce another and, ultimately, assert it. The specter evictions, the most common subjective experience among *man kam* of urban precarity in Port Vila, is made material by people deliberately negotiating ambiguity to achieve their “desires” for the land, in McDonnell's terms (2023). In the city, ambiguity is produced by, among other things, an increasing number of people cohabiting in the same place. The increasing presence of multiple, overlapping stories about land opens up new spaces for contest and creates new ways for people to assert power.

## 6 | Conclusion: Sorting Out Stories Amidst Urban Precarity

By allowing the presence of multiple narratives about the same piece of land, ambiguity has the potential to both enable productive and mutually agreeable coexistence and, at the same time, sow the seeds for tenure insecurity. Contrary to the expectation that successful and durable land agreements rely on shared understanding, the case in Port Vila of Chief Joseph and Chief Palani shows that, sometimes, being able to hold onto contradictory positions is useful. Forcing the two of them to mediate a common position risks undermining the contradictory, but mutually acceptable status quo. On the other hand, ambiguity can enable the failure of land tenure agreements, particularly when existing power differentials are at play. The presence of multiple perspectives means that one party to the agreement has the space to assert their opinion over others or, as in the case of Margaret and Noah, insert and assert a new interpretation. Ambiguity enables this by allowing for land to mean multiple things at the same time. People like Noah can use this ambiguity to implement a change in an existing agreement to regain control of his inherited customary land.

We show, through two cases, how apparent contradictions can be highly useful and the techniques required to elevate a single narrative among others. These cases are emblematic of myriad others we have encountered in Port Vila's growing urban sprawl onto customary land. Returning to the *natangura* eaves of Chief Joseph's church illustrates the structure and purpose of overlapping stories. The ethnographic examples we have described here reflect the structure of rooves made from *natangura*. From the outside, the roof structure looks like a dense collection of leaves, similar to thatch. They are trimmed to the same length, but it is impossible to see any ordering principle. They provide excellent protection from the sun and rain and offer useful lessons for building cyclone-resistant safe houses because they are lightweight, strong, and flexible (ANU College of Engineering, Computing, and Cybernetics 2024). However, on the inside, the structure of the *natangura* reveals itself. What appears from the outside as a dense mat of individual leaves is, in fact, a strategic layering of multiple neat rows of coherent and consistent human-made woven leaves. The many sections lay on top of each other across even distances, and each row is distinct. Like the *natangura*, stories appear inextricable and confounding from the outside. Our ethnographic attempts to ascertain a truth were stymied. But looking at the web of stories from the inside reveals the way they interrelate, support each other, and work in productive cooperation. Having multiple layers of stories can create better outcomes. On the other hand, the many layers make it easy to change or remake the status quo. A layer can be pulled aside or otherwise undermined, which has flow-on effects to the whole structure.

In part, this paper responds to Alimardanian and Heffernan's (2024) call for an anthropology of ambiguity by applying it to a study of urban precarity. Thinking with this concept helps unravel the overlapping and intertwined meanings of land in Port Vila. Ambiguity refocuses attention on the reasons behind the polysemy associated with land in Vanuatu, allowing us to move beyond the impossible task of reconciling contradictions in the field to find the one *stret* story. Embracing ambiguity in the field allows for meaningful ethnographic engagement with a range of actors, including those who hold different stories, because it allows space for this kind of diversity. The prevalence of multiple meanings of land in Port Vila shows one technique that residents and customary owners use to navigate the precarious city. Urban precarity provides fertile ground for ambiguity to thrive and to be a useful social tool to negotiate life and access to land and, ultimately, the city. These stories show that it is not only the material aspects of life that are under pressure in the city, but also, epistemologies themselves. In the city, particular interpretations of land agreements are not guaranteed, so *man kam* and *man ples* negotiate the multiple, overlapping narratives. As Port Vila and other cities like it continue expanding in population, so too will stories about the meanings of land and urban precarity continue proliferating. Paying attention to the ambiguity can help sort out the stories, not to find the "truth" among them all, but to understand how they, like the *natangura* leaves, might overlap.

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### Ethics Statement

The project has been approved by the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee (reference number 24954).

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> All people and most local places have been given pseudonyms.

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