

Sister Communities: Rejecting Labels of Informality and Peripherality in Vanuatu

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Keywords: urbanization, Pacific, eviction, displacement, informal, peri-urban, settlement, Vanuatu, formality, postcolonial

Abstract

Some labels have dire consequences. This paper takes issue with the labels commonly used to describe physical and social location of communities living on the edge of Port Vila, Vanuatu – labels that position communities for eviction by entrenching tropes of informality and peripherality into how they are seen and represented. Such terms include *informal*, *settlement*, *informal settlement*, *squatter*, and *peri-urban*. Based on around 100 formal interviews and two years of ethnographic engagement with urban communities in Port Vila, Vanuatu, I critique the language of policy against the lived experience of those at the urban edge. I use Bourdieu's (1989) articulation of power as

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an accumulation of *symbolic capital* that enables one to speak the world into being. I conclude that the language of policies and plans is reflective of a dominant discourse in urban studies and international aid, and non-reflective of the experience and identities of people living at the urban edge. My interviewees and interlocutors maintain their identities as *sister communities* – as places grounded in the formality of customary tenure, and as part of the city rather than outside it.

<H1> Introduction: Labels that Marginalize

Mary's home was bulldozed with two-hours' notice in March 2019. After her home was destroyed with everything that she could not salvage in two hours, it turned out that the sheriff's office had made a mistake: the court order pertained to another property. She has not been compensated in any way for her losses, nor for the losses she suffered in 2014, when her previous home in a different community of Port Vila, Vanuatu, was also bulldozed overnight while she and her young children wept outside. Mary's experience is not uncommon in the rapidly-urbanizing South Pacific. Thousands of people have been evicted since 2014, and currently, there are more than 70 evictions slated to start early in 2020, in Port Vila alone, and another 30 or so in the remainder of Vanuatu (personal communication with the Vanuatu Sheriff's Office, December 2019).

Mary's two destroyed homes were in places often described in policy and international literature as, *informal* and *peri-urban*. In this paper, I challenge the dominant language of the informal and the geographically-peripheral — two dualisms that expose Pacific people to vulnerability because of the way that customary land is (not) governed as part of the city. Using ethnography and textual investigation, I critique the common language of policy and discourse, against the lived experience of those outside the municipal boundary. I argue that current urban planning power-holders influencing Port Vila are mobilizing language that is not congruent with the experience of urban people. I argue that Western ideas of formality are being misapplied to Port Vila's growing urban population, imported through non-local actors via institutions whose power is pronounced in the post-colonial setting of this least-developed, poor country. What is at stake is people's ability to avoid eviction and find a place of belonging in the city.

My analysis contributes to the debates in urban studies that seek to understand how power is wielded through declarations of informality and peripherality in the post-colonial setting. It is concerned primarily with what formality means, what counts as the city, and the material consequences of mis-applying these terms. The story is entwined with aid dependency, whiteness, customary governance, rapid urbanization, and situation as a small-island developing state (SIDS). Postcolonial theory offers capacity to critique the application of Western logic to places in the Global South – often in hindsight. Sometimes, it may be possible to identifying institutional and social locations of power before they become unacknowledged, unseen modes of domination.

Port Vila, with its just-emerging urban governance structures, may be such a place. My purpose is to intervene in the current construction (in language) of communities living on the physical edge of Port Vila, as *informal* and not of-the-city or belonging to it. This intervention is necessary because in its absence those with the power to articulate the city have created a class of people whose presence on certain lands is illegitimate, illegal, and unprotected by current law. Forcible evictions are common in the communities where these labels are applied, even in the presence of a national policy which declares protection against forced displacement.

I identify the presence of dominant discourses and argue that the current language prevents widely-used customary tenure practices that are recognized in the country's constitution from being recognized as a kind of formality. My general argument is that people living at the edge of Port Vila do not experience themselves as either *peri-urban* or *informal*, though development discourse and planning in the form of official documentation and *advisor* writing decisively positions them as both. They also do not experience themselves as *squatters*, though popular discourse positions them as such. Much of the language used by advisors and plans is out of resonance with people's identities as urban migrants and citizens of Vanuatu.

People in Port Vila's newly-expanding geographic periphery see themselves *sister communities*. Urban planning could adapt to be more-reflective of how people see themselves, and of the kinds of tenure arrangements that are among the most common in this post-colonial capital. I start with a discussion of the power that planners and international actors wield in development settings.

<H1> Power in the Post-Colony

One form of power is the power to articulate the world – to speak the world into being¹. The project of mobilizing language in advance of hegemony of thought is elegantly expressed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1989). In a 1986 lecture, Bourdieu comments on the importance of classification to the making of power:

The struggle over classifications is a fundamental dimension of class struggle. It is the power to make groups, to manipulate the objective structure of society (p. 23).

Not everyone has the power necessary to speak the world into being. This *symbolic power* comes from recognition:

¹ I am borrowing language from Dr. Sophie Sturup here. I am not sure where this turn of phrase entered our many conversations over a long friendship, but I am certain that I owe the idea to her.

Symbolic power, whose form par excellence is the power to make groups is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition (p. 23).

Two bodies of theory enable me to question the structure of power that disadvantages the subaltern by enabling some actors to declare them to be *peri-urban* and *informal*: postcolonial urban theory and informality theory. Across both branches of urban studies, scholars have sought to identify hegemony of thought that prevents critical reassessment of presumptions in urban planning and the theory that underpins it.

The formality-informality dualism is where I primarily position this paper because it is there that I believe it has the most to offer urban planning practice. This dualism is one issue taken up by a recent, 2019 special issue in *Urban Studies*. This special issue notes that declaration of location and formality is also a form of political power (Pratt, 2019), and describes how declarations of formality and informality can act as a kind of “intellectual governmentality” (McFarlane, 2019), calling upon Foucault’s language to illustrate how the presumed and reiterated reinforces current power dynamics and vulnerabilities. This is consistent with Bourdieu’s ideas, where the power to name becomes the power to imagine and decide.

Unlike the special issue described above, which focuses on a single dualism (in/formality), I add a second dimension: that of the peri-urban. I do this because these places where both labels are applied (informal and peri-urban) are the sites of horrific evictions that have occurred overnight, with insufficient warning, and with children present. I do not take up other terms in development, such as slum (as does Gilbert, 2007) or improvement, as does (Ranganathan, 2018). This is not because they are unimportant: it is because they are less central to the critical issue of eviction that many Pacific communities currently face, in the particular urbanization processes happening there, now. Informality, combined with geographic peripherality, is so ubiquitously applied in Vanuatu’s policy and popular discourse, that its insidiousness hides in “plain sight” (Simone, 2019).

One of the reasons that informality and peripherality can hide in plain sight, is that the post-colonial setting enables the uncritical transfer of Global-North concepts via non-local actors endowed with symbolic power. Vanuatu is a post-colonial setting, one of the world’s poorest and least-developed countries, and heavily impacted by its hundreds of years of colonial rule. The Republic of Vanuatu became independent in 1980 after joint colonial rule by Britain and France, which began in 1906. A small-island developing state (Butcher-Gollach, 2015), Vanuatu’s national accounts place its per-capita income at around USD \$3,200, a rank of 196th in the world (International Monetary Fund, 2019), behind its Pacific neighbours Fiji and Samoa. The country’s urban growth has been clocked at 4 percent growth overall and anywhere from 3 to 12 percent in the urban periphery (Jones and Sanderson, 2017b). Citing World Bank data

in an unpublished masters thesis that is as far as I can tell the only compiled source of this information, Spring (2017) analyzes the “aid dependence” of Vanuatu between 1981 and 2014, concluding that overseas development assistance contributed between 10 and 40 percent of that country’s gross national income (p. 29), which he notes places it in Bräutigam (2000)’s category of “aid dependent.” Australia has historically been the largest donor in Vanuatu (Spring, 2017: 32), and anyone who spends time in Vanuatu will observe the proliferation of Australian advisors operating across the branches of government, from the aviation regulator to the central bank. Recent increases in Chinese aid may ultimately tip this balance, but the Australian aid program has recently pledged significant increases in its aid to the Pacific, likely motivated by competition with Chinese aid (Harris, 2019).

This location of symbolic capital (in international agencies and advisors) can be problematic if their representational choices do not align with the lives of people who will ultimately be subject to the processes they produce. In urban planning, postcolonial critique opens the possibility of seeing the uncritical application of Global-North concepts to Global-South settings, by paying attention to the ways in which action and thought is structured by global structures of power in places where the colonial period is only recently ended (Roy, 2006). The uncritical application of language that I highlight herein, reflects on the discipline of urban planning as lacking an “ethics of accountability” (Rankin, 2010) that could help practitioners to identify where they generate their symbolic power. Roy (2006), calling on planners to acknowledge that the discipline is culpable in reproducing empire-relationships. She asks planners to redirect their powers of declaration to an “ethics of accountability” where the development project becomes accountable *to* rather than responsible *for* subaltern people.

There is a some other work describes language as constitutive of symbolic power or as unaccountable to subaltern people. Gilbert (2007) critiques the use of the word, *slum*, by UN agencies, arguing that the term has the potential to harm those to which it is applied because it brings with it values and presumptions about the character of those who live there, and about these settlements being scourges of which cities seek to (and should be seeking to) rid themselves. Throughout his detailed argument, Gilbert remains outside of critical theory. Ranganathan (2018) makes the argument that urban “improvement” should be understood as a term that recreates class and embeds it into urban space, reinforcing the materials inequalities in property and infrastructure that are the underpinnings of poverty and marginality.

I have moved toward Bourdieu’s terms because they provide a shorthand – a language to describe the relational structures that grant credibility to some ideas and the processes by which that credibility is granted. My purpose in this paper is to describe some particularities of Pacific urbanization as they relate to the worldwide project of critical urban theory. Rather than painstakingly convince the reader – like Gilbert did –

that the effects of words are real and impactful, I leverage the work of past scholars that have made this case – for instance, Schmid, Karaman, Hanakata, Kallenberger, Kockelkorn, Sawyer, Streule and Wong (2018) who interrogate the terms, *gentrification, urban growth, suburbanization, informality, global cities*. These concepts are related to the language I study in their spatiality and normativity. Their work along with most of that cited above on language and power, however, does not extend empirically to the Pacific.

My use of Bourdieu acknowledges the city as a negotiated space that is constantly created and recreated, rather than as given, a priori, modernist construction (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010). Other shorthands exist. Bunnell and Maringanti (2010)'s "metrocentric tendencies" refer to a centre identified by whiteness (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995) and feminist (Bordo, 1992, Butler, 2011) scholars as they seek to identify and disrupt current normative presumptions underpinning discourse. Whiteness is a habitual way of being and thinking (Ahmed, 2007) that renders those habits invisible to many, even those oppressed by them. Whiteness theory provides a framework for understanding response to deviation from the values and assumptions of European-extracted societies (Coates, 2015, DiAngelo, 2018) – much as feminist theory offers ways for understanding the structural advantages of *maleness* (Bordo, 1992, Butler, 2011). Most relevantly to this analysis, interrogating whiteness enables us to overcome the invisible normativity of its presence – a project of "making the center visible" (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995). Bourdieu's symbolic power is compatible with all of this theory, providing a language to identify the location of power and the producers of power in Pacific cities.

<H1> Methodological Approach

The arguments I make in this paper are based on my ethnographic and textual investigation of whether symbolic capital wielded by state and non-state actors in Vanuatu, aligns with the community experience of itself as a peri-urban. I achieve this through analysis of policy documentation, writing assembled by intergovernmental agencies and advisors, media discourse, and my own ethnographic work in communities facing displacement or rumours of displacement.

My engagement with communities in Vanuatu has been a combination of interview and ethnography. This paper centres on my engagement with the Elang Etas Community Association (EECA). Formed in 2018, the EECA came into being as a response to politically-motivated eviction threats by candidates attempting to assemble political patronage in advance of an upcoming election. Since then, the EECA has taken on a developmental role, establishing committees for youths, mothers, and chiefs that engage to varying degrees in community-building projects and capacity-building.

Heading out of Port Vila to the southeast, six kilometres out of town, one cuts a sharp

left from the main, paved road that encircles the island, and heads another couple of kilometres up the potholed road to Elang Etas (see Figure 1). The story of Etas starts when the road to the Bouffa landfill was cut through the jungle in the early 1990s. The first people to settle at Etas located near the Round Island road. *Elang* means, “high,” or, “above,” in a local language from this island, Efate. The landfill road is unpaved, but that has not prevented more than 2,000 people making Elang Etas – a couple of kilometers up the landfill road – home. They have come from all around Vanuatu – including from other areas of Port Vila. Some are people who were displaced from other communities in Port Vila. Virtually all of the houses in Etas are *one-day houses* – built in a day to provide basic shelter, with dirt floors, roofs and walls made of corrugated metal. Hot in the sun and leaky in the rain, the community’s homes are densely-arranged. Three small houses can be built on a 1/30-hectare plot, in addition to a toilet and kitchen. When the plots were first divided by Etas’ first planner (described below), they were meant to be temporary places of refuge as people integrated into Port Vila (personal communication, October 2018). Today, the EECA is attempting to solidify the idea of Elang Etas as home to its current and future residents.

Figure 1. Elang Etas and Port Vila

(source: Google Earth base map; Port Vila municipal shapefile (HDX, 2018); Elang Etas boundary produced by author)

I first became acquainted with Elang Etas when I sought out people displaced in 2014 from another peripheral community, Destination. That single event evicted more than 500 people, overnight and with a few hours’ warning, and many people have not recovered financially or emotionally (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019). Since then, evictions in Port Vila have seem to be increasing in number and affected population, though no official statistics are available.

A number of households from Destination moved *antap* (on top; up the hill) to Elang Etas, where I interviewed them in 2018. On 19 October 2018, I attended the launch of EECA’s constitution, where I found out that EECA was not borne of a set of community-development goals. It was, rather, a product of necessity. In his speech on 19 October 2018, the EECA then-Chairman, John Yasur, described the origins of this association. In early 2018, several of Elang Etas’ twelve zones were threatened with an eviction order – first, the entire community, and then a targeted threat at the seven members of the EECA Committee and their households.

Since late 2018, I have become more-active in EECA’s activities. When I am in Port Vila, I attend Executive committee meetings, help to organize community trainings and educational workshops, and often prepare written materials like the mission statement I describe above. Between October 2017 and my drafting of this paper in August 2019, I have spent 24 weeks in Port Vila, closely engaged with EECA. During the period between 2017 and now, I have both conducted around 100 formal interviews and observed community activities as a participant, attempting to stay faithful to a

decolonized (Smith, 2013) Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) approach (Bozalek, 2011). At the recent launch of a week of Independence Day festivities on 24 July 2019, I was invited to speak alongside community leaders, including chiefs and pastors, and was described on the day's program as an advisor to EECA.

This language of *advisor* is an important feature of my analysis in this paper. International advisors introduced with aid have been central in the preparation of key urban governance processes specifically related to urban planning and forced evictions. Aid is also an important part of Vanuatu's urban governance. Two aid-entwined policy documents/processes are the subject of the remainder of this section.

The first governance process I discuss here is the *Port Vila Urban Resilience and Climate Action Plan (PVURCAP)*, which UN-HABITAT is in the process of preparing in collaboration with advisors working for RMIT University in Australia and government agencies in Vanuatu (Trundle, Barth and Mcevoy, 2019). I refer to the *PVURCAP* as a process rather than a document because it is not yet possible to comment directly on the written report. It is not yet complete and has not yet been made public. Nevertheless, advisors and UN-HABITAT staff have published academic work and media articles that leverage their participation in the process of developing the *PVURCAP*, e.g.,:

This paper reflects on two participatory action research projects that respond to these various calls for action. These projects have developed urban resilience and climate action plans for Honiara and Port Vila, the respective capital cities of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu (Trundle, Barth and Mcevoy, 2019).

For this reason, as a proxy for the unreviewable governance documents, I review the advisors' language about the *PVURCAP* in academic and media writing. I focus on the *PVURCAP* process because there are currently no reviewable town plans or strategy documents focused on the greater area of Port Vila (Cullwick, 2017).

The second governance artifact I reference in the remainder of this paper is the *Vanuatu National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement* (Government of Vanuatu, 2018). The policy was officially adopted by government in September 2018, after the eviction of Destination, and before the mistaken eviction in 2019 that I discuss above. With only one city, and with that city having no planning to speak of (Cullwick, 2017), national policies have urban implications. In different ways, the *PVURCAP* and the national displacement policy reproduce the language that identifies places like Elang Etas as informal and peripheral, and therefore makes them vulnerable to evictions.

My access with EECA is a product of my positionality. My work with EECA is at least partially a privilege that has come from being an educated foreigner, though a woman

working in a patriarchy (Taylor, 2010). It is through this same lens that I must also acknowledge the incompleteness of my understandings as well as my capacity to wield symbolic capital.

<H1> The Language of Informality

Right now, much of the power to articulate the city appears to be held by international agencies that advise government. At least from the vantage point of *town* – a term I use euphemistically here to refer to the capital city-based institutions whose language choices are those that are recognized and encoded into policies and official documents, and writing by their advisors – Vanuatu’s cities are dominated by the idea of the peri-urban, and by an insistence on informality as constitutive of these places. The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the tendency among official documents and the concomitant literature produced by advisors, to insist that customary tenure is a form of informality. In subsequent sections, I will describe how people in Port Vila view customary tenure and argue that this mismatch produces and reproduces informality.

Part of my purpose here is to provide a critical analysis of a common conflation of *custom* and informality. I argue that custom – not just introduced processes and legal systems – can also form the basis of formality. This argument requires a couple of important distinctions: between custom and customary law, and between customary and introduced legal systems.

The distinction between custom and customary law is a product of colonialism. Custom is the set of social rules, mores, and lores that, in pre-colonial Vanuatu, guided behavior in every aspect of a person’s life, from cooking practices to dress to punishment for harming others, and restorative practices for those wronged. Custom continues to be strongly present in many aspects of people’s lives in the Pacific, though many customary practices, e.g., wearing traditional island dresses (Cummings, 2013) are not regulated by the legal system.

During the colonial period, Western legal systems were introduced to the New Hebrides islands. In Western systems, the legal system is distinguished from other spheres of human activity (Bothmann, 2003). At independence, the new nation, Vanuatu, adopted a constitution that enshrined custom alongside the introduced processes. Vanuatu’s *Constitution*, for instance, declares in Article 74 that, “[t]he rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land in the Republic of Vanuatu.” Customary land arrangements, then, could be said to be formalized by virtue of their inclusion in *Mama Loa* (Mother Law; a colloquial term for the *Constitution* in Bislama).

In Vanuatu as in many societies, some custom has been translated into the legal system in the post-colonial state, co-mingled with introduced legal practices (Bothmann, 2003). In her treatment of custom’s role in criminal law, Forsyth (2009) outlines how

customary practices augment or supplement the criminal system – for instance, judges in Vanuatu have taken previous customary punishments into account in sentencing under the introduced legal system (pp. 176-185). Customary law also tends to have little, if any, focus on individual rights or rule of law. Rather, the well-being of communities is the central focus of custom (Bothmann, 2003), which makes sense given the development of these customary systems in the absence of a state, which could adjudicate between communities or enforce laws that protect individual rights.

I turn back now to the set of publications to which I refer above, the *PVURCAP* process, to illustrate how these products of aid and advisors uncritically equate customary arrangements with informality. In Trundle, Barth and Mcevoy (2019), they write:

A similar proportion of Port Vila’s population occupies land through an equally diverse range of informal tenure arrangements, from customary occupancy agreements (based on the exchange of goods and services) to communal leases and subletting arrangements for inner-city blocks (p. 58).

They go on to speak directly about the residents of Elang Etas as living under an informal arrangement (an idea which I contradict later):

Although a 2012 survey by the National Housing Corporation found 13,145 informal settlers within the official urban area (equating to 29.9 per cent of the city’s official population at the time), extensive peri-urban informal areas, including a large settlement of 5–6,000 inhabitants adjacent to the Port Vila landfill site, suggest the total figure across the wider metropolitan Port Vila area is substantially higher (pp. 58-59).

These same advisors continue to assert, in other publications that also draw on the unpublished *PVURCAP* process, that customary tenure equates to informality. In one article for a news publication *The Conversation*, Trundle and McEvoy (2019) write:

“Informal” encompasses many different ways of urban living.... Other communities hold collective leasehold. Some have arrangements with traditional owners, renting through cash or customary payments.

The term, *settlement*, and its variants also carries with them, a strong connotation of informality. The *PVURCAP* quotes above refer to “....informal settlers within the official urban area....”, contrasting the officialness of the city with the lack of belonging of the settlers. The quotes above also refer to Elang Etas specifically as part of the “....extensive peri-urban informal areas....” Elang Etas, they claim, is “a large *settlement* of 5–6,000 inhabitants adjacent to the Port Vila landfill site....” (emphasis added). The choice of the term, *settlement*, combined with assertions of informality, signals an

underlying meaning: that these are not permanent places of the city, that the people living there do not have a formal claim to the place where they live.

It is tempting to think of places like Elang Etas, as these advisors do, as “informal” and as “settlements.” To an outside observer, the community certainly resembles some informal settlements in appearance. Most homes have earthen floors and flimsy walls and roofs. Bush toilets are often shared between households, and “backyard shacks” (Oldfield and Greyling, 2015) are a common feature of plots, with a plot owner’s children and grandchildren building dwellings on the same plot. The streets are non-rectilinear, and the pathways are unpaved. City services do not extend to Elang Etas, despite that the municipal trucks must haul garbage from town right past the community to deposit it in the landfill. There is no piped water or sanitation, though there are ongoing discussions with the municipality to extend water lines from the main road. The current dispute over the land (described below) does place people’s tenure in question, which is why EECA formed. Many people in the community have told me that they will not build stronger, more-permanent homes until their tenure is secure. The community sits on an agricultural lease, and the individual plots are not registered with government.

However, it is important to draw a distinction between formal as *regulated* or *legible to outside observers*, and formal as *legitimate*. In the quotes immediately above, the advisor-authors appear to be asserting that any tenure arrangement that does not fit a Western model of formalized, written leases or land sales registered with a government agency, cannot count as formal. This idea is contrary to Vanuatu’s *Constitution*, particularly Article 74 (above), which declares custom to be relevant to land governance.

Can a kind of arrangement be informal if it is recognized by the national constitution? If regulation and legibility are what constitutes formality (Marx and Kelling, 2019), then the term may have some resonance. However, even this is a tenuous conclusion: by whom must it be understood and legible? The subdivision scheme is understood by residents, with most householders knowing their plot area and boundaries with to-the-metre precision. I know this from firsthand experience, as I was involved in the analysis of a survey conducted by EECA in March 2018, in which householders were asked to specify the area of their plot. All Elang Etas residents to whom I have spoken about the matter, would prefer government registration to protect their investment in land and home, and to provide them with a homestead safe from eviction threats.

If legitimacy is the basis of formality, then there is an even-stronger case to abandon the term, *informality*, and terms that suggest informality, such as, *settlement*. As I will demonstrate below, people in Vanuatu do not view these customary arrangements as informal. First, I describe another term that the people in Elang Etas do not use, but which appears frequently in advising and governance documents: *peri-urban*.

<H1> The Language of the Periphery

The term, *peri-urban* is used frequently in Vanuatu's governance processes to refer to places outside the municipal boundary of Port Vila. This distinction between municipal and non-municipal land is an important part of Vanuatu's history. Return of customary land from its seizure by colonial powers was a galvanizing part of the independence movement. Articles 73 and 74 of Vanuatu's constitution vest the ownership and governance of all land outside of the Port Vila and Luganville municipal boundaries, with the customary owners. It is, then, a critical feature of urban governance that the national capital is surrounded entirely either by customary land, or the Pacific Ocean.

Port Vila's municipal boundary was set shortly after its 1980 constitution, and has remained unchanged since then. As with many cities, "Port Vila" is the language used to refer to both the administrative area inside the municipal boundary and, colloquially, the larger metropolitan area, including all urban settlements that are within the functional urbanized area. The vast majority of urban population growth is occurring on customary lands (Jones and Sanderson, 2017b, a, Rey, Le De, Leone and Gilbert, 2017, Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2017). The capital of this nation of 300,000 people (World Population Review, 2019), Port Vila is a fast-growing primate city with high levels of migration from the nation's other 82 islands. Population estimates in the 2016 Mini Census estimated a national population of 279,459 and a metropolitan Port Vila population of 78,248. Of this, 27,304 (35 percent) resided outside the municipal boundary (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2017), almost all on customary lands.

It is in the land outside of the municipal boundary, then, that much urban marginality is reproduced. My understanding of the term, *peri-urban*, has evolved over time, with sustained engagement with EECA. In June 2019, I was involved in an effort to write a mission statement for the Association. One complaint of the EECA leadership has been slow uptake of Association participation and support. At my suggestion, in June 2019, the EECA Executive Committee agreed that a mission statement could galvanize the community around a central goal of the newly-formed EECA: to compel non-paying members of the community to make payments to the customary landowner in order to secure their use rights of the land. After a lengthy discussion of its content and under instructions from the EECA Chairman, I wrote an initial draft of the mission statement in English – my primary language – and then translated the statement into Bislama with the help of Brian Merah, President of EECA's Youth Committee. Merah struggled to translate one particular piece of my language: *peri-urban neighborhood*. The mission statement is a one-page document that includes a declaration of the identity of EECA, articulates a set of goals, and describes how those goals will be achieved. The English-language phrasing of the declaration section is as follows:

The Elang Etas Community Association

is a community-driven initiative
whose mission is to achieve tenure security
and a share of urban prosperity
for the residents of Elang Etas,
a peri-urban neighbourhood of Port Vila.

I particularly found Brian's struggle to translate *peri-urban* to be surprising. In common discourse, journalistic writing, and official policy, the peri-urban is frequently evoked across the Pacific, including in Vanuatu. How, then, could it be an unknown concept to the people who live the experience of the peri-urban every day? This sent me back to my field notes and interview transcripts for a query into whether the non-use of the term held. It did, as I will demonstrate in this paper. I also started to look for evidence in my interviews of the other common words that appear in the discourse on urbanization: *informal*, *settlements*, *informal settlements*, and *squatting*. Those queries form the findings of this paper.

Brian and I discussed the term at length, ultimately settling on the translation, *sista komuniti* (sister community) to represent the concept of *peri-urban neighbourhood*. Through these discussions, I came to understand how people in Elang Etas view their community as part of the larger urban form of Port Vila. The term, *sister community*, is referent Elang Etas' location as a part of Port Vila – as a part of the family of communities that comprise Port Vila, rather than as a place outside of the city and therefore not belonging to the city. Indeed, many people in Elang Etas have lives and livelihoods that are deeply connected to the urban area. They make the daily commute to town for education and medical care, to shop and recreate, to work as police officers and bus drivers, to work in hospitality, and to sell produce at the various markets.

In the subsequent workshop where we consulted the EECA Executive committee, five members of the Youth Committee, and one member of the Mamas' Committee about the statement, the term, *sista komuniti*, was not contested. This language has since been reproduced in speeches and community assemblies by the Executive. The final Bislama translation of the above identity declaration is:

**Elang Etas Community Association
hemi wan niu wantok organaes grup blo pipol
we i hang andanet long wan stamba tingting
we i aotlaenem gud seftiness blong ol pipol longsaed blong graon
mo fearshering lo komuniti developmen projek towards rod blo sakses
blong ol pipol we i stap insaed long komuniti blong Elang Etas,
wan sista komuniti blo Port Vila long Efate, Vanuatu.**

The term, *peri-urban*, is presumed in the language of town and advisors. The publications I reference in the previous section use the term uncritically, as do my own previous writings, e.g., (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019). Indeed, prior to my discussions with Brian and others in Elang Etas, the term framed much of my understanding of Elang Etas. The *Vanuatu National Policy on Climate Change and Disaster-Induced Displacement* (Government of Vanuatu, 2018) is another document in which the ideas of *peri-urban* and *informal settlement* appear substantively and frequently, without any attempt at definition or explanation – suggesting a presumption of familiarity with the terms for the intended audiences, e.g.,:

Urban population growth in Vanuatu is increasing at almost twice the rate of rural population growth, with around one quarter of the population living in urban and peri-urban areas (p. 11).

Special attention should be given to providing assistance to peri-urban communities and informal settlements (p. 30).

Notably, the second quote immediately above also distinguishes communities from informal settlements, signaling that they are distinct kinds of places – perhaps distinguished by uncontested or registered land rights. Elang Etas, which has been referred to in the *PVURCAP* process as an informal place, though its members also consider it to be a community. This distinction is, I argue, not only factually incorrect. It also creates a pairing between the ideas of peripherality and informality that may exclude places outside the municipal boundaries from being thought of as anything but informal. When the consequences is easy elimination of informality in the form of eviction, the stakes are high.

Both the *PVURCAP* advisors and the national displacement policy document insist that they are the products of participatory processes:

This paper reflects on two participatory action research projects that respond to these various calls for action (Trundle, Barth and Mcevoy, 2019).

Development of this policy has taken a conflict-sensitive approach, incorporating the views of many different stakeholders. Wide-ranging consultations have been held with communities affected by displacement, government and non-government agencies at national, provincial and local levels, the private sector and academia (Government of Vanuatu, 2018).

However, the language used in both of the above documents is much more consistent with other documents by those same agencies and advisors, such as in a similar document prepared for Honiara in the Solomon Islands, by the same advisors, the *HURCAP* (Trundle and McEvoy, 2017), than it is with the language I have experienced in

Vanuatu's *sister communities*. As I will demonstrate in the remainder of this paper, neither the idea of informality nor the idea of the peri-urban is present in the language of community members that live the daily experiences of the urban edge.

<H1> Customary as Legitimate

The idea of informality is unrepresented in people's ideas about themselves and their communities. Some words that never arose in my interviews with reference to the mixed communities are, *informal, village, settlement*, or compilations of these, like *informal settlement* – despite their appearance in the language of the international institutions and their advisors. People instead discuss a familiarity with customary tenures and the formalities that they expected would provide them with security.

Customary tenure agreements are agreements between customary landowners and tenants that occur outside of the introduced, colonial leasing system. Customary agreements have always been part of Vanuatu's narrative, since migration has always been a common feature of Melanesian life (Bonnemaison, 1985). The stories around customary tenure are complicated – often comprising some historical permission to use land followed by unmitigated in-migration by relatives who construct backyard shacks (Marais and Ntema, 2013), that a landowner feels powerless to stop. In our background paper to the *Internal Report on Internal Displacement 2018* (Day and Wewerinke-Singh, 2019) Wewerinke-Singh and I describe the story of one landowner who allowed a few families to settle on his peri-urban lands. Over the ensuing decades, however, more arrivals from the islands to the capital moved in without permission. In this case, the line between squatting and customary agreement is more blurry.

Despite these complexities, there is great faith in customary agreements around land. Jack² is a customary chief who may be said to be Elang Etas' first planner. Jack told me the story of how he dreamed of creating a place of belonging for people renting at high prices inside the Port Vila town boundaries. His dream was a literal dream, as opposed to the metaphoric meaning of the term referring to a longing or desire. In our long conversation – more than three hours – he described the dream: swimming down to the coral reef and looking into the different pockets and divisions where fish would take refuge. He described this dream to an aspirant to politics, who saw the opportunity to leverage this growing community for political patronage. Together, they approached the customary landowners and sought permission to begin constructing a community on their lands.

The legitimacy of the customary tenancy under which the people in Elang Etas live, then, is a strong theme in the narrative of the community. Jack describes the negotiation between himself, the since-deceased lessee of the land, and the customary

² This interviewee's name has been changed for privacy.

landowner – at the conclusion of which, in 2007, he began clearing the jungle in one-hectare increments and sub-dividing each hectare into 30 x 25-metre plots. He cleared 39 hectares in total. Now, by EECA estimates, more than 2,000 people live in Elang Etas (personal communication, July 2019).

Shirley³, a widow and mother of three evicted from Destination and at the time of our interview in October 2018, living in nearby Tagabe with her two sons, describes how she was invited to come *insaed* (inside) the Destination community by the chief, who she saw as having a legitimate arrangement for that land. Shirley describes her presumption of trust that customary tenure had been arranged between Destination's chief and the customary landowner:

.... jifi telem i se bae i neva happen. Court order bae i neva happen. Mifala i no wari.

[The chief told us that it would never happen. A court order would never happen. We didn't need to worry.]

The trust in the customary arrangements was so strong that dozens of families relocated from Destination to Elang Etas again began making payments to the lessee, in expectation of secure tenure during and after the payment period. Lucy and Willy⁴ moved there from Destination in 2004. They have only recently found out – after the 2018 eviction threats to the entire Elang Etas community – that they lessee's estate is in arrears to the lessor, and that these arrears are the basis of a possible eviction. Lucy and Willy estimate that they have made payments well in excess of 80 percent of the 600,000 Vatu (\$5,160 USD) they owe to secure their land. Community-wide, there is a strong case that the terms of a customary agreement have been honored – at least by many community members. In a 2018 Census conducted by EECA, which I analyzed on their behalf (the report is not published), 175 of the 316 households then living in Elang Etas, reported having paid a total of 57,512,862 Vatu (in real, inflation-adjusted 2019 currency; USD \$494,611 in 2019 dollars) toward their usufructuary rights to this land. Of 122 respondents who provided sufficient data, 43 percent had fulfilled the terms of their financial obligation to the lessee or landowner, and the vast majority indicated that they had made significant financial investment in their plots.

This section demonstrates the expectation of legitimacy experienced by people living under customary tenure arrangements at the outskirts of Port Vila. Unlike the interpellation of informality demonstrated by other scholars in other settings, e.g., Roy (2003), the residents of Destination and Elang Etas do not view themselves as informal.

³ This interviewee's name has been changed for privacy.

⁴ Both interviewees' names have been changed.

This sits in sharp contrast to the language introduced to the governance system by the PCURCAP advisors and the national displacement policy.

If people do not use the language of informality, how do they describe themselves and the places where they belong? I describe the language used by communities below, after a discussion of a more-pernicious idea in urban development: squatting.

<H1> The Complexity of Customary Tenure

Not everyone in Elang Etas has honoured the terms of their migration to the community. Marie⁵ is an experienced seamstress who used to sell Vanuatu's *Mother Hubbard*-style island dresses (Cummings, 2013) at the Central Market. After moving *antap* to Elang Etas, she was abandoned by her violent, vengeful ex-husband, who burned her sewing machine before leaving her and her two children to live with his new girlfriend and her family. Without the means to her livelihood and caring for small children at this prohibitive distance from town, Marie has not made her land payments and is also what popular discourse in town might term a, "squatter." To complicate matters even further, because the lease at Elang Etas is for land holding the entire community – Marie's and others' non-payment means that the entire community is in arrears to the landowner, providing the landowner with a justification to begin eviction proceedings. There is an emerging anti-squatter discourse in Vanuatu that provides less and less recognition of the complexities of urban migration. For instance, in a June 2018 newspaper article reporting on the imminent eviction of 100 people facing eviction from a peri-urban village in Port Vila, the editor of the *Vanuatu Independent* feels compelled to preface the article with an explanatory note that condemns "squatting" and goes on to explain the sympathy of the publication with the households facing eviction:

Squatting on someone else's land is clearly wrong and we do not condone it. But as a parent from another island, where subsistence farming is just about the only real alternative, and therefore you choose to relocate to Efate in the hope you can give your children a better future is not unreasonable either.

The EECA's position has consistently been that *non-payers* like Marie must be compelled to begin making payments for their land within their means – but has stopped far short of naming them as squatters. The *PVURCAP* and the national displacement policy do not use the language of squatting. This is consistent with other locally-generated language. In 2016, the then-Minister for Lands, Hon. Ralph Regenvanu, wrote the Foreword for a compelling edited volume on urbanization and land governance in Melanesia (McDonnell, Allen and Filer, 2017). In that foreword, he comments specifically on the squatter issue:

⁵ This interviewee's name has been changed for privacy.

In discussing urbanisation in the Melanesian region, I think we need to challenge the idea of ‘squatter’ settlements on customary land. In my experience in Vanuatu, very few people are ‘squatters’ on customary land; almost everyone has an agreement that they have entered into that allows them to live on the land (xiii-xiv).

The contrasting language of the *Vanuatu Independent*, the EECA, the former Minister for Lands, the policies, and Marie – suggest that there is still time to intervene in the language that frames urbanization in Vanuatu before it becomes hegemonic. One way to avoid hegemony is to allow subaltern (Chakrabarty, 1984, Spivak, 1987, Roy, 2003) self-perception to enter discourse. In the next section, I describe how people who have survived displacement, or who live the daily experience of being named as *informal* or *peri-urban*, view their urban settlements. I describe how we may be in a moment of decision wherein careful attention to the experience of displacement, urbanization, and community could realign the practice of urbanization with the place and people making it.

<H1> Community: An Identity and a Possible Governance Structure

So, how *do* people at the urban edge describe themselves and their position in relation to the city? In describing the places where they live, people at Destination and Elang Etas tend to use the language of *community*. This is, by far, the most-common language that people in these two places use to describe their home. Jack, to describe Elang Etas, uses the language of *ples ia* (this place) and *community*, even as he describes the process by which some people leave the community for more-secure tenure arrangements:

Yu stap blo ples ia yu claem ladder. Bae yu stap ia yu mekem mani blo gud graon we yu paem, yu wan yu wanem taetel. Be fulap I habin finis fulap lo member blo community ia, oli stap ol gudfala graon nao.

[People from this place climb the ladder. If you make money, you can buy good ground. A lot of members of this community have good ground now].

Sometimes, people refer to, “mixed communities,” to distinguish Destination or Elang Etas from the nearby *vilej* (villages) of Eratap, Erakor, and Mele (see Figure 1). *Community* is used in contrast to *vilej* (village), which in my interviews and experience has never been evoked to describe Elang Etas. This distinction acknowledges the relative cultural homogeneity within peri-urban villages with long-established populations and secure land rights. While there are new entrants to these villages, their core populations have strong tenure rights based on customary ownership.

Indeed, the idea of *community* is built into the Elang Etas Community Association's title. The EECA's graphic design (Figure 2) is evocative of the ethnic and linguistic diversity that comprises this cosmopolitan place. The logo features five interlocked hands of different colors surrounding a golden star that represents the country, Vanuatu. In combination with the graphic component of the logo, the subtitle, "United We Stand," evokes both defiance against forces of displacement and a unity with Vanuatu's national identity. The EECA's current Chairman, Mr. Sam Tabawa, described the logo's meaning as reflecting EECA's belief in a sovereign Vanuatu while also challenging the legitimacy of displacement. The logo embodies EECA's belief in customary governance and of unifying against oppression.



Figure 2. Elang Etas Community Association (EECA) Logo. Source: EECA. Reproduced with permission.

I note, as I did above, that my own attempt to inject a term – *neighbourhood*, drawn from my own American experiences in cities that commonly use the term, like Chicago and San Francisco – was converted by Merah back into the language of his experience: *community*. Of all the labels I have introduced above that could describe Elang Etas – *informal, settlement, informal settlement, neighbourhood* – only one persists in the language used by the people living its experience: *community*. The rest appear to be products of Schmid, Karaman, Hanakata, Kallenberger, Kockelkorn, Sawyer, Streule and Wong (2018)'s "metrocentricity" – a tendency in the English-language literature to create a hegemonic language of urban studies.

The technology of governing cities in the Pacific is proliferating rapidly. Though Port Vila has no town plan (Cullwick, 2017), it does have the in-progress *PVURCAP* and national policies that govern aspects of urbanization, like the national displacement policy. Who is deciding what kind of language should describe communities at the urban periphery in the formal governance structures and documents in Vanuatu? The evidence I present here suggests that there are oppositional processes at work: in town, and among the people with the experience of living in *sista komuniti(s)* at the urban edge.

Modes of thought based on introduced systems bring policies and practices where cities are treated as engines of development, as in much of the world, e.g., (The World Bank, 2012). At the same time, this way of thinking about land competes with customary land practice where exchange value is subordinate to other customary practice (Phillips and Keen, 2016). It is in this tension that forced resettlements like those that happened at Destination can occur, where people may not know about or believe that it could happen. In future policy operationalizations, recognition of customary agreements as a kind of formality, and of places like Elang Etas as of the city rather than outside it, could be a good starting point for solving some of the problems I highlight here, including evictions.

People in Elang Etas quietly insist on their term – *community* – when negotiating labels to describe themselves and their location. Like Chief Jack and the chief from Destination, they invoke custom and history to describe their legitimacy to be in this place. Rather than *informality* or *squatting* as an organizing principle for urbanization in Port Vila, then, perhaps a better term is what Regenvanu’s “customary agreements” (McDonnell, Allen and Filer, 2017).

Formalization of customary agreements is unlikely be a complete or easy solution for urban migrants. One complication is that recent decisions and policy have preferenced the ownership rights of customary owners over use rights of people living under customary agreements. Protecting customary lands is a core focus of Pacific constitutions, including Vanuatu’s. Protecting communities living on customary lands is another difficult problem that seems hard-to-manage with the hard-won protection of customary ownership achieved at independence (in 1980) still so new. This tension between protection of customary owners and protection of urban migrants differs from a tension between neoliberal practice and protection of customary owners, as described by other authors (Phillips and Keen, 2016). While customary owners are sometimes characterized as representatives of the “community,” the Destination and Elang Etas cases illustrate that they can also be at odds with communities. As (Phillips and Keen, 2016) argue “it is very unclear whose rights should be the basis of urban development frameworks” (p. 12).

Another complication is possible disinterest in government processes that could help to make customary arrangements more transparent and legible. In neighbouring Fiji, *vakavanua* (customary) land arrangements are often more lucrative for landowners due to the presence of formal institutions like the Land Bank. A “frustration” for customary landowners is with the formal mechanism such as the Land Bank. Better returns compel them to use customary practices (Phillips and Keen, 2016) even though these practices are susceptible to problems such as non-payment of rents.

<H1> Conclusion: Seeing Symbolic Power

This paper is about misalignments of language, so it is worth noting some of the complexities of Vanuatu’s geography and cultures. Governing in a linguistically-diverse country like Vanuatu – and its capital city – is a task requiring patience with far-greater complexities and misalignments of language. There are at least 15 languages represented in the Elang Etas community (personal communication, December 2019). The country of Vanuatu is linguistically-diverse, with 111 indigenous languages, and French, English, and the *lingua franca*, *Bislama*, serving as the three national languages.

As an Anglophone, I recognize my own complicity in the process of language reproduction. Adopting the language of *peri-urban*, I have described the EECA and evictions in multiple publications, e.g., (Day, Wewerinke-Singh and Price, 2020). I have reproduced the language of development agencies, government, and other scholars without critical reflection about its application to this place. In this way, I have myself contributed to assembling the field of power by reproducing the language produced by UN-HABITAT and government – specifically, the language of *peri-urban*.

However – as evidenced by the language of the people who survived the eviction at Destination, and those who now call Elang Etas their community – the interpellation of this identity is not yet complete. People retain the identity of *community* and *ples*, resisting the identity of *peri-urban*, *squatter*, and *informal*. In this way, they have resisted allowing the conversion of symbolic capital into power – by international advisors, the national displacement policy, and my own attempts. Their identity has thus far resisted the power Bourdieu (1989) describes, that would speak their class into being by recognizing themselves as members of a social reality invented and imposed by someone else (pp. 23-24). The metrocentric tendencies (Bunnell and Maringanti, 2010) that we all attempted have thus far failed in Elang Etas. Perhaps we should pay attention to this quiet resilience, this failure to grant symbolic power to the language and agents of town.

This paper contributes to Roy’s (2006) and Rankin’s (2010) call for an “ethics of responsibility” in planning, by asking for recognition of different tenures and community types as a kind of formality that is currently not acknowledged by advisors to Vanuatu’s planning agencies. There is a strong possibility that those of us with

symbolic capital are not able to readily see that we wield it. “We” are the producers of the symbolic capital that is un-vetted by those living the labels (*informal, settlement, informal settlement, and peri-urban*). This is a call to continuously update and improve the language in which policy is articulated – to acknowledge the evolving relationship between place, language, and symbolic capital. This language matters because of the ease of which human-rights violations like evictions happen in the name of reducing *informality* and *squatting*. The *PVURCAP* is still in draft, and the national displacement policy is yet to be operationalized from its current high-level vision to standard operating procedures and by-laws. There is still time to acknowledge that even seemingly-benign terms like, *peri-urban* and *informal settlement* are terms with political intentions and profound effects for people facing evictions and marginalization in sister communities.

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Figure 1. Elang Etas and Port Vila

(source: Google Earth base map; Port Vila municipal shapefile (HDX, 2018); Elang Etas boundary produced by author)



Figure 2. Elang Etas Community Association (EECA) Logo. Source: EECA. Reproduced with permission.

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IJUR_12965_Art-4794.R3 Day Figure 2 Colour.jpg