

# ***Oi Man Kam: Community Associations as part of inclusive urban governance in the urban South Pacific***

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Emerging governance structures of small, Pacific island capital cities are important because indigenous knowledge and practice present an alternative to dominant, Eurocentric ideas around which most of the world is now organised. Mobilising culture and indigeneity to challenge hegemonic ideas has become important all over the world (Escobar 2007; Freire 2005) and over-reliance on colonially-influenced social structures as instruments of governance discounts the possibility of allowing new ones to be integrated into governance processes.

Two institutions in Vanuatu seek recognition and legitimacy from both the State and the public: the first is a state creation, the *area council*; and the second is the *community*, which has a distinct identity from a village or an urban settlement and is currently seeking its own status as a unit of governance. Community associations like the Elang Etas Community Association (EECA) offer models that could be added to existing State-led additions to help make urban governance more inclusive. The EECA organises communities of around 2800 people as a way of seeking to avoid eviction from land disputes. At the end of 2019, there were more than 70 evictions planned in metropolitan Port Vila, with another 30 in the remainder of the country (Personal communication with the Sheriff's Office, December 2019). Some of these have been delayed because of COVID-19, but these delays have not resolved the underlying land disputes. If Vanuatu wishes to avoid urban conflict like that experienced in Honiara in Solomon Islands (Foukona 2015), it must find ways to resolve land disputes, accommodate urbanisation, and foster a sense of belonging (Day and Bamforth 2020) in new, urban migrants. New governance structures such as EECA could be considered along with state-driven structures such as area councils, as a possible model. This paper is the result of sustained engagement with EECA and the Elang Etas community since EECA's founding in 2018.

## **Background: Informality and city identity**

Vanuatu is a democratic republic, founded in 1980 after a colonial period (1906–80) where it was jointly governed by France and Britain under the name, New Hebrides. The post-colonial environment of the capital, Port Vila, has blurred the distinctions between city and village confusing outsiders and locals alike that seek to understand where settlements sit on a continuum of formality. Port Vila continues to be characterised as a city of villages, or a 'village city' (Jones 2011); an urban fabric characterised by groups of people reproducing ethnic enclaves of village life in an urban area. The distinction between formal and informal is another problem that appears in a distinct way in this setting where *kastom*, or traditional culture, is enshrined in the identity and founding constitution of the state.

In Port Vila, the persistent link between the city and the village is underscored by the encirclement of the city by villages, and the functional and administrative inclusion of some villages into the metropolitan area. Around Port Vila, the established peri-urban villages were originally composed of the kin groups that were present in the area that became Port Vila: Pango; Eratap; Erakor; Ifira, and Mele (Rawlings 1999). Attempts to create typologies of Pacific settlement types consistently miss or misunderstand some types of communities that are outside these villages. One Asian Development Bank report (Jones 2016), for instance, lays out a typology that includes traditional villages, squatter settlements, informal settlements, and planned settlements – missing the non-village, non-squatter, communities that are growing rapidly and outside the planning structures that govern the area within the Port Vila municipal boundary. Including these communities in planning is important, given the proportion of people that live on customary lands in Port Vila (around 27,000,<sup>1</sup>) the proportion of the peri-urban population in *communities* (at least 25 per cent), and the rapid growth of these settlements (up to 12 per cent annually (Jones and Sanderson 2017)).

In contemporary Vanuatu, the authority of chiefs is still highly relevant to social life. Chiefly authority was central to the construction of the independent state (Bolton 1999; Martin 2019), and chiefs are called upon to manage all matters of land and custom in Vanuatu. They are often declared the representatives of communities in determinations of rightful land ownership in customary and introduced legal proceedings, (e.g., Smith 2017). Importantly, chiefs continue to be called upon by the current government and social structures to provide leadership in new state structures, such as area councils.

## **The current governance structure: Area councils**

One local structure of governance that has recently begun to assert more authority in matters of local regulation is area councils. Area councils are structures of the State that leverage Pacific respect for chiefly authority (Wairiu 2006). Established by an act of Parliament in 2003 (Government of Vanuatu 2003), area councils have been slowly mobilised as a form of local government. In 2015, at the official opening of the Eratap Area Council office, Shefa Province President Edward George noted that the:

Eratap Area Council Office represents a 'small government' for the people of Number Two Lagoon, Eratap, Teouma and Teouma Bush (Garae 2015).

One example of the growing power of area councils is their ability to place restrictions on regional activities. Every year in July, people in Vanuatu plan a weeklong

celebration of independence, culminating on 30 July, Independence Day. In one community, the leadership decided to leverage the event to draw revellers to the Elang Etas community so that they could experience its vibrancy and organisation, and so that the community would be acknowledged by urban citizens as a viable part of the urban fabric. A convenient, secondary aim was to use the event to generate funds to support the operations of EECA.

Starting in the first week of July 2019, youth members of the community cleared grass and brush from the community's common space and erected 54 stalls with bamboo frames that would host food and drink vendors, kava sellers, and handicraft makers. Soccer and volleyball competitions were organised, and teams were invited from other communities to participate. A Miss Etas competition was planned. Youth volunteers publicised the event in town, selling raffle tickets and seeking sponsorships from government departments. A gender-inclusive security committee was established that would police the event and provide escorts to women and girls. Numerous similar festival grounds were set up in various communities in and around Port Vila during the month of July. Until 2019, these events appear to have occurred entirely outside of state regulation, with no permits required and no state involvement necessary.

Then, in late-July 2019, the Elang Etas community was served with an unexpected notice that its festival would be shut down because it had not received a permit from the area council. This was a new regulation implemented by the provincial government that had not been effectively communicated with communities. Several days of information-gathering ensued, wherein organisers feared that they would have to shut down the Independence Day festivities. There was relief when days before the start of the celebration on 24 July, the area council officially permitted the event.

It turns out that the State-directed organisation of the area council is deeply embedded in outdated notions of who belongs in the urban area. Centred around the five urban villages, area council leadership is drawn from the ranks of chiefs and customary landowners from these villages – to the exclusion of tenants living on that land. This structure further solidifies a significant power imbalance that favours customary landowners over their tenants. This is a problem because the vast majority of urban growth in Port Vila and other Pacific cities is happening on lands that are owned by customary landowners.

### **An alternative governance entity: Communities**

In contrast to *villages*, *communities* are settlements without the history of customary land ownership in the area. They are often composed of migrants from outer islands or other parts of Efate. The distinction between villages and communities is a matter of degrees rather than any distinct feature or rule. To some extent, all villages and communities in Port Vila are mixed and non-homogeneous, at least compared to their historical compositions. A generation ago, one could generally expect that people living in a village were members of the extended kin network of the

customary landowners. Nowadays, villages are no longer home only to homogenous kin groups; Ni Vanuatu migrants and foreign expatriates live in villages and have leased land from customary landowners that have subdivided and leased to long-term tenants.

Communities can be homogenous, composed of people from a common island or group, living under the guidance and organisation of community committees and an elected or self-appointed chief. Increasingly, communities have *ol man kam* configurations, or people living in diverse communities composed of populations from multiple islands; a place where people from all around Vanuatu establish residence in a location that gives them access to the city. Port Vila is a variation of *mankam*, a sometimes-derogatory term used to refer to migrants from other islands (Smith 2017). In Port Vila, the term appears to have been repurposed by some community leaders to describe their urban fabric and other similar places in the city. At Elang Etas, where there are at least 22 islands represented, the community has sorted itself into 12 zones that are largely but not exclusively correlated with island of origin, according to the 2018 census.

Even though both villages and communities are growing in population diversity, there is an important distinction in that land tenure security is much stronger in villages. Although there are evictions of some people from urban villages, there has never been a case of wholesale eviction of an entire urban village, or of customary landowners being evicted from their lands. Customary land ownership is far too strong and foundational in Vanuatu, enshrined in the country's 1980 Constitution. It is this strength of customary landownership, however, that has produced the wholesale evictions of communities or large parts of communities. Since 2014, there are well-publicised evictions that have affected thousands of people, including Destination in 2014; 580 people (estimate based on interviews with community members and leaders) in Prima and Mele Waisisi (Napwatt 2018), and at least 1000 people and probably closer to 3000 in Bladinieres in 2018 (according to Cullwick 2018). The language used to talk about these populations in government documentation, by international advisors, and in popular discourse is very important as the label 'squatter' is applied to people who do have some form of permission to live on the land where they reside.

Determining how many people in Port Vila live in *communities*, as opposed to villages is difficult because there is no publicly available data source that answers this question due to the reliance on area councils as the administrative boundaries for Census data reporting. Elang Etas is certainly not Port Vila's original *ol man kam* community, but the community does have roots dating at least to the 1990s but today many people are not interested in life in a *community*. Port Vila offers alternatives. Inside the municipal boundaries of the city, people make the additional distinction between *community* living and *urban* living, distinguished by the presence of a chief and collaborative lifestyles in communities. At Elang Etas, the EECA has organised the community for all kinds of civic projects – from mothers' and youths' committees to human-rights training to fundraising for Independence Day celebrations.

## The EECA: A functioning governance entity

The reason that the EECA was established was to plan for tenure security in Elang Etas. Its logo (Figure 1) illustrates its mission of unity and inclusion, with interlocked hands of different colours arranged around a golden star. The star represents the Republic of Vanuatu, and its inclusion in the logo represents the community's recognition of the State in the identity of the community. The phrase, 'united we stand', signals community solidarity against the threats to the community namely, dispossession and eviction.

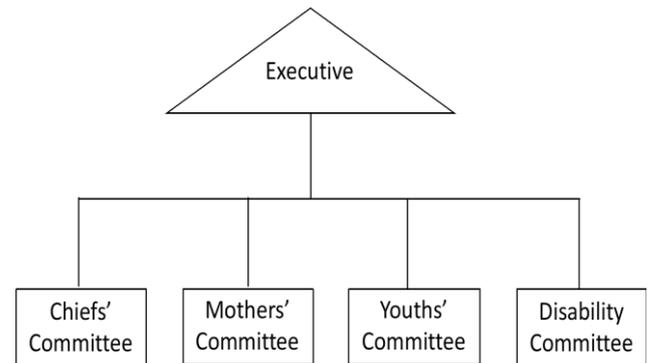
Figure 1. Elang Etas Community Association logo



With the endorsement of the Elang Etas Council of Chiefs, the Association decided to find out how much money people living in Elang Etas have paid under the customary and quasi-customary arrangements under which they reside. Elang Etas residents have also made significant financial and social investment in their community, and many believe that they have satisfied the terms of their agreement to live on this land. In the 2018 EECA Census, a total of 237 of the enumerated householders responded to a question about whether they had made land payments to the now-deceased former leaseholder. Of these, 232 reported that they had made some payments, and only five reported that they had made no payments. Of the 232 respondents that reported making a payment, 175 provided the amount of their payments. In 2019, these 175 households have paid a total of 57,512,862 Vatu (A\$732,648 in 2019 dollars) toward their usufructuary rights to this land, since they began making payments in the 1990s. Despite this, an ongoing land dispute means that people's tenure remains insecure.

Area councils and communities have chiefs in common. At Elang Etas, a council of 12 chiefs works in collaboration with the EECA Executive, but has voluntarily become integrated into the EECA as a component of the Association's structure. Figure 2 is a somewhat simplified reproduction of an EECA-produced figure showing the organisational structure of the Association.

Figure 2. EECA Organisational Structure



This is an unusual positioning of a new kind of social structure (the Association) over an established institution (chiefs). I have witnessed the EECA leadership structure survive two internal challenges, with community members and chiefs convinced of the need for this new structure of community organising. The first challenge occurred in 2018 during a closed session with the Council of Chiefs and the EECA Executive. The second challenge occurred at the first annual general meeting, held upon the closing of EECA's Year 1 activities in November 2019. One chief testified that a chief's responsibilities in a mixed, urban community are far too complex for the Council of Chiefs to also assume the role of advocating for the community with the State and outside entities. His responsibilities in maintaining the *kastom* and managing conflict within his own zone occupied all of his time. Other chiefs from Tanna, Ambae, Tongoa, and Epi agreed, arguing that the Executive should retain this role. A vote solidified the Executive's role as the spokespeople for the community and the interface with outside agencies.

In this *ol man kam* community, gathering data on land payments, for instance, is outside the scope of chiefly duty and expertise. It is, however, extremely important for future challenges to the community's legitimacy, and for future advocacy between the community and the State. In the 2018 census, 150 householders responded to assess whether they had completed the obligations they made with the lessee when moving to Elang Etas. Of these 150 respondents, 31 per cent reported that they had finished their payment obligations, either to the lessor or customary owner; 54 per cent reported that they had not yet completed their obligations; and 15 per cent did not know if they had completed payments. Fifty-eight per cent of households have made more than half of their required payments. In summary, the EECA found that most people living at Elang Etas believe that they have fulfilled their financial obligation or a significant part of it.

## Conclusion: Communities in governance

Current urban governance in Vanuatu has uncritically reproduced social structures such as area councils to the exclusion of other kinds of governance possibilities, has enabled the trope of the village to persist as the presumed building block of the city, and has allowed the inaccurate labelling of many places as 'informal'. *Communities*, offer

a possible alternative to the dogma of the existing city-village-informal distinction. Urban policy is currently under active construction in Port Vila, and there are competing narratives and logic that could affect this planning. One is top-down and State-led, one is bottom-up and community-generated, and one is longstanding and changing with the times – area councils, community associations, and chiefs, respectively. All are important to governance, as they represent the various social locations where people look for guidance, seek belonging, and secure their place in the city. Cities will continue to expand onto customary land and the tenure arrangements that residents make with landowners should be recognised even if they are oral or customary.

What is to be made of state engagement with customary processes when reliance on them excludes the majority of city dwellers? This is an important question that those who govern Port Vila should be asking. Recognising customary title and the role of chiefs in everyday society was a critical component of the independence movement in Vanuatu – a movement that still exists in the living memory of Vanuatu’s lawmakers and bureaucrats. Incorporating chiefly authority into state institutions like area councils is an important step to successfully administering this diverse society – but it is no longer enough. *Communities* have introduced complexities to the urban landscape and governance systems like area councils must now be expanded to accommodate them.

## Notes

- 1 The 2016 Mini-Census Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2017, ‘2016 Post-TC Pam Mini-Census Report Vol. 1 Basic Tables,’ Report, Port Vila: Ministry of Finance and Economic Management..conducted after Tropical Cyclone Pam (derived from Chart 3.7, p. 166) suggests that about 75 per cent of households in the peri-urban area councils (Mele, Ifira, Erakor, Eratap, and Pango) reported some other housing tenure than ownership. The same report (Table 1.14b) suggests that the 2016 metropolitan population living outside the municipal boundary was 27,304 people with around 50,000 living inside the municipal boundary. If 25 per cent of this population are living in non-ownership tenures like those at Elang Etas, this implies that about 6,800 people, or 9 per cent, in Port Vila are living in *communities* comprising about 2.5 per cent of the national population – and growing

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