Embracing the ambiguity of land: lessons from urban Vanuatu

Land can carry different meanings at the same time in Vanuatu and other places
Photo Credit: Sebastian Antoine Salay

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During our fieldwork in Port Vila, Vanuatu, we heard plenty of stories. Stories are almost a way of life in Vanuatu. People tell stories for fun, to teach people about history or *kastom* (custom, the right way of living), and to make sense of their lives. Ni-Vanuatu people have a wry humour, and stories are usually full of metaphors and vivid examples. It took us a while to learn how to understand what people were telling us through their stories. The most confusing thing, though, was when someone told us a story that directly contradicted something we had heard from someone else. How were we supposed to find out who was telling the *stret* (true) story, and who was *giaman* (lying)?

After a few weeks, we realised that it was neither our place nor was it possible to sort truth from fiction. Rather, what was more interesting was the ambiguous meaning of land. How do people negotiate contradictions in the multiple truths? The skills to navigate these issues were nowhere more important than when talking about land. We were in Port Vila to understand the rapid urbanisation that has occurred there since the country's independence in 1980, which has been mirrored across Oceania. Our project wanted to understand how migrants to the city from elsewhere in the archipelago have made land agreements with local customary landowners. For a long time, these agreements to share land according to *kastom* have worked well. But, in the last decade, a series of mass evictions of migrant communities has rocked the city and made many migrants uneasy about the future of their land agreements.

We found during our research, the initial findings of which were recently published in *Anthrosource*, that sometimes it can be very useful when a piece of land means something different to migrants and customary landowners. In one urban village, longtime migrants have come to see themselves as *man ples*, meaning they belong to the land and have enduring rights to it. They have been there for decades and while they do maintain a distinct identity and connect with their relatives on their home island, they see Port Vila as their home. On the other hand, the customary landowners of that same land see the migrants as an "adopted community". The

phrase implies a power differential between the adopters and the adoptees, and emphasises that the land itself will always belong to the customary owners. The migrant community is allowed to live there temporarily. Aside from a little stiffness between these communities, they co-exist side by side. They each hold tightly to their own idea about the meaning of land and, although the stories can't both be true at the same time, somehow they manage.

In another part of the city, however, the ability of land to mean multiple things creates new ways for disputes to happen and for powerful people to change the status quo. Margaret told us about how she had made a customary agreement with a landowner when she came to Port Vila. She didn't pay rent but sometimes gave cigarettes or food to the landowner. When he died, his son inherited the land but wanted to do something else with it. So, he started charging Margaret rent, itself an introduced practice in Vanuatu. Sometimes she paid and at other times she refused, hoping to make the original arrangement stick. They would argue and the son acknowledged that he was changing the story of the land. He added a new meaning on top of the existing layers and, in the end, Margaret was moved off the land so he could use it for another purpose.

Margaret Rodman, an anthropologist who also worked in Vanuatu, once described land there as "multilocal" and "polysemic", meaning it can comfortably hold multiple meanings for different people. But she also argued that the idea that land can hold multiple meanings is not unique to Vanuatu. Walk around any neighbourhood and you will see the various ways that people contest land use and development. Some residents might want to protect the existing character of a neighbourhood while others want to address a housing crisis by building more densely. These are political contests which ultimately rest on the premise that land itself is ambiguous; it can mean multiple things at the same time to different people. Perhaps there is something we all can learn from Port Vila, where people hold onto their own interpretation, acknowledge other groups' perspectives and, sometimes, find ways to embrace contradictions.

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