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## **Re-territorialising the city: youth and the productive role of reggae music in Vanuatu**

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### **Abstract**

In Vanuatu, the popularity of reggae music has been on the rise since the late 1980s. Today, reggae music and culture is ubiquitous. For many young people in Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital city, reggae is a fundamental component of their sense of belonging to the city. Their attraction to reggae music and reggae culture derives from reggae's messages of camaraderie, equality and justice. This paper argues that for many urban youth, playing, consuming and sharing reggae music and culture instrumentalises their urban place-making activities and helps reterritorialise themselves in urban spaces. Drawing on ethnographic research, we demonstrate the extent to which reggae lyrics and messages resonate with youth who feel they are unable to express their social, economic and political discontent through other mediums. Furthermore, we show how for many youth, reggae conveys a sense of hopefulness that emboldens them to build a new life or 'father land' for themselves and their children.

**KEYWORDS:** urban Melanesia, urban Vanuatu, social transformation, reggae music, young people, place-making

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*So we gonna walk—all right!—through de roads of creation:  
We the generation (Tell me why!)  
(Trode through great tribulation) trod through great tribulation.  
Exodus, all right! Movement of Jah people!  
Oh, yeah! O-oo, yeah! All right!  
Exodus: Movement of Jah people! Oh, yeah!  
Yeah-yeah-yeah, well!  
Uh! Open your eyes and look within:  
Are you satisfied (with the life you're living)? Uh!  
We know where we're going, uh!  
We know where we're from.  
We're leaving Babylon,  
We're going to our Father land.*

‘Exodus’ by Bob Marley and the Wailers

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In Port Vila, the capital of the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu, groups of young men pass their time sitting atop empty old paint cans, broken buckets and crumbling brick piles outside disused ramshackle sheds. Oftentimes a youth will be strumming a guitar as others sing songs from international and local reggae artists. ‘Are you satisfied with the life you’re living?’, Bob Marley’s song ‘Exodus’ asks, and the young men can be seen collectively raising their fists into the air and in unison shouting out ‘Eh no!’.

In Vanuatu, the popularity of reggae music has been on the rise since the late 1980s and reggae music and culture is now ubiquitous. The music of Bob Marley and other renowned international reggae artists including Lucky Dube, Peter Tosh, Toots and the Maytals and Alpha Blondie, as well as many local reggae artists, are heard constantly: blasting from busses, houses and people’s mobile phones. Throughout the city there are people wearing T-shirts, hats and armbands sporting Bob Marley iconography and the green, red and yellow reggae colours. Conversations are peppered with terms from reggae lyrics, and youth name community roads and their ‘squads’ (informal youth groups) after reggae musicians, reggae concepts and reggae songs (Kraemer, 2013, 2020). As ni-Vanuatu musician and writer Marcel Meltherorong explains: ‘We say that Vanuatu has a reggae culture, a kind of history of reggae culture’<sup>1</sup> (MS interview, 13 October 2012, Port-Vila).

However, not everyone in Port Vila is a reggae fan (Levisen, 2017, pp. 108, 109). Critics are especially wary of reggae’s promotion of marijuana, which is illegal in the country; the delinquency sometimes enacted during large urban music festivals and

concerts; and that youth spend hours practicing music instead of looking for or working in 'real' jobs. Nevertheless, for the young people with whom we spent time, reggae is a fundamental component of their sense of belonging in urban Vanuatu. The attraction derives from reggae's messages of camaraderie, equality and justice, and how the music instrumentalises young people's urban place-making activities and helps them reterritorialise themselves in urban spaces. Reggae lyrics and messages also resonate with youth who feel they are unable to express their social, economic and political discontent. Lastly, for many youth, reggae conveys a sense of hopefulness that emboldens them to build a new life or 'father land' for themselves and their children. Moreover, it is through camaraderie in the two aforementioned processes that youth find and build local and international imagined community connections which they highly value (Anderson, 1983; Born, 2011).

Reggae music originated in Jamaica in the late 1960s, emerging out of earlier Jamaican genres like ska and rock steady rhythms. Like most of the world's popular music, reggae is played in 4/4 time (four beats per measure). However, unlike in other genres, where the first and third beats are emphasised, in reggae the second and fourth beats are emphasised. These second and fourth off beats are accentuated by a chord played by a harmonic instrument such as the guitar. The bass guitar also assumes a prominent role, making the musical genre an aesthetic where rhythm takes priority over melody and harmony (Chang and Chen, 1998, pp. 43–44).

Reggae's rise to international popularity was quick in Britain, the US and parts of Africa. Then with international movements of the Jamaican diaspora, it spread to the rest of the world. Its global rise is largely attributed to reggae pioneer Bob Marley, a charismatic Jamaican singer, songwriter and musician now known the world over as the 'King of Reggae'. Marley grew up in Kingston city, Jamaica, which was under British colonial occupation at the time. Jamaica only gained political independence in 1962, and so Marley grew up during the independence movement, which was experienced as a social and economic context with food shortages and political violence. Many of Marley's songs address political and religious subjects, social and economic injustice, and the fight against oppression; they call for rebellion and revolution and they reject colonialism—the 'white man culture' encapsulated in the notion of the 'Babylon System' (Cooper, 2012; Moskowitz, 2007).<sup>2</sup> Marley's music quickly became a voice for the poor and dispossessed in Jamaica and around the world, a 'universal poetics of suffrage and of hope' (Gilroy, 2005, p. 238). As

Gilroy (2005, p. 226) notes, Marley himself has become an iconic, godly embodiment of the universal struggle for justice, peace, and human rights'. Today, Marley and his music continue to be embraced internationally in anti-colonial struggles and independence movements as a 'celebration of the defiant human spirit that refuses to be suppressed'.<sup>3</sup>

The international popularity of reggae music, including the diverse ways in which reggae music has been localised by people in cultures around the world, has been widely documented (Cooper, 2012; Dagnini, 2010; Daynes, 2004; Hope, 2013). As a result, one cannot assume that reggae makes up a homogenised conceptual category (Levisen, 2017, p. 102), and certainly in Vanuatu, reggae has emerged as a Melanesian subculture distinct from Caribbean or international reggae, but with similarities to other Pacific Island reggae movements.

There is limited documentation of reggae in Vanuatu, with just a few scholars writing about it in the context of the global/local relationship (Dick and Stern, 2012), the role of music in the process of resilience facing urban issues (Dick and Meltherorong, 2011; Stern, 2017), and how a semantic analysis of the local concept of reggae illustrates social changes and ideology shifts in the nation (Levisen, 2017). Somewhat more attention has been paid to reggae music and culture in other Pacific countries like New Zealand (see Cattermole, 2004), Hawai'i (see Weintraub, 1998) and the Pacific more broadly (Clough, 2012). Yet, in most writings, discussions about reggae take place within wider conversations about popular music in the Pacific more generally, and are less focused on reggae specifically (see for example Crowdy 2006, Webb 2019, Wilson 2014).<sup>4</sup>

Reggae was first introduced to Vanuatu in the 1980s. It came by way of radio and audio cassettes sold in music stores and also pirated and shared between friends. Reggae music was also popularised in local communities by ni-Vanuatu students returning from abroad, development workers and other expatriates living in Vanuatu with connections to New Caledonia, New Zealand and Australia, where local musicians were already blending reggae beats with their local music forms (Ammann, 1998; Clough, 2012).

Before the rise of reggae, several other musical genres were widely practiced in Vanuatu. For example, *kastom* music, Vanuatu's 'traditional' music, varies greatly from island to island across the archipelago, and represents the many different musical identities of Vanuatu's diverse people (Stern, 2007). Another genre is string-band music which emerged around the 1940s through exposure to the popular music brought to Vanuatu by soldiers during World War II. It is an acoustic style of music sung and accompanied by string instruments like guitars, ukuleles, 'bush basse' (a homemade single string bass built out of a

wooden box) and small percussion instruments (see Ammann, 2013; Ellerich, 2020). Christian church music is also valued: older people in particular cherish the hymns introduced to the archipelago by missionaries in the 19th century (Webb, 2015). Finally, since the advent of recording technologies and the arrival of radio, country, rock and roll, and pan-Pacific pop genres have also been discovered by ni-Vanuatu communities (for an overview of Pacific Island music see Diettrich et al., 2011 and Geneix-Rabault and Stern, 2021).

The growth of ni-Vanuatu interest in reggae can be divided into three phases (Dick and Stern, 2012). In the 1990s, local bands like Huarere, Vatdoro and Tropic Tempo began creating their own reggae music, largely inspired by the rhythms and melodies of traditional repertoires like *kastom* music. In the early 2000s, ni-Vanuatu reggae style aligned more closely with international reggae, and bands like Naio gained popularity with songs focused on local socio-political issues. With the introduction of the mobile phone in 2008, which enabled people to share and distribute music in MP3 format (see Crowdy and Horst this volume for Papua New Guinea (PNG)), and gain access to global music repositories like YouTube and other music platforms, local reggae artists like Kalja Riddim Klan, Black Ghetto, Benny and the Gang, Masamp Crew, and Ruff House more closely aligned their stance with Jamaican and African reggae's focus on freedom, anti-oppression and anti-colonialism. They also projected a biting critique of prejudice, intolerance, miserable life conditions, human rights abuses and corruption.

In the 2000s, reggae continued to be extremely popular in Port Vila and throughout the entire country. However, another genre of music—hip hop—has been gaining popularity and a new generation of musicians who play reggae and hip hop are innovating Vanuatu's music scene. Much of the ethnographic research for this study was carried out between 2008 and 2019 in Port Vila, the largest urban area in the country. As such, these more recent developments in Vanuatu's musicscape are outside the purview of this paper. Throughout the 2000s reggae music and culture were largely male preoccupations, with some exceptions. Our interviews and observations reflect this trend as most were with male reggae musicians and male reggae culture adherents.

Popular music and cities have always been 'closely connected' (Cohen, 2007, p. 2), and this is the case in Port Vila where the technologies and structures that allow for the dissemination of popular music are housed and developed. Since the late 1990s, platforms like radio and TV, and recording and rehearsal studios in town have led to an extraordinary

boom in the music industry. There are also new digital technological possibilities and several national and international music festivals that are held annually in the archipelago (see also Dick and Doyle, 2021). Thus, ni-Vanuatu are able to practice music and to showcase local talent in unprecedented ways.

## **2 A HISTORY OF URBAN EXCLUSION**

When Bob Marley brought his *Babylon by Bus* tour to New Zealand, Australia and Hawaii in 1979, the colonial structures that had been in place in Vanuatu for 74 years were still largely intact (Clough, 2012, p. 266). The country, known then as the New Hebrides, was under British and French co-administration. As in many other contexts of colonial occupation, local populations were governed through policies framed around explicit ideas about race (Rodman, 1987, p. 1).

Vanuatu became politically independent in 1980, and the process of decolonisation exacerbated social and economic problems. As Bolton writes, in the early years of independence, the newly formed government, as well as the many international aid agencies that had come to assist the development of the new nation, were focused on providing services to rural populations, and the population of Port Vila developed almost ‘invisibly and unattended’ (Bolton, 2010, pp. 4–5). The speed of the city’s population growth, due to urban drift, resulted in a dearth of affordable and available dwellings (Chung and Hill, 2002). Subsequently, urban life came to be characterised by overcrowding and poor housing conditions (Vanuatu Women’s Centre and Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2011). The rising costs of food, transportation, electricity and living expenses in Port Vila have also resulted in a precarious socio-economic context for many residents (Kraemer, 2017), a trend that other researchers have observed in rapidly growing Pacific cities including Honiara in Solomon Islands and Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea (see Connell and Lea, 1994, 2002).

The young people we spent time with are children of ni-Vanuatu who moved to town from the rural islands in the archipelago and are considered to be some of the first generations born and raised in a Vanuatu urban context. Many are children of ‘mixed island marriages’ whereby both parents trace their origins to different islands and cultures in the archipelago. During our fieldwork their ages ranged between 16 and 35. They continue to be socially classified as ‘youth’, and are often (mostly) endearingly referred to as ‘boys’, because their everyday life practices, such as spending significant time in peer groups, and continuing to live in their parents’ households, are seen in Vanuatu to be those of youth, not adults.

Many of the young men we got to know consider themselves to be undereducated. They had left school in class six (grade six), when school fees became increasingly unaffordable for their families. They refer to themselves as ‘school drop outs’ or ‘class six leavers’, an identity which they heavily resent (Kraemer, 2013, p. 99). Unemployed young men speak about emerging inequality between youth who are ‘schooled’ and who work, and youth like themselves who continue as ‘boys of the road’, a pejorative term used throughout the archipelago to refer to unemployed young men hanging out on the streets all day.

These young men frame their experiences of urban living around a narrative of economic exclusion. They talk about how their parents came to town to create a better life, but this better life has only rarely been realised. Mitchell (2002), who was researching young people living in a community on the outskirts of Vila in the late 1990s, more than a decade after independence, suggests that ‘restlessness’ became a distinguishing feature of this first post-colonial generation. Mitchell describes youth as disempowered by their lack of opportunity for formal education and formal employment. Kraemer (2013, 2020) shows that this continues to characterise the everyday lives of many youths in Port Vila today.

In addition to formal economic exclusion, many young men find themselves excluded from the informal support, care and guidance of family. In town, some parents exclude unemployed sons from the urban household because they are displeased by their unemployed sons’ lack of financial contribution to the household (Kraemer, 2017). Low incomes and high living expenses also preclude many urban families from purchasing the gifts needed to participate in *kastom* ceremonies through which kin relationships are maintained and through which support is given and reciprocated (Eriksen, 2008, p. 75; Kraemer, 2013, p. 91). Further, without sending remittances to kin still living in their ancestral homes, access to land, resources and support from extended family is also increasingly diminished (Kraemer, 2020).

Young men experience a lack of economic stability and a reduction in family support as barriers to achieving success, often defined as formal marriage and the possibility of owning land upon which they can root themselves and their children. They describe this urban experience as living the ‘life of the ghetto’, a term taken from reggae discourse that describes living conditions that are slums or occupied by disadvantaged groups. They often point out that their living conditions—which range from brick single family houses to corrugated iron-roofed row houses with shared bathrooms—resemble that of disenfranchised communities in other colonised countries around the world. Many urban youth perceive the



increasing overcrowding and poor housing to be a consequence of the destructive colonial and settler history in their country.

Urban youth often describe their life as the ‘last life’, interpreted as the life of the neglected (Kraemer, 2013, p. 99; see also Burrige, 1960 for another narrative on being the last people in Melanesia). They see themselves as a disadvantaged generation, the product of a gap between traditional and colonial and post-colonial systems. Growing up in town, many youths say they have access to neither the *kastom* economy of their home islands nor the cultural capital that would help them succeed in town. They describe themselves as having been ‘left at the half road’; powerless, ineffectual and uncertain about how to transition from youth into adulthood (Kraemer, 2013, p. 29; Kraemer, 2020, p. 4). This is the context within which musician Meltherorong, explains why ni-Vanuatu are so attracted to reggae music:

The music ... matches the physical, social, and cultural environment of Vanuatu ... [Bob Marley’s] music fits here in Vanuatu because it is a music of consciousness. It is an everyday music for everyday people ... reggae is a music born out of oppression and slavery and this is the main reason why we feel it matches with the cultural and social environments—connects Jamaica and Vanuatu. (Dick and Meltherorong, 2011, p. 9)

While Jamaica’s history of oppression, colonialism and slavery are not the same as Vanuatu’s history of colonialism and pacification, the power of reggae for these young men lies in their ‘consciousness’ of their historical experience of colonialism and continued neo-colonialism. They see themselves as living in a ‘Babylon’ system where they experience a rupture in the trajectory of their lives, systematic exclusion and a continuing present-day life of social and economic inequality and substandard living conditions.

However, not all the urban youth we know live in these difficult circumstances. Many of the children of independent Vanuatu’s first politicians, church leaders, government workers and first settlers (those who had sufficient income to purchase land in the city and educate their children) have been able to build easier urban lives for themselves. They have done this by continuing in post-secondary studies and/or through employment opportunities in government administration, as teachers, non-government organisation workers, or in the tourism industry, finance, and other industries in the private sector.

Among this group we also find reggae musicians. However, most of them, unlike their unemployed peers described above, practice music in parallel to their more formal lucrative activities. The boundaries between those who experience ‘better’ or ‘worse’ living conditions

are not clearly delineated. Currently, most local reggae bands are made up of members who each come from a different island of 'origin', and who also possess different social and economic profiles (there are a few exceptions such as Naio). Despite their differences, these groups build a sense of camaraderie with one another through their new 'music family'. Youth who have 'more' money or who are formally employed often provide transport for others, pay for rehearsal studio spaces, or even help finance an album for the group. Everyone is aware that financial and social success is fragile, and they all have relatives in need. For many, reggae has become a common ground, regardless of differences in levels of education, the economic status of their families, income earned or island of origin. Playing music together is a unifying, expressive activity that enables them to imagine and anticipate a better future for the youth of the city. Moreover, through their musical endeavours, youth are building new socialities of 'imagined communities' through 'affective alliances' that are independent of the usual social categories (Born, 2011; Straw, 1991).

### **3 DECOLONISING IDENTITY AND EXPRESSING DISCONTENT THROUGH GLOBAL REGGAE MESSAGES**

Since the 1990s, reggae has been a crucial tool young people use to exteriorise their discontentment. But why have youth adopted reggae instead of other local music genres? Through the following discussion we will see how reggae, which speaks to globally shared post-colonial experiences of inequality and systemic oppression, provides Port Vila youth with an accessible medium to express their discontent, and importantly, to not feel alone in their struggles as people of colour living in a post-colonial context.

Since its emergence, reggae has been defined and claimed as the music of sufferers. This category is limited not only to the descendants of slaves but has been extended to any experience of domination and resistance. As Daynes (2004, p. 134) writes, reggae has become a 'state of mind accessible to all, as long as they share a common position and commitment' [our translation]. The historical inscription of reggae, by virtue of its birthplace in a post-colonial and post-slavery context, is reinforced by a movement of artists and listeners who place reggae at the very heart of resistance to colonial and imperialist power.

Our research participants in Port Vila feel marginalised and neglected and believe that neither the government nor their communities hear or understand their concerns regarding Port Vila's social and political context and their experience within it. They feel that the only thing they have received from the Government is threats to send them back to the rural

islands. Urban youth have tried to communicate their needs and aspirations publicly. In 2005 a group with youth representation from many of Port Vila's communities formed an association called 'Vanuatu Roots'. They met regularly in front of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre to discuss problems faced by urban youth as well as possible solutions. Each week they invited community leaders and members of parliament to attend and engage with them in dialogue. Few leaders attended, and eventually the police broke up the gatherings. They have not reconvened since.

Music is an important conveyor of emotions, thoughts and experiences. There are several reasons why urban ni-Vanuatu youth have turned to reggae music rather than other popular genres to help them express discontent or to reflect upon their current situations. For example, they have not turned to Christian music because ni-Vanuatu do not view it as a specific means by which to communicate with God. They have also not turned to string band music, which was once widely popular, and around the time of independence held great political significance (Ellerich, 2020) as musicians sang about local issues and performed and recorded albums supporting local political leaders (see Stern and Wittersheim, forthcoming). Today, urban youth show little interest in string band music because of its focus on love songs and its tributes to the Pacific environment. Lastly, youth do not widely engage with *kastom* because the traditional songs are sung in special, often 'secret' languages (François and Stern, 2013), brought to humans by spirits. To receive the songs a certain status and set of skills must have been acquired through cultural initiation processes. There is also a strong notion of customary ownership of these songs (Geismar, 2013; Leach and Stern, 2020; Stern, 2013). Reggae, rather than these other genres, has become the current common denominator for youth to engage in the messaging and exteriorising of their discontent. Unlike *kastom* music, string band music and church music, reggae provides youth with the opportunity to exteriorise their discontent because it is 'free'—there is no sense of appropriating another's cultural property. Furthermore, the style is 'freely rearrangeable'; in other words, people can build on reggae's musical characteristics (instruments, rhythms, harmonies, etc.) by incorporating into their songs other styles of popular music as well. This is seen, for example, in the many reggae remixes popular in Vila.

This brings us to the question of the issues urban young people are exteriorising. During the early years of independence, in the early 1980s, there was a dream of Melanesian socialism (Howard, 1983; Premdas, 1987; Tabani, 2000; Wittersheim, 2006). But in practice, little by little, the capitalist system has overtaken this socialist ideology. This has led to

growing social and economic stratification and increasing economic and social inequality (Mitchell, 2004; Kraemer, 2017). While people celebrate Vanuatu's independence from British and French control, the common belief among the urban population is that the archipelago continues to be dependent and controlled by foreign aid making the nation state still politically and economically reliant. Youth, like 24-year-old Alfred, exclaim that while Vanuatu is an independent country,

... this is in name only. In reality our living is not really independent. This is because the government is making decisions to benefit the 'White Man' and not to benefit us 'Black Man'. The decisions are eating us. In the long run they are eating us up too much. So this is why the independence we have is not a real independence. It is a political independence but not an economical independence at all. (Kraemer, 2013, p. 230)

Popular topics of conversation in Port Vila are the country's dependence on foreign donors and the corruption amongst politicians making deals for the nation. Local reggae songs reflect these happenings and denounce them. For example, in 2001, Nairo, a popular local reggae band, released a song titled 'Same Old Cap' whose lyrics talk about how newly elected members in government have new ideas, but once they are in power, they end up doing the same things as their predecessors. Another popular band, XX Squad, released a song in 2003 titled 'Politician', condemning the political climate and politicians' lies and corruption. Corruption was also the theme of the 2011 Fest' Napuan, Vanuatu's largest music festival. The theme inspired many local reggae artists to write songs on the topic, including reggae band the Koncerners whose song 'Corruption' includes the lines: 'You politicians need to stop it, stop it ... Make good use of your time ... you can make a difference, make it better. You politicians need to stop it, stop it ... We cannot live on like that'.<sup>5</sup> Four years later, another popular local reggae band, Stan & The Earth Force, released the song 'Equal Opportunity'.<sup>6</sup> The song's chorus includes lines such as: 'we are waiting, we are struggling, what we want is equal opportunity ... while you are bickering, while we are struggling ... What we want is equal opportunity'.<sup>7</sup>

Although there is a growing ni-Vanuatu elite class in town, the majority of urban ni-Vanuatu depend on wage labour to get by, and there is widespread disappointment surrounding the failed notion of Melanesian socialism. Some urban youth and well-known local reggae artists, in the hope it would be watched by Vanuatu politicians, expressed their discontent and their concerns about growing income inequality in a documentary they made.<sup>8</sup> The phrase 'Babylon System' recurs in this film, as well as in many Vanuatu reggae songs,

and makes sense here as people in Vanuatu witness continued political corruption in government and other organisations that wield power.

**FIGURE 1** Ni-Vanuatu reggae artists playing at Vanuatu’s Fest’ Napuan music festival in 2016. Photo by Dan McGarry, Port Vila.

Popular local reggae songs speak to important social issues as well, particularly difficult living conditions related to rising living costs, lack of affordable housing, food insecurity and poor living conditions. The urban youth we spoke to also talked about limited opportunity to build more secure futures for themselves (Kraemer, 2013, 2017; Stern, 2017). Additionally, they criticise relatives who ‘sold’ land to Australian and other expatriate business owners and developers (see also Wittersheim, 2011).<sup>9</sup> As Sam, a 26-year-old youth and the lead singer of a popular reggae band explained: ‘white people bought the land, and so now the black man is shut in too much, shut in like a cage. They built walls around us. So where do we breathe? They live in places where there is lots of wind. But we live here in the middle. The wind never reaches us. It just passes over us’. (Kraemer, 2011). Discontentment is reflected in the lyrics of many local bands, such as Black Ghetto’s 2013 song ‘Bongo Jamin’, whose chorus states (in our translation from Bislama):

Walk about in the concrete jungle,  
Culture man walk about in the concrete jungle,  
Preacher man walk about in the concrete jungle,  
Roots man walk about in the concrete jungle.  
Am I right or wrong about the politicians?  
Am I right or wrong about some new decisions?  
Am I right or wrong about the political parties?  
I just want our society to be far from all poverty.  
I just want our society to be far from all poverty.  
Man I’m going to shout out again and say—there’s a political crisis,  
everyone must rise and fight against the system of poverty in this peaceful  
nation.

Another issue expressed by urban youth in reggae music is their experience of continued and increasing lack of justice, mainly at the hands of the western justice system inherited from past British colonial presence in the country (see Jowitt, 2018). In 2007, for example, urban young people burned down Port Vila’s courthouse. They did this as a symbolic act of rejection of ‘white’ justice. In 2008, prisoners and their supporters burned down the prison,

following a damning report about the jail's living conditions published a few weeks earlier (US Department of State, 2008). In 2010, lack of justice was demonstrated in its extreme form when the police beat an escaped prisoner to death after finding him hiding in the bush. While some urban youth engage in criminal acts such as theft, violence, rape and robbery, many of these acts can be attributed to young people's economic inequality and lack of opportunity. Local reggae band Kalja Riddim Klan's song 'Justice' mentions brutality at the hands of police. Their chorus lines are 'we care about transparency, the blind lead the blindness' insanity ... We want justice and no more brutality'. Fans of reggae, whether or not they themselves are living in difficult circumstances, have adopted and internalised these 'grassroots' discourses about their oppression. Reggae music, with its focus on the Babylon system, corruption, justice and equality, is an easily accessible and useful template urban youth use to exteriorise their discontent with the world around them.

It is also important to point out that Vanuatu's own history of colonialism is still relatively recent. The country only gained independence from Britain and France in 1980. Relics of this system persist and are seen, for example, in the separate school systems for Francophone and Anglophone ni-Vanuatu, and a persistent narrative that employment should be a precondition for people to live in town, which was originally a colonial mandate (Mitchell, 2004, p. 361). Vanuatu's urban youth see themselves as having roots in this oppressive colonial legacy. Richard Shing, former director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and a local musician, expressed how he sees reggae music as the music of oppressed black people:

I like reggae because reggae is a style of music that has come out of people who are oppressed. The roots of reggae, the way we see it, came out of Jamaica when there was lots of oppression of the black man in Jamaica. There was segregation and racism and that. Reggae musicians gave rise to these issues, they put them in music, and this is how reggae was born. I like reggae as well because it symbolises us the grassroots people. It's music that is accessible, it's easy to play, you don't need to have lots of skills, as long as you know how to write a good song you can play. And now reggae is known around the whole world, reggae has become so sophisticated and it's now like all other kinds of music. But the message of reggae hasn't changed. Reggae still talks about peace, love and how we need to look after our communities and everyone in our communities. (MS interview, 12 November 2012, Port-Vila)

This universally attributed character—reggae as a music of black people—came up in all our interviews with reggae musicians and reggae fans in Port Vila. As James Langdale, a

local reggae artist told us, ‘young people here, they really relate more to reggae music because reggae music came out of the struggle of the black man, out of the black man’s fights for their beliefs’ (MS interview, 16 October 2012, Port-Vila). This importance of blackness as a symbol of being inheritors of a colonial legacy is present all over Melanesia and also in parts of Polynesia. Through reggae music and reggae culture, people have become connected to a more global colonial history and have been able to identify with colonised ‘black’ people all over the world. Reggae has thus become a vector through which a black global culture, including a black Pacific culture, has been built.

Vanuatu is not alone; across Melanesia identification with a wider black world has been underway for several decades. Webb and Webb-Gannon (2016, p. 62) write that ‘(...) through music - lyrics as well as style - notions of blackness are evoked in the service of Melanesian identity. Appropriating and absorbing musical styles such as reggae and hip-hop allow some Melanesians to identify with a wider black transnation, (...)’. They show that historically, relations between colonised black populations are not recent and that through the population displacement that occurred during periods of blackbirding and forced labour, Christianisation, and World War II, Melanesians ‘became aware of the existence of other black people’ (Webb-Gannon et al., 2018, p. 183). Melanesians who studied overseas in the 1960s and 1970s were exposed to ideologies of other colonised peoples and their similar colonial histories. They were also confronted with the ideological trends of the time, such as *la négritude* (on the francophone side), inspired by French literature such as the writings of Martinique author Aimé Césaire and the Senegalese author Léopold Sédar Senghor. Other ideologies of the 1960s, such as Black Power, also influenced the political thinking of some Melanesian leaders and played an influential role in the lead up to Vanuatu’s independence (Webb-Gannon et al., 2018). Melanesians also started to identify with slavery, a leitmotif of black cultural history (Gilroy, 1993). Indeed, blackbirding, one of the darkest pages of Melanesian colonial history, is identified by ni-Vanuatu as being akin to Atlantic slavery. The 2003 reggae song by XX Squad titled ‘Slava Land’ tells the story of blackbirding:

*Blackbirding day  
Do you remember the days of slavery  
Do you remember the blackbirding day  
Blackbirding days  
Yeah, Blackbirding days*

*They came, they travelled at night  
To steal our grandfathers and take them to slave land  
Mothers cried, fathers too*

*You would think that they'd feel sorry  
But no.*

*Slave land/ Slave land  
Slave land/ Slave land  
Slave land/ Slave land*

*Hey Babylon ...*

Some of our research participants pushed this comparison between blackbirding and slavery to the extreme. String band and reggae musician Benny Willy told us:

Yes, yes, yes, we are the black man, the black man! So, when we first heard reggae music, we felt that this music was right, that this music understood our true hearts. Because we are all the same, and we are all the descendants of slavery. Every black person around the world. In the US, in Jamaica, everywhere, even in Cuba, we are all descendants of the enslavement of the black man. (MS interview, 6 November 2012, Port-Vila)

The wound of colonisation and the history of blackbirding in the Pacific is very present in Vanuatu, and ni-Vanuatu artists still talk and sing about this history and its pain. Stan & the Earth Force's locally famous song, 'My Land My Life', speaks to these issues, as do many other songs such as 'Vanuatu', written by Sam Sandy and recorded by Kalja Riddim Klan. These songs relate how during colonisation white people stole or bought for just two pennies land from their ancestors. Many local reggae songs call for change—sometimes for revolution—to bring down the foreign Babylon system and create a country that people feel is not just independent in name, but provides true independence, defined as greater economic independence, opportunity, equality, justice and respect. Reggae affords urban ni-Vanuatu youth a non-violent means of venting their frustrations (Stern, 2017, pp. 13, 14), and to date, their calls for revolution have not incited violence in Vanuatu.

#### **4 RE-TERRITORIALISING THEMSELVES IN THE CITY**

Port Vila's urban youth, who are the focus of this paper, largely experience themselves as a de-territorialised group. In Vanuatu, people's sense of belonging is intertwined with their experience of physical land or 'ground' (*graon*) (Bonnemaison, 1985, 1994; Jolly, 1982; Rodman, 1987). While many ni-Vanuatu urbanites still express strong connections to ancestral land (Lind, 2010; Lindstrom, 2011; Mitchell, 2002; Tonkinson, 1977, 1985), for many younger urbanites, the strength of this connection is diminishing (Kraemer, 2013,



2020). For some, this is due to extended absence from ancestral land, or having ‘lost their passport’ to the land (Kraemer, 2013, 2020, p. 5; see also McDougall (2017) for Solomon Islands). For others, it is about not having been taught the language and *kastom* of their ancestors. For others still, it is because they have grown up in ethnically and linguistically diverse communities in town rather than in communities in the archipelago in which most inhabitants originate from the same place. In these diverse communities, young people grow up speaking Bislama, Vanuatu’s national creole language, rather than one of the 110 Oceanic languages in the archipelago. They also practice urbanised forms of *kastom*. Lastly, people in town are increasingly marrying people from different islands and so, by default, children grow up with more heterogeneous exposure than intimately learning the cultures of one place. Not learning the language and *kastom* of their ancestors, and not accessing ancestral land, has led to a sense of uprootedness, and ultimately, existential crisis amongst many Port Vila youth (Kraemer 2020, 2013). Our research reveals that emerging from these trends is a de-territorialised urban generation. But, as we will now show, this experience of uprootedness gives many urban youth reason to reinvent themselves, as well as strong aspirations to connect themselves primarily (and even singularly) to the urban territory and urban community in which they reside.

Many Vanuatu urbanites hold a negative image of their city that is often based upon residual colonial racist attitudes (as mentioned above, ni-Vanuatu were not permitted to settle in town without a work permit) and a widespread belief that because town is not the *stamba* or ‘root base’ of most town residents’ ancestors, town is not land to which a ni-Vanuatu person can belong (Rawlings, 1999). Many people also view town as a place lacking in morality, *kastom* and Christian values, and as a place where NGOs, development agencies and ‘modernity’ have corrupted ni-Vanuatu behaviours and ideologies, particularly those of urban women who are increasingly seeking gender equality and an end to gender-based family violence (see Taylor, 2008).

The urban youth we spent time with critique these narratives; they are actively constructing a Vanuatu urban identity of their own. Reggae music is instrumental in this, as it provides them with an accessible culture that accords them a sense of social cohesion and belonging to each other and to the urban place. This is similar to a music phenomenon in Hawaii called Jawaiian music, which is a mix of local Hawaiian influences and reggae music. Jawaiian music does not belong to any one ethnic group and cannot be claimed or ‘owned’ (Weintraub, 1998, p. 85). Similarly, in Vanuatu, local reggae music is a music style that anyone can access regardless of their island of origin, *kastom* knowledge or socio-economic

background. As Daynes (2004) articulates, this attribute of reggae music makes it possible for anyone who identifies with suffering and oppression to engage with reggae in their own way and that ‘from this universal core, reggae is then reinterpreted, and enriched by the experiences of each individual’ (pp. 134, 135, our translation). This theory is articulated in the words of one of our participants, ni-Vanuatu reggae artist Lopez Adams:

We identify ourselves mostly with reggae, one of the reasons is that it brings us a sense of identity. When you identify with reggae, you identify with Jamaica, or Rastafari, not just Vanuatu. I believe that in lots of places, when you start going deep into reggae and listen to it, then you start to feel that you belong to all kinds of ideologies like Rastafari or others in reggae and then you stick to these ideologies, you become comfortable with them because they become part of you. You don’t have to pay for them [like in some *kastom* practices where you pay with mats and shells], you don’t feel like you are even borrowing them—it’s not like you’re paying a dreadlocked man from Jamaica to come and put these ideas in your head, the ideas just come into your body, then they grow with you and you become like them. (MS interview, 6 November 2012, Port Vila)

As Adams’ words reveal, reggae is experienced as accessible to everyone. Even 45-year-old ‘mamas’ told us that their favourite musical artists are reggae artists.

The deterritorialisation experienced by urban youth has created a need for re-territorialisation; an attempt for the displaced culture to ‘re-establish a cultural “home”’ (Canclini, 1993, pp. 228–229; Tomlinson, 1999, p. 148). In the case of global reggae, its new home is in the cities and metropolises of the world. As Agier comments: ‘Black or Afro-descendant culture begins in the cities, it is a product of the cities ... It is necessary to be in the urban context with differences, mirror games, exchanges or ... racism, so that individuals look back on themselves and start thinking about their differences in relation to others who are their contemporaries and share the same city’ (Agier, 2015, p. 53, our translation). In Vanuatu, reggae is also originally urban music (Stern, 2017), and the ‘cultural home’ they are re-establishing is in the urban communities in which they live. As Agier (2015, p. 192, our translation) explains:

Artistic creations or political actions can ephemerally bring together all different individuals—no longer the anonymous members of the crowd—in search of connections and assemblages, seeking to exist against the emptiness of meaning and relationships that threaten every inhabitant of cities. Formed by ritualised, localised encounters, or by

some shared imagination, these situations and the people they mobilise thus bring the city to life at the same time as they bring about communities of movement.

A process of re-territorialisation is occurring in tangible forms, seen for example in how young people are naming their roads and the sheds in which they spend their time after reggae artists and popular reggae phrases (Kraemer, 2013, 2020). The names they choose are homages to reggae music and culture and reflect the importance of reggae as an identifier and guide for their everyday life.<sup>10</sup> For example, road names include 'Babylon Street', because police officers live there and 'Natty King' street, after a Jamaican reggae artist. For urban youth, these names 'offer a strong "statement" about who they are and what they believe' (Kraemer, 2020, p. 11; cf. Rodman, 1987, p. 36). One squad we spent time with call themselves 'Kingston-4'. Kingston connects them to the birthplace of reggae in Jamaica, and the number four describes their particular catchment area in their community (Freswota-4). They say they chose this name because Freswota-4 is an extension of Kingston Jamaica, and they share an affinity with roots and rasta men from there. This squad of young men often retell their own origin story, one that is tightly tied to their exposure to and adoption of reggae. They tell of the time when Jamaican reggae singer Jah Mason visited Port Vila in 2008. After playing a concert in town the squad invited him to Freswota-4. They said that when he stepped off the bus and saw 'Kingston-4' written on the shed in bright orange paint he shared his feeling that being in Freswota-4 with the 'Kingston-4' squad was just like being back home in his holy Kingston, Jamaica. He told the squad that Freswota-4 was a holy place too. He then removed his head covering and took out his dreadlocks. The squad, accompanied by Jah Mason, walked around the community, all with their dreadlocks flying loose. The Kingston-4 squad describe this as a great day, and an important day in their own history and rootedness to place (Kraemer, 2013p. 144).

Reggae music and culture invokes and inspires a sense of belonging both to the local urban community and the international community. This includes a sense of being part of a global black community, rather than a singularly ni-Vanuatu community. Music is an important although often underexplored tool in this endeavour.<sup>11</sup> It is a popular form of counter-colonial expression, where identity politics associated with black consciousness, as well as global discourses of indigenusness, are engendered (Webb-Gannon et al., 2018, p. 177).

## 5 CONCLUSION: THE PRODUCTIVE ROLE OF REGGAE MUSIC

Over the past 20 years, reggae music has become one of the most popular genres of music in urban Vanuatu, not just among youth—its unique downbeat rhythms, catchy choruses and general ‘reggae vibe’ make attract young and old alike. However, as we argue throughout this paper, for many of the urban youth we know, it is reggae’s associated belief system that resonates most strongly. With its ideas of freedom, equality, justice and counter-colonial expression, reggae has been adopted as an accessible tool enabling youth to exteriorise their world view and critique their status quo and the state. It has also been adopted as a shared world view that unites people from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds, engendering a sense of belonging and ‘rootedness’ in urban communities.

Emerging from the uptake of reggae by urban youth is the development of a ni-Vanuatu urban belonging where people are connected to urban land and urban people—in Port Vila, but also in Jamaica, in Africa and in other places where people have experienced or continue to experience colonisation, injustice and racism. This emerging identity is illustrative of how ‘urban ethnic phenomena exist by themselves ... and does not derive from the supposedly more authentic rural ethnicity’ (Agier, 2015, p. 103). Integral to the emergence of this ‘urban ethnic phenomena’, as we have demonstrated throughout this paper, is music, music as an ongoing part of community-building, construction of belonging and even nation-making (Crowdy, 2016; Foster, 1997; Gewertz and Errington, 1999; Webb, 1993). As Levison (2017) notes for Vanuatu, reggae music in particular has become a cultural force constitutive of urban sociality, and the categories of cultural influence in Vanuatu are no longer primarily *kastom*, church and education alone, but reggae as well (p. 115). Indeed, the urban ni-Vanuatu youth we spent time with are attracted to reggae because the messages speak more accurately to their lived experiences than do the messages of *kastom*, religion, formal education or the ‘Babylon system’.

In this sense, ni-Vanuatu urban identity is transitioning from a race-based (Melanesian identity) to one centred on shared values and beliefs. It is the shared values relating to poverty, discrimination and oppression that forms the basis of their urban collective identity. Writing about the uptake of reggae in the Pacific, Cattermole (2004, p. 108) suggests that by inducting themselves into a global community of oppressed peoples, through reggae, indigenous populations enhance their experience of cohesion amongst groups. This in turn instils a sense of empowerment built on knowing that there are others collectively struggling

alongside themselves. In Port Vila, many urban young people feel displaced from ancestral land, practices and *kastom*, as well as marginalised from formal opportunities in town such as school and work. Reggae affords them a sense of inclusion and belonging, which is such an integral part of ni-Vanuatu personhood.

Thus we see that in Port Vila, Vanuatu reggae music has a productive role to play. It is instrumental in motivating youth to re-territorialise themselves in the urban context, not only by physically assigning reggae names, themes and the names of heroes to places and landmarks in their urban communities, but also in building a sense of place and communal belonging, as well as a sense of solidarity and cohesion amongst like-minded people. In Port Vila, groups of urban youth congregate around reggae music, by playing it, listening to it and exchanging songs, because it engenders them with a shared purpose in proactively and collectively rallying against their status quo.

Through reggae music, urban youth find comfort and safety in an otherwise fraught and challenging urban context. Faced with marginalisation and a lack of activity, many young people feel that practicing music prevents them from sinking into delinquency and boredom. Similarly, the structures that allow them to practice (e.g., studios and associations) as well as their fellow musicians, provide safe places and safe relationships (Stern, 2017). Clough (2012) writes that the journey from rural tribal life to urban life is full of uncertainty, and that popular music, especially reggae music, has become a refuge; a ‘solace and key to imagining the future for their communities and an emerging sense of nationhood’ (p. 274). For many ni-Vanuatu urban youth, the reggae world view guides them out of a neo-colonial Babylon (Clough, 2012, p. 274) and into an urban context of their own creation, one that is more in keeping with their own values and desired way of living and being in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> All our interviews were conducted in Bislama. The English translations are ours.

<sup>2</sup> 'Babylon System', from Rastafarian philosophy and inspired by the Bible, is a phrase used frequently in Bob Marley's and other reggae artists' music to refer to societies or groups considered to be corrupt, capitalistic or imperialistic.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.britannica.com/art/reggae>

<sup>4</sup> The works of these scholars on PNG popular music have contributed significantly to this discourse.

<sup>5</sup> They also released a video clip for the song at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nK5DjokUx0w>

<sup>6</sup> They also released an accompanying video clip for this song at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V\\_jr-vZugYc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V_jr-vZugYc)

<sup>7</sup> Popular Port Vila song lyrics are often a mix of Bislama and English. See Vandepuette (2011) for a discussion on how English lyrics are more valued by educated urban classes and Port Vila local media.

<sup>8</sup> Now I Can See: Thoughts of Some Boys in Town (2011):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXchledq4Rs>

<sup>9</sup> Land is considered inalienable in Vanuatu and most land 'sales' have a 75-year maximum lease.

<sup>10</sup> Names borrowed from reggae are used in many contexts, for example, musicians give themselves stage names borrowed from famous international musicians like Barrett, Topman, Downie, etc.

<sup>11</sup> In more economic analyses of musical identity (of different musical genres), Hayward (2012) describes this fluctuation between the local and the global. He analyses the uses of music as a tool to show national pride, to develop the national music industry sector, and to overcome economic uncertainties and financial issues. It is also in this economic sector that other hopes can be raised for individual musicians who dream about music careers, fame and money from the music business. The case of Bob Marley is an excellent example of how a black, disadvantaged and marginalised musician from a small island can become a world star.

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