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## A Brief History of Political Instability in Vanuatu

Guy A. Lavender Forsyth <sup>a,b</sup> and Quentin D. Atkinson <sup>a,c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>School of Psychology, University of Auckland, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand; <sup>b</sup>Department of Linguistic and Cultural Evolution, Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig, Germany; <sup>c</sup>Centre for the Study of Social Cohesion, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

### ABSTRACT

Vanuatu has largely avoided the political violence seen elsewhere in Melanesia in the recent past. It has a small but successful tourist economy, based on its selling point as a tropical paradise. It has powerful cultural resources, in the form of Christianity and *kastom*, to bind its people together with a sense of belonging from a shared past and hope for a shared future. Vanuatu also has a well-earned reputation for political fragmentation and instability, a topic which can raise strong emotions both inside Vanuatu and out. Our brief history of political instability in Vanuatu aims to put the present political situation into broader perspective by tracing different elements of instability over time. Our approach is informed primarily by the historical and ethnographic record itself and, rather than focusing narrowly on the splits and intrigues of political parties, we try to provide the broader sociocultural context from which Vanuatu's party politics emerged and that which it operates within. We thereby attempt to highlight the interconnections that exist between different forms of instability, political, religious, cultural, and otherwise.

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## Introduction

In 2022 and 2023, Vanuatu had four Prime Ministers from four political parties. Each change in government resulted from either a Parliamentary motion of no-confidence or the threat of one. After yet another vote of no-confidence was narrowly avoided in November 2023, some political leaders apologised to the people of Vanuatu for the instability caused by Parliamentary infighting (Garae 2023). What accounts for this situation?

Instability in Vanuatu's politics has been noted by observers for a long time. The birth of an independent Vanuatu was marred by armed rebellions on two of its most populous islands (Beasant 1984; Gubb 1994). While the quelling of this situation saw Vanuatu settle down to its most stable stretch of political history to date, this lasted just seven

**CONTACT** Guy A. Lavender Forsyth  glav713@aucklanduni.ac.nz; guy\_lavender\_forsyth@eva.mpg.de  Science Centre, Building 302, 23 Symonds Street, Auckland Central, Auckland 1010, Aotearoa New Zealand

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years before Prime Minister Walter Liñi faced the first serious challenge to his leadership, which resulted in expulsion of half of all MPs from parliament (sparking a constitutional crisis that saw the President found guilty of inciting mutiny, a ruling later reversed on appeal) and ultimately precipitated Liñi's party splintering into three and transfer of power to Maxime Carlot Korman's opposition in 1991 (Morgan 2008, 126–127; Steeves 1989; Van Trease 1995c). Carlot Korman, struggling to contain nascent divisions within his own party, was nevertheless able to form a precarious coalition: when the alliance he initially formed Walter Liñi's splinter group collapsed in 1993, he survived by recruiting a splinter group that had broken from Liñi's own splinter group (Ambrose 1996, 54–55; Miles 1998, 26; Morgan 2008, 127). From here, Vanuatu entered a period of intense instability: Carlot Korman's party divided into two opposed factions and, by 1997, three governments had been felled by no-confidence motions, eight major changes in coalition composition had occurred, and basic functions of government were not being carried out (see also Ambrose 1996; Hassall 2007, 232–233; Miles 1998, 26–27; Morgan 2008, 128). Angered by their lack of pay, the paramilitary Vanuatu Mobile Force took the President hostage in Malekula (Hassall 2007, 236). Following regular ombudsman's public reports of high-level corruption that were ignored by the judiciary (Forsyth and Batley 2016, 7), publicisation of the government's misuse of workers' savings in the National Provident Fund led to riots in early 1998 (Mitchell 2011). Barak Sope became Prime Minister in 1999 with an urgent need for funds and made several highly questionable financial decisions that resulted in another constitutional crisis in 2001 that involved arrest of the Speaker of Parliament for colluding with Sope, Sope's replacement by Edward Natapei in 2001 in a tense vote of no-confidence, and Sope's eventual imprisonment (though he was pardoned after serving three months) (Forsyth and Batley 2016, 7; Morgan 2003). While Natapei's 2001–2004 government could appear relatively stable given the preceding events, this stability was again highly precarious against multiple threats from motions of no-confidence, changes in coalition partners, and in 2004 a split in the main coalition party (Hassall 2007, 230–231; Morgan 2008, 131). Another bout of outright instability then broke out after Natapie called snap elections to avoid a further no-confidence motion, resulting in an even greater number of smaller parties being represented in parliament (Morgan 2008, 131), intense wrangling over appointments to government positions, and a government that lasted all of five months before itself being toppled by a no-confidence motion (but not before an abortive attempt to arrest the Prime Minister for contempt of court) (Hassall 2007, 231, 237–238). Overall, so many governments fell between the early 1990s and mid-2000s that their average lifespan was less than a year (Cox et al. 2007, ii).

The same basic pattern, with precarious coalition governments recurrently giving way to periods of intense political turnover, has continued since. Ham Liñi's four-year stay in office (2004–2008), which Van Trease (2010, 467) calls 'remarkable', was, Van Trease states, 'mainly because he refused to take any action (i.e. hold accountable politicians who were members of his coalition accused of mismanagement, corruption, or misbehaviour) or make decisions that could jeopardise the coalition'. Thus it should not be surprising that yet another period of instability followed the 2008 elections, with frantic coalitional manoeuvring, several votes of no-confidence, and appeals to the courts to vacate MPs' seats (Van Trease 2010). This situation deteriorated still further when, in one six-month period in 2010 and 2011, Vanuatu saw five changes of Prime Minister

as MPs used court judgements to take down political opponents (Forsyth and Batley 2016, 14). Corruption plays a central role in this instability, with money changing hands in return for political support, a practice that has generally not been pursued as a crime (see Hassall 2007, 238–239). An unprecedented case of successful prosecution in 2015 saw almost 30% of MPs imprisoned for bribery, highlighting both a surprisingly resilient institutional ability to uphold constitutional governance as well as the extent and high-level nature of the corruption problem (Forsyth and Batley 2016). Moreover, governments that succeed in surviving a full term in office, such as Charlot Salwai's of 2016–2020, do not reflect a stable political situation. Salwai had to defeat no less than six motions of no-confidence in just his first two years (Veenendaal 2021, 11) and was sentenced to two years imprisonment after leaving office when convicted for perjury (RNZ 2021; he was later awarded a Presidential pardon allowing him to return to parliament, Blades 2021). The trend towards increasing numbers of parties has continued, with the 2020 election witnessing the greatest ever number of parties gain seats (see Veenendaal 2021, 7). The ensuing coalition government, headed by Bob Loughman, gradually lost support such that by 2022, Loughman resorted to a snap election to avoid losing a no-confidence motion (Manassah 2022), thus bringing us back to the latest round of intense instability described above.

Vanuatu's instability has often been considered within the context of the so-called 'arc of instability', a notion arising in the 1990s of a contiguous zone of political instability running across Australia's northern to eastern borders and which has been used to justify Australian foreign policy aims (Rio 2011, 52–53; Wallis 2012). Given the politically sensitive nature of 'instability', therefore, it is important to be clear on the specific kind of instability in Vanuatu. Vanuatu has not seen prolonged political violence like in Papua New Guinea or the Solomon Islands and, despite serious challenges, its constitutional framework and overall democratic structure have been resilient (Forsyth and Batley 2016; Mcleod and Morgan 2007; Veenendaal 2021). Vanuatu's instability can instead be characterised by a 'party system [that] is one of the most fragmented, personalised and volatile in the world' (Veenendaal 2021, 13), by recurrent periods in which no party or coalition is able to maintain stable government, by persistent concerns about high-level corruption, and—perhaps the concern closest to most people's day-to-day lives—by the hampering effects this situation has on the provision of basic government services such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, and support for rural development (Cox et al. 2007; Forsyth and Batley 2016, 22; Hassall 2007, 225). Vanuatu's instability is not just theorised by outside observers, it is widely discussed and disliked within the country, singled out by politicians (for example in Hassall 2007, 225), chiefs (for instance, Tepahae 1997), media (Manassah 2024), and civil society groups (Lewis 2023). Instability is also perhaps the most widely discussed political topic in Vanuatu at the time of writing. At the end of May 2024, the country will vote—in its first ever national referendum—on constitutional amendments that aim to reduce instability by blocking MPs from switching parties ('2024 National Referendum' 2024; see also Herbert 2024; James 2024). Questions about the explanation of and solutions for political instability are therefore of high significance for Vanuatu today.

In searching for explanations for political instability, perhaps it makes sense to consider 'simpler' possibilities first. Prior work has considered whether Vanuatu's voting system lends itself to unstable factionalism (Van Trease 2005). But, as this existing

work argues, this seems unlikely to be a sufficient explanation, primarily because instability did not begin with the institution of Vanuatu's current voting system. The environment could be posited as another explanation, as Vanuatu is known to be the world's most at-risk country for natural disasters (Aleksandrova et al. 2021). Indeed, the political apology described above took place in the context of relief efforts in response to the destruction raised by a tropical storm the previous month, an unfortunately common occurrence. But while some have claimed that environmental turbulence can have important implications for political instability around the world (see Benati and Guerriero 2021), the hypothesis is not straightforward because the effects of natural disasters are likely to be diverse and highly context-sensitive (for instance, Vardy and Atkinson 2019). We therefore leave a comprehensive analysis of the interplay of environmental and political turbulence in Vanuatu's history for future work (but see Davies 2023; Galipaud 2002). Instead, our starting point is the conclusion reached by existing research that there is a need for 'in-depth analysis of the local and regional context' to understand the way Vanuatu's political instability is 'embedded' in other aspects of its society and culture (see also Miles 1998, 28; Van Trease 2005, 298).

As we will explore, for a country widely regarded as bound up in tradition—marketed to outsiders as a lost paradise and defined by many insiders by reference to timeless custom and unchanging Christian truths—Vanuatu's political history is one of incessant reevaluation and change. Building on work that already documents the party splits and inter-personal conflicts that have occurred in Vanuatu's politics since independence (see above), we aim to take up the longer view. The fragmented yet interlocking web of institutions and identities that comprises Vanuatu's political landscape today is testament to both the amount of cultural diversity within the country and its complex history of colonialism, anticolonialism, and religious conversion and syncretism. We hope here to sketch an outline of political instability in Vanuatu that does justice to this complexity by adopting the historical perspective on continuity and change over time and emphasising the interconnectedness of political instability with other forms of instability in wider society and culture.

### Deep-rooted Diversity

The Indigenous people of Vanuatu, called Ni-Vanuatu, represent a diverse patchwork of ethnicities. Vanuatu is in fact perhaps the most diverse country in the world in terms of the density of languages, with more than 130 Indigenous languages each occupying an average of just 88 square kilometres (François et al. 2015). This diversity seems linked to Vanuatu's geography, with communities scattered across around 65 inhabited islands, as well as a cultural orientation towards local community differentiation (François 2012). As such, one former Prime Minister has described Vanuatu as 'like 100 nations inside one country' (quoted in Forsyth 2009, 19). Of course, prior to the Europeans' arrival there was no political unit of 'Vanuatu' (or 'New Hebrides', as it was first known). Political organisation was decentralised and—at least compared to the extent of chieftaincies in Polynesia—relatively small-scale (though the time-depth of 'big-men' in anthropology's classic sense has been questioned by many, for instance Spriggs 2008). Governance took diverse forms across different islands. In northern Vanuatu, men generally undertook redistribution of goods to progress through grade-taking ceremonies that conferred authority, whereas in central Vanuatu chieftainship

was often patrilineal (Tryon 2000). On Tanna, in the south, authority was relatively negotiable and numerous men laid claim to different modes of prestige (Adams 1984, 14–18; Lindstrom 2020, 14–15).

Nevertheless, diversity does not imply an absence of interconnection. Vanuatu's linguistic diversity can be thought of as a series of inter-related 'communalects' that run the extent of the archipelago (François et al. 2015), with evidence for widespread bilingualism between neighbouring languages prior to colonisation (François 2012). These connections were maintained by widespread travel between Vanuatu's islands and beyond the current country's borders (Arauna et al. 2022; Huffman 1996; MacClancy 1983, 10–11). Today, these connections are reflected in inter-island commonalities in archaeology (Carson 2012; Haddow et al. 2018; Spriggs, Bird, and Ambrose 2010) and cultural traditions (Bonnemaison 1994, 151; Luders 1996; Lynch 1996; Thieberger 2006, 15), and they are remembered and retold through customary stories (Lindstrom 2011b).

### Emergence of Christianity and *Kastom* Under Colonialism

The arrival of the Europeans in the archipelago was destabilising and destructive, as well as transformative. For one, there were simply fewer people after contact. All islands suffered from introduced diseases, while many experienced catastrophic mass death (Spriggs 1997, 255–263). The devastation fundamentally changed social organisation as the networks of hamlets that had existed in island interiors collapsed, with survivors migrating to larger coastal villages. European arrival thus resulted in decreased long-distance exchange between Vanuatu's Indigenous peoples and increasingly localised social networks (Bedford and Spriggs 2014), alongside a loss of linguistic diversity (François 2012). This transformation was also the context for the emergence of one of Vanuatu's most salient identities: Christianity, albeit in its many forms.

In the nineteenth century, the two main European points of contact were missionaries and traders—two groups with very different ideas about the purpose of contact with Ni-Vanuatu (Bolton 2003, 8; MacClancy 1981, 23–24). Missions expressly sought to ingratiate themselves and create a Christian society from 1839 onwards when the London Missionary Society first attempted to found congregations (Adams 1984, 51), followed by more concerted efforts by Anglophone Presbyterians and Anglicans and Francophone Catholics (Van Trease 1995a, 4). Traders, meanwhile, sought profit. They first collected sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* (sea slugs) to sell in Chinese ports (Shineberg 1967, 1–15). For this they established a string of trading stations, as at Tanna's Port Resolution where more than fifty ships docked during the 1840s (Adams 1984, 33–34). When sandalwood was exhausted, traders turned to 'blackbirding', in which they transported Ni-Vanuatu to work on overseas plantations (MacClancy 1983, 18–19). Around 40–60 thousand were taken to Queensland, Australia, while others went to Fiji, Samoa, and New Caledonia (Philibert 1981, 317). The yearly death rate on Australian plantations reached as high as 148 per 1000 people (Scarr 1967, 147–148), while over the span of forty years perhaps one third of all those transported to Australia died there (Moore 2022). Still others settled, founding Australia's South Sea Islander community (Quanchi 1998).

Indigenous opposition to missionaries and traders was widespread throughout the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Religious conversion took a long time and the missions'

association with sickness and death was a significant inhibiting factor (Adams 1984, 68–72, 108–130; Flexner 2016, 51; MacClancy 1981, 30). Many labourers did return to Vanuatu from abroad with greater knowledge of Christianity, though their opinions of it could be both positive and negative (Fox 1958, 44; Mitchell 2002, 238). Some villages near present-day Port Vila killed several missionaries before yielding to conversion in the 1880s (Thieberger 2006, 28–29), while the residents of one more held out till the dawn of the twentieth century (Rawlings 1999, 80). In 1865, after Tannese people drove missionaries from Port Resolution, the British HMS *Curacoa* bombarded the coast, burnt villages and crops, and made locals promise to submit to the word of God and to Queen Victoria (Adams 1984, 150–169). But opposition, as these examples suggest, was not universal. Christianity also posed significant opportunities for Ni-Vanuatu. Christianity was a source of novel knowledge in a cultural context that prized religious innovation and provided a practical means by which Ni-Vanuatu might gain parity with the perceived technological, political, and moral wealth of the Europeans (MacClancy 1981, 45; Philibert 1992, 113–123; Whiteman 1983, 188–194). A compellingly optimistic narrative cast Christianity as a new dawn, in contrast to the ‘darkness’ of backward and amoral heathenism (see Mitchell 2019). Indeed, Christianity has become one of Vanuatu’s defining identities, enshrined by Vanuatu’s first post-independence leader Father Walter Liñi (of the Anglican Church) in the constitution and national motto: *Long God yumi stanap* (‘In God we stand’) (MacClancy 1983, 407; Tonkinson 1982, 60). The people of Vanuatu today generally recognise Christianity as a central feature of their Indigenous history and identity (Flexner and Spriggs 2015) and church organisations play a key role in community governance (Cox et al. 2007, 48). As we will see, however, Christianisation occurred through complex processes of selective uptake and indigenisation.

As numbers of traders and then planters grew during the latter nineteenth century, the British and French governments were eventually stimulated to take greater control of the archipelago (Rodman 1987, 2). The first generation of settlers to found plantations were mostly British. But French settlers soon overtook them due to their government’s proactive support, perceiving British influence as a threat to France’s other interests in the Pacific (Rodman 1987, 18–19). Again, many Ni-Vanuatu actively opposed these efforts, killing settlers frequently (Philibert 1981, 334). After the killings of French citizens on Efate and on another island, French soldiers stationed in New Caledonia occupied Vanuatu in 1886. This resulted in the 1887 British–French Joint Naval Commission to ensure their subjects’ safety (Philibert 1981, 319; Scarr 1967, 207–208). This agreement in turn led to the creation of a joint Condominium Government in 1906 that lasted with little formal change until Vanuatu gained independence in 1980 (Bonnemaison 1994, 94; Van Trease 1995a, 9–10). Colonialism was thus established by the early twentieth century, with French settlers dominating land holdings, Anglophone missionaries commanding the largest stake in religious life, and—rather than dividing the archipelago—with each and every island governed by dual British and French colonial administrations (Bonnemaison 1994, 49). The Condominium considered the land and people of the then-New Hebrides to be subject to Britain and France’s joint influence, and Indigenous Ni-Vanuatu were subject to colonial laws with no way to obtain citizenship (Bonnemaison 1994, 86; Miles 1998, 36–37; Rawlings 2019).

Distinctively Ni-Vanuatu practices were not simply lost during colonisation, however. One reason for this was the Condominium's relatively ineffectual government, widely parodied as the 'Pandemonium' (Brown 2010, 9; Langridge 1921, 17; Liñi 1980; Scarr 1967, 217). The Condominium did exercise arbitrary and intimidating force over Ni-Vanuatu, but actual interaction with it was sporadic (Rawlings 2015, 162–163). White settlement peaked in 1927 at just 777 French and 452 British citizens, against a Ni-Vanuatu population of 40–60 thousand (Philibert 1981, 320). Port Vila, the largest colonial outpost, remained a backwater, taking three months for news from the First World War to arrive from Europe (MacClancy 1981, 56). Vanuatu was generally not at the forefront of either British or French national interests (Matas Kele-Kele 1977, 19–20; Miles 1998, 29–30) and the dual colonial authorities demonstrated a vigorous inability to agree on policy (Bolton 1998). Plantations did initially spread to various islands; the French even imported Vietnamese labourers to work them (MacClancy 1981, 55; Mitchell 2002, 144–154). But the 1929 financial crash cut short any real movement towards economic development (Bonnemaison 1994, 92; Philibert 1981, 320). Much plantation land fell into disuse and local communities settled it without knowing its *de jure* foreign ownership (Cox et al. 2007, 9). Cash-cropping, rather than plantation labour, became the primary means by which Ni-Vanuatu intersected the global economic system, which benefitted the Condominium as it required little infrastructure and oversight (Rodman 1987, 3–4, 29–30). It also meant penetration of capitalist relations of production occurred in addition to subsistence agriculture and traditional lifeways, rather than at their expense, and thus provided Ni-Vanuatu with exit strategies to participation in the global economy (Mitchell 2002, 293; Regenvanu 2010; Simo 2010).

By the middle of the twentieth century, various syntheses of European and Indigenous ideas and institutions had emerged and it was these that set the stage for the current nation of Vanuatu (Miles 1998, 57–58). One particularly important innovation was the idiom of *kastom*, a Bislama word that refers to customary knowledge, values, and practices, and which emerged in antagonism with *skul* ('school'), or Christian ideals and missionary institutions (Bolton 1999, 51; Jolly 1982, 339–341; MacClancy 1983, 97–98). On Tanna, *skul* was ascendent between the 1890s and 1930s in the form of 'Tanna Law', a theocratic interpretation of Presbyterianism (Bastin 1981, 341; Scarr 1967, 244–246). Christian Ni-Vanuatu chiefs, supported and legitimated by white missionaries, banned traditional practices like kava drinking, ritual dancing, and wife exchange, and used public humiliation to break the power of non-Christian leaders (Bonnemaison 1994, 199–203). By 1920, Tanna's 5500-strong population counted 4000 Christians (Guiart 1956, 110). *Kastom*'s backlash, however, was more dramatic still. 'Pagan' beliefs resurged in remote areas and from 1938 various communities encountered a mystical man named John Frum who preached a reinterpretation of Christianity from the perspective of Tannese folklore (Bonnemaison 1994, 215–256). He instructed them to throw cash into the sea, banish the Europeans, and return to *kastom*. Influential men drank kava together and even Christian chiefs partook. The movement became public in April 1941 and a month later the churches emptied; by June perhaps less than 100 Tannese identified as Christian (Bonnemaison 1994, 222, 225). The Condominium authorities perceived a threat to colonial interests and began a sixteen-year campaign of repression, exiling John Frum's leaders and fining its followers (Bonnemaison 1994, 222–223). Yet despite this, John Frum remains a functioning institution on Tanna (Lindstrom 2020).



And though the number of adherents to *kastom* religion has fallen from at least 15% at the time of the 1967 census (McArthur and Yaxley 1968, 67), still 3.1% of Ni-Vanuatu explicitly identified themselves as practicing a *kastom* religion in 2020 (Pacific Community 2020).

In any case, Tannese events are but one dramatic example of tensions between *kastom* and *skul*. Similar conflicts played out across Vanuatu (Beasant 1984, 15–19; Sope 1974, 22). Some confrontations were violent, as when villages on Malekula were shelled in response to an attack on planters in 1900 that aimed to rid the land of the colonisers (Scarr 1967, 213–214). In other instances, tensions were more drawn out. In northern Vanuatu, Anglicans established schools in remote areas of the Banks Islands at the turn of the twentieth century (MacClancy 1981, 47). Priests on Vanua Lava prohibited the long periods of seclusion needed for men to gain authority and respect by advancing through elaborate grade-taking ceremonies, essentially overturning the island's social structure (Fox 1958, 46–47, 132; Hess 2009, 11). But especially following independence, Vanua Lavans' interest in rediscovering their *kastom* found increasingly strong expression. Thus, like much of Vanuatu, Vanua Lava is today a place both 'traditional and modern' (Hess 2009, 12, see also 190–191). Even in the places that Ni-Vanuatu consider most cut off from traditional lifeways—like Port Vila and its peri-urban villages—*kastom* still circulates in the clearing of gardens for swidden horticulture and in people's animist beliefs (Thieberger 2006, 18–20). *Kastom* has become, more generally, an idiom of great significance to modern Vanuatu (Rousseau 2011). This *kastom*, as exemplified by the John Frum case, is not so much the persistence of pre-contact lifeways or 'old against new', but a syncretic position that re-interprets traditional knowledge to deal with a changing world (for example, Eriksen 2014, 145–146; MacClancy 1983, 55–57; Philibert 1992, 101). It thus often exists parallel to Christian and other identities, rather than as a negation of these (Flexner 2022; MacClancy 1983, 60, 94; Rousseau 2011). The flexibility of *kastom* also leaves much room for conflict in the various purposes to which it can be put (Facey 1995; Rawlings 2002).

## Anglophones and Francophones

The identities created by Vanuatu's navigation of colonialism, Christian and *kastom*, are both heavily contested. One major point of tension is a result of the Condominium's division between British and French, Anglophone and Francophone, and several other distinctions that follow from this, including Protestant and Catholic. With decolonisation advancing as a global force in the 1960s, the British and French governments took more proactive roles in Vanuatu's affairs. The British, looking to shed costs, favoured swift independence (MacClancy 1983, 89). The French wanted to retain territory, fearing that losses could endanger their more valuable possessions: nickel mines in New Caledonia and nuclear testing sites in French Polynesia (Beasant 1984, 25; Gubb 1994, 6; Van Trease 1995a, 15–18). France thus began to put large quantities of resources into Vanuatu in order to build support (Lindstrom 1997, 214). Healthcare funding increased from two million Pacific Francs in 1964–36 million in 1968, and the Francophone Ni-Vanuatu community grew from perhaps 12% of the population in the early 1960s to 35% by 1980 (Cox et al. 2007, 21; Van Trease 1987, 110). France also set about establishing a 'conservative' political force within Vanuatu (Forster 1980, 367–

368; MacClancy 1983, 200, 224–226). As far back as the first decades of the twentieth century, France had allied with *kastom*-oriented groups to oppose Anglophone Protestant initiatives at local governance that undermined French economic interests (MacClancy 1983, 127–142; Scarr 1967, 237–240). Continuing this precedent, in the 1960s and 1970s French settlers courted *kastom* groups sceptical of national centralisation led by Anglophones, including Tanna's John Frum (MacClancy 1983, 368; Naunun, Sel, and Willie 1995, 372; Van Trease 1995a, 32) and a movement on Espiritu Santo called Nagriamel (Beasant 1984, 28). These and other groups later coalesced into the Union des Partis Moderés ('Union of Moderate Parties', UMP) (Boulekone 1995, 203). At the same time, an anti-colonial movement among Anglophone Ni-Vanuatu was rapidly emerging, strengthening and building upon a perception of national agency and purpose. The pro-independence movement benefited from the international education made available by the Protestant churches, exposing the leaders to global political discourses surrounding decolonisation and national self-determination (Brown 2010, 14; Gardner 2013; Smith 2021, 241–242). Capitalising on the longstanding and widespread issue of land alienation (see Scarr 1967; Van Trease 1987), the Anglophone coalition named itself the Vanua'aku Pati ('Our Land Party') and campaigned for cancellation of all European land interests in the name of Melanesian Socialism (Cox et al. 2007, 8; Premdas 1989a). Thus, while Francophone-aligned groups adopted ideas of *kastom* that were localising and opposed centralisation (Abong 2013; MacClancy 1983, 368–369), the Vanua'aku Pati adopted *kastom* as a unifying national signifier (Liñi 1980, 42; MacClancy 1983, 92–93, 190). *Kastom* was thus clearly politically expedient as well as a sincere statement of values, and this was true for both sides—as much for Francophone-aligned John Frum and Nagriamel as for the Anglophone-aligned Vanua'aku Pati.

The Vanua'aku Pati won the 1979 election convincingly (winning over 60% of votes at a 90% turnout rate; Beasant 1984, 72–73) and oversaw the first decade of independence for newly-named Vanuatu. Yet the new nation was immediately imperilled by conflict with these *kastom* groups. In 1980, the French government supported rebellions on Espiritu Santo, led by Nagriamel, and on Tanna, led by *kastom* groups including elements of John Frum (Beasant 1984, 83; Gubb 1994, 13; Molisa, Vurobaravu, and Van Trease 1980; Van Trease 1995a, 47–49). The situation was only resolved with interventions from Papua New Guinean, Australian, New Zealand, and British troops (Bonnemaison 1994, 295–300; Naunun, Sel, and Willie 1995, 372–374; Van Trease 1995a). Cultivation of a unifying national identity was therefore an immediate priority (Bolton 2003, 68; MacClancy 1983). Alongside promotion of national *kastom* through cultural festivals—the first having taken place in 1979, which by some accounts provided the occasion for Vanuatu to see 'itself as a country for the first time' (Bolton 2003, 30)—the new government also promoted Vanuatu's pidgin, *Bislama*, as another such measure (Bolton 1999, 50–52; Crowley 1990, 4). *Bislama*'s name derives from *bêche-de-mer*, one of the commodities that first drew European traders to Vanuatu, and it developed as traders and planters moved around the archipelago, a process that was accelerated through its use on the Queensland plantations and shipping lanes (Crowley 1990; Tryon 2009). Based on English, but incorporating Indigenous Melanesian syntax and French loanwords, *Bislama* successfully became the unifying language of government, media, and national life in post-independence

Vanuatu. However, while rebellion ceased to be a threat, the Anglophone and Francophone camps, divided by language, by religion, by approaches to centralisation and decentralisation, by Socialism and Liberalism, and by their interpretations of *kastom*, remained at the foreground of national politics into the 1990s (Morgan 2008; Premdas 1989b, 63; Van Trease 1995b).

An overriding theme of post-independence politics has been the splintering of the Anglophone and Francophone political blocs. The distinction retains significance—the Vanua’aku Pati and UMP are both represented in parliament at time of writing. But since the 1990s, the two camps have disintegrated as functional coalitions able to monopolise political power (Van Trease 2005). Parties continue to differ in Francophone or Anglophone orientation and the other issues which go along with this distinction, but Vanuatu’s governments are comprised of multi-party coalitions that are unstable and that crosscut these distinctions (Morgan 2008). Some observers have credited this fragmentation with preserving Vanuatu’s democracy and averting violent conflict by preventing monopolisation of power by a singular elite (McLeod and Morgan 2007; Veenendaal 2021). More commonly it is portrayed as dysfunction, the routine complaint being that politicians are elected by supplying resources to their constituents rather than through commitment to values or concern for the public good (Cox et al. 2007, 23–24; Morgan 2008; Veenendaal 2021, 8–9; but see Rousseau 2012; note this connects with an extensive literature and ongoing discussions over ‘patrimonialism’ and ‘distribution politics’, for example Scott 1972; and Trapido 2021). This is the perspective that predominates within Vanuatu, with blame for the instability, inter-personal factionalism, and interminable votes of no-confidence that we describe in the introduction falling on an insidious, creeping individualism that is also the erosion of *kastom* (Smith 2021, 243; also Lindstrom 2020, 138–139). In turn, this perception leads many people to desire a strong one-party government with powers to act decisively in the national interest (for example, also Dalesa 2010; Kalpokas Masikevanua 2010; Tepahae 1997). Having traced the origins of Vanuatu’s present political situation and its defining identities, we will use the rest of this article to put political instability into Vanuatu’s contemporary socio-cultural context.

### Different but Connected Stories of Rural and Urban Change

A broader perspective on instability is particularly necessary in Vanuatu because the government is only one part of the system of governance, which in reality is a negotiation between the government and *kastom* institutions that provide the most immediate political institutions for most Ni-Vanuatu, especially in rural areas. There is no settled institutional framework to manage the interface of these two systems, meaning their relationship remains essentially unresolved (Cox et al. 2007; Forsyth 2009; Nimbtki 2020). The Condominium created local councils to extend government reach in 1957, but these were never funded sufficiently (Premdas and Steeves 1989, 25–35; Sope 1977, 109–111). A Francophone government attempted to decentralise in 1994 by creating Provinces and Area Councils, but these too have never been funded at a level that would enable them to take over basic administrative tasks from central government (Cox et al. 2007, 44–47; Komugabe-Dixson et al. 2019). In a geographically complex archipelago, therefore, the government’s influence over daily life thus declines sharply outside the

two urban centres of Port Vila and Luganville. Some observers have thus argued that political instability—particularly the fragmentation of Vanuatu’s political landscape and the practice of MPs directly provisioning their constituencies with resources—constitutes a reassertion of local *kastom* norms of political leadership in the parliamentary context (see Van Trease 2005; also criticism in Rousseau 2012, 101–104). Indeed, most of the politicians interviewed by Veenendaal (2021, 8–9) admitted their careers directly depended on endorsement by local chiefs. We must be careful, though, not to essentialise *kastom* leadership and recognise it as phenomenon that itself evolved under particular historical conditions.

*Kastom* governance in practice constitutes a multiplicity of ‘chiefly’ systems that normally involve some form of community council (Forsyth 2009; Premdas 1989a, 78). Despite the name, *kastom* chiefs sometimes have only tential relationships with pre-colonial forms of political authority. Modern chiefs are the result of negotiations between these different local communities’ ideas about legitimate authority and the organisational needs of the missions, Condominium, and postcolonial state (Bolton 1998, 182–184; Nimbtik 2020; Regenvanu 2005, 43; Scarr 1967, 236–237). The Condominium used various titles including ‘big-man’ and ‘assessor’ for these local authority contacts before ‘chief’ won out as the dominant nomenclature (Lindstrom 1997, 212–213). With independence, and the rise of *kastom* as a defining idiom in national politics, came greater responsibilities for chiefs, albeit without state funding or clarity in the proper extent of their role and powers (Lindstrom 1997). The constitution gave a National Council of Chiefs, later renamed *Malvatumauri*, the role of advising the government on ‘customary matters’ (Bolton 2003, 19–20). Yet the government has been reluctant to relinquish real power and the *Malvatumauri*’s role has remained uncertain and largely symbolic (Nimbtik 2020; MacClancy 1983, 419–424; Tabani 2019, 71–72). Today, therefore, chiefs fill the crucial but difficult role of bridging the gap between Vanuatu’s state apparatus and local politics on the ground (Forsyth 2009, 165). This role is made particularly tricky due to the multiple unresolved tensions that exist in the legal compatibility of *kastom* practices with the personal rights guaranteed by Vanuatu’s constitution (Bowman et al. 2009, 29–31; Bratrud 2017, 226; England 2018; Molisa 1995; Nimbtik 2020). This perhaps goes some way in explaining the concerns that most chiefs articulate regarding their inability to exercise chiefly authority within local communities and about their perception of a lack of respect for their institutions especially amongst youths (Forsyth 2009, 109–110; Lindstrom 2020, 138; Naupa and Simo 2008; Tepahae 1997).

It can be tempting to envision rural Vanuatu as timeless. The small-scale horticulture and limited cash-cropping that predominate amongst the 75% of Ni-Vanuatu people who live outside the urban areas (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2017) does not seem far removed from the kinds of activities that would have been characteristic of daily life prior to colonisation. This is in a sense true, with the large majority of rural Ni-Vanuatu living on lands inherited through *kastom* (Hakkert and Pontifex 2022, 83)—a system in which land, as one prominent politician put it, ‘is what a mother is to a baby’ (Sethy Regenvanu n.d., quoted by Van Trease 1987, xi). However, change is not a uniquely urban phenomenon. Tourism is a growing business, though still mostly restricted today to a few hotspot regions such as Tanna (Bowman et al. 2009, 77; Lindstrom 2020, 159–160). Since 2007, an increasingly common income source has been

seasonal labour on plantations in New Zealand and Australia (Bailey 2013). The gradually increasing dependence on cash and the global economy in rural areas (Cox et al. 2007, 12; Pacific Institute of Public Policy 2011) is an ongoing source of political tensions, as communities and families compete for development opportunities (for example, Bedford, Nunns, and Bedford 2020; Bratrud 2021; Rodman 1987; Smith 2021) and as class differences and inequalities widen, including between islands. In response, Vanuatu has experienced growth of political movements to defend Indigenous land rights and promote self-sufficiency through a ‘traditional Melanesian economy’, which has recently seen gains in representation in parliament (Mahit 2016, 44–57; McDonnell and Regenvanu 2022; Regenvanu 2010; Rousseau and Taylor 2012).

In Vanuatu’s urban areas, meanwhile, *kastom* and Indigenous identity is rapidly being transformed anew. As Vanuatu has no history of Indigenous urbanisation, the cities are the places most influenced by European lifeways (Connell and Lea 1994). Port Vila was a European settlement from the early 1880s, when a French planter purchased the land from the area’s *kastom* custodians and cleared the land along the seafront (Bonnemaison 1994, 45–46; Crowley 1990, 73). Within the decade it was the archipelago’s commercial and planting centre (MacClancy 1981, 56). Yet in 1930, Port Vila remained a settlement of just 1000 people (Haberkorn 1989, 7). Truly urban life only began with the American war effort (D. Bedford 1971, 111–116). At the 1944 peak, 100,000 Americans were stationed in Vanuatu, outnumbering the entire Ni-Vanuatu population by two to one (Lindstrom 2011a, 44). The American military gave Port Vila an all-weather street network, bridges, and a water system (Bonnemaison 1994, 93; Mitchell 2002, 139). Vanuatu’s second city, Luganville on Espiritu Santo, was erected almost overnight when the US military drained swampland to create the Allies’ main base for the Solomon Islands campaign (Ludvigson 1981, 64; MacClancy 1981, 107). The war also involved large numbers of Ni-Vanuatu in wage labour (Mitchell 2002, 138–139). Ni-Vanuatu labour was necessary for pre-war colonial building projects and plantation work (Rawlings 2002, 136–138, 299) but the war drew Ni-Vanuatu into a tighter relationship with the global economy. Women from Port Vila’s peri-urban villages were paid previously unheard-of amounts of money to wash soldiers’ clothes (Rawlings 1999, 83–84), and thousands migrated from rural Vanuatu to the new cities for employment (Lindstrom 1989, 395–403; MacClancy 1981, 65–66). Circular mobility, with migrants travelling back and forth between islands, is a pattern that continues today (Posso and Clarke 2016, 71). Only in the 1950s did the Condominium permit Indigenous Efate islanders to settle in Port Vila (Rawlings 1999, 83), prompting the population to expand from 1300 in 1955 to 10,000 by 1979 (MacClancy 1981, 83). Especially from the 1970s onwards, Vanuatu has seen greater linear migration and the foundation of permanent urban migrant settlements (Haberkorn 1989, 148–153). Nevertheless, many Ni-Vanuatu still do not view the cities as places one can be from. To claim to be a person of Port Vila or Luganville can be tantamount to claiming to be from nowhere (Kraemer 2013, 86–96; Rawlings 2002, 130). The perceived loss of *kastom*, thus identity, in urban areas is sometimes presented as a necessary sacrifice. One Ni-Vanuatu spoke to Radio Vanuatu in 1979 that their peri-urban community had sacrificed *kastom* for the sake of the development from which all islanders benefit (Philibert 1992, 128).

## Modern Moral Instabilities

These changes in social life have been accompanied by growing fears of moral instability, as past certainties are challenged by alternative modern practices. One important correlate of the perceived lack of *kastom* in urban spaces is that they are commonly seen as places where the norms of community life are less stringently upheld, places of freedom and excess that are dangerous and corrupting, especially for youths (Eriksen and Rio 2017; Kraemer 2013, 193–194; Mitchell 2002, 321). The number of young and unmarried mothers in town provides a target both for pity, for example the subject of church prayers, as well as for derision—the outcome of modern youths’ recklessness and selfishness (Widmer 2013, 152). Marijuana, frequently consumed alongside reggae music, has become a particular focus for criticism through the idiom of sorcery, identifying marijuana consumption with Christian notions of occult evil (Rio 2011). A commonly proposed solution for young people corrupted by town life is to send them back to their home islands (Wirrick 2008), a solution that envisions rural Vanuatu as the ‘real’ Vanuatu, experience of which is necessary for learning one’s *kastom* and identity (Widmer 2013, 149). Yet as the urban population continues to increase—the proportion of Ni-Vanuatu in urban areas rose by 25% in the decade preceding 2012 (Posso and Clarke 2016)—new generations are growing up that do not have links to ‘home’ islands to go back to and these people must create new identities for themselves (Mitchell 1998). A good example of this is Bislama’s shift from pidgin to creole. Having been used to help unite the country following independence, Bislama is now the first language for more than 40% of urban Ni-Vanuatu (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2021, 15), 93% of Port Vila’s youths speak Bislama almost exclusively among friends (‘Vanuatu Young People’s Project’ 2008), and an increasing proportion of households in both urban and rural areas use Bislama as their main language (François 2012, 104). Yet this expression of a new, pan-Vanuatu identity is also a threatening one: the rise of Bislama as a first-language creole makes many people worry for the future of Vanuatu’s linguistic diversity, something that genuinely is under threat as people leave their rural homes, marry people from other islands, attain higher levels of formal education, and consume more English- and Bislama-language media (see Daly and Barbour 2021; Early 2023; Love et al. 2019; Tryon 2006; Willans 2015). Bislama thus reflects both the moulding of new Indigenous identities in urban intensification as well as the perceived threat that greater participation in global ‘modernity’ poses to the survival of Vanuatu’s unique cultural heritage.

One important arena of contestation connected to *kastom* and modernity is the much discussed topic of the role of women (Cummings 2005; Willans 2017, 372). As pointed out by Ni-Vanuatu women themselves (for example, Molisa 2002), women are given heavy burdens of expectation in performing childcare alongside gardening and selling produce at market (Donahue, Eccles, and Miller-Dawkins 2016, 52–54; Sparks 2005, 110–111). At the same time, women are frequently restricted by men in what they can do. For example, women’s travel and wage work have been interpreted as signs of *kastom*’s erosion (Mitchell 2002, 341) and women have been denied opportunities for lucrative overseas labour due to arguments that it would be detrimental to community structures and traditional gender roles (Bowman et al. 2009, 70). Women lack proper political representation, with only a handful of women having served in parliament since

independence (Howard 2020). As explained by Grace Molisa, one of the few women's voices present during the debates in the run up to independence, the lack of representation of women's interests within Vanuatu's institutional framework can only contribute to their relative powerlessness overall (MacClancy 1983, 305–306). Women's access to political resources is made particularly urgent by alarming rates of violence against women, with around 60% of Ni-Vanuatu women who have been in a relationship reporting intimate partner violence (Vanuatu Women's Centre and Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2011, 55). When women have tried to change their situation, their efforts have been criticised for undermining social cohesion (Cummings 2005) and for being 'pro-divorce' and 'anti-men' (Douglas 2002, 22). When the Family Protection Bill specifically criminalised family violence, some chiefs voiced opposition due to perceptions that it threatened family integrity and chiefly mechanisms of dispute resolution (Cox et al. 2007, 43). In the mid-2000s a group called the 'Violence Against Men and Family Protection Centre' was established in Luganville with the explicit aim to fight 'foreign' reforms introduced by activists and restore what they saw as traditional (Christian and *kastom*) male dominance (Taylor 2008). However, such movements do not simply conserve men's rights and powers as they already exist in *kastom*; instead, these movements assert thoroughly modern forms of control over women (Jolly 1996; Regenvanu 2005, 43–45; Tor and Toka 2004), such as excluding women from decisions about land they had previously been party to (Naupa 2017; Naupa and Simo 2008). The ideological justifications for male dominance draw as much on Christian as *kastom* discourses (Cox et al. 2007, 31; Donahue, Eccles, and Miller-Dawkins 2016, 59). It is thus crucial that *kastom* not be confused with political conservatism (Regenvanu 2005)—women have their own forms of *kastom* authority and tradition (Bolton 2003; Naupa and Simo 2008; Patterson 2001) and some have become chiefs (Cox et al. 2007, 31; Hess 2009, 178). Moreover the backlash against the women's movement has not stopped it from achieving notable progress. Groups like the Vanuatu Women's Centre have been able to make women's rights and protection from violence a central part of contemporary discourse in Vanuatu by working with other organisations to provide community education campaigns, counselling, and legal support (Ellsberg et al. 2008, 48–49, 174–181; Naupa 2017, 317).

A final example of entwined moral and political instability is the growth of new Christian identities. Aside from the 'big three' mainline churches (Presbyterian, Anglican, and Catholic), Seventh Day Adventists have had small footholds in rural Vanuatu since the early twentieth century (Steley 1990, 94–97), with Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Assemblies of God establishing a presence by the mid-twentieth century (Van Trease 1995a, 6). But the 1970s and post-independence 1980s saw a marked increase in affiliation to new churches (Eriksen 2022, 115; see also *Vanuatu National Population Census May 1989: Main Report* 1991, 38), particularly in the expanding urban centres where American-influenced charismatic and Pentecostal Christianity took hold most strongly. By 2009, Eriksen counted more than fifty different churches active in Port Vila alone (Eriksen 2022, 112). While inter-denominational tensions have existed in Vanuatu since the nineteenth century (see Bonnemaïson 1994, 71–72, 213–214; Flexner 2016, 12; MacClancy 1981, 45), this religious effervescence has intensified the issue. In 1989, the Vanuatu Christian Council, primarily representing the 'big three', requested the government to stop minority religious groups from sowing societal division, including banning the Seventh Day Adventists and Assemblies of God from radio preaching. The

governing Vanua'aku Pati's support for the Council's suggestion had the political effect of pushing followers of minority denominations towards the opposition UMP (Van Trease 1995b, 131–132). But the antagonism between minority churches and the mainstream is not merely a product of the established churches' intolerance. The established churches have learnt to coexist with *kastom*, separating out the 'good' from the 'bad', the latter represented by local spirits called 'devils' and sorcerers that practice *nakaemas* (for example, Bratrud 2019, 124; Hess 2009, 41). Pentecostal Christianity might at first appear a natural match for this animatedly supernatural context, with its emphasis on miraculous faith-healing and real-time battles between demons and the Holy Spirit (Ryrie 2018, 446). But unlike the mainline churches, which tend to be more comfortable existing in entanglement with non-Christian forms of *kastom*, Vanuatu's Pentecostal churches draw a very clear line on the Satanic evil of all non-Christian ritual and tend to perceive seeds of this evil in any accommodation to *kastom*. One remarkable expression of this came in the mid-2000s when a Supreme Court Judge, himself the founder of a Pentecostal congregation, blamed the mob killings of three accused sorcerers in Port Vila on the Vanuatu National Museum for its promotion of *kastom* in arts festivals, prompting the director of which to respond by saying it was instead the churches that were to blame for stirring up fears of sorcery and belief in the evil of *kastom* (Rio 2010, 194–195). Thus in contrast to the co-existence of *kastom* and Christianity within the mainline churches, minority Christian movements frequently set themselves apart from the established churches and from wider society by explicitly rejecting *kastom*, viewing it as something from which Vanuatu must be cleansed in order to enjoy economic development and prosperity (Eriksen 2009b; 2009a; 2022; Mitchell 2002, 261–263). While *kastom* may be almost totally reconciled to Christianity in modern Vanuatu, Christianity remains not entirely reconciled to *kastom* (Miles 1998, 108). Furthermore, as religious diversity grows, pressures on community life mount. Vanuatu's rural villages, often originally founded by a single denomination (Eriksen 2008, 36–37; Philibert 1992, 114; Whiteman 1983, 186), have begun to literally break apart as religiously nonconformist families disperse once again into complex networks of hamlets (see Hess 2009, 160; Lindstrom 2020, 137; also Shaver and White 2022). Vanuatu thus retains its distinctive character at once both 'traditional and modern' (Hess 2009, 12).

## Conclusion

Vanuatu's present political instability can be seen in this long view as one part of a more general sociocultural instability in response to a highly turbulent past. With its history of depopulation and dysfunctional colonialism, and its ongoing experiences of urbanisation and economic change, not to mention its scattered geography and frequency of natural disasters, Vanuatu has certainly had more than its fair share of turbulence.

Perhaps we should not be surprised to find that in response, certainties like those to be found in religion and custom will be strongly held onto as guiding principles. However, a tight grip on these certainties has not reduced the instability of these 'certainties' themselves. On the contrary, at the point of independence, *kastom* was flexible enough to simultaneously serve as justification for both a national campaign for Melanesian Socialism and rebellions against national independence. Christianity, too, divides just as it unites—Vanuatu might rally round its moto *Long God yumi stanap*, but many people's faith leads



them to believe that Vanuatu is sinking in a rising tide of sin, sorcery, and Satanism, in turn leading them to found new, independent churches and contributing to the ever-growing proliferation of congregations. The party-political arena seems to mirror this dynamic, with widespread worries about political splintering—and the erosion of *kastom* suspected of driving it—leading, perhaps ironically, to ever increasing numbers of political splinter groups. When a settled common ground does seem within reach, as in the case of Bislama’s success story, it incites justified fears about the risk of losing a rich heritage of cultural diversity.

The evidence clearly shows that the breadth of instability in Vanuatu cannot be accounted for by something like a style of voting system (concurring with prior analyses; Van Trease 2005). It runs deeper in Vanuatu’s sociohistorical context. Should the referendum campaign succeed in passing a constitutional amendment to restrict MPs’ abilities to switch party affiliations, therefore, it is also perhaps likely to fail in quelling political instability. When the wider context and interests remain the same, especially the difficulty of forming coalitions in such a fragmentary party landscape, politicians will probably find ways to continue current practices under different rules (see RNZ 2024). Yet, despite the negative framing of ‘instability’, an observer will surely be struck by the inventive dynamism apparent in this history of Vanuatu. If our conclusion is, as seems most compelling, that current political instabilities should be understood as part of the process by which the people of Vanuatu have grappled with huge, sudden, and ongoing sociocultural change, then instability cannot not be seen as entirely bad. And not just because it might prevent too much accumulation of power. The same instability reflects the cultural diversity that makes Vanuatu unique, as well as a restlessness with present conditions and a striving for better that we have mapped across diverse domains of life, from politics to religion to morality to custom. Ultimately, the view of political instability we have articulated here shows it to be but one aspect of a deeper, a broader, and, most importantly, a continuing story.

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## ORCID

Guy A. Lavender Forsyth  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3077-7112>

Quentin D. Atkinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8499-7535>

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