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WHY MAKE BOOKS FOR PEOPLE WHO DON'T READ?
A PERSPECTIVE ON DOCUMENTATION OF AN ENDANGERED
LANGUAGE FROM SOLOMON ISLANDS

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of documenting an endangered language from the perspective of a community with low levels of literacy. I first discuss the background of the language community with whom I work, the Lavukal people of Solomon Islands, and discuss whether, and to what extent, Lavukaleve is an endangered language. I then go on to discuss the documentation project. My main point is that while low literacy levels and a nonreading culture would seem to make documentation a strange choice as a tool for language maintenance, in fact both serve as powerful cultural symbols of the importance and prestige of Lavukaleve. It is well known that a common reason for language death is that speakers choose not to transmit their language to the next generation (e.g. Winter 1993). Lavukaleve is particularly vulnerable in this respect. By utilizing cultural symbols of status and prestige, the standing of Lavukaleve can be enhanced, thus helping to ensure the transmission of Lavukaleve to future generations.

Background on Lavukaleve and the sociolinguistic situation in Solomon Islands

Lavukaleve¹ is one of about 80 indigenous languages of Solomon Islands, an independent nation of 409,042 people (Solomon Islands Census Office 1999), formed by a chain of islands located in the southwest Pacific. With about 1,700 speakers (Solomon Islands Census Office 1999), Lavukaleve is of a comparable size to most of the other indigenous languages of Solomon Islands. Solomon Islands is also home to Solomon Island Pijin (usually called Pijin), which, together with Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea and Bislama in Vanuatu, are varieties of Melanesian Pidgin. Pijin is the *lingua franca* of the whole country but is not an official language,

and neither are any of the indigenous languages. Solomon Islands was a British colony until it achieved status as an independent country in 1978. There is no official language of Solomon Islands (Lee 1996); the *de facto* official language is English, which is taught in schools, but which is known only poorly outside major towns. English is the native language of few if any Solomon Islanders.

Almost everyone in Solomon Islands has one native language, the language of their ethnic group. Many people also speak one or more languages of neighboring ethnic groups, and most people also learn to speak Pijin at some time in their lives. A rising middle class in the capital Honiara is also conversant with English.

Radio broadcasts are in English and Pijin (there is no Solomon Islands television station), and the more widespread national newspapers are written in English, with a few grassroots productions in Pijin.

Current official government policy is for the medium of instruction in schools to be English exclusively. Further, neither indigenous languages nor Pijin are overtly taught. This appears to be in part due to a feeling that the mother tongue and Pijin will look after themselves, whereas English is the difficult language to acquire. The extent to which this policy is successful is debatable. A shortage of trained teachers who are well enough educated themselves in English means it is in practice often difficult to provide English-language instruction. Many school classes I have observed in different areas in Solomon Islands have been conducted wholly in Pijin. As a matter of practicality apart from anything else, indigenous languages are also used as the medium of instruction in some schools, despite official policy, if the teacher is from the same language background as the children.

People educated before independence can typically read and write English. Declining funding for education since independence has meant that education standards have dropped considerably, to the extent that young adults and teenagers and children today typically have very poor command of English in particular and indeed of literacy in general. Literacy rates for Central Province, for instance, are 58.4 percent (Solomon Islands Census Office 1999).

Lavukaleve speakers, as indeed most people in Solomon Islands, live in small villages of typically a hundred or so people, carrying out subsistence farming and fishing. Lavukaleve is the language of the Russell Islands, a group of islands in the Central Province of Solomon Islands. Many people engage in the money economy by producing copra, the dried flesh of coconuts, and selling this to a local factory. Money is spent mostly on rice, tinned fish, clothes, tobacco, petrol for transport in small boats, and school fees.

Most Lavukaleve speakers learn Lavukaleve as their first language in infancy. Most also learn Pijin, typically in their late childhood when they go to school. Some people also have a passive command of English, and a handful can speak English relatively fluently.

The implications of this sociolinguistic situation are profound. Many of the forces often noted as threats to minority languages do not apply here. Even though English is the *de facto* official language of Solomon Islands, the dominant Anglophone ideology of the kind discussed by Dorian (1998) that often accompanies English-language dominance over minority languages does not necessarily apply in Solomon Islands. For instance Dorian notes that European conquerors in many parts of the world underestimated the complexity and conceptual apparatus of indigenous languages they encountered; also, largely monolingual Anglophone colonialists often had a belief (which is still encountered today [e.g. Sandall 2001]) that it is difficult and problematic for an individual and a community to maintain two or more languages, and that monolingualism is desirable and even necessary for economic development. Solomon Islands, while it has inherited English from its former colonial power, has not inherited such attitudes toward its indigenous languages. This is partly because until very recently everyone in Solomon Islands has had a “home” language, so everyone comes to use the *lingua franca* Pijin from a more or less equal footing. “Home” languages are not seen as inhibiting progress, but rather are a simple fact of life, like one’s birthplace.

Is Lavukaleve endangered?

To a certain extent, any language with only 1,700 speakers is endangered. Dixon (1991: 231) maintains that “every language with fewer than 10,000 speakers is endangered,” although, as Nettle and Romaine (2000) point out, the situation is more complex than just how many speakers a language has. Further, for Lavukaleve at least, 1,700 speakers is possibly more than it has ever had before.

In 1954, Capell said of Lavukaleve, “It is spoken only by some 250 people, but a record should be made of it before it is swamped by Bugotu. There is no doubt that this is what will ultimately happen” (Capell 1954: 85).

This prediction is based on the fact that Bugotu (spoken on the nearby island of Isabel) was for some time the *lingua franca* of the Melanesian Mission in Santa Isabel and the Russells (Capell 1954: 84), and, given the small number of speakers Capell found, his prediction was reasonable. However, things have not developed as he expected. The influence of

Bugotu has declined, to the extent that no Lavukal I know speaks it. At the same time, Solomon Islands has experienced a population explosion, with a current annual growth rate of 2.8 percent, previously 3.5 percent (Solomon Islands Census Office 1999). In 1971, Lavukaleve's speaker numbers were estimated to be 700 (Wurm 1975, an estimate based on 1975 census figures), and the numbers are still increasing. Importantly, until recently this expanded Lavukaleve-speaking population has been almost entirely in the villages, living a relatively traditional lifestyle and speaking vernacular languages.

Even though Lavukaleve is the first language for most Lavukals, most people, especially younger people, are also fluent in Pijin. In the West Russells, people live a very traditional lifestyle and have little access to town and outside influences, and all children grow up learning Lavukaleve as their first language. There is only one urban center in the Russells, a town called Yandina, located in the East Russells. In the East Russells, largely because of the proximity of Yandina, Pijin is slowly taking over, and many families do not speak Lavukaleve to their children. As a result, many of the families I talked to in the East Russells have children who cannot speak Lavukaleve.

As Dorian (1998: 17) points out, processes of sustained language maintenance are, perhaps ironically, far less understood than processes of language loss:

one of our particularly acute needs is more in-depth studies of linguistic and cultural persistence in small communities. Except in cases of great geographical or social isolation, the long-term maintenance of a small language implies not just the persistence of one language but the enduring coexistence of two or more. Currently we understand the motivating factors in language shift far better than we understand the psychosocial underpinnings of long-sustained language maintenance.

There are factors working both for Lavukaleve and against it. Favorable to the long-term survival of Lavukaleve is the fact that it is on a par with all of the other indigenous languages of Solomon Islands: it is not a minority language with respect to any of the other indigenous Solomon Islands languages. If conditions are right for other indigenous languages to survive, so should Lavukaleve.

Further, most Solomon Islander people live relatively traditional lives in villages with relatively traditional power structures. With national political structures deteriorating in recent times, particularly since the explosion of the civil unrest in June 2000, many residents of the capital city were forced back to their villages of origin (Kudu 2000; Saemane 2000; Solomon Islands Census Office 1999). This has come at a large

social cost, but it speaks to the strength and resilience of traditional village structures. Traditional village life favors language preservation.

A further powerful factor in favor of the survival of Lavukaleve and the other indigenous languages of Solomon Islands is the tremendous power of ethnic identity. In Solomon Islands, everyone has an ethnic identity, and language is a powerful marker of this. There are no despised minorities; all ethnicities are recognized, and it is accepted that every person has a home village and a home language. This is extremely important in considerations of people giving up their languages; it leads to the “psychosocial confidence,” discussed by Dorian (1998), which is necessary for indigenous languages to survive. In this vein, Nettle and Romaine (2000: 9) mention that in Vanuatu, a culturally and politically similar country to Solomon Islands, no language has over 3000 speakers “yet most of them seem to be maintained.” Darrell Tryon has made a similar comment with respect to Solomon Islands that changes are unlikely, given the pride in indigenous languages and cultures, and the decentralized administrative structures (Tryon 1979: 48).

On the negative side, however, there are forces working against the survival of Lavukaleve. Lavukaleve is seen as a very difficult language, compared to the other Solomon Islands languages, most of which are closely related to each other as members of the Oceanic branch of the Austronesian family. Lavukaleve, one of the few Papuan languages in Solomon Islands, stands out as being different and, therefore, much more difficult to learn, and indeed there are extremely few people who ever learn Lavukaleve as a second or later language.

And, importantly, changing social structures, the encroachment of the money economy, the attraction to the city of young people, and a major increase in the proportion of marriages of couples from different linguistic groups present major threats to the long-term viability of Lavukaleve. Wurm (1991: 4) mentions this type of phenomenon under the rubric of an ecological change to the life of a small community, which is similarly affecting small previously stable speech communities in Papua New Guinea. In such communities, young men typically leave the village to live in the town; young women, remaining in the village, are obliged to marry men from other language groups, and thus the tribal language may not be passed on to the children.

A geographical cline of Lavukaleve language health

Lavukal people can be divided into three main linguistic groups, based on their retention of their language; these groups fall into three geographic regions, differing mainly in their proximity and ease of access to the town.

In the group nearest to the town, Pijin has overtaken Lavukaleve as the language of daily communication; in the group furthest from access to the town, Lavukaleve is the only language of daily use, although most people speak some Pijin. In the middle group, Lavukaleve and Pijin are both used as a daily means of communication (Terrill 2001).

During my time spent in the Russells, I have always been based in Mane Village, which is at the western extremity of the Russells, the place furthest away (in terms of ease of access) from the town, and the most culturally and linguistically conservative of all the Lavukal villages. Mane has the best retention rate of Lavukaleve of any of the villages, and in fact in Mane one rarely hears anything other than Lavukaleve spoken, outside of parts of the church services (see below). However in the East Russells, it is much more common to hear Pijin than Lavukaleve, and a high proportion of households do not use Lavukaleve as the everyday means of communication.

To sum up: Lavukaleve as a whole is endangered by the encroachment of Pijin. Its endangerment can be seen as a cline, depending on the ease of access to the major town in the region. Lavukaleve is still being learned as the native language by at least some children in all Lavukal areas, but this situation could swiftly change. It is widely reported in the literature that while number of speakers, governmental recognition, and literacy levels, among other factors, are all important factors for language survival (e.g. Grenoble and Whaley 1998), perhaps the most important factor is that speakers must want their language to survive; or in Winter's (1993: 313) words, "Languages are used because people want to use them; languages cease to be used when people cease to want to use them." Dorian concurs with this notion, observing that "acceptance or rejection [of a language] will necessarily lie with individual communities" (Dorian 1998: 21).

To this end, efforts to maintain Lavukaleve should focus on enhancing Lavukaleve's prestige, on stressing its role as an important and viable language, which still has an important role to play even in the changing urbanizing world. In this way, intergenerational transmission is more likely to take place, and Lavukaleve is more likely to survive for at least the foreseeable future.

First visit: setting the agenda

My initial aims, before I went to visit this community for the first time, were to write a descriptive grammar of the language for my Ph.D. thesis. In my initial field trip I visited the Russells, talked with community leaders, and asked permission to work with their language. Before I went I had very little idea how people would react to this.

On my first visit it was quickly made clear to me that if I wanted to do work on Lavukaleve, I was very welcome indeed. It took some more understanding to realize that people's idea of what working on the language meant was somewhat different from my own idea. My own idea was the traditional linguistic fieldwork style: participant observation, learning the language by immersion, recording texts, and transcribing and analyzing them, occasionally supplementing this with controlled elicitation. Lavukals' idea of what working on a language meant was translating liturgical materials from English into Lavukaleve.

As this became apparent to me, I quickly began to realize the need for being very specific about what I wanted to do and was capable of doing. After some meetings and discussion we came to an agreement about my role. I would write my book for my university (which, as they knew, was paying me to be able to come at all); I would make a dictionary of Lavukaleve and a book of Lavukaleve stories, and I would arrange to get someone to translate liturgical materials.²

This agreement with the community leaders was the basis for all my further work on the language. People generally knew that I was there to write a book about their language and to write a dictionary, and thus to learn to speak and understand Lavukaleve and Lavukal culture was an obvious way to begin. To most people, the dictionary was by far the most important of these aims, and it is the one that is most commonly mentioned when Lavukals give an account of my role to outsiders.

Establishing requirements for the documentation materials

As my work progressed, I began to wonder what specific form the materials I was to prepare for the community should take.

Very few people use written Lavukaleve. Indeed few people have a need to write. The written word is mostly confined to church services. In the West Russells, an English Bible is used, with the Church of Melanesia Prayer Book, which is in English, and hymns are sung either in English, or in Lavukaleve if they have been translated. Some parts of the service have been translated into Lavukaleve, and the rest is in Pijin or English, depending on who gives the service. Villages differ in how much of their service is Lavukaleve. Mane Village uses as much Lavukaleve as possible, whereas other villages tend to use more Pijin and English. This in part depends on the preference of the church leaders of each village. In particular, in some villages, the church leaders are not Lavukal people, and cannot speak Lavukaleve.

Most families own a copy of the Church of Melanesia Prayer Book, and many take it to church with them, but the service is so familiar to people, and the hymns so well known to everyone, that there is no need to actually read the words, and people tend not to. The words of hymns that have been translated into Lavukaleve, however, must be learned. This is done in special practice sessions involving the whole village, in which the Lavukaleve words are written on a blackboard, and people learn to sing them together and copy them down in notebooks. This is overwhelmingly the most frequent situation in which I have seen Lavukaleve being written.

The only other significant situation in which I have seen Lavukaleve written is graffiti. Graffiti are written, scratched, or painted onto wooden house-posts and other surfaces and scratched onto the trunks of coconut trees. Occasionally they take the form of English phrases, rarely Pijin, and most frequently Lavukaleve.

Official English-only language policy in schools means that even those who have attended school have not been taught how to read or write Lavukaleve. However, Lavukaleve is phonologically relatively well suited to an alphabetic orthography, and there seem to be few difficulties for people in copying and understanding Lavukaleve words during hymn practice, or in writing graffiti in Lavukaleve.

Other writing I have observed is mostly in the form of shopping lists or small messages to be sent by a third party to someone in another village, and these are typically in English. They are written by someone who knows how and are sent to someone who can read themselves or can ask someone to read for them.

Given this literacy context, what role would our dictionary have? It was to be made for people who do not have a reading culture, and who were already native speakers of their language. What form should it take? Once again I discussed this with community leaders and schoolteachers. Opinion was fixed that it should be a bilingual Lavukaleve and English dictionary. I asked whether Pijin should be included, given that more people know Pijin than English. However, people pointed out that Pijin is not considered a written language, no one knows how to write it, and in any case it is not considered a suitable language for such a purpose. In Solomon Islands, Pijin is, perhaps unfortunately, very much denigrated as being a corrupted variety of English; thus nobody wanted Pijin in the dictionary. Similarly, the storybook was conceived of as a way to help Lavukal children learn English; therefore, it should have the stories in Lavukaleve, then translated into English.

Once the languages for the dictionary were determined, there were still questions about what it should contain. People had very little idea about

this: I brought some examples of other community-type dictionaries that I had obtained in the capital city. A modest desktop-published example was criticized for having meaningless too-short one-word definitions. A properly published 500-page dictionary was very much admired for its wide inclusion of surely every word in that language. In the end, I decided on a compromise. The dictionary was intended for Lavukaleve speakers, but, realistically, it was also the only dictionary ever likely to be made for this language. Therefore it should be useful and useable by Lavukaleve speakers, but it should also be useful for other non-Lavukaleve speakers who wanted to know about the language. In the future, government policy might change and the dictionary could conceivably be the basis for pedagogical materials. Other linguists might find it useful in the future, so it should have grammatical information and example sentences. However, it should not have so much grammatical information as to be uninterpretable and unusable for the very people it was intended for.

Outcomes so far

So far the Lavukaleve dictionary is in its second version (I hesitate to use the word “edition” for something that is only desktop-published). It consists of just under 200 pages and is co-authored by myself and my main consultant, Patterson Barua. It is a compromise between the desires of the community and possible future needs of the language. It contains, as well as words and their translations, example sentences for verbs and adverbs; information on word class and on transitivity for verbs; and for nouns, gender, dual and plural formatives, and irregular possessive and locative formatives. There is also a small amount of encyclopaedic information, particularly with respect to plant names, explaining what the plant looks like and what it is used for. The dictionary has a number of obvious lacks. I have not worked with a biologist, and many plant and fish names are lacking a proper scientific classification. Some words still need more information. And of course, there are never enough words in a dictionary. It is an ongoing process; I continually find out more information and correct more mistakes. The storybook is also in its second version, and more stories are added to it regularly.

Why do people who don't read want books?

There has been some debate in the literacy literature about the impact of vernacular literacy on a culture that hitherto had no literacy, or had

literacy only in a national language. Views such as those of Mühlhäusler (e.g. 1987, 1990, 1996) and Tabouret-Keller et al. (1997), that introducing vernacular literacy is dangerous for the long-term survival of the language, are argued against effectively for example by Crowley (2000), who is of the view that encouraging vernacular literacy, particularly at the instigation of speakers of the vernacular languages, can be a tool not only for language maintenance but for empowering speakers through better enabling them to make informed decisions about their futures.

The community response to the dictionary and storybook have been interesting and revealing. My prediction was that the dictionary would be highly valued as a record of the language. I thought the storybook would be less successful because it is solid text, and perhaps too difficult to read for people not used to reading for pleasure. In neither prediction was I completely correct.

The most frequent response to the dictionary, when I presented the first version, was disappointment that it is not as big as people were expecting: the model of comparison, I now realized, was the schoolbook Oxford English Dictionary that many people have seen. This might seem like a trivial response, arising from a misunderstanding of the nature of the task, but in fact it reveals important underlying beliefs about the process of documentation and the worth of a language that are critical to the success of a language-preservation project.

This issue is best approached by an examination of the question, why do people who don't read want a dictionary anyway? The answer to this question was made apparent to me very early on when I first asked what work Lavukals wanted me to do on their language. Most people answered that they wanted a book written on their language just like that on language X on the neighboring island, or language Y over in the Western Province. Specific comparisons were made between their own language, which had never had any outsider work on it, and many other languages that had. A picture emerged of their sense of their own language as a worthless language, not deserving of respect; if it had been worthy, it would surely have had a book written on it. There was a widespread perception that the Lavukals, and their language, had been forgotten by the outside world.

There are two issues here. One is the high status frequently accorded to an outsider by any Solomon Islands community with which the outsider lives. It is often a source of pride to a village to have a foreigner living with them, and stories about the doings even of transient visitors to the islands are told for years afterward. Having a foreigner come specifically to work on one's language is a matter of immense pride, for the village who hosts them, and for the whole community that that village belongs to.

Second, having a book written specifically on a community's language is also a matter of great pride for that community. To this end, the content of the book is rarely the matter of comparison, but rather the size and substantialness of the book is. Again, this is not a trivial observation being made by Lavukals, but rather an overt manifestation of a deep unease about the worth of their language in comparison with other "outside" languages, and, ultimately, about the growing encroachment of urbanization and globalization and their impact on the indigenous culture and way of life.

Within this context, the value of a dictionary for this community has less to do with its content, and more to do with its very existence. For Lavukals, the dictionary would better serve their purposes as a good advertisement for the worthiness of Lavukaleve, as a competitor with other languages of Solomon Islands, if it were larger, and also if it were in the format of a properly published book.

The process of realization that led to this conclusion at the same time put another concern of mine at rest. In trying to make a dictionary cover too many purposes, I did not want to alienate the very audience it was primarily intended for, by putting things in it that people might not understand. In practice this turned out not to be a concern. The presence of words and abbreviations that were not immediately understandable (to those who did not read the introduction, which of course many people do not) was rather a factor in its favor. The value of the dictionary is as a symbol: high-status symbols do not have to be completely interpretable, and in fact it is better if they are not immediately available to everyone. In this way, our dictionary fits into existing cultural processes, which privilege a certain knowledgeable section of society. It is right that only certain people should be able to understand its entirety.

The storybook, on the other hand, has had a positive response far exceeding my expectations. My prediction, that it would not be of interest to a community for whom reading for pleasure was not a known past-time, was not borne out.

The first page of the storybook has the name of everyone who told one of the stories inside. Just seeing this far was a matter of enormous interest to everyone. The ten copies I initially brought with me disappeared within days. For the whole couple of months I was there on that trip, every day I would encounter families sitting down reading parts of the stories out to each other, often with a certain amount of hilarity. Soon slightly battered copies were finding their way into every house, and the one spare copy I had brought for myself, to check a few transcriptions with my main consultant, was as often as not loaned out as well.

The village this took place in, Mane, had never before known reading for pleasure, and had never before had anything to read even if people wanted to. For the first time, literature became available, and I discovered far more people could read than I had previously thought. Interestingly, older, generally better-educated people had more trouble reading the Lavukaleve than younger adolescents. The English translations were also read and enjoyed by those who could understand them.

Conclusions

There are a few issues arising from these experiences that may be generally useful in the endeavor to document endangered languages. First, and critically, it is important to consider the particular form that community materials should take. In many cases, there will be a clear pedagogical need (e.g. for school primers in language with bilingual-education policies) or for particular types of documentation in order to enable official government recognition, such as encountered by Nagy (2000). In the case of Lavukaleve though, the expressed desires were formed not by official policy but rather by an idea from speakers of the kind of document that the most prestigious languages had. Thus, for this community, it was not content per se, but rather substantialness and the very existence of the documents that were critical.

Nettle and Romaine (2000: 179) point out that documenting a language is not in itself necessarily going to ensure its survival:

Grammars and dictionaries are artificial environments for languages. They reflect only a fraction of the diversity of a language in its everyday use and cannot capture the ever-changing nature of language. It is like arguing that we should concentrate our efforts on preserving the spotted owl by building museums where we can display stuffed owls, but do nothing to preserve the bird in its natural habitat or guarantee that it can reproduce. ... [Salvage operations] do not address the root causes of language decline, and without further action they do not contribute substantially to language maintenance efforts in the long term.

This is an important point; but also important, at least in the field situation with which I am familiar, is the fact that written materials have an emblematic function far beyond their intrinsic content, serving to bolster the prestige of the indigenous language in the community.

I have often heard comments like, "It's good that you've come because all the other languages in Solomon Islands have dictionaries, storybooks and liturgical materials, only we have been left out, but now you're here

you can make us a dictionary [etc.] and we will be as good as language X.” I was also asked to make sure that the dictionary was as big as that of language X, or Y.

It is easy to underestimate comments like this and to dismiss them as rather unhelpful suggestions from naïve speakers. But in fact the ideas that prompt statements of this type are not naïve at all. People acknowledge that some languages are more widely useful, more fashionable, or more up-to-date-sounding than Lavukaleve. If people think Lavukaleve is worthless, they won't speak it. It is children who make these choices, kids and teenagers. However, the fact of a book existing devoted to Lavukaleve suggests in a direct fashion that it is to be compared on a level with other languages. It is a powerful symbol that Lavukaleve is not a language of the past, is not something that compares poorly or not at all to other languages. Most Lavukals will never read the dictionary, but they don't need to. This is not the point. The point is, the materials sit in every church house in the Russells, as a potent reminder that Lavukaleve is not a worthless language but rather is on an equal footing with all the other languages of the region with which Lavukaleve speakers compare themselves.

Acknowledging and utilizing powerful cultural symbols like this is a useful way to encourage language maintenance, and it is one way to halt the pattern of language endangerment that is creeping into some communities. The extent to which this will help Lavukaleve hold its own in the future, however, remains to be seen.

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Notes

1. Lavukaleve is the name of the language; Lavukal is an ethnonym referring to its speakers.
2. Later I was able to facilitate negotiations between Lavukal community leaders and the local branch of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, who recently sent one of their members, Joel Lee, to begin the task of translating the Bible. This eventuality was strongly, expressly, and unanimously desired by the Lavukal community.

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