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## Language Contexts: Malua (Malekula Island, Vanuatu)

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**Language Name:** Malua Bay

**Language Family:** Oceanic, Austronesian

**ISO 639-3 Code:** mll

**Glottolog Code:** malu1245

**Population:** ~ 600

**Location:** 16° S, 167.18° E

**Vitality Rating :** EGIDS 6b-7

### Abstract

The Malua language is one of more than 30 endangered Oceanic languages spoken on Malekula Island in Vanuatu. Malua is locally understood to have two varieties, one spoken in Malua Bay and the other in Espiegles Bay. Little was known about Malua until linguistic research was initiated with the communities in 2012. In this paper, ethnographic observations, linguistic field notes, and language attitude interviews are reported to build up a picture of the Malua language in context. The two Malua communities converted to Seventh Day Adventism some decades ago, and today blend traditional and modern ways of living. While relying on forest resources for shelter and fuel, and growing most of their own food, the Malua people also participate in market gardening and cash-cropping, and make use of modern building materials, textiles, and store-bought foods. Interviewees outlined positive attitudes towards the language, an appreciation of its intrinsic value, and a desire to see the language and associated traditional knowledge included in formal education. However, the language is under threat due to the increasing use of Bislama (Melanesian Pidgin). Bislama is now the dominant language of some homes, and it has recently been introduced as the medium of instruction for the first three years of primary education. The continued vitality of Malua will require ongoing effort from the community, combined with support from government and applied research.

## 1 Introduction

The language of Malua Bay and the neighbouring dialect of Espiegles Bay are spoken in the northwest of Malekula Island, in Vanuatu.<sup>1</sup> The two varieties are collectively known as Malua or Malua Bay. Native speakers, when asked, describe the two varieties as belonging to a single language. Malua is one of over 100 indigenous languages which are currently recognised in Vanuatu, along with the more recently developed Bislama (an English-lexifier pidgin that is a dialect of Melanesian Pidgin), and the colonial languages French and English. Ethnologue puts the total number of indigenous languages at 108 (Simons & Fennig 2017), while a calculation by linguistic researchers identifies as many as 138 languages (François et al. 2015: 6). The precise count of languages is difficult to confirm as detailed studies examining the relationships between many of the varieties have yet to be conducted. Malekula Island, along with its small off-shore islands, boasts an extraordinarily high number of languages per capita, with 24 languages known to be actively spoken on the island, and a further 15 thought to be moribund or recently extinct (Lynch & Crowley 2001: 68, 85). Malekula's population is around 31,000 (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2017: 95). The total land area of the main island is approximately 2,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Lynch & Crowley (2001: 68) estimate that 500 people speak the Malua language. Unpublished population figures from the 2009 census indicate a population of just under 500 living in villages around Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay, with additional community members residing in villages further afield, including the inland village of Petarmul (personal communication, Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 10 July 2015). There is also a small number of speakers living in Port Vila, the capital city of Vanuatu, on Efate Island. Accordingly, a population of 600 speakers is a reasonable estimate.

In this paper, our understandings of the language context of Malua are presented. In Section 2, the historical and contemporary linguistic context of Malua is detailed. The genetic affiliations of the language, its geographic neighbours, and current linguistic research are described, with preliminary evidence of the relationship between the two Malua varieties being offered. In Section 3, an overview of Malua's community context is presented, covering

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<sup>1</sup> Malekula is often referred to as 'Malakula' in academic publications (see, e.g. Lynch 2016), and 'Malakula' is the official Anglophone spelling of the island. This appears to reflect the pronunciation of the island name employed in the Uripiv language (Northeast Malekula) which stretches northeast along the coast through Norsup, where the hospital and airport are located, and southeast through the main commercial centre Lakatoro, beyond Litzlitz, where an important wharf is located. Elsewhere, many communities refer to the island as Malekula, the spelling we prefer as it reflects the pronunciation by members of the Malua community.

community life, spiritual life and education. The educational context provides an important background for Section 4, where a small-scale study by Wessels (2013) of language attitudes is reported. Community attitudes towards the Malua language and Bislama are discussed first, and then community attitudes towards the inclusion of Malua language and cultural knowledge in early education are described. To conclude in Section 5, the future of the Malua language in its context is considered.

## 2 Malua in its linguistic context

### 2.1 Genetic affiliation

Malua is an Oceanic language, belonging to the Austronesian language family. The higher level genetic affiliation of Malua is presented in (1), based on Ross, Pawley & Osmond (2011: 8) and Lynch (2016: 399).

(1) Austronesian/Oceanic/Southern Oceanic/Central Vanuatu

Within the Central Vanuatu subgroup, Lynch (2016) speculates that the languages of Malekula together form a discrete lower-level grouping. Lynch draws on phonological evidence to subdivide the languages of Malekula into the Northern Malekula subgroup, the Western Malekula Linkage, and the Eastern Malekula Linkage. Lynch (2016: 407) offers:

fairly strong evidence supporting a North Coast subgroup that includes Nese, Vovo, Botovro, and Vao, with the last three forming a lower-level subgroup. There is weaker evidence linking Malua Bay with the North Coast subgroup in a wider Northern [Malekula] subgroup.

The current subgrouping hypothesis for Malua within Northern Malekula is shown in Figure 1, from Lynch (2016: 411).

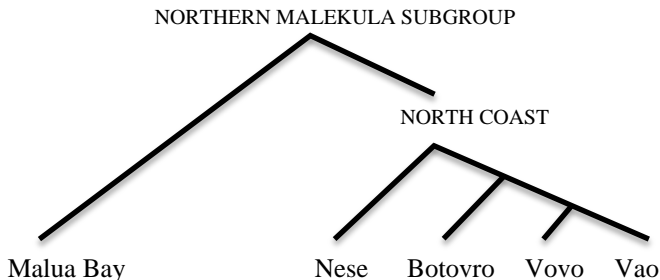


Figure 1: The languages of the Northern Malekula Subgroup

## 2.2 Malua's neighbours

Within the Northern Malekula Subgroup, Malua's closest geographic neighbours are Nese/Matanvat, Botovro, Naha/Vovo, and Vao. These languages are spoken to the north and northeast of Espiegles Bay, and their relative position is indicated on Figure 2. The map displays tentative locations of languages, and only the known coastal settlements are noted. Much of inland Malekula is accessible only on foot, and the authors have yet to visit these areas.

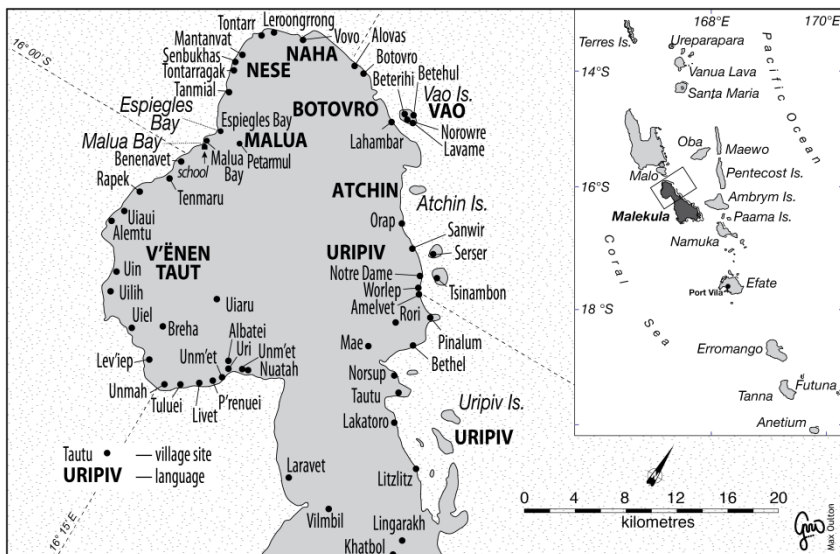


Figure 2: The northern area of Malekula Island, showing Malua and its neighbouring languages. Languages in bold capitals. Map by Max Oulton, used with permission.<sup>2</sup>

Crowley (2006: 1-3) describes the languages spoken on the northern tip of Malekula as a cluster of ‘communalects’ and he believes that Nese, Botovro and Naha are likely to represent a single language. In the early 2000s, when Crowley conducted his field work, the Naha variety (also known as Vovo, after the village where its speakers live) was still actively spoken, while the Nese variety (also known as Matanvat) was already moribund. Apart from work by

<sup>2</sup> The authors have been verbally advised by staff at the Vanuatu National Cultural Centre to avoid specific positioning of languages on maps, due to ongoing disputes over land ownership, and the potential for published maps to be treated as legal evidence when land claims are made.

Crowley (2006) and Takau (2016) on the Nese variety, little is known about these communalects. Crowley's observation that many speakers have transitioned from their heritage variety to using Bislama for most communicative purposes indicates that there is some urgency in documenting the languages of Northern Malekula. The remaining member of the Northeast Malekula subgroup is Vao, spoken on the small offshore island with the same name, and neighbouring mainland of Malekula. This language remains actively spoken, and is being used as a medium of instruction in early education.

Malua's largest and most powerful linguistic neighbour is the V'ënen Taut language (Western Malekula Linkage), spoken in a region covering the western coast as well as the inland area immediately to the south of Malua Bay. The northern-most V'ënen Taut hamlet is a 20 minute walk along the coastal road from Malua Bay. After Uripiv (Eastern Malekula Linkage), V'ënen Taut is the second largest language spoken on the island, with an estimated population of over 3,000 speakers (Lynch & Crowley 2001: 68). V'ënen Taut has been investigated in considerable detail by Fox (1979) and Dodd (2014), and it is the one of three languages currently being documented in Dodd's comparative doctoral study of the languages of Northwest Malekula.

### 2.3 New research on the Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay varieties

The Malua Bay variety and the Espiegles Bay variety were the subject of two recent Masters thesis projects at the University of Waikato under the supervision of author Julie Barbour. The Malua Bay project was carried out by author Kanaueha Wessels, and involved approximately four months of fieldwork in the Malua community. Wessels compiled a corpus of 55 audio recordings of native speakers, covering a wide range of topics, and generating a list of approximately 1,400 lexemes. She also carried out a small-scale study of language attitudes, education, and traditional knowledge, inspired by author Joe McCarter's ethnobotanical research (McCarter 2012) (see Section 4). The Malua corpus is currently held at the University of Waikato by the *Malekula Languages Project*, and is archived permanently with the National Film and Audio Archive in Port Vila. Wessels produced a basic grammar of the Malua language (Wessels 2013), and returned a draft orthography and simple literacy resources to the Malua Bay vernacular kindergarten.

Holmes (2014) studied the Espiegles Bay variety using a small corpus of 13 audio recordings collated by native speaker and University of Waikato student Gayleen Tarosa. Tarosa recorded and transcribed herself speaking on a number of topics, and also recorded her mother Miriam Harrison, on a return trip to Port Vila. Using Tarosa's corpus, Holmes produced a grammar sketch of Espiegles Bay (Holmes 2014). The Espiegles Bay corpus was expanded by Wessels in late 2013, with additional audio recordings from a number of different speakers living on Malekula Island, and Barbour added further audio

recordings and lexical material collected from Miriam Harrison and granddaughter Lindred Harrison. The current corpus of approximately 40 audio recordings, and 1,500 lexemes is held at the University of Waikato by the *Malekula Languages Project*.

The relationship between the Malua Bay variety and the Espiegles Bay variety is being examined as part of a larger grammatical study of Malua led by author Julie Barbour, using the Malua and Espiegles Bay corpora, and the grammatical analyses of Wessels and Holmes. The focus of Barbour's new work is on comparative phonology as well as comparative morphosyntax, with one important objective being to better understand the relationship of these two varieties, as well as their connections to their neighbours. The comparative phonology will draw on the expertise of historical phonologist John Lynch. Lynch's (2016) subgrouping of the Northern Malekula languages relies on legacy Malua Bay data from Tryon (1976), and does not include data from Espiegles Bay. New research may provide stronger phonological evidence for the Northern Malekula subgroup, and will add morphosyntax to linguistic knowledge of these varieties.

When comparing a sample of vocabulary from the new Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay corpora, a number of differences between the varieties can be observed superficially, predominantly concerning the pronunciation of vowels. Table 1 presents a comparative selection of lexemes from the two language varieties, along with reconstructions of the ancestral Proto Oceanic and North Central Vanuatu.

*Table 1: Reconstructed Proto Oceanic [POc] forms from Lynch, Ross and Crowley (2002), Ross Pawley and Osmond (1998, 2007) and Proto North Central Vanuatu [PNCV] forms from Clark (2009) with cognates from the Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay corpora.*

	POc	PNCV	Malua Bay	Espiegles Bay	Gloss
i.	*saliR	*sale	sal	sal	'float'
	*laŋit	*lagi	laŋ	laŋ	'wind, air'
ii.	*keli	*keli	xil	xil	'dig, harvest (tubers)'
	*tunu	*tunu	tin	tin	'cook by roasting'
iii.	*patu	*vatu	nə-vet	nə-vat	'stone'
	*tasik	*tasi	<sup>n</sup> des	<sup>n</sup> das	'sea, saltwater'
	*mai, *ma	*mai	me	ma	'come'
iv.	*mata[-]	*mata[-]	ne-mta-	nə-mte-	'eye'
	*pano	*vano	van	ven	'go'
	*panua	*vanua	nə-vanu	nə-venu	'place, land'
	*taŋa	*taga	<sup>n</sup> daŋ	<sup>n</sup> deŋ	'basket'
v.	*na-ñoRap	*nanovi	na-nov	ne-nav	'yesterday'
	*qa-na-ñoRap				

In Table 1, items from Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay are characterised by the loss of final vowels or VC sequences. Lynch (2011: 247; 2016: 408) describes this kind of loss as being widespread although not universal in the languages of Malekula.<sup>3</sup> Set (i) shows the shared loss of final VC sequences. Set (ii) shows the shared loss of final V, and shared vowel changes, with both varieties showing the change of \*e and \*u to /i/. Set (iii) shows an innovation in Malua Bay where \*a presents as /e/, while Espiegles Bay retains /a/. In Set (iv), the pattern is reversed, with Malua Bay retaining \*a as /a/, and Espiegles Bay shifting it to /e/. The word for ‘basket’ suggests the process of low vowel dissimilation from \*a to /e/ described by Lynch (2003). The final item in (v) shows a shift in Espiegles Bay from \*o to /a/, while Malua retains /o/. Further vocabulary from Malua and Espiegles Bay is presented in Section 3 of this paper, revealing some identical lexemes, and some lexemes with vowel changes in particular. A detailed study of the phonological relationship between the two varieties is much needed.

### 3 Malua in its community context

The Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay villages are physically located on the coast of north-western Malekula. Separated by a small outcrop, the villages are spread along the higher ground overlooking sandy bays. The Malua and Molin rivers drain into these bays. The rivers run all year, including during the dry season, providing a constant source of fresh water. Some half a day’s walk inland and uphill lies Petarmul village, where speakers of the Malua Bay variety still live, and from where the present-day residents of the coastal Malua village report migrating some two to three decades ago. The Espiegles Bay settlement is thought to be a little older, settled at least 60 years ago when families began to convert to Christianity. Both Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay are locations that were accessed by ancestors of the modern-day residents for ocean resources, including salt water for cooking (personal communication, Gayleen Tarosa, 1 June 2018).

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<sup>3</sup> The loss of final consonants and vowels is characteristic of, although not universal to, the Oceanic languages. Lynch (2003: 363-364) describes final consonants as being generally lost in North Central Vanuatu, while final vowels are only sometimes lost. Final consonant loss becomes universal in the Central Pacific and Micronesia (Lynch 2005: 90-91). Newer evidence from Malekula (Lynch 2011) shows that Malua’s closest genetic relatives retain final vowels when there is a high vowel in the preceding syllable. It will be interesting to see whether the more northern Espiegles Bay data patterns with Malua Bay data, and how it compares to the other Northern Malekula languages.



The content presented in this section is drawn from field observations of the authors, some of which are specific to the Malua region, and others of which apply more generally to communities located on the island of Malekula. Wessels stayed with the Malua Bay community during three field trips in 2012 and 2013. Barbour has travelled to Malekula island on multiple occasions since 2004, and began work with members of the Harrison family from Espiegles Bay in 2011. Barbour visited Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay in 2016, and Barbour and Wessels have a field trip scheduled for late 2018 to return to the communities. McCarter spent almost a year on Malekula Island in 2008-2009, and worked closely with members of the V`ënen Taut-speaking Big Nambas community to the south of Malua.

### 3.1 Community life

The residents of Malua and Espiegles Bay depend on the natural environment for many aspects of their wellbeing, including shelter, food, and income through market gardening and cash-cropping. Community members grow up with a detailed knowledge<sup>4,5</sup> of *nakha/nëkha* ‘trees’, *nëmanëkh* ‘birds’, and *nëmech/nëmach* ‘fish’ that inhabit the natural environment. Agricultural practices are central to the daily lives of community members, with most food being grown in the *naut/not* ‘family garden’.

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<sup>4</sup> We adopt the convention of presenting a single lexeme where the Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay forms are identical (e.g. *nukhuli* ‘dog’). Where they differ, the Malua Bay variant is presented first, followed by the Espiegles Bay form (e.g. *naut/not* ‘family garden’). Where only one is documented, the source is given in parentheses, with (MLL) for Malua Bay, and (EB) for Espiegles Bay, e.g. *geka melim* (EB).

<sup>5</sup> Letters in the orthography have their IPA values, apart from <ë> representing /ə/, <kh> for /x/, <ng> for /ŋ/, <b> for /<sup>m</sup>b/, <d> for /<sup>h</sup>d/, <g> for /<sup>h</sup>g/, <ch> for /tʃ/, and <j> for /<sup>h</sup>dʒ/.



Figure 3: Yam pieces ready for planting<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4: Traditional bamboo irrigation system

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<sup>6</sup> All images © Kanauhe Wessels.

*Gaka/geka* ‘giant yams’ (*Dioscorea spp.*) have an important place both in local diet and in traditional culture, with yams being exchanged in many cultural practices, including *lekhan/lekhen* ‘wedding ceremonies’ and *nëmesan/nëmesen* ‘memorial ceremonies’. Yams are locally classified into the highly-prized *geka melim* (EB), those yams which are soft when cooked, and the less desirable *geka terter* (EB), those yams which remain firm when cooked. Yam gardening follows an annual cycle, with the garden being prepared and planted in the second half of the Western calendar year, and harvested from late April or May of the following year. Yams are planted with several companion plants, including *navich* ‘bananas’ (*Musa spp.*), *mokhot/nokhmok* ‘island cabbage’ (*Abelmoschus manihot*), and *nebëch* (EB) ‘manioc’ (*Manihot esculenta*). The companion plants continue to grow in the *bertuwe* (EB) ‘fallow garden’ for two to three years after the yam harvest. When the yield of companion plants lessens, the garden plot is abandoned and the land is reclaimed by the *names* ‘jungle’. As the jungle fully regenerates over a period of five to ten years, the land may be cleared again for a new yam garden.

Locally-grown produce is supplemented by *rënesisakh/ rëlen nesësakh* ‘rice (literally, ant eggs)’ and *tinfis* ‘tinned fish’, which is a convenience food on Malekula. Store-bought produce is particularly important during the cyclone season (November to April), where high winds have the potential to strip gardens of their crops. When crops are growing well, some families harvest surplus produce to sell at the local market at Wal, a location within Malua across the road from the Joe family store. A small number of families send produce to the Lakatoro market, which is Malekula’s commercial center, some 4 hours away by truck. The kava root *nëmalokh* (EB) (*Piper methysticum*) is also grown for sale, and used to make a traditional drink consumed by men. It is valued for its relaxant effects, but its use is not encouraged by the Church (see Section 3.2).

In addition to family gardens, many families also have coconut plantations, from which they harvest and dry copra, as well as small cacao plantations, from which cocoa beans are harvested and roasted for sale. The money raised through cash cropping of copra and cacao tends to be used to pay school fees for children, and to purchase household goods and clothing.

Malua homes are constructed using a blend of traditional materials (logs, bamboo and vines) and modern materials (milled timber, concrete floors, low concrete block walls, and iron nails). The construction of *nim/naëm* ‘houses’ and *nakhëmel/nakhmal* ‘men’s meeting houses’ in the villages is characterised as men’s work, while textile making is characterised as women’s work. Through textile production, female community members also contribute to construction, helping to weave *buvat* ‘strong bamboo’ into panels for the *ner* (EB) ‘walls’ of houses. Women are also involved in the very labour intensive process of assembling panels of *rëwat* ‘thatch’, to be used as roofing.



Figure 5: Vet 'weaving' flattened buvat 'strong bamboo' into a wall panel



Figure 6: A ner (EB) 'wall' panel installed on a new home



*Figure 7: Layers of thatch panels are mich 'tied' to bamboo trusses inside a home*



*Figure 8: A finished nim/naëm 'house' in Malua Bay, blending traditional and new materials*

Women weave *bakhach* ‘sleeping mats’ and *nechel* ‘floor mats’ from *nëva* ‘pandanus’ to furnish homes. Surplus mats are traded and gifted for ceremonial purposes. The creation of textiles is considered an important skill for girls, involving various weaving styles and techniques. Historically, clothing would also have been woven or crafted by community members, although today all community members wear western-style clothing. Alongside basket and mat making, some women are skilled at dress-making.



Figure 9: Nëva ‘pandanus’ prepared for weaving



Figure 10: Weaving a coloured *nechel* ‘mat’



*Figure 11: A design woven into a dang/deng 'bag'*

Daily life in the home is filled with domestic activities, and children help their parents to gather *nakhap/nĕkhap* 'firewood' for cooking fires, prepare food, including *nalok/nelok* 'laplap (grated tubers baked in leaves), and *khokho* 'wash' pots and dishes after a meal. Children also help to *sev nuwe/nuwa* 'fetch water', wash clothing, and keep their house and yard tidy by *khĕchĕr/chichir* 'sweeping' and carrying away fallen leaves.



*Figure 12: A basin of mokhot/nokhmok 'island cabbage'*



Figure 13: Nalok/nelok 'laplap' prepared for cooking



Figure 14: Nēkhpas 'graters' cut from the base of a sago palm, and drying before use



Respect is highly valued in community life. Individuals are expected to respect the physical environment, as well as the people who share it, and their personal possessions and property. Respect for the environment extends into the sustainable management of natural resources. The Malua and Espiegles Bay region is very remote, and like all of Malekeula, the coastline is subject to extreme natural events, including coastal erosion, earthquakes, landslides, and cyclones. Resource management is vital for the continuity of community life, and concerns both sea and land resources. Forest resources provide the community with food, shelter, and fuel, while the ocean provides protein and is an important locus of recreational activities.

Studies of indigenous knowledge systems demonstrate close links between knowledge, belief and practice (Berkes 2018). Vernacular language, as the vehicle for expressing indigenous knowledge, is embedded in the everyday workings of communities from social titles that signal respect (see, e.g. Barbour 2015), to customary practices (see, e.g. McCarter & Gavin 2014b), and agricultural techniques (see, e.g. Furusawa et al. 2014). Malua is no exception, and the language has traditionally been an integral element of community life, encoding local knowledge of the physical environment and cultural practices. Wessels observed, however, that not all families were transmitting the Malua language to their children. In particular, where wives have married into the community, and are not competent speakers of Malua, Bislama prevails as the dominant language of children, and between parents and children. When parents do speak Malua to their children who are dominant in Bislama, the children were observed to either respond in Bislama, or to ignore their parents until they translated their remarks into Bislama.

### **3.2 Spiritual life**

The Malua and Espiegles Bay communities are actively involved in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, and follow the practices of this Protestant denomination. During her field trips, Wessels observed and participated in weekly church services for the Sabbath on Friday night after sunset, on Saturday morning, and again on Saturday evening before sunset. Wessels reports separate services for children, and for group learning on Saturday, followed by the main service which is held on Saturday morning. Throughout the week, a number of regular community activities occur that are organised through the Church. These include meetings of the women's group, and the women's marching practice, choir and marching practice for youth, and choir practice for the group designated in charge of song selection for the Saturday services. Through the year there are Adventists retreats, women's meetings, children's regional celebrations of church participation, and Adventist youth camps. Adventist communities from Malekula gather together for these events and there are close ties between Malua and Atchin on the eastern coast of

Malekula. Atchin is the home of the first permanent Adventist operation, established in 1913.

Adventism has impacted on traditional ways of life in Malua. The growing and drinking of kava is forbidden to Adventists, meaning customary practices involving kava have been discontinued. Dietary restrictions on pork and seafood has meant significant changes, particularly as pigs have historically been an important source of protein on Malekula. Perhaps more significantly, pigs have played a central role in cultural practices, including Chief-making ceremonies, bride price payments, death ceremonies and dispute resolutions. Early anthropological accounts of Malekula describe a high value associated with pigs and their tusks (Deacon 1934). In many parts of the island, the cultural value of pigs is maintained, and as recently as 2014, a traditional chiefly ceremony was held in the neighbouring Big Nambas territory in the village of Tuluei that involved a day of ritual pig killings (Roberts 2014).

Wessels and Barbour saw no pigs at all in their visits to the coastal villages in Malua and Espiegles Bay. The cultural value of pigs has apparently shifted over to other goods, with more emphasis placed on giant yams, store-bought rice and sugar, and for non-vegetarians, beef from the *buluk* ‘cows’ that graze on the coconut plantations. Local people comment that the bush in Malua area is becoming overrun with pigs, because they are no longer being raised, eaten and traded by the Adventists. Interestingly, Wessels reported many pigs in the inland Petarmul village, thought to be the original home of Malua people; current inhabitants are Presbyterian rather than Adventist, and pigs remain central to diet and culture.

Historically, the spiritual life of Malua people was conducted through the medium of the Malua language. Today, the language of spirituality is Bislama. With Pastors from other communities, sometimes even other islands, with inter-community events, and Bislama bibles and hymn books, Bislama has become the default language through which community spiritual life unfolds. On a small number of occasions, community messages were offered in Malua, but Wessels observed few exceptions to the general language use pattern of Bislama in the religious domain, including for hymns and prayers.

### 3.3 Education

The Malua region has been subject to the educational decision-making of a colonial administration, and more recently the centralised ni-Vanuatu administration. In its colonial past, Vanuatu was jointly administered by France and England. The New Hebrides Condominium, as it was known from 1906 to 1980, had duplicate systems of finance, law enforcement, public health, and political governance (Crowley 1990: 4). Education was also shared, with English schools established in some parts of the Condominium and French schools in others. The Anglophone or Francophone characteristics of a given area were the outcome of a combination of historical, religious and

business interests. In Malua Bay, Anglophone interests dominated, and following independence in 1980, children there have been educated in English.

There are two small kindergartens in Malua Bay and one in Espiegles Bay. In Malua Bay, one is positioned as a 'Bislama Kindy', while the other is a 'Malua Kindy'. Wessels observed that in each kindergarten, instructions would be given in the relevant language (Bislama or Malua), but that learning was focused on preparing children for their primary school education in English. Children thus learned the English alphabet, and recited times tables in English. No locally relevant content was included in the sessions that were observed.

After kindergarten, most local children attend the Malua Bay Adventist School, which is a primary and junior secondary school, teaching classes from Years 1 to 10. The school educates Malua-speaking children, and at higher levels, accommodates students from as far afield as Atchin Island on the east coast, and V'ënan Taut students from further along the west coast as far as 'the end of the road', where motorised vehicles can travel no further. Almost all the students from further afield board at the school during term time.

The Malua Bay community has gifted land to the Adventist School for a garden, and students are involved in clearing, burning off, and planting an annual yam garden. The garden is cared for by the senior boarding students. Close to the school there is a smaller productive garden where students grow and harvest crops for their daily meals, including taro, manioc, banana, and leafy greens. Teachers living in government-provided school houses supervise the students on the weekends as they prepare their meals. Wessels, who lived on the school grounds during one of her field trips, noted that the boarding students were at times left to fend for themselves, if teachers had commitments elsewhere on weekends. The gardens, and the skills needed to prepare food, are thus essential for the maintenance of student wellbeing during periods spent away from home.

Until very recently at the Adventist School, the language of instruction has been English, with French being taught as a curriculum subject. Malua youth may gain places elsewhere in schools offering Years 11 and 12 on the basis of their Year 10 examination results. Nationally, only 52% of Year 10 children at English schools are selected for Year 11, although Malampa Province, where Malua is located, has a higher placement rate of 69% (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training 2015: 11).

In 2012, the Government of Vanuatu endorsed a new *National Languages Policy*, which requires the first language of children in the first three years of formal schooling, with transition into French or English throughout Year 3. For the initial policy implementation, the Ministry of Education and Training selected languages in Vanuatu with over 1,000 speakers (Early & Tamtam 2015). With so many of Vanuatu's languages spoken in small communities, and multilingual student cohorts in schools, it was not practical to introduce

vernacular education simultaneously in every language. Malua, with a scattered population of approximately 600 speakers, was not selected. Instead, Malua children are currently being educated in Bislama in Years 1 and 2, before moving to English in Year 3.

#### 4 Language attitudes and education

In the current context, it is interesting to consider the attitudes of the Malua community towards their language, and its potential role in formal education. Wessels undertook a small scale attitudes study in 2012, preceding the introduction of Bislama education. The study was exploratory, seeking community perspectives at a time when educational changes were not yet underway. It used a convenience sample of 11 community members (six men, five women), coded [P1] to [P11]. Six participants were employed in education; the remainder were parents of school-age children or Adventist Church leaders involved in religious education. One participant was a teacher from outside the community. The study was not intended to produce a comprehensive account of community attitudes, but rather to record the language attitudes of people most closely involved in education. The participants all had a stake in the future of education, as well as the future of local languages (see Table 2).

*Table 2: Interview Participants in Wessels's study of language attitudes and early education*

Participant Code	Role	Gender	Language of Interview	Interview Length
P1	Teacher	M	Bislama	25'.33"
P2	Teacher	M	English	28'.12"
P3	Parent	M	Bislama	8'.31"
P4	Teacher	F	English	19'.52"
P5	Teacher	F	Bislama	10'.54"
P6	Church leader	F	Bislama	6'.51"
P7	Church leader	M	Bislama	7'.58"
P8	Teacher	M	English	9'.10"
P9	Parent	F	Bislama	8'.41"
P10	Teacher	F	Malua Bay	12'.17"
P11	Parent	M	Bislama	12'.41"

Participants were interviewed in their language of choice, English (3), Bislama (7), and Malua (1), on topics of language and local environment, particularly concerning early childhood and the first years of primary education, collectively 'early education'. Attitudes towards the indigenous Malua language, both in community life, and in early classroom education, are revealed, and a picture of expectations for early education emerges.

#### 4.1 Attitudes towards Malua and Bislama

In the interviews, the Malua language was positioned by participants as having intrinsic value and being worth knowing, as well as representing a sense of belonging, as in these responses:

it is very important that we teach the children [language] because there are so many who don't know about the language... they have stopped using their language' [P6]

children, they must not lose their customary language. It is their identity, a connection to their place. Their language is their identity. [P1]

we need to train the children so that they don't lose their language. They need to understand that language is part of their identity. [P3]

Expressions of the value of indigenous (or vernacular) languages, and their importance to identity are reflected in 20 years of research elsewhere on Malekula (see, e.g. Paviour-Smith 2005; McCarter & Gavin 2014a, b), in Vanuatu (see, e.g. Tamtam 2004; Vari-Bogiri 2005), and more widely in the Pacific region (see, e.g. Thaman 2000; Sanga 2002).

In contrast, Bislama was positioned more negatively; participants feel that Bislama is increasingly being used in village life, a feeling supported by the authors' observations of children speaking Bislama to each other in many contexts in Malekula, and knowing many couples who communicate predominantly in Bislama. The reported increase in Bislama is viewed negatively by interviewees, who express concern that Bislama is encroaching on their language. They perceive a corresponding decline in Malua in domestic contexts. One teacher commented: 'parents aren't concerned enough about talking in [Malua] language, they only use Bislama... Bislama until they die.' [P1]

After Vanuatu Independence in 1980, Bislama has become increasingly widespread in community and education contexts (Crowley 1990; Barbour 2010: 231-233). One parent acknowledged the importance of Bislama locally, but did not see it replacing the vernacular: 'Bislama is a local language that everyone understands, but it is important that all children learn their own language.' [P3] Elsewhere in Malekula, concerns have also been expressed about use of Bislama. In Southwest Bay, for example, community members are concerned about shift towards Bislama, driven by wider social changes, including marriages outside the linguistic community which have led to Bislama being spoken in the home (Love 2016). Love (2016: 225) generalises that 'many ni-Vanuatu are concerned about the future of their vernacular, fearing that Bislama will *'kaikai'* [eat it] within a generation or two.'

The replacement of local languages by Bislama is concerning because, as a largely English-lexified language, Bislama lacks much of the detailed place-based vocabulary of indigenous languages like Malua to describe the natural world. One teacher [P1] exemplifies this with ‘banana’: while Bislama-speaking children learn only *banana*, Malua-speaking children learn names of many different varieties, including *nëmasor*, *sukaterakh*, *vietnam* and *davëkh* (MLL). Each variety has a specific history and the fruits have individual characteristics, suitable for different types of consumption, with some being harvested green and cooked in savoury dishes, while others are ripened and eaten raw. Some varieties, although not harmful to humans, are not eaten for cultural reasons.

Malua vocabulary for flora and fauna enables speakers to access island resources for food and shelter. Detailed knowledge of flora and fauna is essential for survival and response to natural events (noted in section 3.1). Beyond this, the ability to locate specific physical places which are only named in the local language allows community members to claim land into family lines (McCarter & Gavin 2014a). Moreover, Malua has a detailed vocabulary for kinship relations, whose use is viewed as an expression of respect. Bislama does not replicate the complexity of indigenous language systems that represent the knowledge, histories and identities of their speakers.

#### 4.2 Attitudes towards Malua language and learning in early education

Malua interviewees expressed positive attitudes towards the inclusion of Malua language and cultural knowledge in the early years of formal education. Participants shared the belief that the primary function of early education is to teach literacy and numeracy, as in one teacher’s comment:

I want them [children] to know how to write, read, and do simple mathematics – counting, working out sums ... But also, it is also important for them to learn some of the basic knowledge of their vernacular language. [P2]

When asked specifically about whether Malua should be taught in schools, a Church leader said:

they [children] should all know how to read and write in language, too. Yes, I think that it is very important that they are taught how to talk in language, how to read, and how to write in their own language [P6]

One parent suggested that all education should be delivered in the local language:

[teachers] should teach numbers in language, they should learn to pray in language, they should teach them how to speak in their language, they should teach them how to read in their language.  
[P3]

From the perspective of teachers, education in the vernacular is understood to support children's educational development, with one teacher [P4] point out that initial education in the first language facilitates the child's understanding.

In addition to literacy and numeracy, Malua participants placed a high value on learning that has traditionally taken place outside the classroom – traditional learning about the natural and cultural environment. Participants articulated a common set of expectations about early education content, including knowledge of the natural environment, agricultural practices, construction and textile manufacture, participation in domestic life, and respect practices. Similar themes have been identified in research into the potential use of the school system to transmit, maintain, and revitalise traditional ecological knowledge more widely on Malekula (McCarter 2012, McCarter & Gavin 2011).

Considering construction as an example, knowledge of the appropriate natural resources for house building, how to prepare them, and the skills needed to assemble them, are integral to community life. Everyone is expected to 'have knowledge about how to use the things around them, what the trees are used for...which bamboo is good for building a house.' [P7] This has previously been taught to children through observing adults in action, and carrying out their own small projects in play. One participant commented that:

children learn from what they see around them, and what they watch from their parents. So things like cooking, weaving, building; these basic things...they have to use their hands in doing things they have watched from their parents, and the other members of their family.' [P2]

Boys are expected to 'know how to make all kinds of things, play stores, cut bamboo, and make small toys', while 'all girls should know how to weave mats and fans.' [P9]

Understanding life in Vanuatu before education was widely available provides important historical context to the interviewees' expectations of formal education. Participants describe children as accompanying parents in their daily activities, learning the skills needed to survive and thrive in Malekula at their parents' sides. However, compulsory education has removed children from this traditional learning environment for extended periods of each day. Boarding students at the Malua Adventist School are separated from

their families, and their vernacular languages, for extended periods each year, with an inevitable impact on traditional learning. Young people may spend little time in their home communities during higher primary and secondary education. Isolated from their home communities, educated through a western curriculum in a foreign language, and growing up without the essential practical and social skills that are taught in the home environment, young people may struggle when they return home from their years of formal education (see, e.g. Sanga & Niroa 2004).<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere on Malekula, teaching indigenous knowledge through local languages in formal education has been proposed as a remedy to the loss of traditional learning environments, however this has met some resistance. Individuals have observed that when indigenous knowledge is taught in a classroom, without the wider cultural frameworks in which it is embedded, the knowledge can be distorted, and rendered conceptually similar to western knowledge that is already taught in schools (McCarter & Gavin 2011). There are also concerns about the links between knowledge and belief, e.g., increased teaching of traditional agricultural knowledge could also lead to increased interaction with negatively positioned pre-Christian beliefs and sorcery (McCarter & Gavin 2011, 2014b). Such pre-Christian beliefs have largely passed from lived experience in Malua, however their memory remains part of oral history, and in Malekula the prospect of reviving pre-Christian beliefs in communities has raised concerns (McCarter & Gavin 2011: 6).

For Malua community members, it is essential that young people are able to look after themselves; however, the traditional system of teaching children life skills has been replaced by compulsory classroom education. It is perhaps not surprising then, that interviewees express the expectation that schools will be involved in educating children in traditional life skills and indigenous knowledge, including the local language. Participants do not position their indigenous language and knowledge systems negatively. Indeed, their concern is that if the foundations of indigenous language and knowledge are not laid down in early education, then they will simply be lost, replaced by generic knowledge expressed in Bislama. Interviewees thus see their indigenous language and knowledge as having an essential place within formal schooling, alongside literacy and numeracy.

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<sup>7</sup> Vanuatu's Ministry of Education (now the Ministry of Education and Training) has developed new curriculum statements and syllabi which are locally situated, in an effort to address concerns about the post-colonial education system. The initial document, the *National Curriculum Statement* (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 2010: 1), declares its intention to provide a 'new direction for Ni-Vanuatu students based on our values and aspirations and taking into account the needs of our citizens' and our country's future'.



## 5 The future of the Malua language

The two Malua varieties were once among the many indigenous ways of speaking on the island of Malekula, functioning as important expressions of identity for their speakers. Today, the language varieties and their traditional cultural practices are giving way to Bislama as a regional means of communication, and to Western knowledge systems, education, ways of living, and Christian beliefs. Despite this, Malua speakers still see their language as fundamentally important to the identity and education of their children, and to the acquisition of the skills that will allow young people to survive in the challenging physical environment of Malekula Island.

With the new *National Languages Policy* there is potential for Malua to receive institutional support, and to become the medium of early primary education. There are now basic resources available to facilitate this, including an orthography and word lists; however, important questions remain. Are the two varieties sufficiently close that one set of literacy materials would suffice? If not, will one variety be privileged over the other, or will both need to be offered? How will this decision be made, and how will it affect education delivery at the Malua Bay Adventist School? Can the school afford to resource separate classrooms for the different language varieties and can linguistically competent and formally-trained teachers be found? Given that Malua was excluded from the initial implementation plan for vernacular education, when will further financial resources be made available to support development of classroom materials in these language varieties? These are questions for which there are no simple answers, but they deserve urgent consideration.

The Malua language contexts outlined in this paper presents a rather bleak picture for the future of the language. Transmission has been interrupted in many homes, with many children growing up only speaking Bislama, which also dominates in the domains of education and religion. While there is an opportunity through the formal education system to revitalise the language, there is considerable work needed, in resource development and practical implementation, to facilitate vernacular education. In addition to higher-level institutional support, the Malua and Espiegles Bay communities may achieve greater success with language revitalisation through local initiatives led by individuals with an interest in sustaining their language and culture, supported externally by linguists. Elsewhere on Malekula, communities have established models for cultural and linguistic revitalisation – often known as ‘kastom schools’ – with the backing of the Vanuatu Cultural Center (McCarter and Gavin 2014a). While these have several inherent challenges, they also represent adaptations of knowledge transmission to the current social and cultural context, and so present an opportunity to maintain the vitality of language and culture.

## Appendix I

### Project Ethics and Permits

Barbour's ongoing work with the *Malekula Languages Project*, including the documentation of Malua Bay and Espiegles Bay varieties, was funded by a Royal Society Marsden Fast Start Grant (UOW1103 2012-2016) for the project titled *Exploring mood in the Oceanic languages of Vanuatu*. The project was approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2012 (project code FS2012-04). Barbour was granted a Research Permit by the Vanuatu National Cultural Council on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2012.

Wessels' study of language attitudes in Malua Bay was partially funded by a Masters Field Research Award from New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The study was nested inside Wessels' larger fieldwork project titled *Malua Bay: A description of the Malua Bay language (Malekula, Vanuatu)*. The project was approved by the University of Waikato Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2012 (project code FS2012-27). Wessels was granted a Research Permit by the Vanuatu National Cultural Council on 10<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

McCarter's study of variation, change and maintenance of traditional knowledge on Malekula was funded by the Sasakawa Foundation, the New Zealand Aid Programme, the JL Stewart Foundation, and the Victoria University of Wellington Faculty of Science. The project was approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee in March 2008 (approval 15452) and again in March 2009 (approval 16500). The work was authorised by the Vanuatu National Cultural Council, most recently on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

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