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# Autonomous Change Processes in Traditional Institutions: Lessons from Innovations in Village Governance in Vanuatu

RESEARCH ARTICLE

DANIEL VORBACH 

JONATHAN ENSOR 

\*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

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## ABSTRACT

In many parts of the world, traditional institutions are the backbone of village governance and service delivery. While the effects of introducing new institutional arrangements from outside have been widely studied, autonomous changes – that is, those that originate from within communities – are not well understood. Recognising that traditional institutions continuously evolve to remain relevant, we build on critical institutionalism and the concept of institutional bricolage to explain autonomous change processes in traditional institutions. Relying on unstructured storian conversations with community members (20 female, 18 male) from two villages in Vanuatu, our fieldwork explored the emergence of village committees as a governance mechanism to sustain access to vital services. Storian data revealed that a small number of bricoleurs – local agents of change – were driving these autonomous institutional change processes, their agency enabled and constrained by structures within and beyond the community. Bricoleurs created new institutional arrangements to address new governance challenges by borrowing traditional and non-traditional elements and associated meaning, authority and legitimacy. Our analysis reveals the interplay of two established institutional bricolage processes – elite capture and leakage of meaning – each of which operated to open up and close down spaces for change. We draw on agonistic accounts of the political to deepen our understanding of this interaction. By adopting this approach, we reveal the significance of the political at the local level, through which the social plurality of village life is negotiated, resulting in profound shifts in some norms and the maintenance of others. We conclude with reflections on the prospects of unsettling the deep-rooted exclusion from decision making of groups such as women and young people through future autonomous changes in village governance.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Daniel Vorbach**

Stockholm Environment  
Institute, Department of  
Environment and Geography,  
University of York, GB  
[daniel.vorbach@york.ac.uk](mailto:daniel.vorbach@york.ac.uk)

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Across many parts of the world, traditional institutions remain a cornerstone of village or community governance and the delivery of public goods (Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon, 2021). Far from being static, traditional institutions are dynamic systems of rules, norms and beliefs that continuously evolve to remain relevant when faced with changes in the broader environmental, social, economic, and political context (Feola, 2017; Mowo et al., 2013; Sirimorok and Asfriyanto, 2020; Wallis, 2013; Yaro, 2013). In this paper, we adopt a critical institutionalist lens and the concept of institutional bricolage to explore mechanisms that cause the type of change we observed in traditional institutions in response to governance challenges. We focus on the case of the incremental transfer of governance responsibilities and authority from chiefs to village councils in two Vanuatu communities. These cases offer examples of what we refer to as autonomous institutional change: shifts in rules initiated from within communities looking to adapt to changing conditions rather than changes resulting from explicit attempts to introduce new institutional forms from outside. Here, we understand 'autonomous' in the sense of 'self-initiating', distinguishing our analytical focus from processes of change that are initiated by external interventions (OED Online, 2022). Thus our focus is on change processes that arise from the agential creativity and innovation of local actors in response to emerging governance challenges, as opposed to those that develop in response to attempts to improve, for example, natural resource management through the introduction of new institutional forms by external actors such as NGOs or government agencies. While the latter form of institutional change has been widely studied (Haapala and White, 2018; de Koning, 2014; Ostrom, 1990), gaps remain concerning traditional institutions (Feola, 2017; Neupert-Wentz and Müller-Crepon, 2021). In particular, the underlying mechanisms that shape autonomous changes in traditional institutions remain poorly understood.

Vanuatu's many small villages are scattered across 63 inhabited islands (Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2010). The cultural values, knowledge, beliefs and practices that originated in pre-colonial times and are perceived as traditional across these communities are referred to as *kastom* (Cox et al., 2007; Kalontano et al., 2003). The national government relies on traditional or *kastom* institutions, including traditional chiefly systems, for local-level governance and provision of the type of services that the state would deliver in other contexts (Barbara and Baker, 2020; Nimbtkik, 2020). Government bodies lack the fiscal and human resources to engage with Vanuatu's many remote and difficult to access areas (Cox et al., 2007; Miles,

2007) and *kastom* institutions under the leadership of local chiefs are a crucial component of local governance (Miles, 2007; Nimbtkik, 2020; Regenvanu, 2005). According to Cox et al. (2007, page 47), "the strength of these institutions is arguably Vanuatu's most precious asset, helping to offset a range of pressures on traditional communities."

Most ni-Vanuatu regularly engage in *kastom* practices, and chiefs have a more significant influence on local governance than the state (Huffer and Molisa, 1999; Regenvanu, 2005). However, *kastom* and chiefly systems are not static. They have continually evolved in response to changing social and economic contexts and external influences since the arrival of traders, missionaries, and settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Bolton, 1998; Forsyth, 2009). Following Vanuatu's independence in 1980, the country's newly elected political leaders combined elements of diverse *kastom* systems from across Vanuatu to construct a national *kastom* and unifying national identity to bring together the many geographically distant and linguistically and culturally diverse communities (Cox et al., 2007; Lindstrom, 1997; Miles, 2007). As a result, even the identity of chiefs in its current form is largely a modern construct drawing together diverse traditional leadership positions with missionary and colonial influences (Cox et al., 2007; Lindstrom, 1997; Regenvanu, 2005). Today, pressures to adapt *kastom* institutions continue due to increasingly rapid changes in social and economic contexts, including the growing role of the cash economy and increasing exposure to external influences through opportunities for travel, work, education and communication (Cox et al., 2007; Forsyth, 2009; Warrick, 2011). The authority and ability of chiefs to govern their communities often suffer due to these changes. For example, the common practice of setting aside one day per week for unpaid community work on "chief's day" is in decline (Smith, 2018). However, this type of collective work has been essential for local service provision. Its decline places chiefly governance structures under pressure to adapt and avoid failure of the services they coordinate.

In many communities in Vanuatu and other Pacific Island countries, village councils play essential governance roles, yet they have received little attention in the literature (Kalontano et al., 2003; Love, 2016). While chiefly systems are widely regarded as the traditional form of community governance, it is increasingly common for elected village councils to carry out some of the day-to-day community governance and administration alongside chiefs (UNDP, 2012). Despite emerging from missionary, colonial and post-colonial roots, village councils are no longer considered foreign forms of governance (Love, 2016). Cox et al. (2007) note that "many chiefs have recognised the need to establish village councils, to provide a forum where representatives of different groups within the community can meet to discuss

and decide jointly on local matters” (page 48). The resulting institutions are “neither the direct continuation of local socio-historic praxis nor a neat appropriation of ‘foreign’ forms, but rather as dynamic and contested domains of social (re)production” (Love, 2016, page 125).

In this paper, we explore the mechanisms underlying the autonomous adaptation of traditional institutions. First, we introduce the concept of institutional bricolage, which synthesises key critical institutionalist concepts. After setting out our data collection and analysis methods, we describe recent changes to traditional institutions that resulted in new governance mechanisms in our study sites. In the discussion section, we apply an institutional bricolage lens to explain and conceptualise this phenomenon. We argue that change and reproduction of norms and power relationships are located in the interplay between elite capture and those aspects of pre-existing institutional forms that are carried forward. We highlight the centrality of the political at the local level in explaining how these mechanisms interact and, therefore, in the potential for change in traditional institutions.

## 2. CRITICAL INSTITUTIONALISM, INSTITUTIONAL BRICOLAGE AND AGONISM

In referring to traditional institutions, we adopt and expand on North’s (1990) influential definition of institutions as the ‘rules of the game’. We use the term to denote systems of socially shared rules, norms and beliefs that structure people’s day to day behaviour and interactions (Hodgson, 2016; de Koning, 2011; Scott, 2014). More specifically, our focus is on institutions that shape local level community governance. These range from readily observable institutions, such as village council rules captured in a policy document, to implicit and hidden norms, such as those around women’s participation in meetings (Hodgson, 2016; Mohmand, 2016). While institutions have some degree of permanency (Merrey et al., 2013; Uphoff, 1992), they are not static and change over time.

Critical institutionalism (CI), an interdisciplinary body of literature, provides analytical tools to explore how and why institutions change in practice (Hall et al., 2013; Johnson, 2004). CI aims to analyse and explain the complex and socially embedded processes behind the emergence and evolution of local institutions (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Johnson, 2004; Wong, 2013). For CI, institutions are “always enmeshed with and emerge out of people’s systems of meaning and culturally accepted ways of doing things” (Whaley, 2018). This embeddedness of institutions in their local context is emphasised by CI, drawing attention to how institutions are

anchored in and evolving from their history and context and, as a result, frequently reproduce power relationships (Mosse, 1997). This approach reacts to prior institutional theories such as Ostrom’s (1990) influential design principles, which abstract local contexts and people’s complex identities and rationalities to predict institutional outcomes, rather than considering them vital to understanding institutional change (Hassenforder et al., 2015; Johnson, 2004; Mosse, 1997). As with other critical theories, critical institutionalism emphasises and challenges the role of power relationships and inequality (Devetak, 2013).

As outlined in Cleaver (2012), the concept of institutional bricolage synthesises and develops key elements of critical institutionalism and social theory to explore the underlying mechanisms of institutional endurance and change, with particular attention to power relations and how agency is both shaping and shaped by social structures. Institutional bricolage focuses on how agents of change – known as bricoleurs – combine locally available political, social, cultural and symbolic resources and relationships in new ways to address everyday challenges and respond to new conditions (Cleaver, 2012; Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Cleaver and Whaley, 2018; Ingram and of, 2015). The resulting hybrid institutions combine traditional and non-traditional practices and meaning (Cleaver, 2012). The ability of bricoleurs to drive institutional change can be understood in relation to pre-existing social structures which limit or enable their agency (Cleaver, 2012; Douglas, 1986). Articulating the relationship between structure and agency is thus key to explaining the formation and alteration of institutions; here, social structures are defined as relatively enduring patterns of social institutionalised relationships that underly social interactions and enable or constrain human agency (Munkvold and Bygstad, 2011; Sayer, 2000). Agency is understood as the capacity to create and implement institutional changes: in a critical institutionalist understanding, actors are constrained or enabled by pre-existing structures and use their agency, often unintentionally, to reproduce and, less frequently, transform future structures (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 2015; Whaley, 2018).

Power imbalances within communities mean that some bricoleurs have a more significant influence over the direction of institutional change than others (Rusca and Schwartz, 2014). As a result, institutional change often benefits local elites and reproduces or reinforces existing power relationships and inequalities. These processes of elite capture shapes whose vision of governance results from institutional change and allows local elites to secure the benefits and further consolidate their power (Wong, 2010). Elite capture frequently goes unnoticed, unchallenged or can even be encouraged by the community due to existing patron-client relationships or because the role of elites

as representatives of the community is ingrained in the social fabric (Rusca et al., 2014; Wong, 2013). Therefore, the legitimacy of institutions relies, in many cases, on the maintenance of highly inequitable social relations (Agrawal and Bauer, 2002; Cote and Nightingale, 2012). As bricoleurs assemble new institutional arrangements from those they are already familiar with, aspects of authoritative meaning are transferred (Cleaver, 2012; de Koning, 2014). This leakage of meaning provides new or changed institutions with familiarity, authority, and legitimacy that helps sustain them and assist their integration into the local fabric, which we refer to as naturalisation (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Lund, 2006).

The political is implicit to institutional bricolage, as leakage of meaning directs attention to the reproduction or reinforcing of pre-existing power relationships and inequalities that are entrenched in social life. Lowndes and Paxton (2018) draw parallels between critical institutional analysis of change processes and agonistic accounts of the political. Agonism focuses politics on social plurality, recognising conflict and contestation as inherent to human societies. While hegemonic discourses may emerge, endorsing particular social arrangements with the appearance of an uncontested truth (Fairclough, 2010), agonism draws attention to the inevitable presence of alternative and (for the time being) subordinate perspectives. The contradictions that arise from the interplay of history, context and agential power in processes of institutional change resonate with this agonistic account of the political, in which “struggle between adversaries” is at the centre (Mouffe, 2013, page 7). For critical institutionalism and agonism, institutions are “discursively constructed power settlements that are animated through the creative action of reflective agents” (Lowndes and Paxton, 2018, page 703). While agonism centres analytical attention on the political as distinct from the social and cultural, both schools of thought recognise the influence of institutions and actors on each other; the potential for agential creativity to enable institutional change; and the deep entanglement of institutions with the power relations embedded in broader social structures (Lowndes and Paxton, 2018). Institutional order is, therefore, an expression of a particular configuration of power relations at a given point in time and, as the agonistic view of the political emphasises, “could always have been otherwise [...] every order is predicated on the exclusion of other possibilities” (Mouffe, 2016, page 1). By considering institutional bricolage alongside agonism, we are able to foreground the significance of social plurality, alternative perspectives, and the fundamental role of struggle and dissent in local change processes.

The processes of agential creativity involved in rearranging and combining institutional components

blur the distinction between institutions considered traditional and those categorised as modern (Rusca et al., 2014). Bricolage implies a continuous interplay between traditional and non-traditional institutional arrangements, in the process of which the notion of ‘tradition’ itself can be invented or reinvented (Cleaver, 2012). For example, in Vanuatu, the role of chiefs in its current form is a hybrid institution composed of diverse local practices and elements introduced by missionaries and the colonial government, who sought local leaders representing their communities in dealings with outsiders (Bolton, 1998; Cox et al., 2007; Morgan, 2013; Regenvanu, 2005). The hereditary legitimacy and wide-ranging authority of chiefs also draw on a fabricated account of *kastom* for most Vanuatu communities (Regenvanu, 2005). For example, chief’s days, which are considered part of *kastom*, are thought to combine traditional practices with elements introduced by church and state (Smith, 2016). The hybridisation of traditional and introduced systems has been a critical means through which the traditional chiefly system in Vanuatu has been adapting to changing conditions, which secured its survival to this day (Kernot and Sakita, 2008). However, hybridisation processes also resulted in the widespread exclusion of women and youth from community governance which was, in many cases, heavily influenced by norms introduced by missionaries (Regenvanu, 2005). While recognising the fluidity between traditional and non-traditional institutions, here we use the terms to differentiate between institutions that contemporary community members perceive to be local and socially embedded and those they regard as new and externally introduced (Dore, 2001).

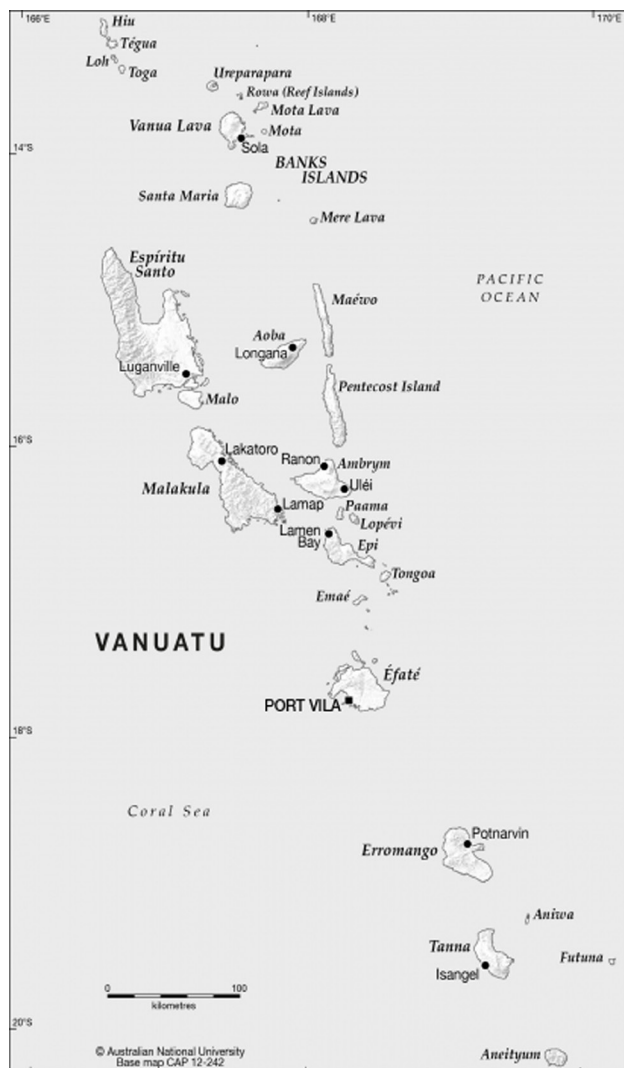
Understanding the local processes whereby traditional institutions adapt to external changes remains limited (Abu and Reed, 2018). Mainstream institutionalist literature, associated with New Institutional Economics (North, 1990; Ostrom, 1990), focuses predominantly on developing predictive theories to inform the design of externally introduced institutions (Hall et al., 2013; Hassenforder et al., 2015; Johnson, 2004). This paper builds on critical institutionalist analysis of the interplay between traditional and non-traditional institutions (cf. Cleaver, 2012; Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Quimby, 2021; Sirimorok and Asfriyanto, 2020) by using institutional bricolage in relation to autonomous change processes of traditional institutions. The concept of institutional bricolage was developed for and is still predominantly used in the context of institutions for natural resource governance (Basu et al., 2015; Cleaver and de Koning, 2015). However, the usefulness of institutional bricolage as an analytical tool is not limited to natural resource governance (Whaley et al., 2021). In this paper, we shift the focus from the resource being governed to the act of governing. This perspective expands the

analysis of the commons as shared natural resources to include the less studied role of institutions in mobilising and managing common social resources or ‘social commons’ (Coote, 2017; Basu, 2015; Fournier, 2013). In our case, we apply the concept of institutional bricolage to institutions that mobilise and manage community members to provide unpaid collective labour to construct, repair, and maintain public, communally used spaces, buildings, and infrastructure.

While commons literature focuses primarily on Asia, Europe and Africa (Laerhoven et al., 2020), here we apply critical institutionalist analysis in a Pacific Island context. In our analysis, we draw on agonistic accounts of the political to deepen our understanding of the interaction between key bricolage mechanisms.

### 3. METHODS

This study draws on fieldwork undertaken in two villages in Vanuatu, which provide useful examples to explore autonomous change processes in traditional institutions. Both villages formed after missionaries relocated different family groups living dispersed in the hilly centre of the islands to live together in coastal settlements (cf. Love, 2021). Village A and Village B are located in coastal, rural areas. Village A, on Epi Island, can only be reached by boat or small plane from the capital Port Vila. By contrast, Village B is situated on Vanuatu’s most populated island (Efate), about a one-hour drive from the capital, making it easier to sell produce at the market and purchase supplies. Neither village has access to state-run electricity, water, sewerage or waste disposal services, and both villages rely predominantly on subsistence agriculture. Income-generating activities include market stalls, small scale copra and cocoa production, and seasonal work in Australia and New Zealand. The villages are divided into smaller settlements, locally referred to as *sub-stations*. These *sub-stations* often consist of extended families or tribes, each with their *smol jifs* (‘small’ or assistant chiefs). The chiefly structure also includes a *paramount jif*, the chief responsible for the whole village, assisted by a local council of chiefs, made up of *smol jifs*. The council of chiefs meets at a traditional meeting place referred to as *nakamal*. Village chiefs are linked through sub-national councils of chiefs to the *Malvatumauri* National Council of Chiefs (Miles, 2007). The *Malvatumauri* advises the national government on matters related to *kastom* and tradition (Republic of Vanuatu, 1980). Vanuatu’s government has a decentralised structure with provincial councils in each of its six provinces and area-level councils responsible for several villages each. Since village councils are not



Source: Vanuatu Elevation Map. CartoGIS Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University. <https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/maponline/base-maps/vanuatu-base#> (accessed June 29, 2022). License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

included in the Decentralisation Act, these area councils are the lowest level of formal state governance in Vanuatu (Republic of Vanuatu, 1994). In contrast, chiefly structures link from the *Malvatumauri* to chiefs in each village. Area Secretaries, which represent the Area Council, liaise with both chiefs and village councils at the community level.

Our qualitative study design aims to explore the lived experience of ni-Vanuatu community members. Data collection involved an unstructured *storian* approach based on the *talanoa* research methodology, which is widely regarded as a culturally appropriate way to engage Pacific communities in research (Vaiolleti, 2013). *Talanoa* describes a formal or informal unstructured conversation to create and exchange ideas, knowledge, feelings and information common to many communities across the Pacific region (Vaiolleti, 2013). In Vanuatu, the term *storian* is commonly

used to describe this type of conversation (Warrick, 2009). The researchers visited both communities four times between 2017 – 2020 as part of a broader research project concerned with the co-development of drinking water quality monitoring technologies and institutions. During these visits, we facilitated discussions about local institutions and how the co-developed technologies should be governed. In addition, the lead researcher conducted *storian* conversations with thirty-eight participants (20 female, 18 male), aged between 20 and 78, in April and May 2019. *Storian* conversations focussed broadly on local institutions and institutional change and lasted on average 46 minutes. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, starting with project participants. *Storian* conversations were conducted in Bislama, a creole language that serves as a lingua franca in Vanuatu. As part of the broader project, ongoing engagement with communities allowed establishing trust and relationships before recording the *storian* conversations.

Each study participant was assigned a unique identifier, comprising a village code (A = Village A, B = Village B) and a number. Quotes are attributed to participants using these identifiers to maintain confidentiality. *Storian* conversations were recorded, translated, and transcribed. The data were analysed using the reflexive thematic analysis (TA) approach outlined in (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA is an analytical method to organise qualitative data and develop themes by looking for repeated patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Using NVivo, the lead author coded the data inductively and developed initial themes. The authors subsequently refined these themes by introducing an institutional bricolage lens. In line with critical realist research, our analysis focused on identifying possible mechanisms that would explain the observed autonomous changes in traditional institutions (Bhaskar, 2015; Danermark et al., 2005; Easton, 2010). Participant observations, understanding gained from the lead author living and working in Vanuatu for five years, and discussions with ni-Vanuatu colleagues also informed our analysis.

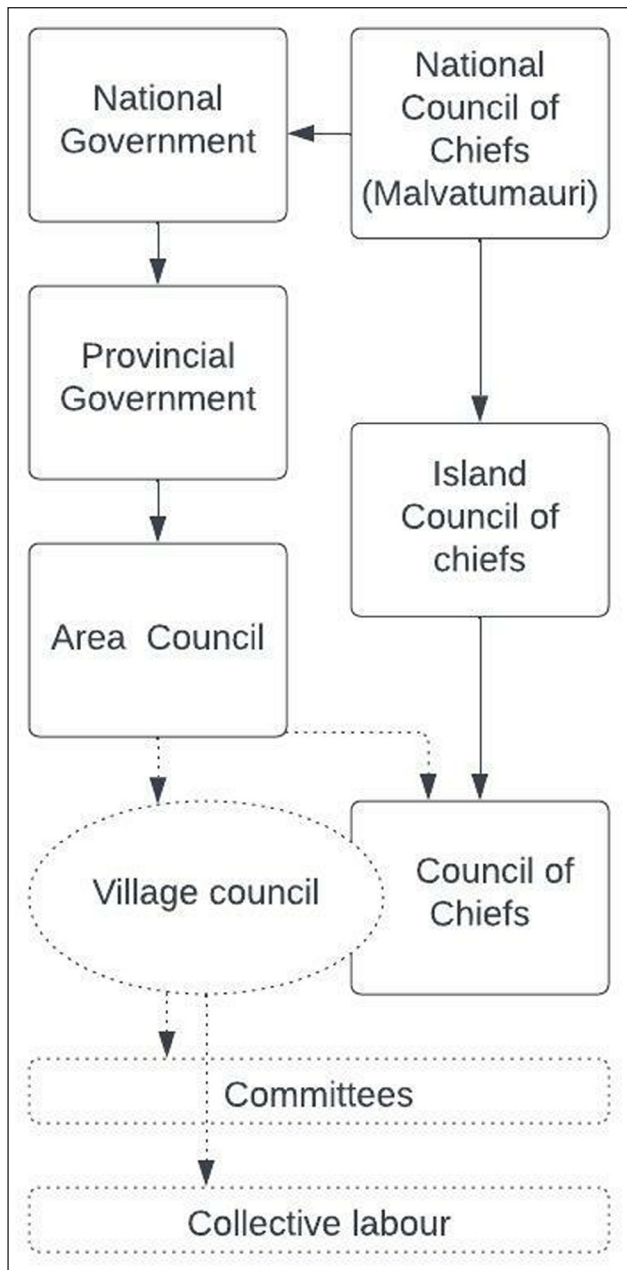
## 4. RESULTS

Our results are structured by the key themes we developed from the *storian* conversations in the context of each of the two study villages. Neither the state nor the private sector provides essential services in the two study communities. Service provision is governed by community institutions and relies on community work; functioning local institutions are therefore of practical importance to govern and manage these services on behalf of the whole community. This role traditionally falls on the chiefs. Community work is traditionally carried out on a weekly *dei blong jif* or chief's

day. On these days, chiefs decided what work needed to be carried out by community members. Unpaid communal tasks performed on chief's day often involve constructing, repairing, and maintaining public, communally used spaces, buildings, and infrastructure. For example, tasks mentioned by participants included cutting grass, clearing land, maintaining communal water systems or roads or managing waste disposal (see also Smith, 2016).

Research participants in both communities noted that attendance on these communal workdays is declining. One woman commented: "it was different before because before when the chiefs sang out, people would go" (B6); another participant stated that "the work of the village is dead" (A7). An older woman said that in the 1960s, the community was active on chiefs day, while today, it is no longer working (A5). These reports are symptomatic of increasing challenges faced by chiefs in governing their communities. As one participant explained: "a lot of people don't listen to the chief anymore" (B2). When asked about the reasons for the declining authority of chiefs, research participants mentioned conflicts between chiefs about land or chiefly titles and insufficient capacity or interest of individual chiefs to meet the increasingly complex demands of community governance. Both communities addressed the governance vacuum created by the declining authority of chiefs by transferring some authority and responsibilities from chiefs to village councils. These councils developed new rules and processes as needed to take on the additional governance and management tasks.

The concept of village councils is widely used in Vanuatu to describe a range of local governance systems. In the two study villages, village councils took the form of hybrid institutions with elected leaders and chiefs working together to carry out some of the roles and responsibilities that were traditionally the sole domain of chiefs (for example, mobilising the community for collective labour on chief's day, and making decisions on the work to be carried out). The village councils mirrored the structure of, and informally engaged with, higher-level government institutions (Figure 1). They councils assumed responsibilities of, but did not replace, councils of chiefs, which continued to be widely regarded as a legitimate form of governance. Chiefs remain influential as village heads, landowners, arbiters in local conflict resolution processes and village council members. Local councils of chiefs are part of Vanuatu's chiefly system and, like the village council, maintained informal links to government officials (Figure 1). Several participants expressed a desire for the chiefly system to be strengthened. In the next sections, 4.1 and 4.2, we set out how respondents describe the transfer of authority from chiefs to village councils in each of the two villages.



**Figure 1** Current institutional structure in the study sites. Governance responsibilities and authority were transferred from struggling local councils of chiefs to village councils composed of elected non-chiefly leaders and chiefs. Solid lines represent formal relationships, while dotted lines represent informal ones.

**4.1. VILLAGE A**

Chiefly governance in Village A is unresolved, and there has not been a *paramount jif* governing the entire community since before independence. A chief explained that the knowledge of who should be *paramount had* been lost due to successive external influences: “after the white men came, like the traders and the missionaries, then the *kastom* was broken” (A14). The chiefs of the different tribes in Village A have been unsuccessful in establishing a village level council

of chiefs due to ongoing internal disputes. To resolve this impasse, a village council, facilitated by ordinary community members, was established. A community member explained that “because the chiefs are all disputing with each other about who has chiefly title, we will put some ordinary man inside, some young guys to become council members” (A1). This village council was initially tasked with conducting a process to determine which of the many *smol jifs* rightfully held their chiefly titles and who should be ordained as the *paramount jif*. This process was initiated as part of a national initiative by the *Malvatumauri* National Council of Chiefs to strengthen *kastom* governance by determining customary land ownership rights and boundaries as well as identifying chiefs, customary land laws and practices. Additionally, the village council was given several governance responsibilities that have traditionally been the domain of chiefs, such as organising community work on chiefs’ day, creating a budget, collecting money, and approving reports from committees in the community (*Village council policy and action plan, n.d.*). These tasks were outlined in a written policy and an action plan, displayed on the community noticeboard.

The village council policy and action plan were drafted with input from and approved by the chiefs. The policy is very high level and leaves room for improvisation. For example, the village council is tasked to “give overall direction”, “coordinate and organise people for all community developments”, and increase cooperation between the different tribal groups as well as groups from various churches (*Village council policy and action plan, n.d.*). The village council thus fills the governance vacuum created by the disunity of the villages’ *smol jifs* and lack of *paramount jif* while at the same time leading a process to find a new *paramount jif* and re-establish strong *kastom* governance.

Mirroring the composition of the former council of chiefs, the village council meetings included chiefs from each *sub-station*. However, unlike a council of chiefs, the meetings we observed were attended by ordinary community members in addition to chiefs. Several women observed the meetings but did not participate in the discussion, despite having the right to do so according to the village council policy (*Village council policy and action plan, n.d.*). The council chairman explained that women “have a representative inside [the village council], but it’s not really a woman, but a man that will talk on behalf of the women. [...] In Vanuatu, women are not allowed to talk in the *nakamal*, so that is one challenge for us. But here in [Village A], in our system, we want to make sure that there is a voice for everyone” (A2). Meetings were facilitated by an elected chairman using a meeting format reminiscent of local government meetings and meetings



organised by NGOs. For example, in the meetings we attended, the village council chairman reviewed the agenda, introduced each agenda item, and facilitated subsequent discussions. The meetings were minuted by a secretary and attended by a treasurer. Representatives from community committees, including the water committee, disaster committee, women's committee and youth committees, were called to report their activities "so that the chiefs and the council will know what is going on in the community" (A2). Meetings were opened and closed by a local pastor with a prayer. None of the 'executive member' roles was held by chiefs, possibly due to a rule that executive members needed to stay neutral in discussions ([Village council policy and action plan, n.d.](#)). Some of the chairman's facilitation techniques, such as encouraging participation, steering the discussion, and ending with a meeting summary and documenting the next steps, were not dissimilar from facilitation techniques employed in workshops run by NGOs in Vanuatu.

Some community governance matters, such as the budget and "other issues", which are not further defined in the policy, must be discussed in a meeting with the whole community rather than the village council ([Village council policy and action plan, n.d.](#)). These meetings, traditionally organised by chiefs on chief's day, are now called by the village council chairman. He noted that "when I call a meeting nearly everyone comes, I think they like it, [...] many people are interested to join, I don't feed them, but they like to come" (A2). Our observations and *storian* conversations suggest that the partial transfer of authority and responsibilities from chiefs to village council members has revitalised community governance. Nonetheless, participants widely regarded the village council as an interim solution whose role would change once a *paramount jif* was ordained. A *smol jif* explained this arrangement: "because we don't have a big chief, the council makes [community rules] on behalf of the chief" (A13). The village council seemed to be perceived as working for the chiefs, not as a threat to the chiefly system. A chief in Village A told us that: "the council are my workmen, so a lot of their activities and projects that pass through the council, that is on behalf of me, [...] they are my workmen, so when they handle it, they handle it with my power" (A14). Importantly, the council succeeded in creating a platform to facilitate agreement between the different chiefs. One participant remarked that the chiefs "really respect the council" (A1).

Since the original purpose of the village council was to appoint a *paramount jif* with extensive decision-making authority, it was unclear what would happen to the council once a *paramount jif* was ordained. Opinions were divided. Some thought that the village council would advise the *paramount jif* and share governance responsibilities; others

envisaged the *paramount jif* would take over community governance, relying only on the advice of other chiefs in the community. Several community leaders envisioned the future of the village council and committees as integrated into a *kastom* structure, sitting underneath the *paramount jif* and his council of chiefs. The council chairman envisioned a structure similar to old *kastom* practices, which involved assistant chiefs advising the *paramount jif* on different aspects of community governance.

"In our plan, once we find the chief, he is the man that sits down and talks, but he has advisors, including representatives of youths, chiefs and women." (A2)

The *paramount jif* would, however, maintain the authority to make the final decisions, as one *smol jif* who is also a council member explained: "The village council will still be there, but the big chief will be the authority of the village. If the village council wants to make something, then it must go under the authority of the big chief" (A13).

#### 4.2. VILLAGE B

In Village B, a single *paramount jif* controlled all areas of community governance until he died in the early 2000s. One of the women explained that "it was only the chief that would instruct [the community], and they would do what he told them" (B3). This concentration of power in the hands of a single chief changed when the current *paramount jif* appointed the leaders of each *sub-stations* as *smol jifs*. Several community members noted that this has diluted the authority of the *paramount jif's* role and reported that differences between these chiefs weaken the community. One woman noted: "when all the other chiefs come on top, they make too much headache" (B3). Several participants reported declining respect for chiefs in their community and that people have stopped following the rules, which is apparent, for example, in the declining participation in weekly meetings and communal work on chief's day.

In Village B, community governance was predominantly the domain of the village council, which, in addition to the *paramount jif*, was made up of three *smol jifs* from the *sub-stations*, their assistants, as well as a chairman, treasurer and secretary and other council members representing the different tribes, including a small number of women. Council members, including the chairman, were elected by the community at a village meeting and did not need to be chiefs. Asked about the requirements for becoming chairman, a woman responded that "any man can do it as long as he can be a good leader" (B5). One non-chiefly community leader described his plan to "use some of our resourceful people to be in the council to properly engineer

the council so that the community can work” (B2). Despite these significant adaptations to traditional structures, several participants continued to refer to the resulting hybrid institution as council of chiefs rather than village council. While women participate in village council and village meetings, which involve the whole community, one young woman noted that “not a lot of young women talk because they are afraid” and that “one of the things they practice at the *nakamal* today is that the ideas of the men take priority” (B5).

Community members could submit requests or complaints in writing to the chairman to be discussed by the village council. In particular cases – such as when there is no agreement between council members or community members requesting permission to start a business or community development project – a village meeting was called to discuss these agenda items at the *nakamal*. One woman explained the process to introduce new projects: “the whole community will get together to discuss how they will go about it. The whole community because the whole community will do the work” (B3). A *smol jif* explained that these community meetings are “always held on Monday because that is the chief’s day in this place” (B12).

The role of organising community work on chief’s day and allocating tasks was no longer the responsibility of the chiefs in Village B following a village meeting called by one of the non-chiefly community leaders. He explained that “the community faces a lot of problems today [...], but they don’t know how to solve them, so when I call this meeting and tell the chief that I want to *storian* with them to make a plan, we have 136 people in the *nakamal*, that is the highest attendance” (B2). After the meeting, an action plan was drawn up, printed and endorsed by the chiefs. The plan resembles government and NGO project planning documents. It splits community members into groups across tribal lines to implement activities outlined in an action plan. The leadership of each group was randomly assigned to one of the *smol jifs*.

Similar to Village A, the village council was described as an extension rather than an alternative to the chiefly system. Two participants, including a *smol jif*, described the council and village meetings as playing an advisory role to the chiefs who have the power to make final decisions. One non-chiefly community leader described the village council structures as an embellishment of long-standing *kastom* governance:

“Yes, yes, these kinds of things are just how we try to decorate it. [...] Because there are a lot of people, if it were just [the chief], then it would be very hard. So you must delegate the work, to the chairman, to the spokesman, or to whoever is a member of

the council. So that we are giving a hand to the *paramount jif*, so the *paramount jif* can sit quietly, and all these people will do the work” (B13).

Despite recognising a need for pragmatic reforms such as improving the governance of essential services, community members in Village B preferred the chiefly system to continue. Even the non-chiefly community leader responsible for many of the current institutional reforms argued in favour of preserving the chiefly system: “we must not lose the idea of our chiefly system, [...] it will be a hard thing for us to do it, but we have to do our very best, maybe it will take time, but we will try our best to come up with a good idea” (B2). He equated a functioning chiefly system with a strong community and notes that “where the chiefly system has been down, that makes that the community is not good and we don’t want to become like this, we want to hold on tight to what we have now” (B2).

In practice, the role of the *paramount jif* in day-to-day community governance appeared to be largely symbolic as the village council and its chairman already carried out many of the tasks traditionally associated with the role of the *paramount jif*. For example, the council chairman regularly gave speeches on behalf of the chiefs, and the *paramount jif* authorised him to make decisions on his behalf. Nonetheless, some aspects of community governance remain the exclusive domain of the chiefs: “some of our issues, we just need the chiefs only to sit down, because they have the power, they have the title to do this work so only they can do it” (B2). These governance tasks include mediating conflicts in the community and imposing traditional restrictions referred to as *tabu*, for example, on access to fishing.

## 5. DISCUSSION

Our *storian* conversations drew attention to autonomous change processes in traditional and local institutions, particularly the partial transfer of responsibilities and authority from chiefs to village councils. While others have observed this phenomenon in Vanuatu and neighbouring Pacific Island countries (Allen et al., 2013; Cox et al., 2007; Love, 2016), the underlying mechanisms that determine the scope and pace of change have not been explored or explained in detail. In the following, we draw on institutional bricolage to elicit some of the processes that underlie autonomous change of local governance arrangements and how they shape the resulting institutions.

We analyse our results around two themes: (i) how the agency of bricoleurs to bring about institutional change is enabled and constrained by existing social structures,

and (ii) how autonomous institutional changes are shaped by existing power relationships and why they reproduce existing inequalities. In the process, we demonstrate the utility of institutional bricolage to explore the underlying mechanisms behind autonomous institutional change and illustrate how the embeddedness of institutions works against the potential for more radical or transformational change. In the following, we use the term ‘institutional bricolage’ to refer to our analytical lens and ‘bricolage processes’ as a collective term for the institutional change processes we identify through this lens.

### 5.1. SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE AGENCY OF VILLAGE-LEVEL BRICOLEURS IN VANUATU

Our results show discontent with chiefs’ decreasing ability to govern certain aspects of community life as the social and economic context changes. Since chiefs’ authority relies on community support, such discontent opens spaces in which local institutional arrangements can be negotiated to address these governance challenges and renew support for the chiefs. In the two study communities, non-chiefly community leaders proposed new governance arrangements under the umbrella of village councils to respond to these challenges. The agency of these bricoleurs to bring about change in local institutions and shape future social structures was enabled, constrained and shaped by local and external structures.

In both communities, non-chiefly bricoleurs, with support from community members, suggested to task village councils, instead of chiefs, with organising collective work. Local chiefs agreed to trial the proposed changes since they had been unable to mobilise the community and address the associated decline in services. However, due to the central role of chiefs in all aspects of community governance, which was taken for granted by community members, authority to organise collective work was only partially transferred from chiefs to village council. Chiefs continued to play an influential role in deciding on and leading community work. In village B, the community action plan, which outlined changes to the community work regime, was framed as a continuation or revival of traditional practices. Community work tasks allocated in the action plan were scheduled to be carried out on weekly chief’s days, *smol jifs* were appointed as group leaders, and the plan was endorsed by the *paramount jif*. This borrowing of language associated with the traditional institution of the chiefly system made the new arrangements appear instantly familiar, thereby assisting their naturalisation and, potentially, their endurance. At the same time, it reproduced and reinforced the traditional authority of chiefs in these new community governance arrangements (Whaley et al., 2021).

Research participants also discussed village councils more generally in terms of supporting, rather than replacing, the chiefs’ work. In village A the village council was firmly anchored in the chiefly system and explicitly tasked with restoring its functionality. The village council was initially set up to lead the *Malvatumauri* National Council of Chiefs’ initiative to confirm chiefly titles and find a *paramount jif*. Village council meetings, attended by all the chiefs, performed this role alongside other community governance tasks. In addition, community leaders and chiefs described the village council as a new version of much older forms of governance that were no longer practised. These governance arrangements, transmitted through oral history, involved a *paramount jif* overseeing a council of assistant chiefs with different sectoral governance responsibilities. One chief appealed to this history by referring to councillors as ‘chief’s workmen’ (A14), thereby positioning the village council as an extension of or even return to these traditional institutions. Similarly, in Village B, the village council was perceived as an embellishment or adaptation of traditional governance arrangements in response to new challenges rather than a separate new institution. The framing of village councils as supportive of the chiefly system ensured that new institutional arrangements were not regarded as a threat to the chiefly system. Presenting committees as advisors to the chief opens up opportunities to strengthen the chiefly system without losing aspects of the current interim system that have proven effective in governing the community. It also helped gain the endorsement of chiefs and community members and further contributed to the naturalisation of village councils (Cleaver and de Koning, 2015; Lund, 2006).

The agency of bricoleurs in both communities was underpinned by their position in the community (Funder and Marani, 2015; Haapala and White, 2018). In both cases, they were related to influential chiefs and had in-depth knowledge of the chiefly system. Their kinship ties and knowledge of traditional institutions enabled them to judge which institutional elements were negotiable at a given point in time and enabled them to propose reforms that were not regarded as a challenge to chiefs or widely accepted norms. They also held leadership roles in other aspects of community life, such as local government, NGOs or churches, which expanded their skills and conferred authority. Bricoleurs’ knowledge of both traditional and non-traditional governance arrangements enabled them to propose a set of governance arrangements that felt familiar, fit the cultural context and promised to address new governance challenges. In the words of one non-chiefly community leader, bricoleurs are ‘resourceful people’ (B2). However, the limited institutional raw material also brings its constraints. Bricoleurs borrowed

from their experience of local government councils, church committees and NGO projects, and as a result, many local governance arrangements emerging out of autonomous adaptation processes share similarities. For example, the facilitation techniques bricoleurs introduced to village councils in both communities stem from their previous experiences facilitating workshops for local government and NGO projects. The written policy and structured meetings in village A resembled those of formal local government institutions, and village councils in both communities adopted the titles and roles of chairman, treasurer and secretary to denote their leadership roles. By mimicking familiar governance structures, terminology and associated meaning, bricoleurs created the impression that village councils possess some of the authority of the state, church or NGOs – despite lacking official sanctioning.

The borrowing of traditional institutional elements and their associated meaning, and the positioning of village councils as supporting the chiefly system, strengthened the perceived legitimacy and familiarity of new institutional elements. This legitimacy and familiarity enabled bricoleurs to gain support for their proposed institutional change. However, the close alignment of village councils to traditional institutions also defined the boundaries of what changes were possible, which constrained the agency of bricoleurs and prevented a more radical departure from pre-existing social structures.

## **5.2. ELITE CAPTURE, LEAKAGE OF MEANING AND THE POLITICS OF AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

The bricoleurs who led the process of shaping village councils also became influential in their implementation. In the sense that already influential bricoleurs were able to further their vision of governance, this reflects a process of elite capture. By taking on critical roles in village councils, bricoleurs expanded their role in community governance, which bolstered their authority and increased their ongoing influence on institutional changes. The factors that enabled them to lead institutional bricolage processes, such as leadership skills, kinship ties, authority and familiarity with traditional and non-traditional institutions, made bricoleurs a seemingly obvious choice to lead the governance arrangements they introduced. Chiefs, however, wielded a different power that enabled them to retain their influence. Their pre-existing power and authority secured them an influential role in village council meetings, as established power structures were reproduced. These new institutions, in turn, relied on the legitimacy and familiarity of the chief, illustrating the potential for leakage of meaning to enable elite capture. However, leakage of meaning does not imply an absolute reproduction of the status quo: the emergence

of bricoleurs as an elite with powers comparable to chiefs illustrates a significant shift in the ordering of authority in the adapted institutions. Leakage here implies a form of lopsided reciprocity that bestows legitimacy and requires a sharing of power.

Those peripheral to decision-making, for the most part, remained so. In common with findings from the analysis of externally introduced institutions (Rusca and Schwartz, 2014), autonomous changes to institutional arrangements improved access to decision-making for individuals in positions of power but not for those who were already excluded, such as women and young people. For example, women and young people were present at village council meetings but did not actively participate in discussions. Despite some efforts on behalf of the bricoleurs to include women and young people in village councils, gender and age-based inequalities persisted. New institutional arrangements reproduced deeply ingrained cultural and religious rules, norms and beliefs that place constraints on women and young people in particular, as in the case of the adapted institution in Village A, where women are represented in decision making by a man (Cox et al., 2007; Lindstrom, 1997). Deep-seated norms, such as gender and age-based roles in society, are embedded within and are part of the legitimacy of institutions (Agrawal and Bauer, 2002) and thus remain significant in the naturalisation of new institutions. Here, leakage of meaning operates to sustain power relationships, making social norms resistant to change irrespective of the intention of bricoleurs. The power to influence decisions in village council meetings thus reflected pre-existing patterns of power and authority, retained within an elite group with the balance merely shifted away from chiefs in the new institutional arrangement. From the perspective of the non-elite majority – including women and young people – their power to influence decisions remained marginal, with such power concentrated instead in the hands of a few, mainly older male, community members.

This analysis draws attention to how versions of elite capture and leakage of meaning operate as critical mechanisms, unpacking institutions as mutable structures. Elite capture opens space for change (such as where bricoleurs drive through their vision for governance reform) and closes it down (where chiefs retain their decision-making power in adapted institutions). Similarly, leakage of meaning may bestow new institutional practices with authority or, as in the case of norms that act against the active participation of women and young people, sustain the status quo and limit the agency of bricoleurs. The interplay of these mechanisms yields change that is narrowly defined: the emergence of non-chiefly actors with power in village life, for example, represents a significant shift in norms, while norms around the position of women

in society remain stubbornly intact. Explaining how leakage of meaning privileges some norms over others indicates a need to look at the wider politics of autonomous institutional change. In contrast with emerging trends in critical institutional literature that foreground the significance of higher-scale political economy (Jones, 2015; Whaley et al., 2021), we point here to a strictly local, agonistic politics through which multiple rationalities co-exist in a village environment that is socially plural (Mouffe, 2000).

By centring institutional change in ongoing processes of political struggle, agonism augments institutional bricolage by identifying the role of hegemonic discourses in sustaining and reinventing social relations. For chiefs, non-chiefly bricoleurs and the wider community, the commonly expressed rationale for change lay in resolving breakdowns in governance that undermined service provision. The political saliency of this issue in village life – at once essential for the wellbeing of the governed and the legitimacy of those governing – underpinned the emergence of shared discourses supportive of village councils in both study sites, resolving the conflict between chiefly and non-chiefly positions through the framing of village councils as an augmentation of existing norms. These discourses, in turn, drove institutional reform and enabled the ceding of power from chiefs to village councils. Resolving service provision failures required the institutional resources that bricoleurs bring to village governance, while the legitimacy of these new arrangements depended on the persistence of chiefly power. Shifts in the wider patriarchal norms that infuse village life are not a part of this dynamic and thus remain unchanged. This process was not a zero-sum calculus in which liberal democratic discourse was mobilised to trump chiefly tradition, as deliberative democracy's communicative rationality or approach to political consensus would suggest (Kapoor 2002). Rather, it is illustrative of the indeterminacy central to agonistic politics, where the changed institution exists in a "state of dynamic tension" which has the potential to unravel should its foundational ambiguities expand (Lowndes and Paxton, 2018, page 704).

Therefore, the newly empowered non-chiefly bricoleurs' worldview may set the stage for further future institutional change. However, the potential for changing the status of women and young people is less than clear. To the extent that the deeply rooted and widely shared norms that sustained exclusive chiefly authority are analogous to those that have made gender and age relations resistant to change, there are lessons to be drawn. On this basis, it would seem that unless or until the role of women and young people becomes an issue of similar political saliency to that of service provision, chiefs and male community members are not likely to share their authority. While

village life is home to a plurality of ideals, experiences and ways of knowing, it is also suffused with power relations. The case of village committees illustrates that profound shifts in socio-cultural norms are possible but only likely when conflicting ideas are channelled productively such that those shifts meet the needs of power.

These conditions for change could emerge from the accumulation of multiple influences. In the Vanuatu context, the attendance of women and young people at village council meetings, long term engagement with gender or rights-based NGOs, national policy changes, wider social changes emerging from larger population centres, or the progressive representation of women and young people in television, film and social media are all plausible. These influences may individually or collectively alter how women and young people are perceived and their perception of themselves. If these perceptions were sufficiently widely shared and underpinned calls for equitable participation in governance, those calls would become increasingly hard to resist. In such circumstances, retaining legitimate authority may demand further institutional change and, with it, further ceding of power by established elites. However, as studies within critical institutionalism have made clear, multiple rationalities are likely to persist: the strength of discursively constructed ideas of tradition within the village will be at play alongside the alternative discourse of rights and equality. Whether leakage of meaning operates to support opening up to gender and age equality or closing down in defence of the patriarchal chiefly system will depend on the relative strength of these discourses within the village and – crucially – on how these conflicting views are appreciated and negotiated. Are there opportunities for open and constructive engagement capable of realising the generative potential of conflict (Takala et al., 2021)? In this context, recent work advocating experiments with agonistic institutional forms, such as participatory budgeting (Paxton, 2019), or the use of theatre and the arts to challenge the construction of shared values (Mouffe, 2016), may have relevance for those working to secure sustainable institutional reform in the Pacific context. For example, Vanuatu's Wan Smolbag Theatre performs plays that challenge widely held norms and facilitates subsequent discussions, inviting differently positioned community stakeholders to identify and reflect on their differing underlying values (Taylor, 2007). These experiments are valuable as they prefigure modes of democratic practice in which value conflicts are embraced, and a sense of contingency and critical reflection is engendered that enables productive relationships between those with conflicting ideals. As such, they may prove to be a productive source of institutional raw material for future bricoleurs seeking autonomous and equitable institutional change.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper identifies and explores mechanisms behind autonomous institutional change processes in traditional institutions. *Storian* data showed that these change processes were driven by a small number of bricoleurs who combined traditional and locally available non-traditional institutional elements and associated meaning into new governance arrangements. Their agential creativity resulted in shifts to deep-seated norms of chiefly authority that were hitherto central to a shared understanding of traditional governance. However, while non-chiefly bricoleurs took up newly created leadership roles in village councils, many community members, particularly women and young people, remained excluded from community governance. By applying an institutional bricolage lens in our analysis, we revealed the centrality of elite capture and leakage of meaning in the production of the new institutional form. By augmenting this with post-political insights from agonistic politics, we were better able to reveal the shifts in norms as power settlements that draw not only on diverse institutional raw material but are contingent on the emergence of a shared discourse that resolves conflicting ideals of village governance.

We suggest that future research may benefit from further fusing agonistic political analysis with critical institutionalism, centring the study of institutional change on how multiscale influences play out through the context of social structure, agential creativity and power relations at the local level. Moreover, we note that this assessment of village life draws attention to the overlooked potential of externally introduced institutions to contribute to future autonomous institutional changes. Village institutions will not remain static, and bricoleurs will play an important role in imagining future change. This suggests that there may be value for those engaged in external interventions into village life to focus on introducing a diversity of institutional forms for bricoleurs to draw on. Specifically, exposing villagers to agonistic arrangements intended to realise the productive potential of conflict may offer a promising route towards more equitable village life.

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

**Daniel Vorbach**  [orcid.org/0000-0002-8183-9339](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8183-9339)  
Stockholm Environment Institute, Department of Environment and Geography, University of York, GB

**Jonathan Ensor**  [orcid.org/0000-0003-2402-5491](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2402-5491)  
Stockholm Environment Institute, Department of Environment and Geography, University of York, GB

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