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Andrew Gray  
*Ranwadi College*

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## *The bula- possessive classifier in northern Vanuatu languages: An attempt at a worthless explanation*

ANDREW GRAY

*Ranwadi College*

### Abstract

At least 28 languages of northern Vanuatu share an unusual possessive classifier reflecting *\*bula-*. This classifier is used with crops and livestock and a varied assortment of other possessions which can include body ornaments, dances, musical instruments, vehicles, toys and aunties. This classifier is conventionally interpreted as denoting valuable possessions or economic property, but surveying its use across northern Vanuatu languages suggests that it is not generally associated with value, and in fact is often specifically avoided in economic contexts. Rather, the core use of *\*bula-* is to mark a relationship in which items are reared or cultivated by the possessor, and it has been extended, sometimes in obscure ways, to analogous relationships such as possessions that are led or held on a cord. However, in the Banks Islands, where the classifier's associations include shell money, it may have been reinterpreted in certain languages as a term for valuable possessions.

The *\*bula-* classifier is unusual in the typology of Oceanic possessive classifiers, being a regional feature shared by languages that do not form a discrete sub-group and are otherwise conservative in their possessive grammar. Better understanding of its use sheds light on the question of whether it is simply a widely-diffused local innovation, or a remnant of a category of possession that once occurred more broadly among Oceanic languages.

### Summary in Bislama

Long fulap lanwis blong not blong Vanuatu i gat wan toktok we stamba blong hem hemi *bula-* (or *pula-* or *bila-* or *bla-* o wan nara wod we i lelebet semak) we i tokbaot propati blong wan man. Yumi save harem kaen toktok ia long ol lanwis blong Ambae, Maewo, not mo sentrol Pentikos, samfala pat blong Santo mo Malo mo long sam long ol lanwis blong Bankis. Ol man oli yusum kaen toktok ia plante wetem ol samting we oli fidim o oli planem. Olsem wan eksampol, long Apma lanwis man i save singaotem 'kokonas blong mi' se *bilak kul*, or 'pig blong yu' se *bilam bo*. Be hemia i tokbaot laef kokonas o pig we yumi stap lukaot long hem. Sapos mi no tokbaot stamba blong kokonas we i laef be mi talem kokonas blong mi we blong salem, bae mi nomo talem *bilak kul* be bae mi talem *nok kul*, o sapos mi talem kokonas we blong kakae o blong dring bae mi talem *kak kul* o *mak kul* nao.

I luk olsem se mein yus blong kaen toktok olsem *bula-* hemi blong tokbaot ol laef samting, be long samfala lanwis i gat ol nara yus blong hem tu. Long Ambae, Pentikos mo samfala pat blong Maewo oli yusum kaen toktok ia tu wetem ol samting we man i werem long string o i fasem long bodi, olsem nekles, breslet o hanwaj. Mo tu, samfala lanwis oli yusum toktok ia tu wetem sam nara samting olsem ol danis, ol samting we i save mekem musik olsem gita o redio, ol samting we man i ron long hem olsem trak o baskel, mo ol anti. Long Bankis oli yusum tu wetem mani.

Samfala stadi blong ol lanwis oli talem se kaen toktok olsem *bula*- hemi blong tokbaot ‘propati we i gat valiu’ o ‘ekonomik propati’ (samting we hemi blong salem o blong winim mani long hem). Be long nara lukluk blong hem, tingting ia i no stret, from i gat fulap samting we i gat bigfala valiu be yumi no save yusum toktok ia *bula*- wetem, mo fulap samting we i nogat valiu be yumi save talem wetem *bula*-. Mo ol man oli no yusum kaen toktok olsem *bula*- wetem samting we blong salem.

Long wanem we mi faenemaot long stadi ia, mein yus blong kaen toktok olsem *bula*- hemi blong tokbaot samting we man i fidim o i planem. Afta, ol man oli yusum toktok ia tu wetem ol propati we i lelebet olsem ol samting blong fidim o planem, olsem breslet from man i werem breslet long han semak olsem man i werem rop blong pig. Long Bankis, ating fastaem ol man oli bin yusum kaen toktok olsem *bula*- wetem mani from se kastom mani long Bankis hemi sel mani we i olsem nekles we man i hangem long bodi. Be long samfala pat blong Bankis tedei, *bula*- hemi kam olsem wan toktok blong ol samting we i gat valiu, from se ol Bankis man oli lan blong yusum toktok ia wetem mani.

Long ol lanwis blong Vanuatu mo raon long Pasifik i gat fulap toktok we i tokbaot propati blong ol man, be toktok ia *bula*- i difren lelebet from hemi blong not Vanuatu nomo mo i no klia tumas se toktok ia i kamaot wea fastaem o wanem stret mining blong hem.

## Keywords

northern Vanuatu, possession, classifier, cultivation, valuables, BULA

## 1 Introduction

Northern Vanuatu is home to a cluster of Oceanic languages that are mostly conservative in their possessive grammar but share a curious innovation.

Like typical Oceanic languages (Lynch et al., 2002; Lichtenberk, 2018), the languages of this area mark grammatical possession using either pronominal suffixes (1a & c), or a construct (CST) suffix and a following possessor noun (1b & d). In ‘directly possessed’ constructions, which are typically associated with inalienable possessions such as body parts and kin, the suffixes are attached directly to the possessed noun (1a & b), while in ‘indirectly possessed’ constructions the suffixes are attached to a separate possessive classifier (1c & d). Some languages have additional structures for grammatical possession, such as an associative marker (ASSOC) for semi-alienable or non-controlling possession (e.g. Schneider, 2010, p. 181). Aspects of syntax such as word order, vowel alternations and the use of noun articles vary considerably between and within languages. Possessive classifiers are **highlighted** in all the examples that follow.

- Apma** (1a) *butsu-k*  
 head-1SG  
 ‘my head’
- (b) *butsu-n*      *bo*  
 head-CST      pig  
 ‘the pig’s head’
- (c) *no-m*      *watang*  
 GENERAL-2SG      basket  
 ‘your basket’
- (d) *watang*      *no-n*      *subu*  
 basket      GENERAL-CST      chief  
 ‘the chief’s basket’

Multiple possessive classifiers exist, and the choice of classifier is dictated by the relationship that exists between possessor and possession. The same noun may thus take different classifiers depending on the context in which it is possessed (2).

- Apma** (2a) *ka-k*      *kul*  
 FOOD-1SG      coconut  
 ‘my coconut’ (for me to eat)
- (b) *ma-k*      *kul*  
 DRINK-1SG      coconut  
 ‘my coconut’ (for me to drink)
- (c) *no-k*      *kul*  
 GENERAL-1SG      coconut  
 ‘my coconut’ (for sale or general use)
- (d) *bila-k*      *kul*  
 BULA-1SG      coconut  
 ‘my coconut tree’<sup>1</sup>

The four possessive classifiers illustrated in (2) are shared by all languages in a contiguous area of Vanuatu encompassing Ambae, Maewo, north and central Pentecost, much of Espiritu Santo and its offshore islands, and the southern and central Banks Islands. Several languages in the geographical core of this area have only these four classifiers. Languages on the

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations include ASSOC associative construction, CONJ conjunction, CST construct suffix, PREP preposition and TAM tense-aspect-mood marker. Possessive classifier stems are glossed as GENERAL, BULA, FOOD and DRINK.

periphery have some additional classifiers, but these are local innovations and mostly limited in their scope of use (Table 1).

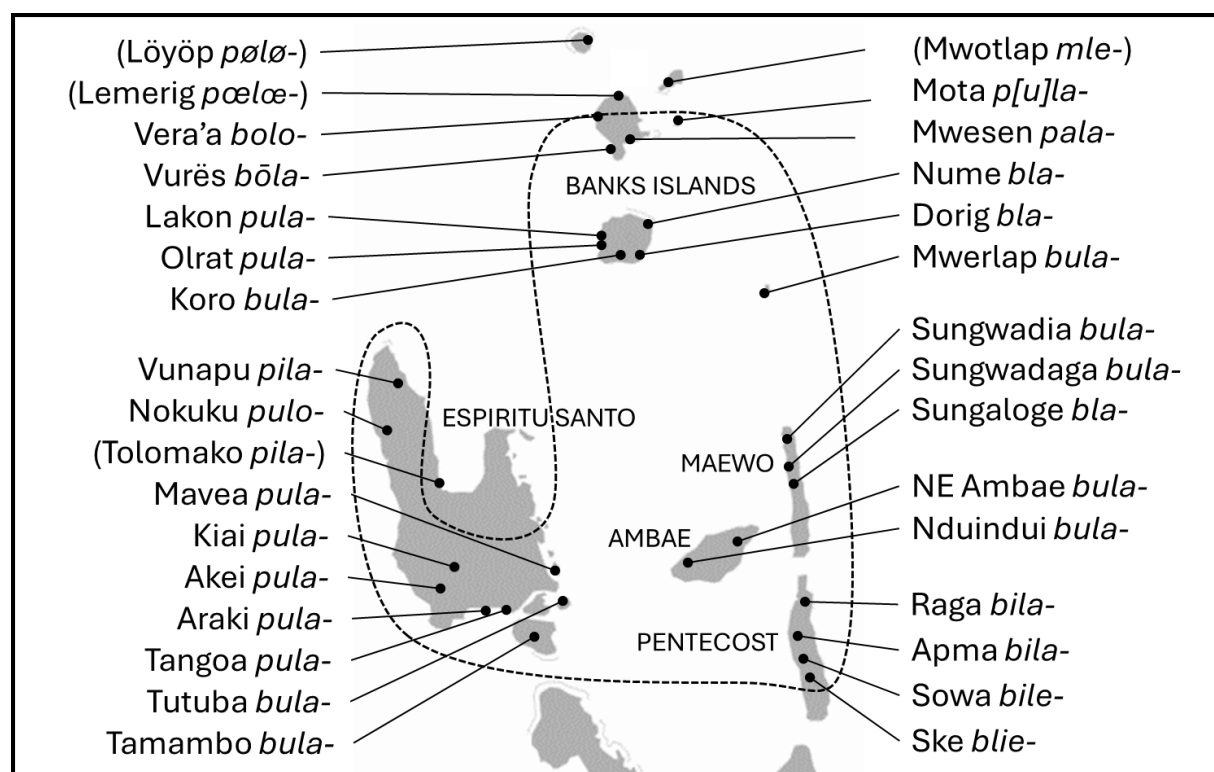
**Table 1.** Possessive classifiers in some well-described northern Vanuatu languages (sources as in Table 2)

| Language               | GENERAL<br>(PERSONAL)          | FOOD       | DRINK       | BULA           | Other possessive classifiers  |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|------------|-------------|----------------|---|
| <b>Vera'a</b>          | <i>mu-</i><br>( <i>no-</i> )   | <i>go-</i> | <i>mo-</i>  | <i>bolo-</i>   | <i>ko-</i> 'VESSELS'<br><i>mō-</i> 'HOUSES'<br><i>qo-</i> 'SLEEP/REST'  |
| <b>Vurës</b>           | <i>mōgō-</i><br>( <i>no-</i> ) | <i>ga-</i> | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bola-</i>   | <i>ba-</i> 'BEDS'<br><i>ka-</i> 'TRANSPORT'   |
| <b>Mwerlap</b>         | <i>mō-</i><br>( <i>no-</i> )   | <i>ga-</i> | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bula-</i>   | (also has an associative-like construction with <i>tabe-</i> )  |
| <b>Araki</b>           | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ha-</i> | <i>mā-</i>  | <i>p[u]la-</i> | <i>cuga-</i> 'PORTION'  |
| <b>Mavea</b>           | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>a-</i>  | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bula-</i>   | <i>mādoue-</i> 'DEAD PERSON'S POSSESSION'<br><i>sa-</i> 'HOUSING AND LAND'  |
| <b>Tamambo</b>         | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ha-</i> | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bula-</i>   | <i>koru-</i> 'DEAD PERSON'S POSSESSION'   |
| <b>Sungwadia</b>       | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ga-</i> | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bula-</i>   |   |
| <b>Nduindui</b>        | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ka-</i> | <i>me-</i>  | <i>bula-</i>   |   |
| <b>Northeast Ambae</b> | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ga-</i> | <i>me-</i>  | <i>bula-</i>   |   |
| <b>Raga</b>            | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ga-</i> | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bila-</i>   | ( <i>wa-</i> 'SUGARCANE' reported in some sources but not used today)   |
| <b>Apma</b>            | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>ka-</i> | <i>ma-</i>  | <i>bila-</i>   | (also has an ASSOCIATIVE construction with <i>na-</i> )   |
| <b>Ske</b>             | <i>no-</i>                     | <i>a-</i>  | <i>mwa-</i> | <i>blie-</i>   | <i>bie-</i> 'FIRE'<br><i>die-</i> 'ITEMS THAT ARE CUT OPEN'<br><i>mwa-</i> 'HOUSE' (same as DRINK)<br>(also has an ASSOCIATIVE construction with <i>na-</i> ) |

Three of the four main classifiers straightforwardly reflect those reconstructed in Proto-Oceanic (Lynch et al., 2002): classifiers for FOOD and DRINK consumed by the possessor reflecting *\*ka-* and *\*m<sup>[w]</sup>a-* (2a & b), and a GENERAL classifier used for tools, trade items, intellectual property, and any other item that does not fit into the other categories (2c). The form of the GENERAL classifier varies among Oceanic languages. In the cluster of languages discussed here it characteristically reflects *\*no-*, though in much of the Banks Islands, this has been supplanted as the default classifier by an innovative form resembling *mo[go]-*, with *no-* continuing to be used for intimate personal items such as clothing.

The fourth classifier (2d) is the subject of this paper. It appears to reflect a root *\*bula-*, and for want of a better label I refer to it here as the BULA classifier. Figure 1 shows all the languages in which such classifiers have been documented. These comprise at least 28 of Vanuatu's 138 or so languages (François et al., 2015). The true number of BULA-using

languages is probably slightly higher than this, since some languages of the region are extinct, poorly documented and/or encompass dialects that might be reclassified into separate languages.



**Figure 1:** Map showing reflexes of *\*bula-* in the languages of northern Vanuatu and the approximate area within which BULA classifiers are used (dotted line). Brackets indicate languages in which the *\*bula-* reflex no longer functions as a BULA classifier. Sources include Codrington (1885), Ray (1926), François (2010), François et al. (2015, p. 3), Naito (2019), François (2023b), Vanua Readers and the sources in Table 2. Orthographies are as in the original sources.

The BULA classifier occurs most commonly when indicating the possession of crops, livestock and body ornaments. However, across languages its use has been documented with a diverse assortment of other possessions including aunties, balls, bicycles, crowds of people, dances, fishing lines, girlfriends, money, musical instruments, radios, songs, speeches, spirits, stars, traditional stories and vehicles.

The standard explanation for this classifier's use, which dates back to Codrington (1885), is that it is associated with valuable or economic property, of which the typical example is a pig. However, studies on several individual languages have concluded that this explanation does not account well for usage in these languages (e.g. Henri, 2011; Hyslop, 2001; Jauncey, 2011; Ludvigson, 1991). These contrary observations date back a long time: *Miss Hardacre's dictionary*, an extensive vocabulary of Raga written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by a missionary who spent over two decades working in the area and undoubtedly knew the language well, notes pointedly that the classifier is "used of valuable and non-valuable property" (Hardacre, 1932, p. 14).

Furthermore, a pig is a bad example. Pigs have multiple relations with their possessors: they are livestock, they are food, they are a trade item, and in northern Vanuatu cultures they are an important source of wealth and status, being used as payment for customary obligations

such as bride prices and fines for misdemeanours, and sacrificed in ‘grade-taking’ rituals through which individuals rise in rank. In Mavea and Tamambo, the BULA classifier is used with most livestock, but older speakers always use the GENERAL classifier with pigs, since “pigs are money” (Jauncey, 2011, p. 209). In other BULA-using languages including Apma, Araki (François, 2002, p. 100) and Vurës (Malau, 2016, p. 309), the BULA classifier is used with pigs in the context of livestock-rearing (3a), but the GENERAL classifier occurs when pigs are being traded or used in traditional ceremonies (3b). This is directly at odds with the traditional explanation of BULA use: here the classifier is specifically not used when the focus is economic or customary value.

**Apma** (3a) *Bila-k bo te-van ne-duu le waka*  
 BULA-1SG pig TAM-go TAM-be.wild LOC bush  
 ‘My pig has gone to live wild in the bush’

(b) *Mwe atre no-n bo le leliboan*  
 TAM announce GENERAL-3SG pig LOC pig.killing  
 ‘He announces his pig at the pig-killing ceremony’

Table 2 summarises the accounts given of BULA in all languages for which modern grammars, grammar sketches and/or studies of possession are available. Some authors stick to the interpretation that BULA classifies valuable or economic property, in some cases seeking justifications for counterexamples (e.g. Duhamel, 2019). Others treat BULA primarily as a classifier for domestic plants and animals, sometimes falling back on the ‘valuables’ explanation in an attempt to account for exceptions (e.g. Henri, 2011).

**Table 2.** Treatment of the BULA classifier in modern studies of Vanuatu languages

| Island/area   | Language | BULA classifier   | Author’s explanation of classifier  |
|---------------|----------|---|---|
| Banks Islands | Vera’a   | <i>bolo-</i> ‘something of customary value’   | “used to specify that the possessum is of value for the possessor in traditional terms” (Schnell, 2011, p. 143)   |
|               | Vurës    | <i>bōla-</i> (~ <i>bule-</i> ~ <i>bulë-</i> )<br>‘domesticated animal, crop possession’ | “used mostly to refer to the ownership of domesticated animals and crops or other plants, whether they are food bearing or not ... things that the possessor feeds and nurtures and in so doing they then give something back to the owner” (Malau, 2016, p. 297) |
|               | Mwerlap  | <i>bula-</i> (~ <i>bulo-</i> )<br>‘agricultural goods’                                  | “for agricultural goods (livestock, plantations)” (Henri, 2023, p. 182)   |

| Island/area  | Language                           | BULA classifier  | Author's explanation of classifier   |
|--------------|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Santo & Malo | Kiai                               | <i>pula-</i> 'producer'  | "the possessor is the producer of the item possessed" (Ludvigson, 1991, p. 291)  |
|              | Araki                              | <i>pula-</i> ~ <i>pla-</i> 'economical possession'                           | "a valuable possession, of economical interest ... generally associated with plants and possessed animals" (François, 2002, p. 99)   |
|              | Mavea                              | <i>pula-</i> 'animal raised, vegetable planted'                              | "used mainly to mark the possession of fruits or vegetables one cultivates, or an animal one wishes to raise" (Guérin, 2011, p. 174)   |
|              | Tamambo                            | <i>bula-</i> 'personal property, living things for which one is responsible' | "prototypically used for all live plants and animals that one owns, with the exception of pigs ... Such things owned must also be primarily for one's own use" (Jauncey, 2011, p. 208)   |
| Maewo        | Sungwadia                          | <i>bula-</i> 'agricultural possession'                                       | "agrarian-type possessions ... domestic and livestock animals ... planted crops ... One element that could indeed indicate a commercial value ... is the use of this classifier for bracelets (and similar items) and necklaces" (Henri, 2011, p. 147) |
| Ambae        | Nduindui                           | <i>bula-</i> 'economically valued or natural possession'                     | "for example, 'coconut plantation', animals ... also refers to objects of adornment such as earrings, necklaces, watches, radio, vehicles or any other transport" (Aru, 2015, p. 80)   |
|              | Northeast Ambae (Lolovoli dialect) | <i>bula-</i> (~ <i>bule-</i> ) 'natural or valued object possession'         | "the main features of the <i>bula</i> relationship are certainly that the possessed is a natural, or life-like object, but there are some exceptions which are difficult to account for" (Hyslop, 2001, p. 180)  |



| Island/area | Language | BULA classifier                               | Author's explanation of classifier   |
|-------------|----------|---|--|
| Pentecost   | Raga     | <i>bila</i> -<br>'valuable possession'        | "used for possession of animals, items of economic, cultural or personal value such as plants, crops, food gardens, traditional dances, adornments, musical instruments ... also for people in certain contexts" (Vari-Bogiri, 2011, pp. 115–116)<br><br>"ownership of items precious to their owner, for cultural or personal reasons, is frequently the relationship encoded ... reciprocity may have bearing in how we can understand [these] relations" (Duhamel, 2019, p. 40) |
|             | Apma     | <i>bila</i> -<br>'valuable resource'          | "by and large, the <i>bila</i> -classifier is used with natural resources: raw materials or unprocessed items [though] this is not always the case" (Schneider, 2010, p. 175)  |
|             | Ske      | <i>blie</i> -<br>'economic or cultural value' | "marks the possessum for value to the owner or a duty of care the possessor has to the possessed entity" (Johnson, 2014, p. 89)  |

As we will see in Section 3, these differing accounts of BULA largely reflect authors' differing interpretations rather than fundamental differences between languages in how the classifier is used. Like the proverbial blind people groping at different parts of an elephant, researchers have offered explanations for their observations of BULA in different parts of northern Vanuatu, but there has been little attempt to review the nature of the entire beast in light of these findings. That is what I set out to do here.

Section 2 of this paper suggests a more satisfactory explanation of the BULA classifier's use, and Section 3 explores the classifier's typical use with different kinds of possessed item. Section 4 examines some languages in which BULA use is manifestly atypical, which leads to an explanation of how the dubious association with valuables may have arisen. Having shed light on the true nature of BULA, Section 5 places it in the wider context of possessive classifiers in Oceanic languages and seeks its origins.

Some of the information here comes from personal experience of the languages of Pentecost island, but I also draw upon descriptions of the languages of other islands (primarily the sources in Table 2) to fill in the body of the elephant and build up a regional picture of how BULA classifiers are used. To cover gaps in the linguistic literature, I have made use of available

Bible translations,<sup>2</sup> and of the Vanua Readers, children's books translated into over 50 local languages and dialects (including 15 BULA-using ones) on behalf of the Vanuatu Ministry of Education. Although not naturalistic sources, these provide a valuable opportunity to compare grammatical usage in identical sentences across a wide range of Vanuatu languages.

## 2 What BULA Classifiers Indicate

In Apma, the language of the area where I live and work, an explanation of the BULA classifier that fits the available evidence was first given to me by Isaiah Tabi, a wise co-worker and chief: “the word is for things that a person looks after”. The main use of BULA is to indicate a relationship in which the possessor rears or cultivates a possession.

This explanation is not unique to Apma or Pentecost: similar interpretations of BULA classifiers have been given elsewhere, including in Mavea (Guérin, 2011), Sungwadia on Maewo (Henri, 2011) and Vurës in the Banks Islands (Malau, 2016). What I propose here is that this explanation best accounts for the use of BULA not just in these languages, but in all languages that have such a classifier (with a small number of exceptions discussed in Section 4), and that it can be extended to account for apparent counterexamples without the need to fall back on notions of value.

One reason for uncertainty about what BULA indicates is that in the economies of northern Vanuatu islands, where most people live off cash-cropping and subsistence gardening, the cultivator of an item and the person who derives value from it are usually the same. However, in rare cases where they are not, it can be seen that the BULA classifier is used to indicate the person who planted or cultivated something, regardless of economic ownership.

Raga and Apma both have a noun *bosari* ‘loaned pig’ which is possessed using the GENERAL classifier by the lender, who is not rearing the pig but still regards it as an economic asset (4).

**Apma** (4) *Bo nong mwane-i no-k bosari*  
 pig DEM TAM-be GENERAL-1SG loaned.pig  
 ‘This will be my loaned pig [for you to repay later]’

Apma speakers can use BULA to specify who planted something, regardless of current ownership (5).

**Apma** (5) *Butsuka bila-n Kwin mwi-di Santo*  
 Tree BULA-CST Queen TAM-exist Santo (island)  
 ‘There’s a tree of [planted by] the Queen on Santo’

In (6), a Kiai speaker uses the BULA classifier in emphasising that it was local people who planted the coconuts on a local plantation; the colonial plantation owners who sought to derive economic value from them did not possess them in a BULA sense.

<sup>2</sup> Apma and Havai (Northeast Ambae) Bible portions available online at [baebol.org](http://baebol.org), and Hano (Raga), Havakinau (Nduindui), Mota and Tangoa versions at [bible.com](http://bible.com) (accessed July 2025).

- Kiai** (6) ...*pulani* *tamamau*, *la am otira*. *Vokai tasale*, *mo kai te pulara*!  
 [The coconut trees on the plantation are] ‘of/owned by our fathers, as they  
 planted them. The European people, there are none of/owned by them!’  
 (Ludvigson, 1991, p. 291)

Similarly in Raga, *aragogona* ‘communal garden’ is usually possessed with BULA, but Duhamel (2019, p.42) found it possessed with GENERAL in one instance where the possessor was the person who had “decided and designed” the garden, not the person who was cultivating it.

The use of BULA with an ambiguous noun implies livestock or cultivation. In Northeast Ambae, *natu* ‘child’ is taken to mean ‘piglet’ when used with BULA (7).

- NE Ambae** (7) *Tangaloi gatigale u belu na bule-ku natu*  
 Person one TAM steal ART BULA-1SG child  
 ‘Someone has stolen my child [piglet]’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 186)

In (8), part of a Raga creation story in which the first nightfall (*boñi*) was brought to Pentecost with the arrival from Maewo of a black chicken variety (also called *boñi*), possessive classifier use helps to disambiguate whether *boñi* refers to the chicken (possessed with BULA) or to the night itself (which, together with ‘sunshine’, is possessed with GENERAL).

- |             |     |             |               |               |                |               |
|-------------|-----|-------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| <b>Raga</b> | (8) | <i>Na-m</i> | <i>binihi</i> | <i>be</i>     | <i>no-m</i>    | <i>boñi</i>   |
|             |     | 1SG-TAM     | think         | CONJ          | GENERAL-2SG    | night         |
|             |     | <i>mwa</i>  | <i>lol</i>    | <i>hantai</i> | <i>no-ḡu</i>   | <i>alo...</i> |
|             |     | TAM         | make          | bad           | GENERAL-1SG    | sunshine      |
|             |     | <i>Na-v</i> | <i>tugu</i>   | <i>gao-n</i>  | <i>bila-ku</i> | <i>boñi</i>   |
|             |     | 1SG-TAM     | untie         | rope-CST      | BULA-1SG       | night         |
|             |     | <i>ba</i>   | <i>go-v</i>   | <i>gita-e</i> |                |               |
|             |     | CONJ        | 2SG-TAM       | see-3SG       |                |               |
- ‘I think your night spoils my sunshine ... I’ll release my black chicken and you’ll see’  
 (Yoshioka, 1987; my translation)

Generic words for cultivated things can be possessed with BULA. In the Vanua Readers, nominalised forms of the verb ‘to plant/cultivate’ are used with the BULA classifier in several languages to translate ‘our plants’, explaining the meaning of the green colour on the Vanuatu flag (9a-d). The Ske translation is literally ‘our things’, with classifier choice alone indicating that plants are meant (9e).

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| <b>Vurës</b>                                  | (9a) | <i>sur o terē wirivriv <b>bulen</b> nēn</i> |
| <b>Nduindui</b>                               | (b)  | <i>huri na <b>bulada</b> rivurivu</i>       |
| <b>Raga</b>                                   | (c)  | <i>huri <b>bilada</b> ririvuana</i>         |
| <b>Apma</b>                                   | (d)  | <i>u <b>bilada</b> ruurubwan nii</i>        |
| <b>Ske</b>                                    | (e)  | <i>laga <b>blied</b> zakle nier</i>         |
| ‘for our plants’ (Vanua Readers) <sup>3</sup> |      |   |

Use of the noun ‘food’ with BULA indicates ‘food crops’ or ‘homegrown food’. Example (10) shows this in Vurës, and similar usage occurs on Pentecost.

|   |      |  |
|---|------|--|
| <b>Vurës</b>  | (10) | <i>...nēr mē-ēlgor o tere gengen <b>bule-n</b> nēr</i> |
|   |      | 3PL TAM -look.after ART PL food BULA-CST 3PL           |
| ‘...they looked after their food crops’ (Malau, 2016, p. 617) |      |  |

There are two main objections to the idea that BULA is associated with reared or cultivated items rather than with value. The first is that ‘value’ is multifaceted and hard to define, particularly across cultures. However, without a clear and adequate definition of what value means in this context, this argument becomes circular. The second objection is that certain possessions with which BULA is used, though not obviously valuable, are not obviously reared or cultivated either. In the following section I survey in detail the use of BULA classifiers across northern Vanuatu languages and attempt to account for these difficult cases.

### 3 Typical Uses of BULA

#### 3.1 *Animals and plants*

When asked for an explanation of BULA use, the first observation often made, both by outside researchers and native speakers, is that the classifier tends to be used with living things. Its most prominent use in nearly all languages is with crops and livestock, and more generally with live plants and animals.

In Apma at least, live plants that are under a person’s care and/or growing on a person’s land are always classified with BULA, even when they have no economic or customary value. In (11), BULA is even used of weeds (*tabika*) being cleared from a person’s garden.

|   |      |   |
|---|------|---|
| <b>Apma</b>   | (11) | <i>Te sabiruu nge i <b>bila-n</b> tabika lekoo na-n</i> |
|   |      | TAM rush just PREP BULA-3SG weeds garden ASSOC-3SG      |
| ‘He did a rushed job on [clearing] his weeds in the garden’ (Pascal Temwakon) |      |   |

BULA is also the usual classifier for animals, regardless of traditional or economic value: BULA occurs with any live animal under a person’s care, including introduced species and non-domestic animals such as snakes and turtles that are being kept in captivity. This has been observed across a wide range of languages.

<sup>3</sup> Parallel examples from Vanua Readers are presented in context but without interlinear glosses as a full analysis is not available for all relevant languages, and the focus of this paper is on classifier choice not syntax.

The most important domestic animals in Vanuatu are pigs, but as we saw in Section 1, these are a complicated possession because pigs are also food and a medium of exchange. Rather, the possessions that seem to occur most consistently with BULA are dogs and cats – introduced species of little customary or economic value whose main role is simply to be domestic animals. I have encountered no example in print of ‘dog’ or ‘cat’ being possessed with any other classifier in a BULA-using language (though in personal experience on Pentecost I have witnessed a few unfortunate occasions where a dog or cat’s relationship with its possessor turned bad enough to lead to use of the FOOD classifier). (12) shows the use of BULA with ‘dog’ in all the relevant languages covered by the Vanua Readers.

|                   |       |  |
|-------------------|-------|--|
| <b>Mota</b>       | (12a) | <i>wa me loḡloḡ <b>plana</b> o kurut</i>   |
| <b>Vurës</b>      | (b)   | <i>e ni ōl na <b>bōlan</b> o tok</i>   |
| <b>Nume</b>       | (c)   | <i>ma tov vavar <b>nablan</b> tok</i>  |
| <b>Mwerlap</b>    | (d)   | <i>nen ti wer <b>pulana</b> viriu</i>  |
| <b>Tangoa</b>     | (e)   | <i>mo tovi na <b>pulana</b> viriu</i>  |
| <b>Tamambo</b>    | (f)   | <i>mo tovi na <b>bulana</b> vuria</i>  |
| <b>Nduindui</b>   | (g)   | <i>mo kware na <b>bulana</b> kwiriu</i>  |
| <b>East Ambae</b> | (h)   | <i>mo war na <b>bulan</b> giriu</i>  |
| <b>Sungwadaga</b> | (i)   | <i>ngwao gi wari <b>bulan</b> gwiriu</i>   |
| <b>Sungaloge</b>  | (j)   | <i>mwaot ware na <b>blana</b> giriu</i>  |
| <b>Raga</b>       | (k)   | <i>mwa uloi <b>bilan</b> vwiriu</i>  |
| <b>Apma</b>       | (l)   | <i>mwahu <b>bilan</b> kuli</i>   |
| <b>Ske</b>        | (m)   | <i>ae la wre mni <b>blien</b> bóblievuk<sup>4</sup></i><br>(‘and) he called his dog’ (Vanua Readers) |

In many languages there are names of plant and animal varieties that incorporate the BULA classifier, together with the name of the person or group associated with cultivating them. The cultivator may be the individual who first brought or found the variety (13a), a group (13b), a mythological being (13c) or even an anthropomorphised animal (13d).

|                |       |  |
|----------------|-------|--|
| <b>Tamambo</b> | (13a) | <i>manji <b>bulani</b> Sakia</i><br>bird BULA-CST Sacier<br>‘Indian myna bird’ (literally ‘Sacier’s bird’, after the French planter believed to have introduced the species) |
| <b>Apma</b>    | (b)   | <i>bo <b>bilan</b> Bule</i><br>pig BULA-CST Bule<br>‘turtle’ (literally ‘Bule’s pig’, after one the two moieties of society) <sup>5</sup>                                    |

<sup>4</sup> The Ske word for ‘dog’ comes from *bó **blien** vuk* ‘white person’s pig’, incorporating BULA.

<sup>5</sup> Apma-speaking society is divided into two moieties, Bule and Tabi, and among plants and animals with two named varieties, one variety is customarily associated with each moiety. Members of the Bule moiety, preferring ordinary pigs for themselves, sometimes call turtles *bo bilan Tabi* ‘Tabi’s pig’ instead.

- NE (c) *boe **bulei** Tagaro*  
 Ambae pig BULA-CST Tagaro  
 ‘scorpion’ (literally ‘Tagaro’s pig’, after a mythological being)
- Apma (d) *beta **bilan** bwihil*  
 breadfruit BULA-CST bird  
 ‘a kind of breadfruit that grows in the bush’ (literally ‘birds’ breadfruit’)

However, where the being after whom a variety is named is imagined as the user rather than the cultivator, the name may incorporate a different possessive classifier such as FOOD (14).

- Apma (14) *is **kan** temwa*  
 banana FOOD-CST rat  
 ‘a banana variety with tough peel’ (literally ‘banana eaten by rats’)

Certain minor usages of BULA are clear extensions of its use with plants and animals. In Apma, a man’s heartbeat (15a) and penis (15b) are possessed with BULA because the names of these things are literally ‘bird’ (*bwihil*) and ‘flying fox’ (*bweret*) respectively, and the analogy with a captive animal remains obvious. (The first of these usages also occurs in Raga and Ske.)

- Apma (15a) ***Bila-n** bwihil te-msuu*  
 BULA-3SG bird/heartbeat TAM-slip.down  
 ‘He had a heart attack’ (lit. ‘His bird fell off its perch’)
- (b) ***Bila-n** bweret te mat*  
 BULA-3SG flying.fox/penis TAM die  
 ‘His penis is impotent’ (lit. ‘His flying fox is dead’)

A woman’s genitalia may also be referred to in Apma as ***bilan bo*** ‘her pig’; a male speaker told me that “it’s because that’s what we buy them with” (pigs are used as bride price). Here the classifier is again BULA, but when Apma-speaking women at weddings are teasing the bride with *Kom dooni **nok bo*** ‘Do you want my pig?’ – also an allusion to genitals – the classifier is GENERAL, as appropriate for a pig changing hands at a ceremony.

In Tamambo, BULA is used with a person’s spirit (*tanume*) when the spirit moves outside the body (16). This may be another extension of the classifier’s use with live animals that are under a person’s control. When referring instead to one’s inner soul, the same word is directly possessed, as appropriate for an inalienable possession (Jauncey, 2011, p. 199).

- Tamambo (16) ***bula-na** tanume na viti-ho hini-a?*  
 BULA-3SG spirit 3PL tell-2SG PREP-3SG  
 ‘do her spirits tell you about it?’ (Jauncey, 2011, p. 381)

Tamambo speakers also use BULA for possession of tattoos. Jauncey (2011, p. 209) suggests that this is because tattoos are perceived as somewhat animate, and also notes that “speakers suggest that some tattoos are like ‘flowers’ (which would take *bula*-)”. This usage might also be connected with the use of BULA in other languages for body ornaments (Section 3.2), though BULA is not used with body ornaments in general in Tamambo.

Non-living items made or extracted from animals and plants do not appear to be ordinarily possessed with BULA in any language. Local lexicographer Pascal Temwakon offered me the (perhaps slightly contrived) illustration in (17).

- Apma** (17) *Na te-hi bila-k buluk i no-k buluk*  
 1SG TAM-hit BULA-1SG cow PREP GENERAL-1SG cow  
 ‘I turned my cow into beef’  
 (lit. ‘I struck my (BULA) cow into my (GENERAL) cow’)<sup>6</sup>

Examples (18a) and (18b) are from the same account in Apma of how woven baskets are made; live pandanus (*wip*) is possessed with BULA but dried pandanus leaves (*bwenges*) are not.

- Apma** (18a) *Ko van ne-ngri bila-m wip*  
 2SG go TAM-break.leaves.off BULA-2SG pandanus  
 ‘You go and break leaves off your pandanus’
- (b) *Ko mwa-li no-m bwenges baiang*  
 2SG TAM-take GENERAL-2SG dried.pandanus.leaves go out  
 ‘You take out your pandanus leaves’ (Schneider, 2008)

Similarly in Northeast Ambae, pandanus (*veveo*) is possessed with BULA when planted (19a) but GENERAL when harvested (19b).

- NE Ambae** (19a) *Tubui mo rivu bula-na veveo*  
 old.woman TAM plant BULA-3SG pandanus  
 ‘The old woman is planting/planted her pandanus’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 129)
- (b) *Da-vano na-ni ngari no-ku veveo*  
 1PL.INCL-go 1SG-TAM cut.pandanus GENERAL-1SG pandanus  
 ‘Let’s go and I’ll cut my pandanus’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 442)

Although GENERAL is the usual classifier for parts harvested from plants, BULA is used with seeds and live cuttings, again highlighting the classifier’s link with cultivation (20). Use

<sup>6</sup> The second classifier here is GENERAL not FOOD because the meat is primarily for sale, not the possessor’s own consumption.

of BULA with seeds is attested in all Ambae and Pentecost languages, and in the Tangoa Bible (Matthew 4:3).

**NE Ambae** (20) *Ngie u voli na **bule-ku** toligi*  
 3SG TAM buy ART BULA-1SG seeds  
 ‘She bought me some seeds (to plant).’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 179)

The strong association between BULA and live plants and animals makes it something of a default classifier for this type of possession when relationships are unusual or unclear. After my son was born on Pentecost, I returned to work the following week and found that some decorative plant cuttings that I had left in flasks had sprouted roots. I planted them outside our house – planting something in memory of an occasion is a common habit on Pentecost – and they grew into a small flowerbed, which I referred to as ‘my son’s flowers’. When I sought an Apma equivalent of this phrase, pointing out that the baby was not the one who planted and was tending the flowers, the general feeling was that I should use BULA anyway for want of a better classifier.

Nevertheless, there are a few contexts in which live plants and animals are not possessed with the BULA classifier. Most awkwardly for the theory that BULA is associated with valuable economic property, speakers of BULA-using languages consistently prefer the GENERAL classifier when possessing live animals in contexts of trade and exchange. In Sungwadia, Henri (2011) analyses BULA as a specifically agricultural classifier because “at the very moment of sale, the general classifier *no-* is used” instead (Henri, 2011, p. 147).

The most important animals traded in Vanuatu are pigs (see Section 1), but the GENERAL classifier is attested in the context of trade with a variety of animals and across a variety of languages. In Kiai, Ludvigson (1991, p. 291) observed cattle and goats being possessed with BULA by a seller who had reared them and GENERAL by the person buying them. In Mavea, Guérin (2011) uses the example of a chicken to illustrate the possession of an animal being offered as a gift with GENERAL classifier by the recipient (21a), though the FOOD or BULA classifier would be used if the chicken were being given to the recipient to eat (21b) or look after (21c).

**Mavea** (21a) *Me ka-vol te kou aite **no-m***  
 TAM 1SG-buy some fowl one GENERAL-2SG  
 ‘I will buy a fowl for you (as a gift)’

(b) *Me ka-vol te kou aite **a-m***  
 TAM 1SG-buy some fowl one FOOD-2SG  
 ‘I will buy a fowl for you (to eat)’

(c) *Me ka-vol te kou aite **pula-m***  
 TAM 1SG-buy some fowl one BULA-2SG  
 ‘I will buy a fowl for you (to raise)’ (Guérin, 2011, p. 180)

Parasites – which are not intentionally tended or cultivated – are another exception to the rule that live animals are possessed with BULA, at least in Pentecost languages (information from elsewhere is hard to find). In Apma, lice (*kut*) are possessed by their host with the



GENERAL classifier (22), and intestinal worms (*warodo*) may be possessed with the FOOD classifier.

|   |      |                |               |             |            |
|---|------|----------------|---------------|-------------|------------|
| <b>Apma</b>   | (22) | <i>Kaamaru</i> | <i>dongvi</i> | <i>no-m</i> | <i>kut</i> |
|   |      | 1DU.EXCL.TAM   | look.for      | GENERAL-2SG | louse      |
| 'The two of us are going to pick out your lice' (Schneider, 2008) |      |                |               |             |            |

Other situations where live animals are not necessarily possessed with BULA concern wild animals. These, by nature, are not individually possessed, but wild animals can occur with the FOOD classifier if being hunted (23), (24). Araki also has a classifier for portions or temporary possessions whose uses include “a catch of fish or game” (François, 2002, p. 99).

|  |      |             |               |               |            |
|--|------|-------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| <b>NE</b>  | (23) | <i>Vini</i> | <i>livusi</i> | <i>ga-da</i>  | <i>boe</i> |
| <b>Ambae</b>   |      | TAM         | chase         | FOOD-1PL.INCL | pig        |
| 'He will chase a pig for us to eat' (Hyslop 2001, p.177) |      |             |               |               |            |

|  |      |              |            |           |            |           |               |             |              |
|--|------|--------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|---------------|-------------|--------------|
| <b>Apma</b>  | (24) | <i>Na-ma</i> | <i>sip</i> | <i>le</i> | <i>teh</i> | <i>ne</i> | <i>saa-te</i> | <i>ka-k</i> | <i>wasis</i> |
|  |      | 1SG-TAM      | go.down    | LOC       | sea        | TAM       | pick.up-some  | FOOD-1SG    | shellfish    |
| 'I'm going down to the sea to gather some shellfish' |      |              |            |           |            |           |               |             |              |

Wild animals that are captured alive or taken under a person's care are subsequently possessed with BULA. This is shown in several languages in the story of *Leitau's turtle* in the Vanua Readers, and in Mavea in (25), in which a woman finds a prawn and decides to feed it every day (see also example (29)).

|  |      |             |            |           |            |                |
|--|------|-------------|------------|-----------|------------|----------------|
| <b>Mavea</b>   | (25) | <i>Mo-v</i> | <i>ura</i> | <i>ro</i> | <i>ura</i> | <i>pula-na</i> |
|  |      | 3SG.say     | prawn      | here      | prawn      | BULA-3SG       |
| 'She said that this prawn here was her prawn' (Guérin, 2011, p. 174) |      |             |            |           |            |                |

The animals and plants living wild in an area do, however, belong in a collective sense to the local community, who may nurture and assert ownership over them by placing taboos on hunting and fishing at certain places and times. In this context, possession with BULA can occur: Apma speakers refer to their local flora and fauna with expressions like *bilada butsuka nii* 'our trees' and *bilada bwihil nii* 'our birds'.

### 3.2 Body ornaments

Besides live animals and plants, the most widespread usage of BULA is for body ornaments worn by the possessor, such as necklaces, bracelets, armbands, ankle rattles, headdresses, rings, and flowers or feathers used to decorate the head or body. This usage occurs throughout the languages of Ambae and Pentecost, and in Sungwadia on Maewo. Other wearable items such as clothes, baskets, footwear and traditional mats are never possessed with BULA, no matter how valuable they are. Example (26) shows a necklace (*sum*) being possessed in Apma with BULA but a traditional mat (*tsip*) being possessed with GENERAL when the two items are worn together. Of these two items, it is probably the mat (not possessed with BULA) that has greater value and customary importance in Apma-speaking culture.

|   |      |                     |           |             |               |            |                    |
|---|------|---------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|------------|--------------------|
| <b>Apma</b>   | (26) | <i>Biteh</i>        | <i>i</i>  | <i>no-n</i> | <i>tsip</i>   | <i>ah</i>  | <i>te-gapgabis</i> |
|   |      | Dress.traditionally | PREP      | GENERAL-3SG | mat           | REL        | TAM-very.good      |
|   |      | <i>bi</i>           | <i>mo</i> | <i>goro</i> | <i>bila-n</i> | <i>sum</i> |                    |
|   |      | CONJ                | TAM.3SG   | wear        | BULA-3SG      | necklace   |                    |
| ‘She dresses in her beautiful mat and puts on her necklace’ (Vanua Readers) |      |                     |           |             |               |            |                    |

Traditional local body ornaments are mostly derived from parts of living things, such as flowers, shells and nuts. In (27), in which a dancer decorates himself with a plant cutting that he stole from outside a girl’s house, the uses of BULA for cultivated items and for body ornaments clearly overlap.

|   |      |             |               |           |           |                |               |
|---|------|-------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|---------------|
| <b>Apma</b>   | (27) | <i>Atsi</i> | <i>dalmwa</i> | <i>ah</i> | <i>te</i> | <i>utat</i>    |               |
|   |      | person      | male          | DEM       | TAM       | fasten.oneself |               |
|   |      | <i>i</i>    | <i>giri</i>   | <i>ah</i> | <i>te</i> | <i>dapmak</i>  | <i>bila-n</i> |
|   |      | PREP        | cordyline     | REL       | TAM       | be.like        | BULA-3SG      |
| ‘This boy decorated himself with a cordyline leaf that was just like hers’<br>(Vanua Readers) |      |             |               |           |           |                |               |

However, it is worth emphasising that possessive classifier use in these languages is determined by relationships not by the characteristics of a possession. Non-living products from animals and plants are not generally associated with the BULA classifier (see Section 3.1), and body ornaments are classified with BULA only when the possessor is contemplating wearing them. In Raga, bracelets (*lala*) – which share a name with the type of sea shell from which they were traditionally made – are possessed by the wearer with BULA, but the GENERAL classifier was heard with a bracelet found lying on a table (28).

|  |      |             |             |             |              |
|--|------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| <b>Raga</b>                                      | (28) | <i>Geki</i> | <i>lala</i> | <i>no-n</i> | <i>ihei?</i> |
|  |      | DEM         | bracelet    | GENERAL-3SG | who          |
| ‘Whose is this bracelet?’ (Duhamel, 2019, p. 40) |      |             |             |             |              |

Viraleo, the Raga-speaking proprietor of a traditional bank and local authority on customary value, confirmed to me that while the pig’s tusk (*livo*) that he wears around his wrist is possessed by him with BULA, an identical tusk deposited in his bank would be possessed by a customer with the GENERAL classifier.

A salient feature of the wearable items possessed by BULA appears to be that they are fastened to the body by a loop or cord. Significantly, animals too may have this relationship with their possessors. Pigs in particular are often led on leashes, and in traditional local culture, the leash was not held in the hand but was tied around the owner’s wrist or ankle. This connection is evident in the Apma terms for ‘wrist’, which are synonymously *utnen kaen bo*, literally ‘place for pig’s rope’, or *utnen lip*, literally ‘place for tooth’ (referring to a pig’s tusk worn as a bracelet). The pig here would be in a BULA-type relationship with its owner, and since the bracelet is in the same relationship, I suggest that BULA came to be applied to it by extension. Other animals may also be held on strings; (29) shows the BULA classifier used with live crabs that have been caught and strung up in a bundle to be carried away for later use.

|             |      |  |                |               |            |
|-------------|------|--|----------------|---------------|------------|
| <b>Apma</b> | (29) | <i>Na-n</i>  | <i>lik-te</i>  | <i>bila-m</i> | <i>kap</i> |
|             |      | 1SG-TAM  | string.up-some | BULA-2SG      | crab       |
|             |      | ‘I’ll tie up some crabs for you’ (Pascal Temwakon) |                |               |            |

In (29) the crabs are intentionally being kept alive, so are in some sense being tended or cared for. This contrasts with the situation in (30), in which fish caught on a line and the hermit crabs used as bait are both possessed with GENERAL in Sungwadia.

|                  |      |  |                 |                |              |               |
|------------------|------|--|-----------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|
| <b>Sungwadia</b> | (30) | <i>[Kami]</i>  | <i>sosouna</i>  | <i>ti-ñwau</i> | <i>tea</i>   | <i>nau</i>    |
|                  |      | 1PL.EXCL   | go.fishing      | NEG1-be.late   | NEG2         | 1SG.TAM       |
|                  |      | <i>reve</i>  | <i>no-ku</i>    | <i>te</i>      | <i>tolu,</i> | <i>bastau</i> |
|                  |      | pull   | GENERAL-1SG     | TAM            | three        | CONJ          |
|                  |      | <i>i-Vaelet</i>  | <i>ti-vetar</i> | <i>no-n</i>    | <i>gatou</i> | <i>baso</i>   |
|                  |      | ART-Violet   | TAM-say         | GENERAL-3SG    | hermit.crab  | finish        |
|                  |      | ‘We fished, but it didn’t last long. I had already caught three when Violet said she had used all her bait.’ (Henri, 2011, p. 245) |                 |                |              |               |

Since relationships and not the nature of possessed nouns are the primary determinant of classifier use, BULA can be used freely with novel and non-traditional items. In all of the languages that generally use the BULA classifier with body ornaments, the usage has been attested with wristwatches. In past years it was common to hear Apma speakers further extend this to the borrowed word ‘time’ (31a), though this is being replaced by the GENERAL classifier (31b) now that most people get the time from their phones, which (though generally more valuable than wristwatches) are never possessed with BULA in Apma.

|             |       |   |             |               |
|-------------|-------|---|-------------|---------------|
| <b>Apma</b> | (31a) | <i>Bila-m</i>                                     | <i>taem</i> | <i>kavih?</i> |
|             |       | BULA-2SG  | time        | how.much      |
|             |       | ‘What’s your time [the time on your wristwatch]?’ |             |               |
|             | (b)   | <i>No-m</i>                                       | <i>taem</i> | <i>kavih?</i> |
|             |       | GENERAL-2SG                                       | time        | how.much      |
|             |       | ‘What’s your time [the time on your phone]?’      |             |               |

However, in certain marginal cases there may be a tendency to prefer the GENERAL classifier with non-traditional items. Duhamel (2019, p. 42) reports that Raga speakers use the BULA classifier with wristwatches and phones when locally-derived words (literally *alo* ‘sun’ and *gainūtulo* ‘whispering tool’) are used for these things, but GENERAL when borrowed words are used. An Apma-speaking youth once asked if he could buy my MP3 player – which was hanging around my neck at the time – using the BULA classifier, then repeated the sentence with the GENERAL classifier when I showed signs of not understanding. These observations might be interpreted in a variety of ways, but clearly these items are marginal within the domain of BULA classifier use.

Certain other uses of BULA are likely extensions of its use with possessions tied to the body or held on strings. Three terms for prominent body parts listed in Miss Hardacre’s old Raga dictionary – *bila(k) le* ‘(my) navel’, *bila(k) mulai* ‘(my) Adam’s apple’ and *bila(k) watu niu*

‘(my) kneecap’ – likely allude to body ornaments. (The last of these is literally ‘coconut shell’ but the derivaton of the other two is unrecorded.) Use of BULA is attested with fishing lines in Northeast Ambae and Sungaloge, even when no fish is present (32), and with fishing nets in Nduindui (33) and Raga (Ivens, 1938).

**NE Ambae** (32) *Bule-ku gau u kaka lo vatu*  
 BULA-1SG line TAM be caught LOC stone  
 ‘My fishing line was caught on a stone.’ (Vanua Readers)

**Nduindui** (33) *Heheriki raru mo tiraki na bula-garu kabe*  
 immediately 3DU TAM leave ART BULA-3DU fishing.net  
 ‘At once they left their nets.’ (from Matthew 4:20 and Mark 1:18)

In Sungwadia, ‘lead’ (presumably for fishing weights) is possessed with BULA (34a), though a fishing line is possessed with GENERAL (34b). This might be compared with how an animal on a rope is possessed with BULA though the rope itself is not.

**Sungwadia** (34a) *Kamu-te tai-tai bula-k led*  
 2PL-TAM REDUP-cut BULA-1SG lead  
 ‘You have already cut a lot of my lead’ (Henri, 2011, p. 220)

(b) *masu masi sumai toga le- no-k string*  
 huge fish come stay LOC GENERAL-1SG line  
 ‘a huge fish came and caught my line’ (Henri, 2011, p. 189)

Languages outside Pentecost, Ambae and parts of Maewo do not in general use BULA with body ornaments or other objects on strings. In the Vanua Readers, the Tamambo, Tangoa, Sungwadaga and Sungaloge translations of (26) all use the GENERAL classifier with ‘necklace’, while Vurës uses a classifier specifically associated with “worn items” and other intimate personal possessions (Malau, 2016, p. 300). However, speakers of Vurës do use BULA with two culturally significant possessions that are related to body ornaments but are not perceived as worn items: shell money (Section 3.9) and headdresses. The Vurës word for shell money, *söm*, comes from a root (PNCV \**zomu*) whose cognates in other languages frequently mean ‘necklace’ (Clark, 2009), while the word for headdress, *timiat*, also means ‘spirit’ or ‘ghost’ (François, 2013, p. 211). Headdresses used in local rituals and dances are not mere ornamentation but transform the performer artistically, and perhaps spiritually, into another being. This use of BULA is reminiscent of its use to possess disembodied spirits in Tamambo (Section 3.1).

### 3.3 Dances

In the languages of Pentecost, dances are possessed by the leader of the dance with BULA (35).

- Raga** (35) *Ra-m uvwi huri havwana bila-n tama-na*  
 3PL-TAM blow PREP kind.of.dance BULA-CST father-3SG  
 ‘They blow [the conch] for his father’s *havwana* dance’ (Vari-Bogiri 2011, p.311)

This usage may be motivated by the animacy of a group of dancers, and represents another case of a relationship with a captive animal being extended by analogy. In Apma, the same verb (*-tku*) describes the action both of a person leading a pig on a leash (36a), and of a dancer leading a group (36b).

- Apma** (36) *Mwa-tku bila-n bo*  
 TAM-lead BULA-3SG pig  
 ‘He leads his pig’
- (b) *Mwa-tku bila-n welan*  
 TAM-lead BULA-3SG dance  
 ‘He leads his dance’

A single Apma word (*kae-*) is also used both for the rope that an animal is tied up with (37a) and a drumbeat for a person to dance to (37b).

- Apma** (37a) *Te duksuru kae-n bo*  
 TAM untie rope-CST pig  
 ‘She untied the pig’s rope’
- (b) *Bwasra bi ra mwa-hi kae-n*  
 clap CONJ 3PL TAM-beat drumbeat-3SG  
 ‘[the dancer] claps and they beat a drumbeat for him’

The use of BULA with dances may also be connected with its use with spirits (Section 3.1) and headdresses (Section 3.2), which are often worn or invoked during traditional dances.

Like plant and animal varieties, dances may be named after a person or group associated with them, with use of the BULA classifier. For example, Apma speakers know a type of dance called the *ka bilan Tokoh* ‘Tokoh’s *ka* dance’, which reputedly originated with a historical figure named Tokoh. Creative works are normally possessed by their creator with GENERAL in Apma. However, Tokoh is not claimed to have invented the dance himself, but rather to have picked it up among spirits in the forest, in much the same way that a gardener might come upon a new plant variety.

### 3.4 Musical instruments

In Pentecost and Ambae languages, the BULA classifier is used with musical instruments and other devices whose function is to produce sound. These include guitars (a modern introduction), bamboo instruments, slit drums, conch trumpets and ankle rattles made from *Pangium* nuts.

The extension of BULA to musical instruments might be because an instrument is perceived as an animate thing, like a crying animal being tended, or because many instruments are worn strung from the body. As with the use of BULA for headdresses (Section 3.2), the use of BULA for sound-making devices may historically have had a spiritual aspect too. Northern Vanuatu in pre-contact times was home to ‘secret societies’ whose members would commune in the bush and make eerie sounds, using devices not known to the uninitiated, which outsiders believed to be the sound of ghosts (Codrington, 1891).

In all these languages, the use of BULA for noise-making or music-making devices extends to radios. In the late 20th century, music on the radio played an important role in the development of modern Vanuatu culture, and local people listened to the radio particularly to hear Indigenous songs (Bolton, 2000). Duhamel (2019, p.40) reports that Raga-speaking children, but not adults, also possess televisions with BULA. This too may be linked to the television’s role as a music-making device, since children particularly enjoy song and dance videos.

In most of these languages there is no association between BULA and music in general: the words for ‘song’ in Northeast Ambae (*asi*), Raga (*iboi*), Apma (*sasaan*) and Ske (*saosaoan*) are possessed with GENERAL. However, in Nduindui the word for ‘song’, *bolo*, is possessed with BULA. The origin of this usage may lie in lexical shift – in Raga and Apma, *bolo* refers to a type of dance and in that context is possessed with BULA.<sup>7</sup> However, among Nduindui speakers online today, use of BULA also appears to extend to related concepts such as the borrowed word ‘video’.

Languages outside Pentecost and Ambae generally do not use BULA with musical instruments, though in Tamambo on Malo (which is geographically and linguistically close to Ambae), older speakers use BULA with radios and guitars. As with shell money and headdresses in Vurës, this might be a vestige of a broader use of BULA that is being lost, or never fully developed, in this language. The differences between older and younger Tamambo speakers – younger speakers no longer use BULA with radios and guitars, but have come to use it with pigs (Section 1) – suggest that the BULA classifier may be undergoing reinterpretation in Tamambo, losing complex earlier associations and becoming simply a classifier for animals and plants.

### 3.5 Vehicles

Apma speakers use BULA with bicycles, perhaps by analogy with riding a horse or dancing with an instrument. In Apma this is on the margin of the classifier’s domain of use: the GENERAL classifier is also acceptable with bicycles, and motor vehicles (which are more valuable) are never possessed with BULA. However, Ambae languages extend the analogy further, using BULA with all vehicles (38), (39).

**NE Ambae** (38) *A tangaloi lai aka lo tano ra-m hiligi bula-ra aka*  
 ART person take vehicle 3PL-TAM hide BULA-3PL vehicle  
 ‘Drivers take their trucks to shelter’ (Vanua Readers)

**Nduindui** (39) *vae hikani mo mule taliku lo bula-na kat*  
 CONJ now TAM return again LOC BULA-3SG cart  
 ‘and was returning in his chariot’ (from Acts 8:28)

<sup>7</sup> In modern Apma, the dance is called *biri bol* ‘little bol’, but the archaic form *bolo* is sung during the dance.

The term used for vehicles in (38), *aka lo tano*, is literally ‘land canoe’, shortened simply to *aka* ‘canoe’ in the second instance, but BULA also occurs with borrowed words such as *taragi* ‘truck’. Ordinary canoes may be possessed in Northeast Ambae with either BULA, GENERAL or direct possession, with no apparent difference in meaning (Hyslop, 2001, p. 186). Rodman (1981, p. 78) suggests that use of BULA for vehicles in Northeast Ambae is motivated by animacy, as part of a category of “possession of things that move or grow”. However, this explanation would be trickier to apply to Apma, in which only bicycles are categorised this way.

Elsewhere in northern Vanuatu, transport vehicles are mostly possessed with the GENERAL classifier (for example, in Mavea, Tangoa and Tamambo). Canoes are directly possessed in some languages (including Apma, Ske and Sungwadia), and Vurës and Vera’a have a dedicated classifier for transport vessels, likely derived from the noun ‘canoe’, whose use at least in Vurës extends to vehicles (Malau, 2016, p. 298-299).

Wheeled vehicles are a historically recent introduction to Vanuatu (as are horses and other beasts of burden), which helps explain why this use of BULA is variable and localised.

### 3.6 Other cultural items

In Northeast Ambae, balls, toys and small stones used in games can be possessed with BULA (Hyslop, 2001, p. 179), perhaps by analogy with animals being tended or items manipulated on strings. Vari-Bogiri (2011, p. 118) also reports *bi* ‘marble’ (a borrowing from French *bille*) possessed with BULA in Raga.

In (40), Northeast Ambae *moli* ‘ball’<sup>8</sup> is possessed with BULA by the owner with but GENERAL by a player to whom the ball is being passed, the same pattern of classifier use as for a pig changing hands at a ceremony.

NE (40a) *Ngire mwalakelo ra-mo mwoso-mwoso-gi na bula-ku moli*  
 Ambae 3PL youth 3PL-TAM REDUP-play-TR ART BULA-1SG ball  
 ‘Those youths are playing with my ball’

(b) *Go= Tuli na moli lawe-eu ngie no-ku*  
 2SG throw ART ball PREP-1SG 3SG GENERAL-1SG  
 ‘Throw the ball to me, it’s mine (to pass, kick in a game).’  
 (Hyslop, 2001, p. 185)

Example (41) also suggests a connection between Northeast Ambae’s use of BULA with moving toys and its use with vehicles.

NE Ambae (41) *Mo susu-ni na bula-na mwosomwoso*  
 TAM push- TR ART BULA-3SG toy  
 ‘He pushed his toy along’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 322)

<sup>8</sup> *Moli* can also mean ‘citrus’, and in that context could be possessed with either BULA, GENERAL or DRINK depending on whether the possessor is cultivating, trading or consuming the fruit (Hyslop, 2001).

In what may be a related usage, children in some areas use the BULA classifier when pretending to possess stars in the sky. This cute custom is documented in two quite widely separated places: in Northeast Ambae, children rub their hands together, point at a star and say *Rahu, rahu, **buleku** visiu* ‘Rub, rub, [that’s] my star’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 179), and in 19<sup>th</sup> century Mota, children would wait for stars to appear in the sky, saying *Titit **pulak** vit ni wowor* ‘Let my stars come out in plenty’ (Codrington & Palmer, 1896, p. 266).

In Raga, Vari-Bogiri (2011, p. 296) shows use of BULA in *lañi **bilan** Tagaro* ‘Tagaro’s wind’, a description of a type of wind that brings fine weather. Tagaro is a figure in local mythology who is sometimes equated with God. Natural phenomena believed to be under a person’s control are normally possessed in Pentecost’s languages with GENERAL (as in (8)), but perhaps Tagaro possesses the wind with BULA because it seems animate, because he raised it like a growing thing, or because it feels as if being pulled or led along.

In Dorig, Koro, Olat and Lakon, four of the five languages of Gaua in the Banks Islands, traditional myths and stories are termed ‘stories of Marawa’, with use of the BULA classifier. Marawa is a mythological figure who takes the form of a spider and in Lakon also shares his name with “a type of ritual headdress that is worn by initiated young men” (François, 2013, p. 222). This use of BULA may thus be another vestige of its connection with body ornaments and/or objects perceived to be animated by spirits. That Marawa is a spider is perhaps also noteworthy given BULA’s association elsewhere with things that are held from the body on strings.

### 3.7 People

Kinship and other inalienable relationships are usually marked in northern Vanuatu languages and elsewhere in Melanesia by direct possession, with suffixes and/or possessor nouns attached directly to the possessed noun (42a). For some kin there are also address terms that are not suffixed (42b), and in modern informal use, these frequently occur with the GENERAL classifier in place of directly-possessed forms (42c).

- Apma** (42a) *tema-k*  
 father-1SG  
 ‘my father’
- (b) *Tata!*  
 father  
 ‘Dad!’
- (c) ***no-k** tata*  
 GENERAL-1SG father  
 ‘my dad’

This is the case in all well-described BULA-using languages. However, in the languages of Pentecost, there is an oddity in this paradigm. For ‘auntie’, a local kinship category that principally includes one’s father’s sisters, there is no directly-possessed noun, and when the



address term is indirectly possessed, the classifier is BULA rather than GENERAL (43a-d).<sup>9</sup> Among Pentecost's languages, only Sa, which has no BULA classifier, has a directly-possessed term for 'auntie' (43e).

|             |       |               |                 |
|-------------|-------|---------------|-----------------|
| <b>Raga</b> | (43a) | <i>bila-k</i> | <i>vwavwa</i>   |
|             |       |               | BULA-1SG auntie |
| <b>Apma</b> | (b)   | <i>bila-k</i> | <i>wawa</i>     |
|             |       |               | BULA-1SG auntie |
| <b>Sowa</b> | (c)   | <i>bile-k</i> | <i>wawa</i>     |
|             |       |               | BULA-1SG auntie |
| <b>Ske</b>  | (d)   | <i>blie-q</i> | <i>wwa</i>      |
|             |       |               | BULA-1SG auntie |
| <b>Sa</b>   | (e)   | <i>itnê-k</i> |                 |
|             |       |               | auntie-1SG      |
|             |       |               | 'my auntie'     |

What is special about aunties? As described by Vari-Borigi (2007), aunties do play a special role in local culture: they provide various kinds of practical and ceremonial support as a person is growing up, and are rewarded with customary gifts on important occasions in the person's life. Vari-Borigi analyses this reciprocal relationship in terms of an auntie's value to her possessor, but it can also be likened to that of an animal or garden being tended (Duhamel, 2019, p. 40). When speakers themselves are asked why they refer to their aunties with BULA, they generally respond that it is simply an established usage; the original reason for it is not remembered today.

A hint of what that original reason might have been comes from neighbouring languages on Ambae and Maewo. Northeast Ambae has a directly-possessed term for 'auntie', *ede-* or *ide-*, which resembles the Sa term used at the opposite end of Pentecost (it thus seems likely that the other Pentecost languages once had a similar term, but have lost it). However, Northeast Ambae speakers also refer to their aunts using expressions such as *retahina bulana toa*, literally 'mother of one's chicken' (Allen, 1964, p. 317, Hyslop, 2001, p. 73).<sup>10</sup> This naturally incorporates the BULA classifier since it alludes to a domestic animal. The historical reason for the usage is, again, not remembered (as a speaker once put it to me, "I call my auntie a chicken but I have no idea why!").

The terms for 'auntie' in some Maewo languages appear to be variants on this theme. The Sungwadaga term for 'my auntie' (44a) is simply 'my chicken'. The Sungwadia form (44b) is interesting because, although it uses the GENERAL rather than the BULA classifier, it combines a word for chicken (*toa*) with a word *veve* (which on its own means 'mother') that is formally similar to the *vwavwa/wawa* of Pentecost.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Young Raga and Apma speakers do occasionally possess 'auntie' with GENERAL rather than BULA, in non-traditional contexts. Some speakers have suggested to me that the use of GENERAL here conveys informality, as it does with other kinship terms; others regard it simply as incorrect.

<sup>10</sup> The exact form of this phrase appears to be subject to some variation, perhaps dialectal.

<sup>11</sup> Terms such as Raga *vwavwa* are treated by Ross & Marck (2023) as reflexes of Proto-Oceanic \**wawa* 'mother's brother', but the reflexes are irregular (Proto-Oceanic \**w* is normally retained as *w* in Raga and Ske and lost in Apma and Sowa), and the history of these kinship terms is complicated. Northern dialects of Apma have address

- Sungwadaga** (44a) *bula-gu toa*  
BULA-1SG auntie
- Sungwadia** (b) *no-ku veve toa*  
GENERAL-1SG auntie  
'my auntie' (Vanua Readers)

It seems plausible that use of BULA with aunts in Raga, Apma, Sowa and Ske also arose from a 'mother hen' expression, in which the association with a chicken has been lost and forgotten but the association with BULA remains.

Some other uses of BULA that are found in old Raga sources are likely extensions of its use with aunts: Miss Hardacre's dictionary lists *bila(k) borai* (literally '(my) BULA generation') meaning females of one's parents generation, and Yoshioka (2003) shows *bilan atatu* 'his person' used for the groom's mother-in-law at a wedding.

Younger Raga speakers also use the BULA classifier with no accompanying noun (*bilana* 'his/her') to mean 'boyfriend' or 'girlfriend' (Vari-Bogiri, 2011, p. 119). However, auntie is not the preferred kin category for a man to marry in Raga custom (Taylor, 2003), and when questioned about the connection, speakers prefer instead to joke about how a girlfriend is tended like a pet or a garden. Use of BULA with one's girlfriend certainly does not indicate customary value, but is disrespectful, as Raga-speaking friends made clear to me once when I attempted to use the word myself in that context. (Partly this reflects a cultural taboo against casual relationships: the polite alternative suggested was *tasalaku* 'my wife', even though we were not formally married.)

In Ske, older speakers remember a noun *blie-* 'daughter-in-law' which is identical in form to Ske's BULA classifier (Johnson, 2014, p. 111). This is likely a coincidental homophone, cognate with equivalent kinship terms like Apma *bwalika-*, Raga *bwaliga-* and Mota *qaliga-*, which are unrelated to the BULA classifier. (In Ske, historical \**k* is regularly lost in this environment.) This kinship term is not used by younger Ske speakers, and when they are questioned about it, there is confusion with the 'auntie' usage of BULA.

An early 20<sup>th</sup> century grammar of Apma states, oddly, that BULA is used in relation to "plants, children and industry" (Niel cited by Schneider, 2010, p.175). There is no other evidence of human children being possessed with BULA in Apma or any other language, though I have encountered Apma *nutsu vido* 'orphaned child' possessed with BULA when referring to livestock (45a, see also (7) in Northeast Ambae). Sons and daughters, including step-children and adopted children, are always directly possessed in Apma (45b). Apma *haavak* 'child' may be indirectly possessed by a schoolteacher referring to pupils, but in this case the classifier is GENERAL.

- Apma** (45a) *Bila-k nutsu vido nanong*  
BULA-1SG orphaned.child DEM  
'I'm caring for this orphan [chick]'

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terms *baa* 'mother', *bawap* 'uncle' and *wawa* 'auntie'; there is obvious potential for historical conflation of these terms.

- (b) *Nutsu-k te woo*  
 child-1SG TAM be.born  
 ‘My child was born’

In Raga and Apma, a chief or political leader may possess his people with either GENERAL (46a) or BULA (46b). The latter is heard mainly in public speeches and adages, and may represent formal or oratorical language.

- Apma** (46a) *Subu te sadok li vini mini no-n tarut nii*  
 chief TAM sit LOC village PREP GENERAL-3SG people PL  
 ‘There was a chief in the village with his people’

- (b) *Subu ba bila-n tarut nii ra-m di daltsi*  
 chief CONJ BULA-3SG people PL 3PL-TAM stay around  
 ‘A chief has his people around him’

The function of BULA here may be to emphasise the possessor’s role in leading his people, as in a dance, and tending to them, as with cultivated items. Similar sentiments are conveyed by (47), an expression used in Apma wedding speeches in which the speaker and the groom possess the assembled guests with BULA.

- Apma** (47) *Tarut nii ah ra-m di ah ba bila-daru tarut*  
 people PL REL 3PL-TAM stay DEM CONJ BULA-1DU.INCL people  
 ‘The people who are here are our people [brought here by us]’

In the Nduindui Bible, BULA is used whenever God is possessing His people (48) (though in Raga, the GENERAL classifier is used in these verses).

- Nduindui** (48) *I God u vanamai kwara ne vakahiki na*  
 ART God TAM come REL TAM help ART  
*bula-na tangaloi*  
 BULA-3SG people  
 ‘God has come to help His people’ (from Luke 7:16)

Where a person is not being led but is being followed or associated with, the classifier is always GENERAL, whether the person is valued (49a) or not (49b). This is true in all BULA-using languages for which I have evidence.

**Apma** (49a) *Mwe dangro mini Subu ah no-n Takaa*  
 TAM pray PREP Lord REL GENERAL-3SG God  
 ‘He prayed to the Lord his God’ (from Jonah 2:1)

(b) *Te vaavaik nokon no-n iwel*  
 TAM provoke PREP GENERAL-3SG enemy  
 ‘He provoked his enemy’

Employees too are possessed with GENERAL (50), (51), reinforcing the observation that it is the GENERAL classifier, not BULA, that is associated with economic transactions.

**Apma** (50) *Atsi bwaleh mwan ba-i atnan karih*  
 person one TAM NEG1-be servant  
*no-n atsi meresan karu nga*  
 GENERAL-CST wealthy.person two NEG2  
 ‘A person cannot serve two masters’ (from Matthew 6:24)

**Nduindui** (51) *ra-na viti lakwa-e ne vanamai vae*  
 3PL.TAM say PREP-3SG TAM come CONJ  
*ne vakahiki na no-na tangaloi boloki*  
 TAM help ART GENERAL-3SG servant  
 ‘they asked him to come and heal his servant’ (from Luke 7:3)

A general problem with the theory that BULA indicates value in people is that, if this were the case, the term ought to be more widely used and appreciated. Even if its use were customarily associated with specific situations, one might expect at least occasional light-hearted use of it outside these situations, in the same spirit in which Apma speakers address someone who has done them a favour with a smile and *bwara subu* ‘big chief’. Yet attempts to use BULA of people outside the very narrow range of contexts mentioned above are not considered excessively respectful or customarily inappropriate, but are regarded simply as grammatically incorrect.

Since the BULA classifier is not generally associated with people, anthropomorphisation of a plant or animal can demotivate its use. In part of a poem about a (valued) tree in the Vanua Readers – “Whitewood, my whitewood, I think you’ll be the next to be cut down” – translations in most of the languages that would ordinarily use BULA with plants do so, but Vurës and Sungaloge use the GENERAL classifier instead. During Ske translation (which I helped oversee), the translator initially used the GENERAL classifier, then acknowledged a mistake and changed the classifier to BULA.

Conversely, a human being may be possessed with BULA when being likened to a plant, animal or body ornament, as when a proud Raga-speaking father refers to his son as *bilan gai* ‘his plant/tree’ or *bilan lalau* ‘his decorative feather’ (Vari-Bogiri, 2011, pp. 119-120).

### 3.8 Gardens

Arguably the most valuable material possession of all for people in Vanuatu is their land. Land provides for the needs of current and future generations, anchors people's identities, and can sometimes be leased or sold for large amounts of money (though Vanuatu's constitution, recognising the importance of land, restricts land sales to outsiders). It was concern over land alienation that initiated Vanuatu's struggle for independence, and land ownership continues to be the subject of frequent local disputes (Lavender Forsyth & Atkinson, 2024). However, I have come across no example in any language of land being possessed with BULA in this type of context. Pentecost's languages use the GENERAL classifier for land as property (52a), some Vurës speakers use the FOOD classifier with land since "it is the land that feeds us" (Malau, 2016, p. 291), and in some languages there are dedicated possessive classifiers for land (Table 1). Many languages do, however, use the BULA classifier with words denoting areas of land in the context of cultivation (52b).

**Apma** (52a) *Te vikaik u no-n tan*  
 TAM argue PREP GENERAL-3SG land  
 'He had a dispute over his land'

(b) *Naeah naa koro-n bila-m tavahe*  
 DEM now fence/area- CST BULA-2SG valley.garden  
 'This is the boundary of your valley garden'

Possession of generic words for 'garden' with BULA is attested in Mwerlap, Nduindui, Raga and all Maewo languages. In Northeast Ambae, gardens under cultivation (*rivuruvu*) are possessed with BULA but gardens that are not under cultivation (*talū*) are not (Rodman, 1981, p. 78). (However, in Raga, the same word *talū* 'old garden' is possessed with BULA, and its Apma equivalent is directly possessed.)

Older Raga sources ((53) and Codrington, 1885, pp. 434, 439) also show BULA referring to 'garden' when used with no accompanying noun.

**Raga** (53) *Tabwalugu vi van lol bila-na*  
 girl TAM go LOC BULA-3SG  
 'The girl will go to hers [her garden]' (Yoshioka, 1987)

In Apma, the generic word for 'garden' (*lekoo*) is possessed with the associative construction (see (11) and (68) for examples), but Apma terms for types of garden such as a valley garden (*tavahe*), worked plot (*um*) or swamp garden (*bul*) are possessed with BULA. Usage is similar in neighbouring Ske. In some other languages including Vurës and Tangoa, words for garden can be directly possessed.

A garden is a multifaceted possession, comprising both cultivated items (which are possessed with BULA) and the land they grow on (which is not), traditionally enclosed by a fence or hedge (which may comprise both non-living materials and living plants). The words used for gardens in northern Vanuatu languages have varied sources and colexifications including 'land', 'enclosure', 'place' and 'work', and some of these concepts may trigger associations with other classifiers or possessive structures, the availability of which varies

between languages. It is therefore not surprising that possessive classifier use is varied in the case of gardens.

### 3.9 Money and valuables

Generic words for valuable property are hard to find in dictionaries of northern Vanuatu languages, but Apma has one, *meres*. This word, which also means ‘weight’ or ‘importance’, can apply both to monetary wealth and to traditional items of value such as pigs, mats and kava. If BULA marked valuable possessions in Apma, then its use would surely be expected here, yet *meres* is possessed with the GENERAL classifier, not BULA, in both traditional contexts (54a) and non-traditional ones (54b).

**Apma** (54a) *Ka biah u no-mi meres*  
 2PL be.thanked PREP GENERAL-2PL valuables  
 ‘Thank you for your valuable contributions [at a ceremony]’

(b) *go-ah ra-m hural ne apko meres no-n tarut*  
 DEM-REL 3PL-TAM walk TAM collect valuables GENERAL- CST people  
 ‘those who go around collecting people’s wealth [tax collectors]’ (from Matthew 5:46)

The Northeast Ambae cognate of this word, *maraha*, refers specifically to ceremonial mats, and again is possessed with the GENERAL classifier (55).

**NE Ambae** (55) *mo wali na no-ra maraha*  
 TAM take ART GENERAL-3PL valuable.mat  
 ‘she took their ceremonial mat’ (Hyslop, 2001, p. 175)

In Raga, the word *roso* meaning ‘wealth’ or ‘valuable possessions’ may be directly possessed (56a) or possessed with the GENERAL classifier (56b), but never with BULA.

**Raga** (56a) *go-v lai roso-mwa lol ute amare*  
 2PL-TAM take riches-2SG LOC place above  
 ‘you will have riches in Heaven’ (from Mark 10:21)

(b) *Sine hagavi tamwata i lolotabetabe vi*  
 mercy peace and love TAM  
*vora no-miu roso*  
 become GENERAL-2PL riches  
 ‘Mercy, peace and love will be yours in abundance’ (from Jude 1:2)

Items of economic value in rural Vanuatu include pigs, staple crops such as yams and taro, and cash crops such as coconuts and kava (Section 3.1). All of these items are typically possessed with BULA when being cultivated (57a) but GENERAL when being traded (57b), and FOOD or DRINK when the focus is on personal consumption (57c). This is illustrated here with kava (*sini*) in Apma, but a similar pattern of classifier use has been noted with a variety of

products (see also (2)) and in a variety of languages, including Mavea (Guérin, 2011, p. 180), Mwerlap (Henri, 2023, p. 182), Northeast Ambae (Hyslop, 2001, p. 184), Raga (Vari-Bogiri, 2011, p. 124), Sungwadia (Henri, 2011, p. 146) and Vurës (Malau, 2016, p. 309).

**Apma** (57a) *Bila-m sini nong ba bwalbwaluk ah*  
 BULA-2SG kava DEM CONJ be.young really  
 ‘These kava plants of yours are really immature’

(b) *Mwi-di i no-n sini*  
 TAM-exist PREP GENERAL-3SG kava  
 ‘He [a kava seller] lives off his kava’

(c) *Na-t liani ma-k sini*  
 1SG-TAM spit.out DRINK-1SG kava  
 ‘I threw up my kava’

Prior to European contact, northern Vanuatu societies did not use money in the modern way, but had elaborate traditional economies in which valuable items were accumulated, lent, borrowed, traded, and used ceremonially to settle obligations or buy rank. The main currencies of these exchanges were pigs, long red-dyed mats, and strings of threaded shells. Pentecost and Ambae specialised in the production and use of dyed mats, and the Banks Islands was a centre for manufacture and use of shell money, though historically there was some trade between areas (Tryon, 1999). Today, traditional currencies are still widely manufactured and used, though it is also common for modern money to be used as a substitute in ceremonies.

Shell money in the languages of the Banks Islands may be possessed with BULA (see below), but valuable mats in the languages of Pentecost and Ambae are possessed with the GENERAL classifier (55), (58), (59). Traditional mats may also be directly possessed when worn or draped over the possessor (60).

**Raga** (58) *daulato nu ilo bwana no-n ratahi-na*  
 girl TAM know traditional.mat GENERAL-CST mother-3SG  
 ‘the girl has known the meaning of the big red mat given by her mother’ (Yoshioka, 2003)

**Apma** (59) *Ra-t sis bahka seese no-n mwariak*  
 3PL-TAM rinse.after.dyeing traditional.mat GENERAL-CST chiefly.rank  
 ‘They rinsed the high chief’s mats [after dyeing them]’ (Pascal Temwakon)

**Raga** (60) *ra-m huri atamani gabe mwalaḡelo nu hun bwana-na*  
 3PL-TAM follow man REL boy TAM cover.head mat-3SG  
 ‘they [aunties at a ceremony] walk after a man to whom the boy has given a big red mat by putting it over his head’ (Yoshioka, 2003)

Shell money resembles crops and livestock in that it requires labour-intensive production in order to generate returns (Malau, 2016, p. 297), but the same is equally true of dyed mats. It therefore seems more likely that the use of BULA for shell money was originally an extension of its use with body ornaments (Section 3.2), but that this connection may have been reinterpreted in some areas.

Modern money typically is typically known by borrowed words such as *mani*, *selen* (from ‘shilling’) or *vatu* (Vanuatu’s currency and in some languages the word for ‘stone’), although in translated literature, ‘money’ may be translated using old words that originally meant shell money or using nouns derived from the word ‘buy/pay’ (e.g. Nduindui *kaivoli*, Tamambo *volvol*). Money is usually possessed with BULA in the languages of the Banks Islands (61a-c), but with the GENERAL classifier elsewhere (61d-h).<sup>12</sup>

|  |       |   |
|--|-------|---|
| <b>Vurës</b>   | (61a) | <i>Na <b>bulën</b> dōrōk o sunōtu sōm aē iñko!</i>      |
| <b>Nume</b>  | (b)   | <i>Nablan duru nut selen aben nek!</i>                  |
| <b>Mwerlap</b>                                       | (c)   | <i><b>Bulan</b> ro net som ben leke!</i>                |
| <b>Tangoa</b>  | (d)   | <i>Enñarua nakerihi <b>nora</b> watu makomono natu!</i> |
| <b>Nduindui</b>                                      | (e)   | <i>Hika a <b>nodaru</b> kaivoli kelekele aia!</i>       |
| <b>NE Ambae</b>                                      | (f)   | <i><b>Nodaru</b> homu tavuigi ngaha!</i>                |
| <b>Raga</b>  | (g)   | <i>Kadogaha <b>nodaru</b> hom kolo abena.</i>           |
| <b>Apma</b>  | (h)   | <i><b>Nodaru</b> mwani mwidi te tewep!</i>              |
| ‘The two of us have some money now!’ (Vanua Readers) |       |   |

Strikingly, the GENERAL classifier is used in Northeast Ambae (61f) and Raga (61g) even though the word used for money here, *homu*, also means ‘necklace’ and in that context would be possessed with BULA. Duhamel (2019, p. 40) suggests that a valuables classifier might not be used for currency since “objects used as a medium of exchange have no genuine owners”. However, even if this idea had philosophical merit, I do not see how it would lead speakers of languages like Raga to choose the GENERAL classifier – which is strongly associated with items of individual property – rather than BULA in this case.

Conversely, it is noteworthy that Banks Islands languages do tend to use BULA with money, even where the terminology is not that of shell money but borrowed words such as *selen* (61b). Have we, at last, found a case in which BULA is genuinely associated with valuables? I will return to this question in Section 4.

### 3.10 Summary

Typical uses of BULA are summarised in Table 3. Since neighbouring languages are frequently similar in their use of the classifier, information is grouped here by island area.

<sup>12</sup> There are a couple of contrary examples: in the Havai (Northeast Ambae) New Testament, ‘money’ is possessed with GENERAL in most verses but with BULA in Matthew 20:15, and Ivens (1938, p. 742) cites *bilak homu* ‘my money’ in Raga. These unexpected uses of BULA in missionary texts may reflect the influence of Mota (see Section 4.3) and/or the polysemy of *homu* with ‘necklace’. Conversely, in modern usage the Vurës dictionary shows ‘money’ possessed with GENERAL where BULA might be expected: *Nēr gete ser ten na möguk o sōm* ‘They haven’t paid me back my money yet’ (Malau, 2021, p. 167).



**Table 3.** Summary of BULA classifier use across languages

| Use of BULA         | Banks Islands (Vurës, Nume, Mwerlap) | Santo & Malo (Araki, Tangoa, Mavea, Tamambo) | Maewo (Sungwadia, Sungwadaga, Sungaloge) | Ambae (Nduindui, Northeast Ambae) | Pentecost (Raga, Apma, Ske) |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Crops & livestock   | Yes                                  | Yes  | Yes                                      | Yes                               | Yes                         |
| Body ornaments      | Limited                              | No   | Sometimes                                | Yes                               | Yes                         |
| Fishing lines       | No                                   | No   | Sometimes                                | Sometimes                         | Limited                     |
| Dances              | No                                   | No   | Not attested                             | Not attested                      | Yes                         |
| Musical instruments | No                                   | Limited                                      | Not attested                             | Yes                               | Yes                         |
| Songs               | No                                   | No   | No                                       | Sometimes                         | No                          |
| Toys & balls        | No                                   | No   | Not attested                             | Sometimes                         | Limited                     |
| Vehicles            | No                                   | No   | No                                       | Yes                               | Limited                     |
| Aunties             | No                                   | No   | Sometimes                                | Limited                           | Yes                         |
| People being led    | No                                   | No   | No                                       | Sometimes                         | Sometimes                   |
| Gardens             | Sometimes                            | No   | Yes                                      | Sometimes                         | Sometimes                   |
| Money               | Yes                                  | No   | No                                       | No                                | No                          |

Despite some variation in usage, certain key features of the BULA classifier occur quite consistently across languages:

- The main use of BULA is to mark the possession of live animals and plants
- BULA is associated with animals and plants specifically in the context of cultivation; the GENERAL classifier is preferred in contexts of trade or customary exchange
- BULA is not ordinarily used with non-living animal and plant products
- BULA is not restricted to traditionally valuable possessions, but can occur with unusual, worthless or recently-introduced items

Secondary uses of the BULA classifier are more varied, but commonly involve items that are fastened to the body, are held on a cord and/or can be perceived as animate. These can be explained as extensions of the classifier's use with domestic animals, though the exact motivations for some usages are obscure and may reflect historical associations that are not remembered today.

Although the core features of the BULA classifier are relatively consistent across most of the languages for which good descriptions exist, there are two peripheral areas of northern Vanuatu, not discussed so far, in which the use of a classifier cognate with BULA departs significantly from this pattern. I discuss these in the following section.

## 4 Atypical Usage of BULA

### 4.1 Widening of BULA use – northern Santo

Tolomako, spoken in the Big Bay area of Santo, is described only in old missionary sources, but it appears from these that in Tolomako a reflex of *\*bula-* has become the GENERAL classifier. Here, a classifier *pila-* ~ *pile-* is used for all possessions apart from those being eaten or drunk, including not only pigs (62a) but also items such as clubs that would not be associated with BULA in any other language (62b).

**Tolomako** (62a) *Na pile-i sei na bo?*  
 ART GENERAL/BULA-CST who ART pig  
 ‘Whose is the pig?’

(b) *na pila-ku na tigo*  
 DEM GENERAL/BULA-1SG ART club  
 ‘my club’ (Codrington, 1885, p. 445)

Several other languages of central and north-eastern Santo, including Merei (Chung, 2000), Matantas (Meyerhoff, 2008), Nkep (Meyerhoff, 2016), and Sakao (Touati, 2014), do not use a BULA classifier. Vanuatu languages tend to converge grammatically with their neighbours as a result of intense language contact, even as they diverge lexically (François, 2011; François et al., 2015), so in this neighbourhood, it is unsurprising that Tolomako might lose BULA as a possessive category even while preserving the *\*bula-* lexeme. (Equally, it is unsurprising that languages in the core of the BULA area, surrounded by other BULA-using languages, should use the classifier in broadly similar ways.)

In nearby Vunapu, also known only from old sources, there is both a GENERAL classifier *se-* and a BULA classifier *pila-* ~ *pile-*. However, the BULA classifier appears to be unusually broad in its use, attested not only with animals but also with clothing, ‘prayer’, ‘merchandise’, ‘glory’, ‘work’ and ‘law’ (Ray, 1926, pp. 401–416). This may represent an intermediate between typical use of BULA and the generalised use found in Tolomako.

### 4.2 Narrowing of BULA use – northern Banks Islands

The other language in which use of a BULA classifier is clearly unusual is also geographically marginal: Vera’a in the Banks Islands. Although Vera’a’s neighbour to the south, Vurës, is an ordinary BULA-using language, no language spoken to the north of Vera’a uses a BULA classifier.

Vera’a has a word *bolo-* that is cognate with BULA and functions in at least some circumstances as a possessive classifier, but appears to be very restricted in its use. Schnell (2011) defines it as a classifier for possessions of traditional value, noting that traditionally valuable items for Vera’a speakers include shell money, pigs and root crops. However, shell money is the only one of these items, and indeed the only possession at all other than generic ‘things’, with which the BULA classifier appears to occur in Vera’a (63).

**Vera'a** (63) *di =m kol sir wo =n vovo'*  
 3SG TAM take.rank for and ART plaiting  
*bolo-gi =n 'eveg bolo-gi =n mōmōglēge dōl*  
 BULA-3SG ART shell.money BULA-3SG ART things all  
 'She passed rank-takings for plaiting, to have shell money, to have all kinds of  
 (traditionally valuable) things.' (Schnell, 2011, p. 143)

In other examples of Schnell's, BULA has generic reference, as in (64).

**Vera'a** (64) *diē gitag bolo-gi 'ekēgēn*  
 3SG not.exist BULA-3SG Here  
 'He doesn't have (traditionally valuable) possessions here.' (Schnell, 2011, p. 144)

Example (64) relates to a person who had just returned to the village after a few years away and "expresses that he is not fully rooted in the community and does not own any customary important items" (Schnell, 2011, p. 144). What these items are is unspecified. In my experience, when ni-Vanuatu return to their traditional communities after some years away, they remain well-rooted in their family connections, and often return with money which can be substituted for traditional goods in ceremonies, but their houses have rotted away and their gardens are bare. Houses can be rebuilt quickly if materials are available, but gardens take time to regrow. It is therefore tempting to associate the use of BULA in (64) with cultivated items. However, Vera'a – uniquely among languages that have a BULA classifier – does not appear to use BULA with any specific cultivated item.

Usages such as (64) also blur the line between classifiers and nouns. Use of a possessive classifier with no explicit possession is not itself unusual: anaphoric use with an already-salient possession, as in (27), occurs widely, in other languages and in Vera'a. However, in other languages, when a possessive classifier is used to indicate one's property in a general sense, it usually occurs with a generic noun 'things', as in (63), (67) and (68). Yet (64) in Vera'a appears to show the classifier itself functioning as a directly-possessed noun meaning 'possessions'. Among other languages, such noun-like usage of BULA is attested only in Raga (with the specific meaning of 'garden' or 'boyfriend/girlfriend') and in Mota (see below), and in both these languages such usage is rare.<sup>13</sup> BULA in Vera'a, having lost most of its use as a classifier, may thus be in the process of being de-grammaticalised into a noun denoting possessions of a certain kind.

This development appears to be complete in three neighbouring languages of the Banks Islands: Mwotlap, Löyöp and Lemerig. These languages do not have BULA possessive classifiers but do have directly-possessed nouns reflecting *\*bula-* (François, 2010). In Mwotlap, the best-described of these three languages, the noun takes the form *na-mle-* when prefixed with an article (the underlying root is *bele-*), and François (2023a) lists two meanings: "personal properties, estate: particularly economic possessions, garden, domestic animals" and "gift, offering, present". Both usages are described as rare. This word cannot syntactically link a possessor and possession, and is therefore not a possessive classifier; the type of usage in

<sup>13</sup> Ray (1926, p. 375) also suggests such usage in Tasiriki (Akei), but his examples are hard to interpret and may represent anaphoric usage.

Vera'a illustrated in (63) would not be possible in Mwotlap. It now functions only as a directly-possessed noun (65), a usage comparable to (64) in Vera'a.

**Mwotlap** (65) *nēk qoyo vēl na-mle-k atgiy*  
 2SG TAM give ART-present-1SG later  
 'You'll give me a present later [for helping me to pass an initiation]'  
 (François, 2023a, p. 32)

### 4.3 The link with valuables? – Mota

Adjacent to Vurës, Vera'a and Mwotlap is the language that the scholars who originally made a connection between BULA and valuable property knew best: Mota. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Mota was used as a common language and literary medium by the Anglican Church's Melanesian Mission, and much early scholarship in northern Vanuatu languages was conducted through the medium of Mota (Ivens, 1918, p. 171).

Use of BULA as a possessive classifier in Mota appears to be much like in Vurës: the classifier occurs with crops, livestock, money (*som*) and headdresses (*tamate*). The form of the BULA classifier in Mota has evolved from *pula-* in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to *pla-* today, but from the limited evidence available, its usage has not changed. BULA in Mota might therefore be interpreted as in Vurës, as a classifier for items that are cultivated. However, there are also usages in the Mota dictionary that seem to show BULA functioning as a possessed noun meaning 'property' (66), as it can in Vera'a and Mwotlap.

**Mota** (66) *na-pula-na tagai ran*  
 ART-BULA-3SG nothing entirely  
 'one who has no food or property' (Codrington & Palmer, 1896, p. 144)

BULA also forms part of compound terms in Mota relating to valuable property, such as *mare-pula-* "rich in possessions", *sale-pula-* "source of wealth", and *vile-pula-* "to make return, by the person taking a step in the *suqe* [grade taking], for what his introducer has distributed for him to the members" (Codrington & Palmer, 1896).<sup>14</sup>

In the Mota Bible, 'property' or 'possessions' is typically translated using a generic noun 'things' possessed by BULA (67a). This usage in Mota contrasts with that in other BULA-using languages such as Tangoa, Northeast Ambae and Raga (67b), which all use the GENERAL classifier here.

**Mota** (67a) *Tur n̄arag reag pula-miu o savasava*  
 TAM sell away BULA-2PL ART things

**Raga** (b) *Gi-v salei no-miu Ginau dului*  
 2PL-TAM sell GENERAL-2PL thing every  
 'Sell your possessions' (from Luke 12:33)

<sup>14</sup> The original sources cite these words with a generic suffix *-i*, but in all attested examples there is a specific possessor.

In languages other than Mota and Vera'a, use of 'things' with BULA is attested only when referring specifically to cultivated items (68), or in examples from old missionary sources where the context is unclear and usage may have been influenced by Mota (e.g. Ray, 1926, p. 389).

|   |      |             |             |                      |                |            |               |
|---|------|-------------|-------------|----------------------|----------------|------------|---------------|
| <b>Apma</b>   | (68) | <i>Ra-t</i> | <i>leli</i> | <i>lekoo</i>         | <i>na-a</i>    | <i>bi</i>  | ...           |
|   |      | 3PL-TAM     | make        | garden               | ASSOC-3PL      | CONJ       |               |
|   |      | <i>ra-m</i> | <i>ruwu</i> | <b><i>bila-a</i></b> | <i>le-leut</i> | <i>nii</i> | <i>lele-n</i> |
|   |      | 3PL-TAM     | plant       | BULA-3PL             | REDUP-thing    | PL         | inside-3SG    |
| 'They made their garden and... they plant things in it' (Pascal Temwakon) |      |             |             |                      |                |            |               |

Comparison of Vurës, Mota, Vera'a and Mwotlap suggests a path of evolutionary development by which BULA, originally a classifier for cultivated items, was reinterpreted in certain languages of the central Banks Islands as a term for valuable possessions. In Vurës, BULA remains demonstrably linked with cultivation, and the only non-living items possessed with BULA are shell money and headdresses. Elsewhere in northern Vanuatu, these two items belong to a larger category of items fastened to the body or held on a cord that are possessed with BULA, perhaps by analogy with a leashed animal (Section 3.2). However, local developments in the Banks Islands – the importance of shell necklaces as currency, and the emergence of a competing classifier associated with worn items – obscured this association, leaving BULA's use ripe for reinterpretation. One alternative interpretation of the link between crops, livestock and shell money was that they are traditional valuables. This concept proved more useful as a generic noun than as a possessive classifier, and grammatical use evolved accordingly.

Possessive classifier evolution in Oceanic languages typically involves nouns evolving into classifiers (e.g. Lichtenberk, 2018), not the other way round. However, the possibility of a BULA classifier de-grammaticalising into a possessed noun (potentially with a meaning somewhat different from the classifier's typical use) is demonstrated by its use for 'garden' and 'boyfriend/girlfriend' in Raga (Section 3.7 & 3.8). As we have seen, the core use of a BULA as a possessive classifier for cultivated items occurs in a consistent way in the vast majority of the languages that have a *\*bula-* reflex, while its use for valuable property is demonstrable only in one small cluster of languages at the margin of the BULA area, and can be readily explained as a result of local developments there. There is even a tiny bit of historical evidence that BULA was previously a classifier in Banks Islands languages that now use it only as a noun: 19<sup>th</sup> century grammar sketches (Codrington, 1885, pp. 315, 335) show the phrase 'my pig' in Mwotlap (*na-blek qo*)<sup>15</sup> and Lemerig (*pelek no qo*) with what looks like a BULA classifier.

Codrington was never specific about what kind of value BULA might denote in Mota, defining it only as "a choice possession" (Codrington 1885, p. 272) or "a piece of property, chattel, having reference to something of more consequence than what would be represented by... *no*" (Codrington & Palmer, 1896, p. 122). But the idea of a connection between BULA and value took hold, and was applied to other languages such as Raga (Codrington, 1885, p. 434), even though – as Miss Hardacre and others would observe – it did not account well for usage in these languages. BULA classifiers in the literature on northern Vanuatu languages have denoted value ever since.

<sup>15</sup> The change from historical *na-blek* to modern *na-mlek* is regular (François, 2001, p. 37).

## 5 The Wider Picture

In the typology of possessive classifiers in Oceanic languages, BULA is a slight oddity. Typical Oceanic languages have the three original classifiers (FOOD, DRINK and GENERAL), which have monosyllabic roots and can be applied to a broad range of possessions, together in some languages with innovative classifiers that are often longer in form, restricted to a single language or a few closely-related languages, and have narrower functions. Examples of the latter in northern Vanuatu include classifiers for beds and for transport vessels in Vera'a and Vurës, for portions in Araki, and for dead people's possessions in Mavea and Tamambo (Table 1). BULA somewhat straddles these two groups of classifiers. It is polysyllabic and restricted to a single region of Oceania, but within this region it is found in a large number of languages and is broad in functional scope.

Uncertainty about the typological nature of BULA dates back to Codrington. In his grammars of Melanesian languages, BULA is generally not listed among other "possessive particles" (what would today be called classifiers), but instead is categorised as a noun meaning 'property'. As we saw in Section 4.3, BULA can indeed be used this way in Mota, the language most familiar to Codrington. However, he was reluctant to count BULA among the other possessive classifiers even where he recognised that they were functionally the same: "No one would think of calling it a Possessive Particle ...only because it is too long. But it is in use, and in fact, of identical character with those" (Codrington, 1885, p. 131).

It has been suggested that in addition to the three monosyllabic classifiers, Proto-Oceanic speakers made use of a large, open set of possessed nouns as classifiers, and that BULA may represent an example of how "in some languages lone members of the large set have been grammaticised and have survived" (Lynch et al., 2002, p. 79). BULA-using languages are among Vanuatu's most conservative in their possessive grammar, so it is worth considering the possibility that a classifier like BULA might have been a widespread ancestral feature of the region's languages that has been lost elsewhere. Specialised classifiers for plants and/or animals can be found in a number of other languages elsewhere in Vanuatu and more broadly in Oceania. The languages of Paama and Southeast Ambrym have a classifier that is used for the possession of plants and animals, together with gardens and (unlike BULA) one's home and ancestral land, which Crowley (1982, p. 213) rationalises as expressing possessive relationships "determined by traditional law or custom". Languages of Tanna have classifiers for plants (Lynch, 2001), and the extensive classifier systems found in New Caledonian and Micronesian languages also commonly include classifiers for plants and animals (e.g. Bril, 2023, Lynch et al., 2002, p. 782). However, none of these classifiers is cognate with BULA.<sup>16</sup> The classifier for plants and animals in Paama and Southeast Ambrym, which is the closest to BULA geographically and in usage, reflects a root \**sa-* that is widely used as the GENERAL classifier elsewhere in Vanuatu (Franjeh & Gray 2017); a classifier *sa-* for housing and land also occurs alongside a BULA classifier for plants and animals in Mavea (Guérin, 2011, p. 174). It therefore seems unlikely that this classifier shares a common origin with BULA. Plant and animal classifiers elsewhere in Oceania likely also represent independent innovations.

Grandison et al. (2021) conducted experiments into the psychology of classification among speakers of a variety of Vanuatu and New Caledonian languages (though sadly, no BULA-using language was included). When asked to sort a selection of items freely into

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<sup>16</sup> Capell in the 1930s reported a classificatory particle *bula* "referring to chattels and animal property" in a Kilivila language of Papua New Guinea (Lichtenberk, 1985), but I can find no modern account of this. It may be related to the classificatory particle *po'ula* for 'plantation/grove' or 'heap/group' listed by Senft (1993), but this is clearly not cognate with BULA.

categories, speakers frequently created categories based on the usage of an item (“things for X”), the source of items (including, significantly, “things from the garden”), whether items were local or foreign, and whether they were natural or manmade. (Value was not mentioned as a means of categorisation.) This highlights the fact that natural and cultivated items are fairly obvious categories into which to group items, so it is not surprising that distinctions in possessive relationships based around such items have arisen repeatedly in Oceania.

The fact that we find BULA among languages that are generally conservative in their possessive grammar may not be because BULA itself is a conservative feature, but because it is incompatible with other common innovations. Several languages spoken close to the BULA-using area, including Sa, Merei (Chung, 2000) and Lehali (François, 2023b), show historical simplification of their possessive classifier systems, not fully retaining even the three basic classifiers inherited from Proto-Oceanic. It is possible that a BULA classifier was also lost during this simplification. The presence of *\*bula*- reflexes in Tolomako (Section 4.1) and the northern Banks Islands (Section 4.2) hints that the distribution of BULA previously extended into areas of northern Vanuatu where it is not used as a classifier today.

Another nearby language, North Ambrym, has a possessive classifier inventory that superficially resembles that of Ske, the closest BULA-using language, minus the BULA classifier. However, instead of using these classifiers flexibly to indicate the type of relationship that exists between possessor and possession, as Ske and all other BULA-using languages do, in North Ambrym the classifiers have developed into a gender-type system in which particular nouns always co-occur with particular classifiers (Franjeh, 2012). ‘Pig’, for example, is always possessed with the FOOD classifier in North Ambrym, whereas in Ske and elsewhere it would occur with the FOOD classifier only in the context of pork (and even then, only if the pork was for the possessor’s own consumption). In a system like North Ambrym’s, a classifier for cultivated items would be hard to maintain, because items are cultivated for reasons (such as food), so cultivated items almost always have multiple relationships with their possessors. (Indeed, the range of items classified as FOOD in North Ambrym – which includes inedible plants and certain kin including ‘auntie’ – looks suspiciously like what might result from a merger of the FOOD and BULA categories in a Ske-like language.) It is therefore unsurprising that we do not find BULA here.

As a shared innovation, BULA was once used as evidence for a ‘Northern Vanuatu languages’ subgroup (Clark 1985), but it is now recognised that the languages of this region do not form a discrete subgroup but rather a set of overlapping linkages (Lynch et al., 2002; François et al., 2015). The area in which BULA is used is also not coterminous with Northern Vanuatu as defined by Clark and others, since BULA is absent in the northernmost Torres and Banks Islands and parts of Espiritu Santo (though as we have seen, there is evidence from some languages that it was secondarily lost there), and is found in Apma, Sowa and Ske, which have historically been grouped with central Vanuatu languages (though the boundary here is not sharply defined).

The original source of BULA remains unclear. The only reconstructed proto-form I have encountered that is close in form and relates to a cultivated (or valuable) item is *\*bulaka* ‘swamp taro’. Irrigated taro cultivation is a major economic activity and source of subsistence in parts of northern Vanuatu, so it is not implausible that this might be the prototypical cultivated item. However, reconstruction of *\*bulaka* as a Proto-Oceanic word is problematic: this form is regularly reflected only in Micronesian and Polynesian languages, while putative North-Central Vanuatu cognates mostly reflect *\*bu[R]aka*, which these languages are assumed to have borrowed from a Micronesian source (Ross, 2008, p. 270). François (2011, pp. 148–149) presents evidence of doublet forms, so this borrowing may have happened multiple times.

Perhaps the BULA classifier reflects an additional doublet form, but the evidence is not compelling.

Since the usual relationship denoted by BULA is concerned primarily with an activity (cultivation) rather than a type of object, we might alternatively speculate that it originated from a verb that became nominalised. The evolution of a verb into a possessive classifier in a BULA-using language can be observed today in Tamambo, in which a verb *koru* meaning ‘be dry’ or ‘wither’ appears to be in the process of evolving into a possessive classifier indicating a possession whose owner is dead (Jauncey, 2011, pp. 220-221).

Descriptive verbs in conservative Oceanic languages like Tamambo can postmodify nouns (69), a construction that likely dates back to Proto-Oceanic (Lynch et al., 2002, p. 74).

**Tamambo** (69) *Mo le tevi na ronjo koru-koru*  
 3SG TAM sweep ART dead.leaf REDUP-dry  
 ‘It sweeps the dry leaves’ (Vanua Readers)

In Tamambo, *koru* in this position has become able to link a noun to a possession (70a), in a manner analogous to that of a possessive classifier like BULA (70b). In this context, Tamambo speakers no longer interpret *koru* to mean ‘dry’, but regard it as marking a certain type of possessive relationship.

**Tamambo** (70a) *toa koru-ni bumbu*  
 chicken dry-CST grandpa  
 ‘grandpa’s chickens’ (left behind after his death)

(b) *toa bula-ni bumbu*  
 chicken BULA-CST grandpa  
 ‘grandpa’s chickens’ (still being tended by grandpa) (Jauncey, 2011, p. 211)

No likely source verb for BULA can be identified within Vanuatu, but as Pawley (1973) and others have pointed out, in eastern dialects of neighbouring Fiji there is a very well-known potential cognate – Fijian *bula* ‘live’. It is easy to see how a classifier for cultivated items could have evolved from this verb in a manner similar to the evolution of *koru* in Tamambo. Just as a possession being dry or withered was interpreted historically by Tamambo speakers to indicate that its owner was no longer around, a possession being alive implies that its owner is tending it, which could have led to its reanalysis as a classifier for cultivated items. A precise reconstruction of the historical steps involved is not possible here, and the ultimate Proto-Oceanic etymology of Fijian *bula* is unclear, but the formal similarity between (for example) Fijian *toa bula nei X* ‘X’s live chicken’ and Tamambo *toa bula-ni X* (with essentially the same meaning but with *bula-* functioning as a classifier) is striking. This explanation of BULA’s origin, if correct, would of course add to the evidence that the classifier’s prototypical meaning has nothing to do with value.

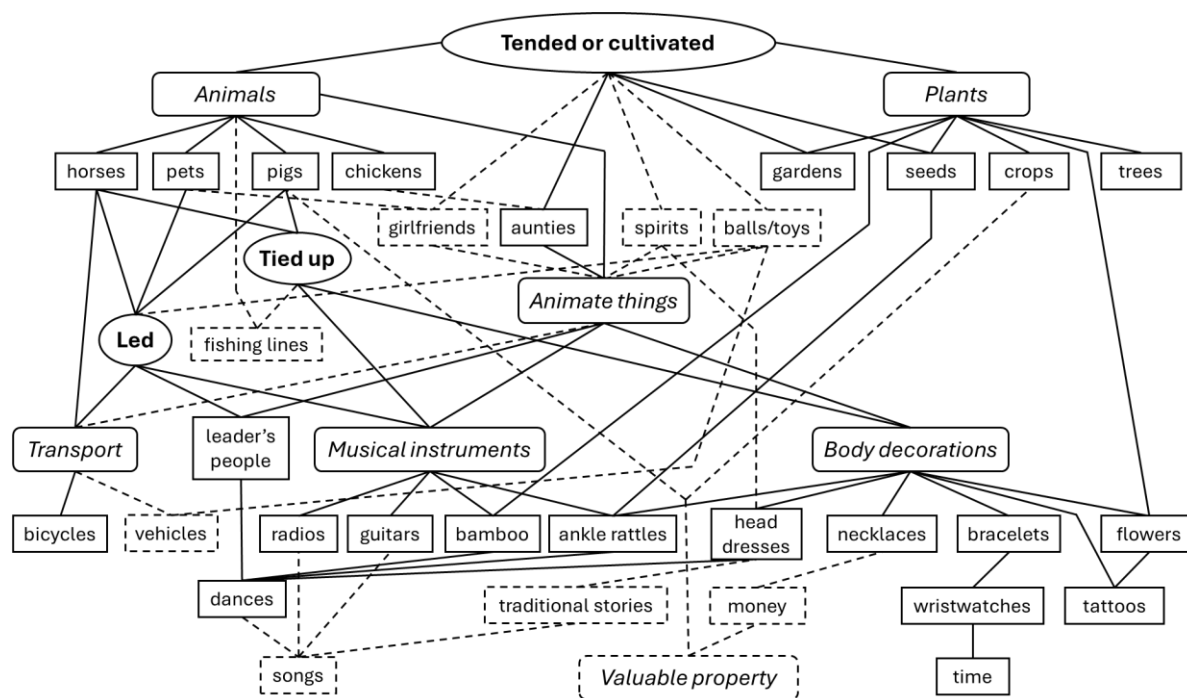
## 6 Conclusion

A survey of BULA classifiers across northern Vanuatu languages shows that their core use is usually to mark the relationship between a possessor and an animal or plant that is being reared



or cultivated. Languages have extended this use to analogous relationships in various ways, some of which are complex, multifaceted, or reflect historical associations that are no longer obvious today.

Rather than attempting a single coherent definition that covers all uses, or a set of sharply defined categories, it may be best to conceptualise BULA use, within and across languages, as an evolving network of associations stemming from an original primary association, as illustrated in Figure 2. In the overwhelming majority of BULA-using languages today, the primary association appears to be cultivation, but anyone who still wishes to argue that the original association may have been something else can simply follow the linkages in Figure 2 from a different starting point.



**Figure 2:** Some associations of the BULA classifier. Solid boxes and lines indicate usages that occur today in Apma and their likely associations; dashed boxes and lines indicate those that exist in other languages and/or may have existed historically. This diagram is not intended to be exhaustive.

This networked analysis is similar to the approach used by Franjeh (2012) in accounting for similarly complex patterns of possessive classifier use in North Ambrym. However, unlike North Ambrym, BULA-using languages in northern Vanuatu retain relational classifier systems in which classifier use is determined primarily by the relationship that a possession has with its possessor (such as being cultivated) rather than a possession's qualities (such as being alive). Semantic categories such as 'plants' and 'animals' do inevitably emerge even within a relational system, and may play a role in classifier choice, but this requires further investigation.

In most languages, the BULA classifier is not demonstrably associated with valuable or economic property, and in fact, the GENERAL classifier is specifically preferred over BULA when the focus is on economic value. However, an association between BULA and valuable property appears to have arisen as a result of local developments in parts of the Banks Islands, and led early researchers to believe that BULA classifiers in general denote value. This misconception has persisted in the literature on Vanuatu languages for 140 years, despite being contradicted

in several good studies of individual languages (and, in my experience, generally rejected by native speakers). The complexity of BULA's usage naturally leaves it open to multiple interpretations, although psycholinguistic experiments with native speakers could help to settle the question of what truly motivates its use.

For now, I conclude in the manner of an orator finishing a speech in Apma: *toptowan ah mwaskak ba bilam toptowan nae* 'the message that's given is your message now'. A talk or message (*toptowan*) would normally be possessed by its speaker with the GENERAL classifier in Apma, or directly possessed by the subject of the message, but in this unusual expression the BULA classifier is used and the possessor is you, the recipient. Like a pig being handed over at a ceremony, an idea that was mine (GENERAL, a trade item) is now yours (BULA, to be reared or cultivated). You are welcome either to slaughter it, neglect it, or nurture it in the hope of future gain.

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