



Decolonizing policy, practice and research on  
planned relocation

***Climate-related voluntary immobility in FIJI***

Merewalesi Yee

# Introduction : climate-related voluntary immobility

Climate mobility research

\*Displacement

\*Migration

\*Planned relocation

Climate immobility research

\*Involuntary immobility

\*Voluntary immobility

## **GAP**

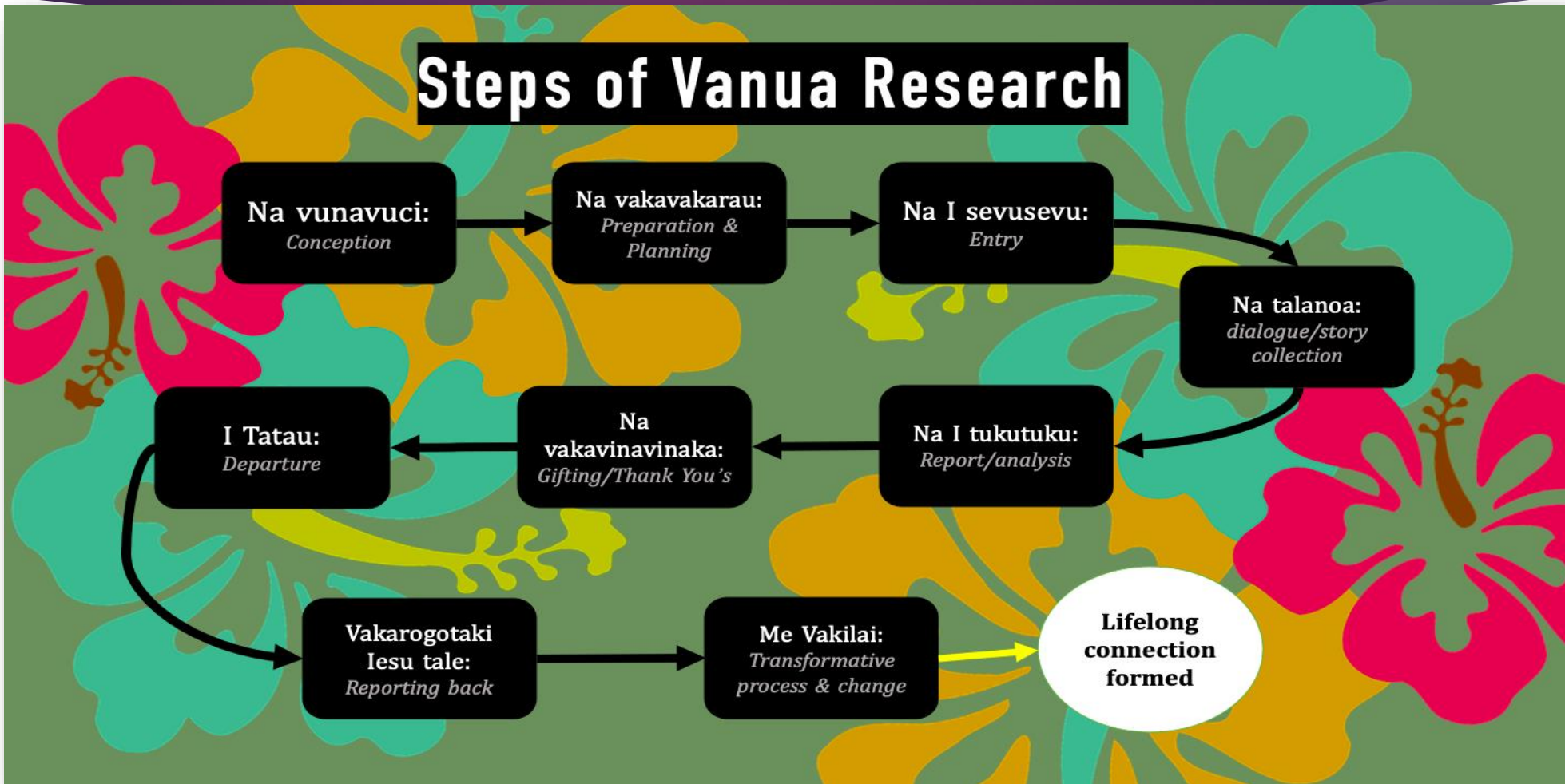
To date, however, few empirical studies have investigated the diverse and context-specific reasons for community reluctance to relocate.

## **AIM**

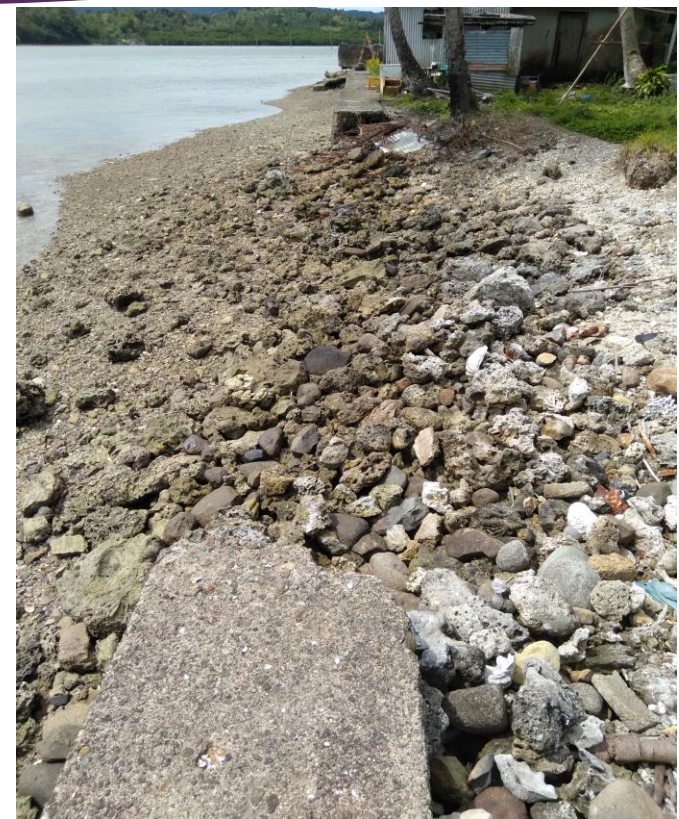
**To identify people's motivations, perspectives, and experiences of choosing to remain in at-risk places to the impacts of climate change**

# Fiji Vanua Research Framework

(Nabobo-Baba, 2006)



# Case study: Serua Island, Fiji





# Na cava na vuna keimami se tikoga kina ike? Why are we still here on Serua Island?



## THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

This includes the natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem services that sustain people's livelihoods, well-being and cultural practices, such as land, forests, sea, rivers, flora and fauna

## STEWARDSHIP

This includes people's strong attachment to nature, society and spirit, which transforms how they perceive, use and protect their natural environment through conservation and sustainable practices to enhance ecosystem resilience, and human well-being.

## SPIRITUALITY

This includes both the belief in supernaturalism based on totems, spirits and ancestral gods, as well as the Christian God that both have the power to save, protect, pardon, reward and punish those who do not conform to its rules. Side by side, traditional supernatural practices and Christianity continue to supplement each other, even though they try to supplant one another.



## SOCIAL BONDS AND KINSHIP TIES

Each iTaukei person is part of a hierarchical social group that share kinship ties and/or identify with the same territory in which its roots are established.

## WAYS OF BEING

iTaukei culture shapes and is in turn shaped by the ethos of the people dwelling on the Vanua and living through it. Emerging from this are beliefs, values and customs of morality, as well as appropriate ways of feeling, thinking and acting.

# Serua Island residents feel an obligation to stay because;

## Closeness to their Chief

- Serua island is the residence of the paramount chief of Serua province (1 of the 14 provinces in Fiji)
- **“Our forefathers chose to live and remain on the island just so they could be close to our Chief “** one resident explained.

## Link to their ancestors

- The link to ancestors is a vital part of life on Serua Island. Every family has a foundation stone upon which their ancestors built their house.
- **“In the past, when a foundation of a home is created, they name it, and that is where our ancestors were buried as well. Their bones, sweat, tears, hard work [are] all buried in the foundation.”**

## Close proximity to the ocean

- Ocean that separates Serua Island and mainland Fiji is a source of food, income and place of belonging.
- **“The ocean is part of me and sustains me – we gauge when to go and when to return according to the tide.”** one woman said.



# Contribution to '*Decolonizing climate change*'

(1) An **empirical place-based study** of immobility in a site where planned relocation is proposed as an adaptive response to climate risk.

(2) Acknowledges and embraces **VANUA** as a concept of central importance in Fiji

(3) The importance of **STEWARDSHIP** of place as a key component of Vanua.



Vinaka! And Thank you!



## Non-indigenous community in Fiji: Togoru settlement



Article

### Climate Change, Voluntary Immobility, and Place-Belongingness: Insights from Togoru, Fiji

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**Abstract:** Many low-lying communities around the world are increasingly experiencing coastal hazard risks. As such, climate-related relocation has received significant global attention as an adaptation response. However, emerging cases of populations resisting relocation in preference for remaining in place are emerging. This paper provides an account of residents of Togoru, a low-lying coastal settlement on Viti Levu Island, Fiji. Despite facing significant coastal impacts in the form of coastal erosion, tidal inundation, and saltwater intrusion, Togoru residents are opposing plans for relocation; instead opting for in-situ adaptation. We conceptualize place-belongingness to a land and people—through personal, historic and ancestral, relational, cultural, economic, and legal connections—as critical to adaptation and mobility decision-making. We argue that for adaptation strategies to be successful and sustainable, they must acknowledge the values, perspectives, and preferences of local people and account for the tangible and intangible connections to a place.

**Keywords:** adaptation; community; intangible; managed retreat; planned relocation



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## Indigenous community in Fiji: Serua Island



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### The role of Vanua in climate-related voluntary immobility in Fiji

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People, communities, and regions around the world are being pushed to adapt as climate-related risks increase. Within both policy and academic literature, the planned relocation of communities is often viewed as an adaptation option of last resort, given that it can lead to losses including attachment to place, place-based cultural practices, and identity. To date, however, few empirical studies have investigated the diverse and context-specific reasons for community reluctance to relocate. This study aimed to examine the motivations behind people's decisions to remain in locations at risk from climate change. Drawing on ethnographic data from fieldwork undertaken in 2021 in Serua Island, Fiji, this study shows how the concept of Vanua, a Fijian term that refers to the natural environment, social bonds and kinship ties, ways of being, spirituality, and stewardship, is used by Indigenous people to resist climate-driven relocation. Through exploring local decision-making, this study contributes to the small body of research on voluntary immobility in the context of climate change. This research also contributes to academic discussions on “decolonizing climate change” from a Pacific perspective while offering a strong empirical basis for critically addressing climate mobility scholarship through Indigenous narratives, values, and worldviews. We highlight that policy and practice must better integrate local understandings of voluntary immobility to avoid potential maladaptation and loss and damage to culture, livelihoods, and social networks. This can help develop more appropriate adaptation strategies for communities in Fiji and beyond as people move, but also resist mobility, in a warming world.