

Uncertain Belongings: Relationships, Money, and Returned Migrant Workers in Port Vila, Vanuatu

Maggie Cummings

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ABSTRACT

New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme allows Pacific islanders, including many from Vanuatu, to migrate as temporary agricultural labourers. For government stakeholders, the program's success can be measured, in no uncertain terms, by the increased consumption of foreign goods and community development projects funded by returned migrants. Yet it is precisely in these terms, of new belongings and one's sense of belonging, that returnees, especially young men, experience the greatest uncertainty. How should they use the money they earn overseas: to strengthen their kinship networks and communities by sharing their wealth, or to purchase clothes, stereos, cars, or even land, which will belong only to them as individuals? Each strategy has its potential promises and pitfalls, and the outcomes remain uncertain. Will workers who spend on belongings alienate themselves from their kin and island communities? And how might they be forging new kinds of belonging as young urban wage earners? In addition to exploring these questions, this paper suggests that these strategies might inform and inspire relevant policy that is able to better grapple with the very uncertainties the RSE helps to create.

Keywords: Migration, Recognised Seasonal Employer, Gender, Wage Labour, Vanuatu