

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

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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

INTRODUCTION

Since 2007, New Zealand's Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme has employed Pacific Island workers for temporary, seasonal work in the horticulture and viticulture industries. One of the key aims of the scheme is to encourage Pacific economic development through the remittances of Pacific Island participants. The scheme is frequently described as a migration-as-development "triple-win" in which migrants, the sending country, and the receiving country all benefit (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014, p.229). An early evaluation of the scheme suggests that one key "win" for migrants and their communities, at least in the short term, is "economic and wellbeing benefits from increased income"; for the sending countries, remittance incomes, framed as "consumption support", were also considered a short-term "win" (New Zealand Department of Labour, 2010, p.8). By these measures, the scheme has been a success for Vanuatu: after tourism, RSE remittances are the greatest source of foreign income, and in 2012, Labour Commissioner Lionel Kalmut estimate that in its first five years, the program had brought in 3.8 billion vatu (NZ \$54 million) (cited in Bailey, 2014, p.26). As well, per capita incomes in those households with an RSE participant have risen by 30% (Gibson and McKenzie 2014, p. 239). Another key measure of the scheme's success (Gibson and McKenzie, 2010; 2014) that is particularly relevant here is the increase in participating households' "durable goods" such as DVD players, radios, and refrigerators. At the same time, the scheme delivers little in terms of skills improvement or self-employment opportunities in Vanuatu for returned workers (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014, p.242). The success of the program, in terms of development, seems to reside in giving ni-Vanuatu greater access to the cash economy and the goods which money can purchase. This paper focuses on the longer-term repercussions of higher incomes and increased consumption for returned migrants, especially men, and their families and communities. The great promise of the RSE scheme as a means of facilitating development through migration is accompanied by a great degree of uncertainty, as well. The uncertain promise of participation in the scheme has to do with the way that the unprecedented possibility to acquire such belongings has the potential to change customary relationships of belonging as they are shaped by local understandings of gender, kinship, and place. The research findings discussed here demonstrate that, far from being paralyzed by such uncertainties, returned migrant workers employ various creative, culturally intelligible strategies to deal with the uncertain promise of their new-found temporary employment. These strategies might inform and inspire relevant policy that is able to better grapple with the very uncertainties the RSE helps to create.

This paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2008 and 2011 with returned RSE workers recruited via snowball sample, most of whom were young ni-Vanuatu (indigenous) men in their 20s, living in Vanuatu's national capital of Port Vila. Data is drawn from 55 semi-structured interviews with 40 research participants, which ranged in length from 30 minutes to 2 hours; most interviews were conducted one-on-one, but in 2011, 10 participants preferred to be interviewed in a group setting (in 2 groups of 5). 20 participants were interviewed in 2008, and of these, 15 were re-interviewed in 2011. In addition, 20 new participants were interviewed in 2011. The overall purpose of the interviews was to gain an understanding of how participation in the RSE might affect ni-Vanuatu understandings of kinship obligations, work, gender, and future livelihood

possibilities. Interviews, conducted in Bislama, one of the national languages and a pidgin lingua franca, began with demographic questions (for instance, about age, marital status, residence, education). These questions were followed by more descriptive questions about participants' lives in Vanuatu and their experiences overseas (for instance, How did you become involved in the RSE? What kind of work did you do in New Zealand? How have you spent your money upon your return to Vanuatu?) As the interviews progressed, the questions became more hermeneutic in nature (for instance, How did participation in the RSE affect your life in Vanuatu? What are your hopes, dreams, and aspirations for the future? Are men or women better suited to RSE work, and why?) These questions generated rich descriptions of contemporary life in Vanuatu and of participation in the RSE, including many anecdotes and vignettes. During analysis of the interviews, the data, including the vignettes, were cross-checked through triangulation, a process that employs different data points and perspectives to demonstrate validity and reliability (Campbell and Lassiter, 2015, p.118). This paper includes several such vignettes, and while each one presents the unique experience and perspective of the participant, they have been selected for presentation here because they are representative of perspectives that reoccurred, in various forms, in most of the interviews. As well, the insights presented in this paper draw on the researcher's broader experiences and understandings of ni-Vanuatu culture during ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation. Most of the fieldwork referenced here occurred during two two-month periods in 2008 and 2011, but insights are also drawn from 12 months of fieldwork in 2001-2002. Such participant observation included participation in local events, sharing of meals, attendance of community meetings and church services, and generally spending time immersed in the everyday lives of participants and their families.

The experiences of ni-Vanuatu RSE migrants vary greatly between men and women (Cummings, 2013); the focus here is on the gendered experience of and responses to the scheme of informants who represent the approximately 82% of participants from Vanuatu who are men (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014, p.231). Although a majority of participants migrate from and return to rural villages (McKenzie, Martinez, and Winters, 2008), this research focuses on young men from the capital of Port Vila (cf. Bailey, 2009; 2014 on experiences of rural participants). Vila is a magnet for ni-Vanuatu looking for wage labour, although they often meet with little success. Findings suggest that the RSE is having a noticeable effect on the urban population: unable to find a way into the program from their rural villages, many young men are migrating to the capital in hopes of finding a recruiter who will take them on. Although not all of these men succeed in finding their way overseas, many of those who do opt to stay and make a permanent home in Port Vila upon their return. The adverse effects of climate change are also increasingly significant factor driving urbanization in Vanuatu. As the archipelago, already extremely vulnerable to climate change (Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery 2011), experiences its adverse effects with greater frequency (such as super-Cyclone Pam in March 2015), so too does urban migration continue to increase. The twin factors of the search for wage labour and for refuge from the effects of climate change are closely interconnected, and suggest the importance of understanding the experiences of urban RSE participants, for whom the scheme further increases the desirability and perceived feasibility of a life in town.

There has been a strong focus, in preparatory briefings for migrants and in studies on the scheme, on the RSE workers as individuals and as drivers of community development. Here the focus is slightly different. Young men who go to work overseas find that, upon their return, the wages they have earned, and the choices they face about spending their earnings, mean that they must rethink and recalibrate the kinds of relationships they have and want to invest in. Both the promise, and the uncertainty, must be understood not only as the result of participation in the scheme itself, but within existing understandings of gendered relationships and their connection to commodity consumption, as well as concerns about rapid urbanization as it relates to long-standing patterns of internal labour migration in Vanuatu. The implementation of policy to improve the efficacy and sustainability of the RSE scheme must take each of these factors into consideration.

ABOUT VANUATU AND NEW ZEALAND'S RECOGNISED SEASONAL EMPLOYER (RSE) SCHEME

Vanuatu is a Y-shaped archipelago in the southwest Pacific comprised of 82 islands. According to the Vanuatu National Statistics Office, the nation's population stood at 280500 in September 2015 (www.vnso.gov.vu). Situated on the central island of Efate is the national capital of Port Vila, with a population of approximately 52 000 (VNSO 2013, p.6). Often referred to simply as "town", Port Vila is Vanuatu's main urban centre (the second is Luganville, with a population of 14 000). The rate of population growth is a rapid 2.3% per year; but the pace of urban growth outstrips even this, at a rate of 3.5% in Port Vila and 1.9% in Luganville (VNSO, 2009). Each year, ni-Vanuatu migrate to town in greater numbers in search of paid employment. Nonetheless, the population of Vanuatu is still mostly rural (76%), and most ni-Vanuatu make their living through subsistence agriculture supplemented by intermittent forays into the cash economy (by selling copra, for instance) (VNSO, 2009). Although the lure of potential employment, especially in the capital, is strong, the reality is less promising, with the majority of newcomers remaining un- or under-employed (ILO, 2009), making temporary overseas employment all the more alluring, especially for those already living in Port Vila, where cash is a necessity but jobs are hard to come by.

Unlike many other developing nations with a long history of sending migrants workers overseas and relying heavily on the remittances from these workers, Vanuatu, prior to the implementation of the RSE, had no opportunities for migration in significant numbers for overseas labour. The one notable exception was the "blackbirding" of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, thousands of ni-Vanuatu (and other Pacific islanders) were recruited, and often coerced or misled, to work as indentured labours on the sugar plantations of Queensland, Australia and Fiji. As Margaret Jolly has put it, the blackbirding reality of "men taken away to work, and women left in their places in Vanuatu's villages" (Jolly, 1987, p.121) provided a template for gendered practices and understandings of migration throughout the colonial period, one which remains salient today. From 1906 to 1980, Vanuatu, then known as the New Hebrides, was jointly ruled and administered by both Britain and France. During this period, Port Vila was effectively a settler space (Rodman, 2001); an administrative centre in which ni-Vanuatu did not belong, but rather passed in and out of as workers (typically, men as gardeners, women

as housegirls or domestic workers). This established a pattern of circular migration, between town, rural villages, and back, has, at least until very recently, been both the conceptual norm and the most common form of migration for most ni-Vanuatu (see, for instance, Haberkorn, 1992). People, but especially men, have tended to migrate to Vila, for brief work opportunities, for school, or to sell their crops, but would then migrate home again; repeating the pattern as necessary, but rarely staying permanently in urban areas. These understandings of labour migration as circular and as gendered shape the way that today's RSE workers experience and make sense of the scheme and its challenges.

The typical RSE contract is seven months long. Workers are either recruited directly by approved employers through the Vanuatu Department of Labour or through an approved recruiter working on behalf of New Zealand farmers. Most urban participants are "walk-ins" who apply through the Department of Labour; recruiters far more frequently draw from rural areas (Gibson and McKenzie, 2014, p.231). Potential participants must provide (and pay for) in advance relevant paperwork including medical clearance, police clearance, passports, and return plane tickets. Men often work outdoors, maintaining vines and trees and picking produce such as apples or kiwis (women tend to work indoors, grading, sorting and packaging the produce). Men's work is thus often piecemeal, with workers being paid per bin of picked fruit. The more fruit they pick, the more money they make, with the typical take-home pay after a season's work being approximately \$7000 NZ. This piecemeal pay system was often cited by research participants—alongside exhortations from both farmers and pre-departure trainers to "take responsibility for themselves" and "make the most of themselves-- as one of the factors that led them to think of themselves, as workers, in increasingly individualistic terms.

NI-VANUATU UNDERSTANDINGS OF PLACE, MONEY AND COMMODITY CONSUMPTION

Local understandings of belonging, and of what it means to be ni-Vanuatu, are closely tied to one's relationship to place in general and to land, specifically. Indeed, the term "ni-Vanuatu" means "people of the place". Most ni-Vanuatu, regardless of where they currently live, identify themselves as being "from" a particular island community: *man Tanna*, *man Ambrym*, *man Santo*, and so on. Even those born and raised in Port Vila identify themselves as belonging to the island communities of their parents or grandparents. Although there is some suggestion that this may be changing, and that some young people born and raised in the settlements that surround Port Vila are actively challenging their status as "unplaced" by "planting roots" and cultivating a sense of primary town emplacement (Kraemer, 2013), rapid urbanization nonetheless poses serious challenges to long-standing notions of personhood, belonging, and livelihood. These challenges may in fact be exacerbated by the effects of participation in the RSE scheme.

In Vanuatu, land belongs, under the constitution, only to ni-Vanuatu *kastom* owners; and one in turn belongs to the place where one's family are the *kastom* landowners. Men's relationship to place, especially, is traditionally embodied through land ownership; for women, relationships to place are created through marriage and childbearing (Jolly, 1994). Land is also the primary resource used by ni-Vanuatu to engage in the cash economy, usually through the selling of one's

garden produce, or copra, or kava. Challenges to traditional ideas and practices of land ownership and use are therefore fraught with uncertainty about both belonging and livelihood. Two of the key challenges, both of which are relevant here, are urban drift (through which people often lose access to land in the islands through prolonged disuse, and because of which many people inhabit, through a variety of informal and often temporary arrangements, land in town to which they have no *kastom* ties) and the increasingly frequent treatment of land as a commodity that can be turned into cash, primarily through long-term leases. Although some such arrangements are for use and occupancy by ni-Vanuatu, the majority are for developers, foreign investors, and tourism ventures (Farran, 2011). As such, when ni-Vanuatu discuss and try to make sense of changing patterns of land occupancy and ownership, by ni-Vanuatu and foreigners alike, they also discuss ideas about concurrent shifts in understandings of identity, belonging, and how they are changed by commodity consumption and migration.

During a 2011 interview, research participant Conrad told a story, a cautionary tale, loosely based on actual events, about the upheaval wrought by the influx of relatively large sums of money, and the new patterns of consumption that accompany it, upon local experiences of belonging, especially as they relate to land and place. When Conrad first participated in the RSE in 2008; by 2011, he had been back four times. The story he told was in response to a question about what kept him going back, season after season, despite his professed ambivalence about, and sometimes disdain for, monotonous work in the orchards, for being away from home, and for working under a boss. It was a story which, at least on its surface, had less to do with the RSE than with the recent spate of land “sales” (really long term leases of questionable legality) to foreigners. Conrad began by insisting, despite his ambivalence that, “at least I have money. Because today all anyone cares about is money. Life is money, and money is life, and people will do anything to get it”. It was by way of demonstrating this money-craze that he told the story paraphrased below:

A couple of days before Christmas, town was a-bustle, as it always is right before the holiday, with crowds of shoppers stocking up on gifts of cheap toys, fabric, and cooking utensils at the Chinese stores, and buying food at the local market and the supermarket for Christmas celebrations. Beyond the usual festive melee something stood out: A mini-convoy of three brand-new pick-up trucks, their beds filled to the brim with bicycles, appliances, toys, televisions, and people. These shopper-revellers were from the peri-urban village of Erakor, and had, according to the *tok tok blong rod* (gossip), just made a deal to “sell” (lease) their *kastom* land to an Australian company that intended to build a hotel. In addition to the cash windfall from the land sale, the buyer promised to hire Erakor villagers exclusively to staff their new enterprise--thus ensuring their continued, if landless, prosperity for years to come. Hence the celebratory spending spree. However, it turned out that the land deal, like so many over the last decade, was not as promising as it seemed, at least not for the Erakor villagers. Rather than building the promised hotel, the new landowners instead subdivided the land to sell to foreigners in search of the good life. In “selling” their land (such leases are typically 75 years in length) the Erakor villagers had effectively locked themselves into the world of money (with no gardens nor beach access), but found themselves without the promised means of earning a living. They believed the wrong promises, and now their entire future seemed uncertain. To be from Erakor, now, is to belong

nowhere, and to be defined by your (dubiously enviable) belongings. As Conrad put it: “Every child from Erakor has a bicycle, but none of them has a garden.”

There are at least two things worth noting about this story and why it was such a compelling cautionary tale (indeed, it was retold, in various iterations, by several other research participants). Firstly, part of the reason that the story “works” is precisely because it is about Erakor village, which, with its peri-urban location, about 10 km from Port Vila proper, has long occupied an uneasy physical and conceptual place in the ni-Vanuatu imagination: neither fully rural nor fully urban.. Erakor villagers lead fairly “typical” rural lives, but have long been in the orbit of the capital. As Jean-Marc Philibert’s work on commodity consumption in Erakor village in the 1970s and 1980s demonstrates, peri-urban villagers were among the first ni-Vanuatu to “embrace” conspicuous consumption-in the form of modern conveniences such as concrete houses, televisions, refrigerators, and cars (Philibert, 1989), as their proximity to town meant that were among the first ni-Vanuatu to work in the nation’s then-nascent tourist industry. According to Philibert, “Erakor villagers like to think of themselves at their best, as culture brokers for their whole island. This is how an informant put it: ‘When a large wave comes from far away on the seas, it must first break on Erakor reef. It has always been so’” (Philibert, 1989, p.81). Erakor village is, in many ways, the harbinger of things to come in Vanuatu, and as rapid urbanization and changes to migration patterns shift the relationship between money, consumption, land and belonging, it is little wonder that people pay close attention to what has happened there.

Secondly, the story is compelling in a context where many ni-Vanuatu now have the unprecedented opportunity to migrate and to make cash through participation in the RSE. In telling it, Conrad alluded to the issues that so many returned migrant workers face: like the Erakor villagers, RSE workers suddenly have a lot of money to spend on new belongings. And like the Erakor villagers, they find their relationship to place, to land, to kin, to community, altered by that very ability to spend money. Like the Erakor villagers, the RSE workers often become the subjects of cautionary tales about the dangerous lure of money. People who have not been to New Zealand tended to accuse migrants of being seduced by all things foreign, and forsaking *kastom* and kin, saying, for instance, that “the RSE workers come back with a taste for cash, and they sell their land when they get back in order to get more cash”. However, none of the research participants had ever done this; indeed very few had any land to sell, or to go back to upon “retirement” from the RSE. Most of the interviewees were born and raised in the settlements around Port Vila, and could be called *SPRs*: young men who *sperem pablik rod* (hit the road); that is, who wander aimlessly around town, window-shopping and causing trouble, because they have no jobs and no land to garden, either. These men were already well-ensconced in the cash-only economy, but with little cash to speak of.

MEN’S GENDERED EXPERIENCES OF THE RSE

Migration has long been a gendered phenomenon in Vanuatu, as has belonging. Participation in the RSE is also gendered. As such, it raises many challenges and uncertainties for the men who participate. Because of their youth and their lack of status as urban-dwelling *SPRs*, interviewees had not yet accrued any of the *kastom* knowledge and respect that comes with being an elder

man in Vanuatu's gerontocracy, knowledge and respect that might be turned, through the skillful working of networks, into wealth and prestige. For young men like the ones who participated in this research project, who had little to no access to *kastom* land, it is relationships that root them in place, connect them to *kastom*, and presents challenges upon their return from New Zealand. At best, this demand new strategies and relationships; at worst, it renders some kinds of belonging undesirable or untenable. Each of the following vignettes encapsulates a common strategy for re-negotiating masculinity vis-à-vis relationships of belonging through kinship in the wake of the challenges posed by the sudden prosperity that their participation in the RSE brought them.

CONRAD

Conrad is ambivalent about his RSE experiences, to such an extent that he stated unequivocally that he intends to stop going overseas when he turns 30, regardless of how prosperous he is. His mixed feelings stem from the fact that although the money that he earns is based on his own hard work as an individual, "when you get back to Vanuatu none of the money is yours. This money is for a wedding. That money is for a nephew's school fees. This money sends your parents to the doctor", and so on. Although he spent most of his money after his first season abroad on consumer goods for himself and his wife (a stereo, nice clothes, a DVD player, a bicycle), since then, he has decided to embrace his role as a key provider for his entire extended family, with whom he and his wife live, on land that they rent from the *kastom* landowners. He now goes out of his way to contribute as much as possible to weddings, naming ceremonies, and school fees. In doing so, he has started to become "senior", in the sense of becoming more and more respected and influential, among his kin. Moreover, he says that his hope is that, if he invests his earnings to "*leftemap*" (lift up, enrich) his extended family, future generations will be able to choose *not* to go overseas in order to make ends meet. He lamented that, "money is great, but this is no way for ni-Vanuatu to live", referring both to the long stretches away from home and to working under close supervision to enrich someone other than oneself and one's kin. Conrad's strategy for managing the uncertainty that wage labour and money introduce to his relationships and his sense of gendered identity and belonging is ultimately an investment in traditional values around gender, livelihood, and place. This investment is particularly interesting given that, as an urban-dwelling *SPR*, he had little to no access to many of these traditional pathways to proper masculine respectability in the first place. However, it remains to be seen whether or not his vision for his family's future will come to fruition because, as Gibson and McKenzie (2014, p.242) point out, seasonal labour does little in terms of developing skills that can be used at home, and therefore "migration is likely to be a long-term part of the economic organization of Pacific Island economies".

WILLY

Willy also feels the pull of family on his earnings, or, as he put it, "their hands in my pockets". Willy moved to Port Vila many years ago, after being "pushed out" of school after Class Six, and he has few meaningful ties to his extended kin on Ambrym; nor does he have any viable claim to any land there. When first interviewed in 2008, Willy had just returned from his first season away, and confessed to having spent his money *olbaot* (carelessly) on clothes, alcohol, and

convenience food. He also picked apples too slowly in that first year to make much real money, after deductions, at this piecemeal task. “I was just an SPR”, he said. “What did I know about making money”? However, when re-interviewed in 2011, he had spent several more seasons overseas, and had in fact become a shift manager. He no longer drinks, he goes to church every week, at home and overseas, and part of his job is to keep the rest of his team “in line. Indeed, some of the other members of the team accused him of being “in the pocket of the white man [the farmer]”, and in danger of becoming too much like a white man himself—that is, stingy, lonely, and bossy. Unlike Conrad, who is investing in the potential promise of kinship and respected masculine influence, Willy has devoted all of his earnings to the purchase of a piece of recently-subdivided land on the outskirts of Port Vila. This land is not for his extended family, but for himself, and he is working on building a small but well-appointed concrete house suitable only for himself and his new wife and young baby. He is part of a new but growing group of ni-Vanuatu who are not *kastom* landowners, but the beneficiaries of the recent spate subdivisions, and who choose to make town their permanent home.

HAROLD

Harold joyously embraced everything the RSE, and the world of wage labour and money, had to offer. Unlike Conrad, he was not investing in his extended kin; unlike Willy (nor almost any other research participant), he had no wife or children, nor even a serious girlfriend; nor did he show any interest in forming and supporting a nuclear family of his own. Unlike Conrad and Willy, he was not at all sheepish about spending nearly all of his money on clothes, cds, alcohol, and other consumer goods. “Money is for spending”, he said. “When I run out, I’ll just go back again. In New Zealand, no one cares how you act or what you do with your money. It’s great! *Mi harem mi fri* (I feel free)!” Harold’s love of the RSE and all it has to offer might be partly explained by the fact that the farmer he works with has entrusted him to work on his behalf as a recruiter in Port Vila. As more and more people clamour to participate in the RSE, he becomes more and more influential, as one cannot go overseas without first being recruited (with fewer recruiters in town than in the islands, this is particularly challenging). He has mastered the new kinds of knowledge, particularly bureaucratic knowledge, needed to get ahead in the RSE, and he would help out naive potential recruits by asking “do you know who is going to do your papers”? (and then pointing them in the right direction). Knowledge, especially men’s knowledge, is literal and metaphorical wealth in Vanuatu (Lindstrom, 1990), and Harold is turning everything he knows about the RSE into wealth. Showing a true embrace of the entrepreneurial spirit, he even offered to recruit interviewees from the ranks of his fellow workers, provided, of course, that he was paid a commission.

NEW RELATIONSHIPS AND WAYS OF BELONGING: APPLE-PICKING, BUS-DRIVING WANTOK?

Living in Vanuatu today, as Conrad pointed out, means worrying about money and how to get it; two of the main ways of getting money, and the much-desired belongings that money buys, are participation in the RSE, or the leasing of *kastom* land. Although seemingly unrelated on the surface, these two phenomenon must be seen as influencing each other: as ni-Vanuatu move

to and stay in Port Vila in greater numbers, attachments to land decrease at the same time that the desire, and need, to earn money through wage labour grows, feeding both lands sales and participation in the RSE. Both of these roads are fraught with uncertainty, especially when it comes to figuring out where, and with or to whom, you belong. The struggles of Conrad, Willy, and Harold are typical of young men's struggles to find their place in this shifting cultural and economic terrain. The successes and failures of young migrants from Port Vila will undoubtedly shape the future of urbanization in the archipelago. As the vignettes above show, although the nature of the labour in New Zealand's orchards is highly individualized, young men's strategies for making sense of life as urban-dwelling wage labourers are relational, and are closely tied to cultural norms of masculinity, which are also subject to new possibilities in this new landscape.

The creation of another new kind of belonging is also worth paying attention to: the crew, team, or cohort of men who work together for the same farmer. Conrad, Willy, and Harold did not know each other before they went to New Zealand to pick apples together on the same farm. They were from different island communities in different settlements around town, and had not encountered each other as schoolmates as they had each been "pushed out" after year six. Nor were they members of the same church congregation. Yet they were great friends after having spent several seasons together on the same farm. Although each has hedged his bets in terms of kinship, masculinity, and belonging in a different way, collectively they have invested, socially, emotionally, and economically, in this new "crew" identity, and it is their relationship with each other, as RSE-cohort members that seems to be the most promising strategy of all. They are, in this sense, like the "Football *wantok*" described by Kobayashi et al. (2011, p.38)--creating and drawing upon "dense social networks in which access to essential resources are available to members of the network". Rather than fellow language speakers, schoolmates, or sports teammates, they are RSE *wantok*. Perhaps most promisingly of all, Conrad, Willy, Harold, and a couple other crew members have pooled their resources to buy a mini-bus. The crew members take turns driving the bus when they are not in New Zealand, and rent it out to relatives while they are away. As a belonging purchased with RSE money, the bus is a fitting one. For one thing, owning a bus complements common strategies for dealing with money and relations: Conrad's brothers and cousins are able to (partly) support themselves through bus earnings, further "lifting up" his family, and easing the pressure to support them with his RSE earnings. Willy's share of the money from the bus allowed him to build not one, but two, houses on his recently-purchased subdivided plot; now he will be a landlord as well as a land-owner. And for Harold, especially, co-owning and driving the bus is a good "fit": bus drivers always have cash on hand to spend; and Harold, rather than just driving around looking for fares, takes calls, like a taxi, which means that he is always in demand, just as he is as a recruiter. One afternoon in 2011, all three men were observed together in their bus. As they drove through town, they waved at friends and relatives, whistled at girls and tourists, showed off their nice clothes and shiny new bus in a way that was reminiscent of the Erakor villagers in Conrad's cautionary tale. But theirs is a happier story: for the villagers, the uncertain promise of money left them with plenty of belongings but belonging nowhere. But as *SPRs* first, and then RSE migrant workers, this crew is more peripatetic than rooted --they had no land to call their own in the first place. As migrant workers, they further uproot themselves, but as bus owners and drivers, they symbolically and economically "double-down" on their hyper-mobility, their cash-savvy, and their ability to create and draw upon new

networks. It gives them a chance to be in the driver's seat, so to speak, among all of these promising uncertainties.

The RSE aims to increase ni-Vanuatu access to and engagement with the cash economy; it is then hoped that the cash will be infused into local communities, encouraging further development from the grassroots level. However, there is a paradox at the heart of these schemes—ideally, they work best when people remain loyal to their traditional communities, kin networks, and church congregations. But being a part of the RSE not only demands the cultivation of an individualistic sensibility and work ethic, at least temporarily; it often cuts short relationship networks and challenges conventional loyalties and relationships. Perhaps by throwing their lot in with their fellow RSE *wantok*, and by embracing their peripatetic-ness, these new cohorts of men have found a tenable middle road?

CONCLUSIONS

Both pre-departure and on-the-job training for RSE migrants currently place a heavy emphasis on the individual work and coping skills that must be cultivated if one is to succeed overseas. As well, the New Zealand Department of Labour (2010, p.xv) has identified skill development as one of the positive outcomes for migrant workers, while at the same time noting that skills-related and money-related challenges, such as “transforming RSE income flows into job creation” and “engendering a savings culture”, have yet to be adequately addressed (ibid. p. xviii). This research suggests that success, at home and in local terms, is experienced relationally, and means being able to skillfully manage, and even re-imagine, one's relationships to one's kin, to place, and to other workers. The problems faced by the research participants, as well as the creative ways in which they attempt to solve these problems, should serve to inspire any future attempts to improve the experiences and outcomes of ni-Vanuatu RSE participants. For instance, greater attention and resources must be devoted to developing transferable skills, supporting entrepreneurs, and cultivating leadership capabilities. This is especially true of migrants from urban areas, most of whom have never been and will never be subsistence farmers, and who rely completely on the cash economy to survive. Moreover, supporting the creation of “exit plans” for a post-RSE life is important, as it takes seriously ni-Vanuatu concerns about the long-term desirability (or lack thereof) of participation in the scheme. Potential and existing participants need to be able to envision a positive future for themselves that does not rely solely upon endless migration that undermines local understandings of place and personhood. Furthermore, it is important to take into greater account the fact that the appeal of the RSE does not occur in a vacuum: interrelated factors such as urban drift and vulnerability to climate change drive ni-Vanuatu into the program as much as any particular desire for “development” per se. One suggested response to Cyclone Pam was to increase intake of RSE workers from Vanuatu (Moroney, 2015); but care must be taken to find longer-term solutions that do not exacerbate existing problems. Finally, greater effort must be made to create opportunities for all ni-Vanuatu to participate in the scheme if they wish. Recruiters tend to prefer rural migrants over “unemployed urban youth” (Bailey, 2014, p.35); but the fact of the matter is that urban youth may stand to benefit the most from the program. Moreover, a greater effort needs to be made to include women as RSE migrant in greater numbers. Without doing so, existing ideas about gender and circular migration, many of

which are limiting to women's potential and the potential for development in Vanuatu overall, run the risk of being replicated and re-entrenched. The potential of the RSE is promising indeed, and ni-Vanuatu skill at dealing with the uncertainties that arise in its wake should be supported and augmented through the program itself.

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