

**2020 Pacific Ocean Pacific Climate Change Conference (POPCCC),  
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# **Risk and Resilience in the Pacific – Community Exposure and Response to Climate Change**



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# Organization of this Talk

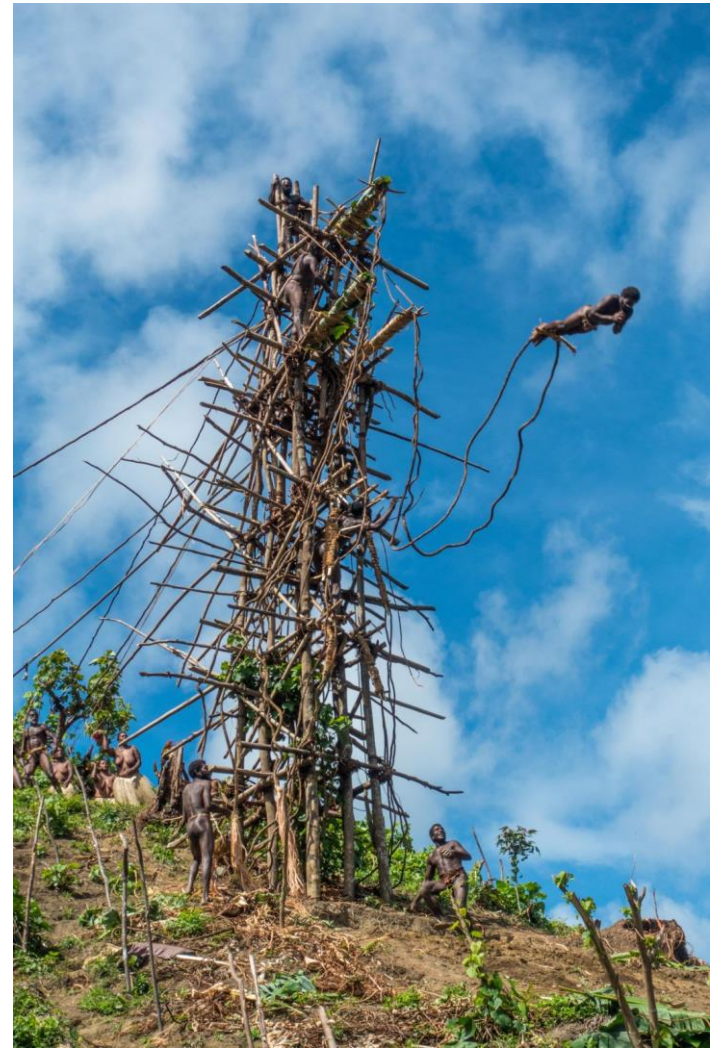
1. Risk and resilience:  
cultural influences on  
meaning ... and their  
implications.
2. Framing exposure to  
climate change:  
contrasting narratives.
3. Sustaining the Pacific –  
cashless adaptation and  
the importance of  
traditional knowledges.

# Part 1.

Risk and resilience: cultural influences on meaning ... and their implications

# What is RISK?

- Risk is a cultural construct – there is no universal definition that straddles cultures.
- Pacific Island people's definitions of what is risky (and what is not) often differ from supposedly universal views.
- But like every other culture, Pacific Island peoples evolved ways of life that minimized their risk exposure.

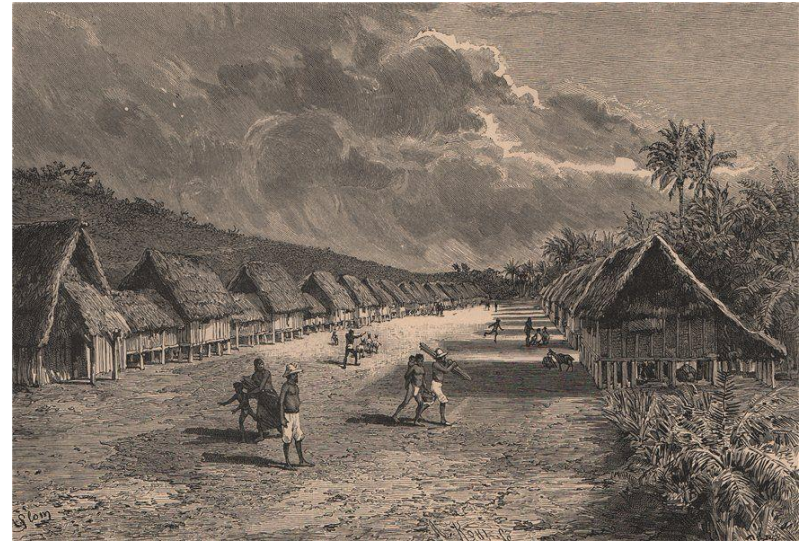


*Naghol (land diving), Pentecost, Vanuatu*

# What is RISK? ... continued

Saipan (1885),  
Mariana Islands

- Prior to colonization and globalization, most Pacific Island communities were located in less-vulnerable places than they are today.
- Most Pacific Island communities routinely prepared for food shortages by planting surpluses, diversifying, stockpiling and fermenting foods – practices that have largely disappeared.



*Masi* (fermenting breadfruit), Tikopia, Solomon Islands

# What is RESILIENCE?

- Resilience is a term that entered (western) scientific discussions about 1973 and has been applied in a climate-change context for less than 10 years.
- Like *adaptation* and *mitigation*, *resilience* is something that has been part of Pacific Island cultures for thousands of years – it is not a new idea, simply an old one under a different name.



*Siva Tau*, Samoans in France 2012 (ESPN)

# Current misunderstandings

Abaiang, Kiribati  
(Malin Fezehai)

- Islands are *small*.
- Small islands are inherently *vulnerable*.
- People living on small islands are inherently *helpless* – outsiders are needed to **BUILD** their resilience to climate change.
- **None of this is universally correct.**



Calling for climate action, Kiribati (Ben Namakin)



## Part 2.

Framing exposure to climate change: contrasting narratives



# Islands' exposure to climate change: top-down views

- IPCC (2014) - “Given the **inherent physical characteristics** of small islands, the AR5 **reconfirms** the high level of **vulnerability of small islands** to multiple stressors, both climate and non-climate (*high confidence; robust evidence, high agreement*)”.
- SPREP (2020) - “Many Pacific islands are **extremely vulnerable** to climate change, climate variability, and sea level rise and will be among the first to **suffer** the impacts of climate change and among the first to be **forced** to adapt or abandon or relocate from their environment”.



Kiribati, Cyclone Pam 2015 (Getty)

# Islands' exposure to climate change: bottom-up views

- President Taneti Maamau (2017) - “We try to isolate ourselves from the belief that Kiribati will be drowned ... The ultimate decision is God’s.”
- *Qase ni lotu*, Fiji (2019) - “My grandfather always used to say that his grandfather was forever saying it was a mistake for our people to move to the coast. That was a time when we lived in the hills, safe from the waves, but then Europeans came along and forced us all down to the water’s edge. The old ones, they knew this was a dangerous place, they said not to go, but we had no choice. Here we are and *dina saraga* – too true – we now discover it is a dangerous place! We should listen to the past”.



# Whose views should prevail?

- Pacific Island peoples **lived continuously** on islands in the western Pacific Ocean for **3000 years** or more (before they became part of a globalized world) – how did they manage this when their islands are apparently so vulnerable and themselves apparently so helpless?
- The truth is that Pacific Island peoples and the cultures they evolved have broad deep reserves of culturally-grounded resilience that are easily overlooked by outsiders ... especially those with large amounts of cash to expend.



*Potsherd with anthropomorphic design, Bourewa, Fiji (2008)*

*Faluw, Riy, Rumung, Yap Proper (2014)*



# Whose views should prevail?

- For the past 30 years and more, the capacity of governments and regional agencies to reach all Pacific Island communities (especially those in peripheral or outer-island locations) has been limited.
- So many such communities have confronted the effects of recent climate change by themselves – that is, **autonomously**.
- This situation will continue and spread as donor countries become less generous (because of soaring costs of adaptation at home) and Pacific Island nations are increasingly forced to adapt to climate change without outside help.



Autonomous upslope relocation  
Fagasa, Samoa (Tavita Togia)

Autonomous taboo, Rarotonga, Cook Islands



## Part 3.

Sustaining the Pacific – cashless adaptation and the importance of traditional knowledges

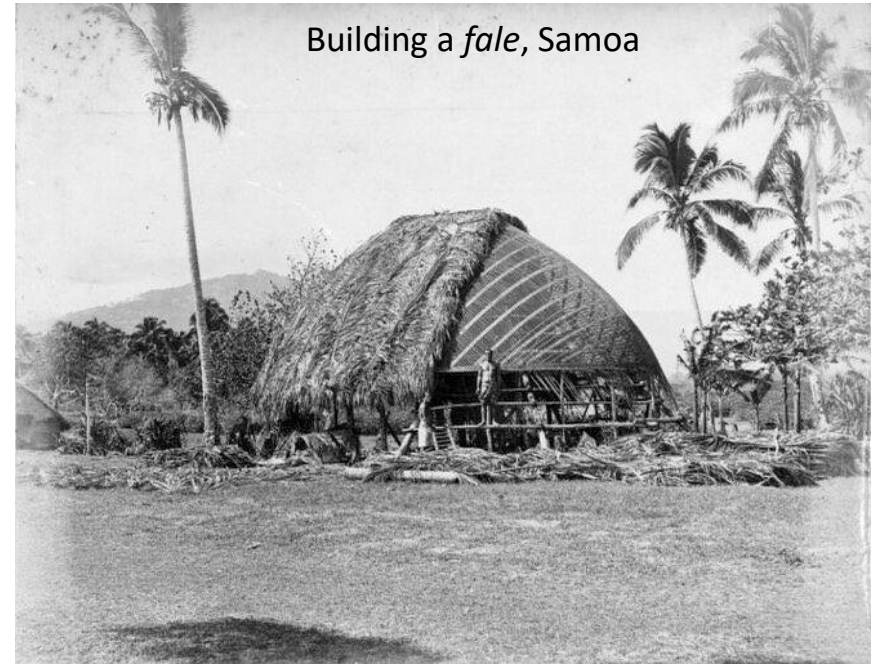
# Adapting to a changing future in the Pacific Islands

- By the end of this century, the ocean surface in the Pacific will perhaps be one metre higher than it is today. Cyclones will become stronger on average yet fewer. Temperatures will be 2-3°C higher.
- Outside help will decrease. Pacific nations will have to increasingly take responsibility for climate-change adaptation.
- TWO things are key to a sustainable future.
  - Detaching adaptation from finance (reviving cashless adaptation)
  - Taking ownership of adaptation through the privileging of Pacific worldviews and knowledges



# Cashless adaptation

- One hundred years ago, no-one gave Pacific Island people money to adapt to life in a changing environment. People adapted autonomously, helping each other, using locally-available materials.
- Future adaptation can also be largely done without money, especially cooperatively in communities.
- **Cashless adaptation** is key to a **sustainable future**.



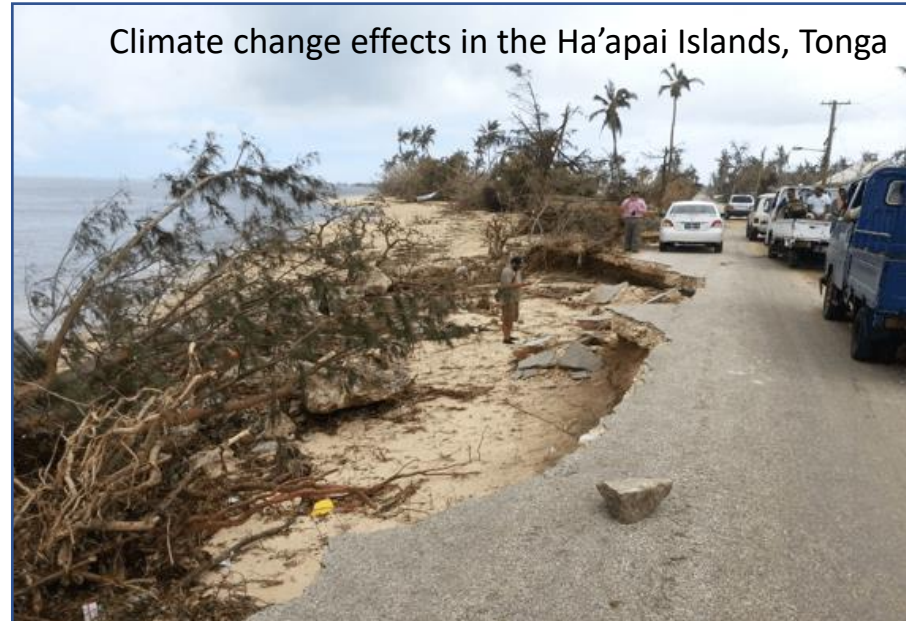
# Owning adaptation

- Climate change was once regarded by many Pacific peoples as a **foreign** preoccupation, adaptation to climate change as something for **others**.
- For the future, Pacific Island governments and communities must **own** the issue of climate change, must recognize that it is affecting every place in this 'sea of islands' ... and will continue doing so for many generations to come.

Climate change effects in the Carteret Islands, Papua New Guinea



Climate change effects in the Ha'apai Islands, Tonga





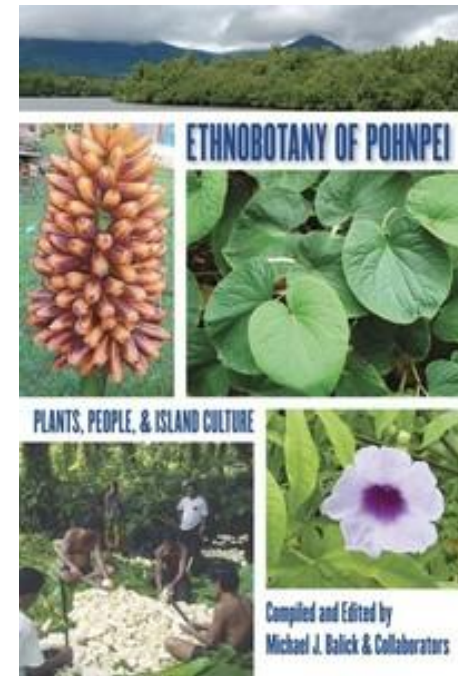
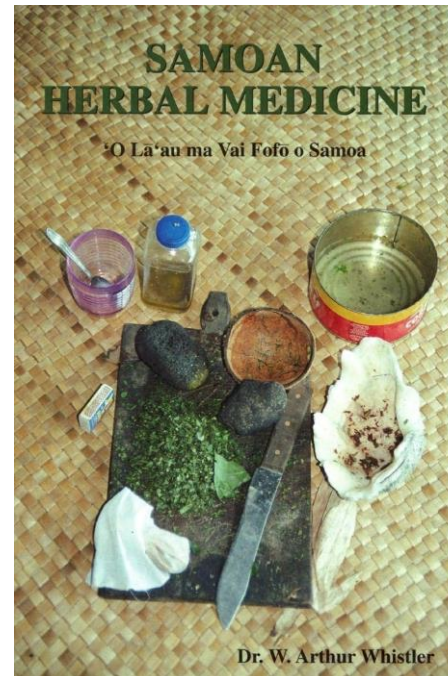
# Privileging tradition

- ‘Global’ methods of climate-change adaptation are not always readily transferable to a Pacific Islands context ... where traditional methods of adaptation (coping) are widespread and deep-rooted.
- A sustainable future for the Pacific and its people will privilege such traditional knowledge, not just for climate change adaptation, but also for food and nutritional security, for primary health care ... and so on.



Sea defences and artificial island, Kadavu, Fiji (1930s?)

Medicinal value of Pacific Island plants – Samoa and Pohnpei



## Further Reading

Korovulavula, I., Nunn, P.D., Kumar, R. and Fong, T. 2019. Peripherality as key to understanding opportunities and needs for effective and sustainable climate-change adaptation: a case study from Viti Levu Island, Fiji. *Climate and Development*, DOI: 10.1080/17565529.2019.1701972

Nunn, P.D. and Kumar, R. 2019. Cashless adaptation to climate change in developing countries: unwelcome yet unavoidable? *One Earth*, **1**, 31–34.

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*Faafetai lava*