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'TE UU NO TE AKAU ROA'
MIGRATION AND THE COOK ISLANDS

*A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Development Studies at Massey University*

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Abstract

At the heart of the international migration debate is the movement of people from developing areas of origin to developed destinations. Conventional international migration approaches conceptualise these movements as responses to the inequalities that exist between these two poles as a result of the unequal process of development. The causes of migration are assumed to be factors related to development differentials between two countries. Therefore, the migrant is conceptualised as an automaton responding mechanically to forces beyond their control. Notions of human agency and the other non-economic factors that may influence movements are not included in explanations of the migration process.

More recent debates in migration challenge the assumptions of conventional international migration approaches. Central to this challenge is the notion that migration is a socially constructed process that is constituted by human beings. Proponents of this perspective call for the need to bring back the 'human factor' into migration research to provide a deeper understanding of migration.

Migration has always been an integral component of Cook Islands social and economic change throughout time. While Cook Islanders have always been mobile people, 1996 marked the beginning of the most recent significant population decline as a result of high levels of emigration. The significant population loss following 1996 has presented the Cook Islands with a 'migration problem' and raises issues of future population sustainability. At the heart of the Cook Islands 'migration problem' is the need to understand why Cook Islanders decide to depart from, stay or return to the Cook Islands. The challenge therefore in this thesis is to understand the causes and effects of Cook Islands migration from the perspectives of Cook Islanders. This thesis is driven by the need to understand Cook Islands migration from the perspectives of the individual Cook Islander.

The perspectives of individual Cook Islanders, have demonstrated that Cook Islands international migration cannot be conceptualised within the narrow confines of the economic imageries of the conventional approaches. Instead, Cook Islands migration is dynamic process constituting of active agents interacting with various structures (both economic and non-economic) to produce Cook Islands international migration. The perspectives of Cook Islanders have illustrated the complexity of the international migration process. It is a process that is characterised by many flows, influenced by many factors, occurs for many reasons and has varying effects. This thesis presents the Cook Islanders story of international migration.

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