

*The Demographic Behaviour of an Indigenous  
Population in Urban Papua New Guinea: the Motu  
Koitabu of Hanuabada*

Esther Lavu

BA (University of Papua New Guinea) MA (The Australian National University)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Applied Population Studies,  
School of the Environment,  
Faculty of Science and Engineering,  
Flinders University,  
Adelaide.

July 2012

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the demographic behaviour of the *Motu Koitabu* people of Hanuabada, a traditional village in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea (PNG) and aims to explain the reasons behind the persistence of their traditional demographic behaviour in spite of their long exposure to modern culture. The study is based on quantitative and qualitative data collected in Hanuabada. The main argument of the paper is that the demographic behaviour of the *Motu Koitabu* are primarily determined by interactions between family and clan, and are associated with old age support, continuation of lineages, and strength and security of clan groups.

This ethnic group is the traditional owner of the land where Port Moresby is built and they are not likely to leave this site and change their social and cultural arrangements without the blessings of their clan leaders. But the economic hardships of urban living are putting pressure on them to make adjustments. From a rational viewpoint, the social and economic changes reshaping Hanuabada are sufficient reasons for them to leave and settle elsewhere, yet most people want to remain in their current place of residence. The continuation of the 'family house' strengthens the family unit and increases clan support, making people continue to live in their cultural safety net.

*Motu Koitabu* women are increasingly completing primary education and many are involved in informal economic activities to earn a living. Their socio-economic and demographic parameters reflect characteristics typical of PNG women. Most women are married, and married early. They prefer to have more children than their total fertility rate of 3.3 indicates. Most women are still required to obtain permission from their husbands to use family planning and those with high fertility have never used any. Education is not a significant determinant of fertility, but women with less income have high fertility. *Motu Koitabu* women experience child loss at the rate of 33 infant deaths per 1,000 live births. Child mortality decreases with increasing income and the highest child losses are experienced by older women, who find modernization confronting and seeking health services a challenge. Most *Motu Koitabu* women in the study sample were born in their current place of residence,

Hanuabada, and about 22 percent were born either in other villages or in town/city. These are the lifetime migrants to Hanuabada.

Given this demographic outlook, the supremacy of the cultural element over other factors in making decisions to remain in the safety nets of the *Motu Koitabu* society is well placed. Maintaining 'family house' activities helps to keep members of the family and clan groups together. The *Motu Koitabu* believe that Hanuabada is their birthplace and rightful home where they feel safe. Moves to alternative locations, if considered should be made in family groups to clan-oriented lands situated nearby which would continue to foster the cultural way of life. A small minority, though do not want to remain in Hanuabada, mainly because of the negative aspects cultural obligations such as contributing to bride price payment and death related feast expenses, which put pressure on individual income.

However, while the family/clan support keeps the *Motu Koitabu* people bound to their current place of residence, those families that want to move out of Hanuabada because of constrained living conditions cannot make any such move because they feel they would not receive the necessary blessings of clan elders to make such a move.

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Esther Lavu

Adelaide, 26 July 2012

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank all the people who in one way or another provided me valuable advice and support in reaching the completion of this PhD Thesis.

Firstly, I am grateful to the Motu Koitabu people of Hanuabada. Without their approval and participation, this study would not have taken place. My gratitude to the Motu Koitabu Council for granting the approval to conduct the study in the largest Motu Koitabu village of Hanuabada.

To the households of Hanuabada that allowed the team to collect data from them. I am indebted to all the women who took the time to sit with my team to complete the survey questionnaires. I am also thankful all the men and women who participated in the focus groups and indepth interviews. Without the support of my brother in Boe Douna and his wife Metue, this project would have been an endless dream. The generous hospitality provided by him and his family during the six months of field work in Hanuabada is deeply appreciated.

I would also like to express my appreciation to the staff of the former School of Geography, Population and Environmental Management and now the School of the Environment, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia. The technical support from the Faculty in providing statistical services is acknowledged. Without the approval of the Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee of Flinders University, this project would not have reached its completion.

I would like to sincerely thank my principal supervisor- Associate Professor Gouranga Dasvarma. I owe it to Associate Professor Gouranga Dasvarma for believing in me and working closely with me on this journey to completing the PhD. His patience and tolerance is a bonus to the completion of this thesis. Dr. Udo Saikia for his continuous questioning and advice on the various aspects of the thesis. Both have given their valued academic advice and guidance as supervisors during the entire project. Their continuous support in my Melanesian female married adult life and related issues is very much appreciated.

I am grateful to the National Research Institute for allowing me to undertake this PhD program, particularly to Dr. Thomas Webster, Director of the Institute for his confidence and encouragement when I took up the challenge that I thought was going to be an impossible task. I am thankful to the Department of National Planning and Implementation for agreeing to undertake the project as a development project supporting human resource development in Papua New Guinea. Ms Christine Aisoli deserves special praise for her efforts in managing such a project in a challenging Papua New Guinea national government guideline and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) financial procedures. I am grateful to the UNFPA for agreeing to fund the project and making it possible. Without such an agreement between UNFPA and the Government of PNG, this PhD project would never have eventuated. I owe to all those people involved in managing the funds of this study.

Finally, I would like to mention the encouragement and support of my husband, John Kalamoroh during my research, for which no word of appreciation is enough. The opportunity cost for him to support and encourage me has been high. My beautiful daughter Evelyn Sapakou, an inspirational achievement in her own way and her full on approach to life in Australia shifted our lives to being more enjoyable than ever. Her primary school life experiences and friendships were motivational for me to take up the challenge of another day. This thesis is theirs as much as mine. The Lavulea and the Kipilas families and the entire Kaiulo tribe's support in prayers and in kind are life-long treasures for me.

Thank you all.

## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to the Motu Koitabu women who have been marginalised for many years in various ways in Papua New Guinea's capital city-Port Moresby. The silent acceptance of outsiders on their homeland has driven Papua New Guinea to acquire modernisation on accounts of deprivation of basic rights and benefits from their cultural heritage- their land.