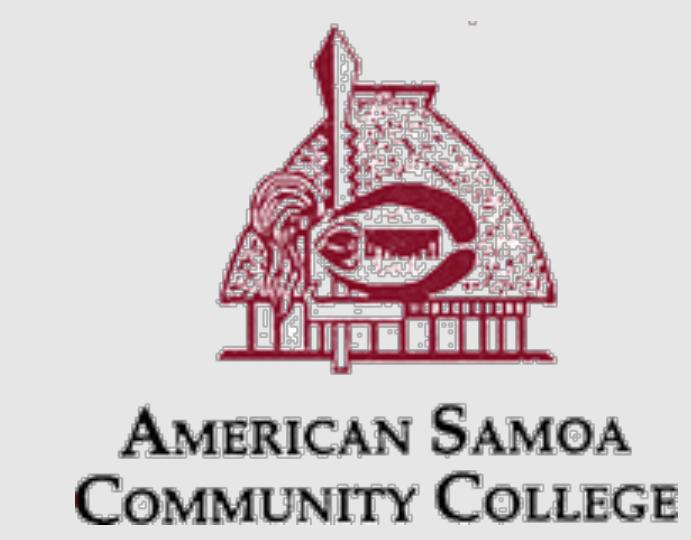




Eroding Ele'ele: A Qualitative Study of the Fa'aSamoa Impact of Climate Migration

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FA'ASAMOA THE SAMOAN WAY OF LIFE

American Samoa inhabits a traditional society governed by **Fa'aSamoa (the Samoan Way)**, where family is of the utmost importance, respect of elders is enforced, and being of service to your community is your duty. Almost every local grows up on the same land their ancestors did, learning and embracing traditional values, practices, and generally their environment.

In Samoa, ele'ele is the word for both land and blood. Ele'ele manifests the strong connection between land and family, which is a fundamental part of Fa'aSamoa. This connection is evident in some of the long-practiced traditions and time-honored customs of the Samoan people. For instance, it is traditional to bury ancestors on family land. Very often, homes of the living are fronted by graves of deceased relatives. Even family names and titles are frequently tied to a place.

In the face of climate change disasters and land displacement, ele'ele in Fa'aSamoa is threatened and weakened. Disaster-induced migration and relocation can make it difficult for families to stay culturally resilient, as they lose the land they were born into and hope to maintain for their descendants.



Graves at the Vaitogi village coastline (Tutuila, Am. Samoa)
Courtesy of Eli Keene

CLIMATE CHANGE IN AMERICAN SAMOA

American Samoa is one of the most vulnerable places to the climate change crisis. From sea level rise to warm temperature, climate change impacts have directly affected the Pacific island country (PIC) and its people. These impacts have influenced the intensity of extreme environmental events, causing extensive damage and problems to locals and ecosystems (PCEP 2014). For instance, **the tsunami that struck American Samoa caused more damage than it would have because of sea level rise.** In some cases, climate change impacts have also increased the frequency of these disasters.

As rural dwellers, subsistence farmers, and natural-resource-dependent inhabitants, the impacts of climate change undoubtedly harm the livelihoods of residents.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How did the tsunami-caused relocations of 2009 influence *Fa'aSamoa* (the Samoan way of life) in American Samoan households?

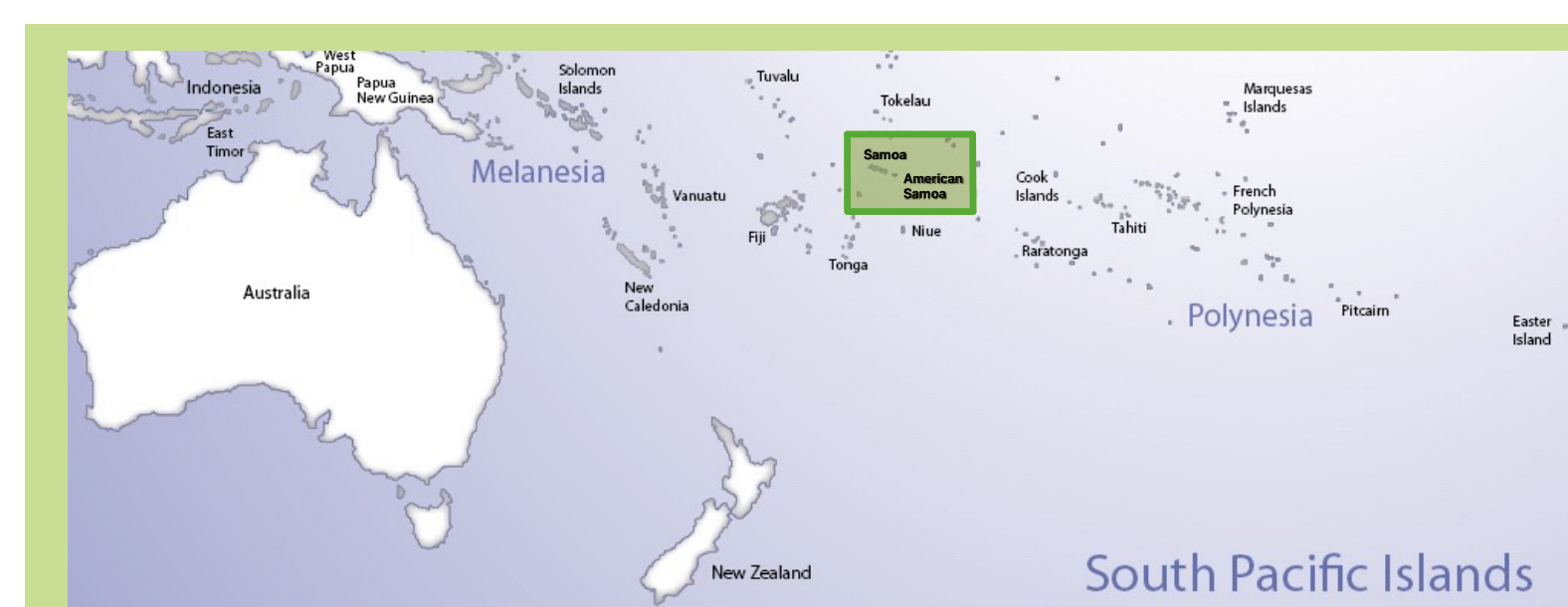
OBJECTIVES

- Examine the impact of tsunami - induced migration on the cultural livelihoods and identities of Samoans
- Underline important lessons for future climate change migration and displacement responses in American Samoa and other Pacific island communities

RESEARCH DESIGN

STUDY AREA

The two extremely damaged villages in the island of Tutuila, American Samoa will be investigated: **Pago Pago and Leone.** (See Figure 1)



Geographic Location of Samoa & American Samoa
Source: Pacific People's Partnership

DATA COLLECTION

Semi-structured Interviews

In-depth interviews will be conducted. A brief guide of pre-determined themes and questions will be established to direct the interviews, while majority of the questions will not be planned in advance. Flexibility is encouraged for comprehensive responses and perspectives.

Snowball Sampling Method

Interview participants will be accessed through the snowball sampling method. An **exponential non-discriminative approach** will be taken in which the Pago Pago and Leone village *pulenu'u* (mayor) will serve as the primary source for referrals. For a representative sample, **thematic saturation** will be implemented.

DATA ANALYSIS

Description-focused Coding System

Using the description-focused coding strategy, the relevant transcript material will be coded as it is (without personal interpretation). Thematic patterns will then be identified and discussed thoroughly. (See Figure 2)

2009 Tsunami Impact by Village (Tutuila, American Samoa)

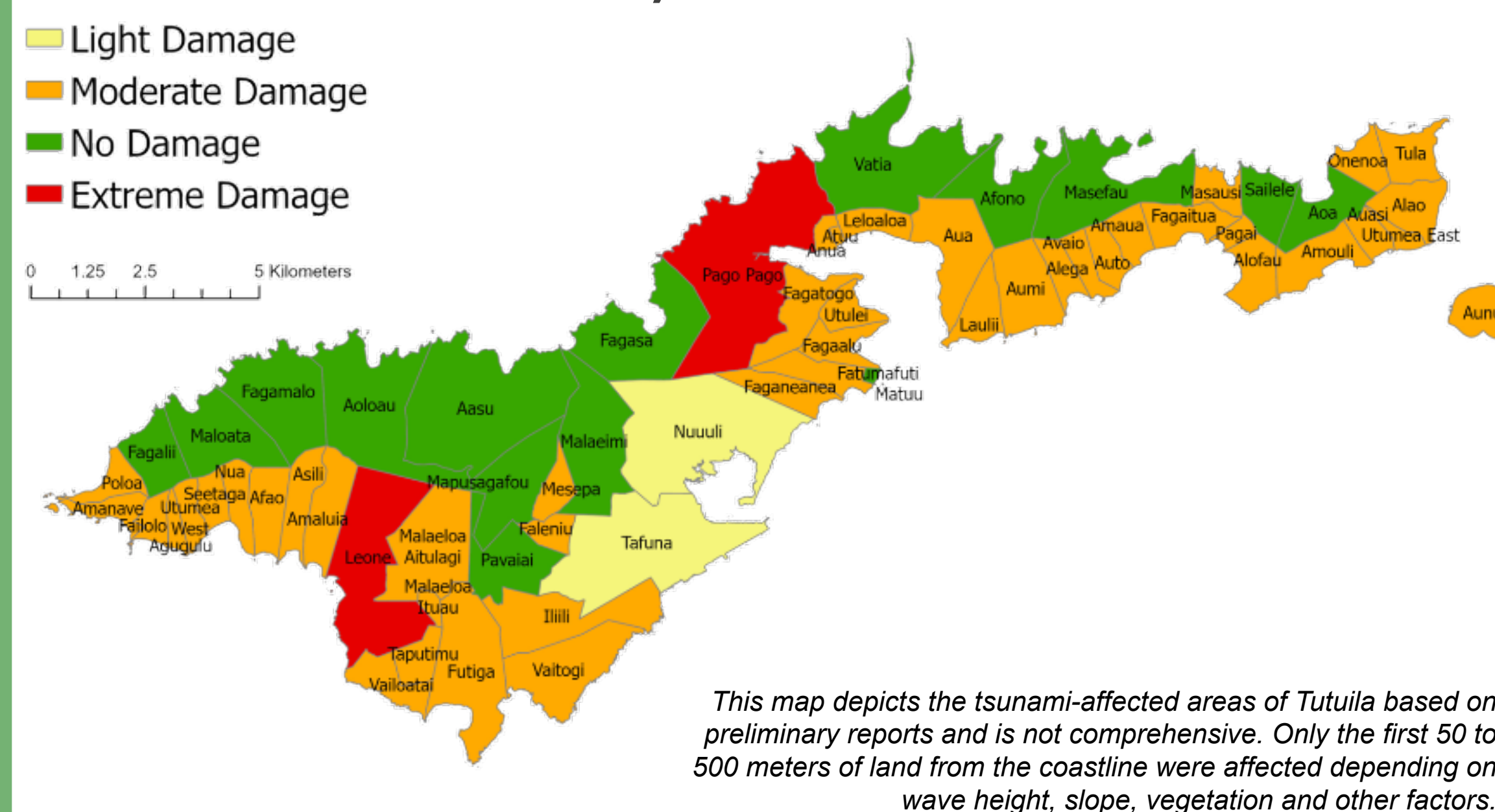


Figure 1
Samoa Tsunami Damage Map Received from OSU Alum Paul Anderson, 9/30/09: Tutuila, Am. Samoa | Source: Anderson 2009

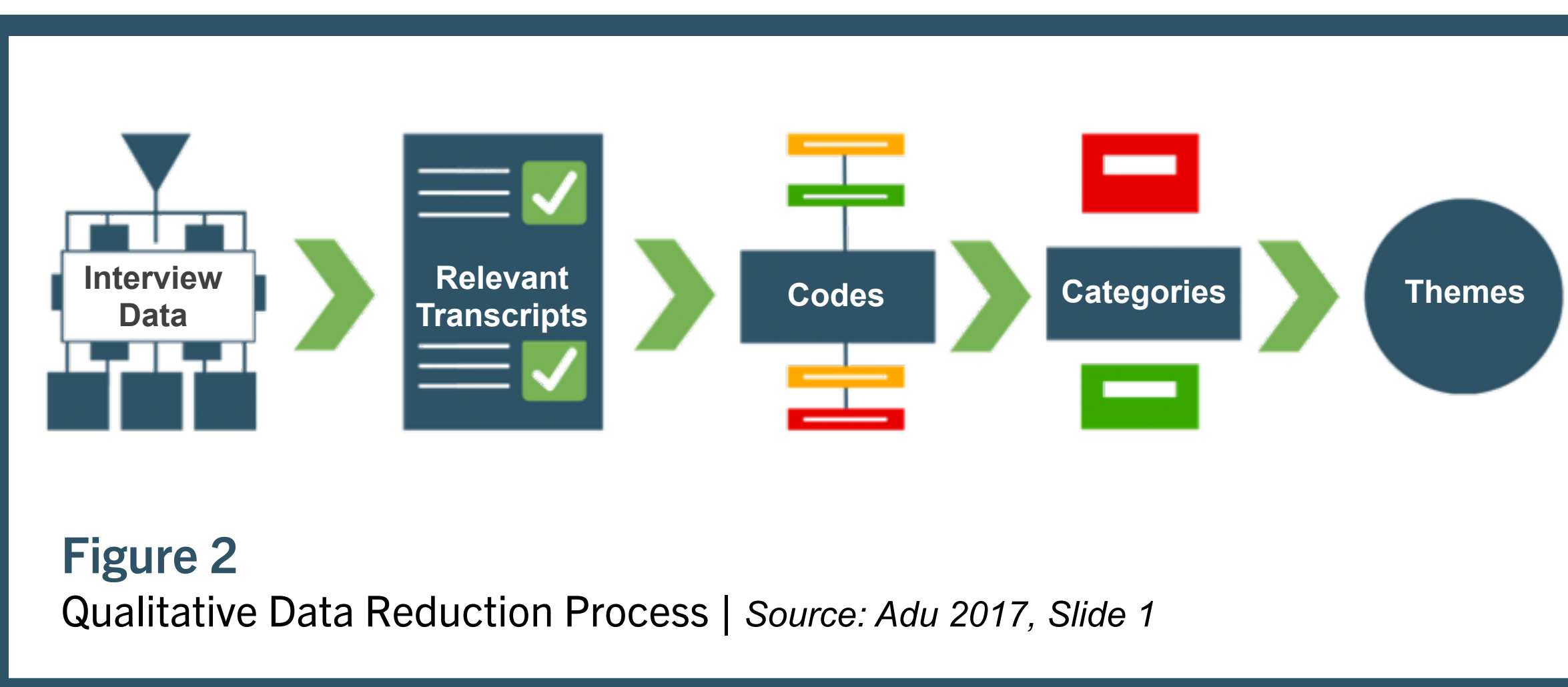


Figure 2
Qualitative Data Reduction Process | Source: Adu 2017, Slide 1

THE 2009 TSUNAMI

In 2009, September 29, earthquakes with magnitudes of 8.0 to 8.1 occurred about 120 miles from the shores of American Samoa—a South Pacific archipelago of seven islands and atolls (NOAA NCEI 2021). Consequently, the coastal areas of the insular territory suffered great devastation that extended beyond human casualties. **Homes were destroyed, properties got swept out to sea, and some (i.e., boats) were washed ashore.**

While many of the tsunami-affected population decided to reconstruct their homes and remain on their lands after the ravaging tsunami, others felt the need to relocate away from their coastal lands and communities (EERI 2010).



Buildings damaged in Tutuila, American Samoa after the tsunami
Courtesy of NOAA NCEI/Gordon Yamasaki

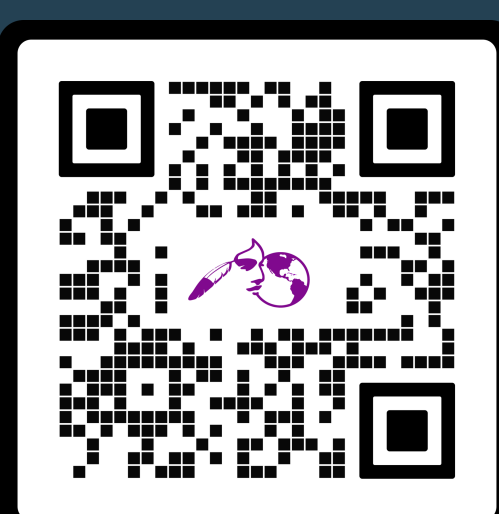


Parking lot in Tutuila, American Samoa after the tsunami
Courtesy of NOAA NCEI

BREAKING GROUND

This research will **break ground for environmental change responses** that seriously consider Indigenous culture and heritage. Understanding the threats of relocation to *ele'ele* can inform climate change adaptation strategies beyond migration. In order to avoid a damage-centered research framework, I will document localized knowledge, aspirations and opportunities to ensure a comprehensive storyline. By better understanding climate change impacts, we can capture the resilience of communities on the frontlines.

CONTACT INFORMATION



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