

THE SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS OF MACKAY, QUEENSLAND, AUSTRALIA

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CULTURAL OVERVIEW

The People

Today approximately fifteen thousand Australians claim descent from Pacific Islanders taken to Queensland as indentured labourers between 1863 and 1904. Sixty-two thousand contracts were issued to around fifty thousand Islanders under the terms of the Masters and Servants Act and other legislation enacted to govern their employment.¹ Queensland is huge, two and a half times as big as Texas. Until about 1880 the Islanders could be employed in any pastoral or maritime industry in the colony, but thereafter they were restricted to the sugar industry along the east coast. The majority were from eighty islands in Melanesia, mainly those included in the New Hebrides (present-day Vanuatu) and the Solomon Islands, but also from the Loyalty Islands off New Caledonia and the eastern archipelagoes of Papua New Guinea, plus a few from Tuvalu and Kiribati. Roughly one-third were from the Solomons and two-thirds from Vanuatu.

The Setting

The Pioneer Valley at Mackay, located midway between Brisbane and Cairns on the coast of central Queensland, is the largest sugar-producing area in Australia and has always had the largest Pacific Islander population, although the residual Islander community there is different in that Islanders of Solomons descent predominate. Descendants of nineteenth-century immigrants from the Pacific Islands, who prefer to be known as *South Sea Islanders*, are very visible around Mackay, making up around twenty-five hundred of the eighty thousand urban population. Including another twenty-five hundred Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, there is quite a substantial black component in the district.

Traditional Subsistence Strategies

Subsistence life-styles were replaced in Queensland by work for wages on plantations and farms. The migration was mainly circular: recruits picked up in the islands, working in Queensland, and then returning to the islands. The normal term of indenture was three years; only a minority stayed on, the ancestors of the present South Sea Islanders. Those who opted to reengage in the islands or in Queensland were paid higher wages as experienced labourers. The rerecruiting and "time-expired" labourers (those who entered second or subsequent contracts) made up a considerable proportion of the numbers. They were not subservient in the way first-indenture labourers usually were - European colonists generally considered these long-staying Islanders to be noisy and unruly.

Social and Political Organization

The first Islander immigrants were mostly young males aged between fifteen and thirty-five; only 6 percent were women. Historians agree that the initial phase of recruiting in most areas was by kidnapping and deception, but as the trade progressed the next generation followed into the whale boats of the labour trade vessels, lured not so much by outright trickery as by the goods offered by beguiling recruiters and the chance to better themselves when they returned to their home societies after three years. However, the majority of South Sea Islanders prefer to depict themselves as the descendants of kidnapped slaves, not indentured labourers. The method of their recruitment remains debated; what is more certain is the high cost in human lives in the largely circular migration. On average, 50 Melanesians in every 1,000 died each year in Queensland, and at worst, in 1884, the death rate was 147 per 1,000, compared with a death rate of around 9 or 10 per 1,000 among European males of the same age in the colony. The primary cause of the deaths was exposure to bacillary dysentery, pneumonia and tuberculosis, against which the new recruits had little immunity.²

Religion and World View

Although most of the fifty thousand Islander labourers involved worked in Queensland for only a limited number of years, and thus were able to maintain much of their traditional cosmology even while in Australia, those who stayed for longer terms or permanently really altered their world views to become colonists and adapted their beliefs and customs. The first generation of these immigrants retained substantial aspects of their customary religious life, building men's houses and to a limited extent managing to establish ancestral shrines and continue worship. Gradually, though, the large regional differences that marked the diverse origins became blurred, as the community retained substantial aspects of their largely Melanesian cultures, united through and shaped by the colonial experience, pidgin English, literacy, and Christianity. Interisland marriages with the few Melanesian women helped unite the community, as did marriages with Aboriginal and a few European women.

The Pacific Islanders always faced a racist colonial society in Australia, which regarded them as inferior and legislated to control and eventually deport them. In its quest for a "White Australia" the new Federal government in 1901 ordered recruiting to cease from 1903 and as many Islanders as possible to be repatriated by 1907. A total of 7,068 Islanders were repatriated back to the islands between 1904 and 1908 and a further 194 departed up to 1914. In 1901, when the deportation order was made, there were around 10,000 Islanders in Queensland and northern New South Wales, one third at Mackay. Eventually, after a 1906 Royal Commission, certain categories, mainly those of more than twenty years' residence and others who could convince the government that they would be in danger if returned home, were allowed to remain. Around 1,500 Islanders were officially allowed to stay and around another 1,000 remained illegally.³

During the two final decades of the nineteenth century missions from the Presbyterian and Anglican churches and a nondenominational group converted the Islanders to Christianity. However, when Islander numbers declined in the 1900s, the parent churches withdrew their support, leaving the Islanders floundering as Christians who were not welcome in the white congregations. Then in the 1920s all but a few of the families followed prominent Islanders into the Seventh-Day Adventist and Assembly of God churches. Today their descendants are leading

members of these churches. Mission Christianity was always fairly fundamentalist, quite different from the parent churches, which made the transition to the new sects reasonably smooth. The Islanders' churches provided the major networks in their community and church elders their major leaders.

THREATS TO SURVIVAL

Legislation and Policy

The new Australian Federation had as a central part of its rationale the concept of a White

Australia. Because Aborigines were thought to be dying out, by halting all further immigration of non-Europeans, Australia would conduct a bold experiment for the world: creation of a nation for white people. This discriminative immigration policy continued until the 1960s and was not formally removed from legislation until 1972, shaping the lives of the remaining South Sea Islanders. Humanitarian concerns had allowed the Islanders to stay in Australia, but within a society that shifted them further to its margins.

Most Islanders who remained in Australia were single men who died in the 1920s and 1930s; very few survived into the 1960s. Among them were the married couples and their families from whom the present-day South Sea Islander community is descended, some now sixth- and seventh-generation Australians. Small South Sea communities, each numbering only a few hundred, remained in all of the cane-growing districts along the coast of Queensland and northern New South Wales, and in one or two pastoral districts in coastal Queensland. Whereas indigenous Australians remained at the back of the collective Australian conscience, on the fringes of rural towns throughout Australia, South Sea Islanders lived in only one region, the tropical east coast, quite invisible to most Australians. Like Aborigines, they were expected to die out, any remnants to assimilate into the white working class. Public recognition of their survival was minimal until the 1970s.

The confines of geography and a century of legislative discrimination kept the Islanders at a semisubsistence level in the first half of the twentieth century and at best employed as field workers in agriculture. Although post 1907 they were no longer governed by the restrictive legislation that had bound them in the nineteenth century, first to tropical agriculture, then to field work, legislative restrictions placed on all nonwhites were tightened in the 1910s and 1920s, particularly in the sugar industry, which government policy, spurred by the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), was to make a totally white industry. In 1903 the federal government introduced a sugar bounty paid to growers who used only white labour to grow and harvest their cane. Ten years later the Queensland government legislated to introduce certificates of exemption that had to be held by any non-Europeans working in the industry. Then between 1919 and 1921 Queensland's Arbitration Court prohibited the employment of "coloured" labour except on farms owned by a countryman and gave preference in employment to AWU members. South Sea Islanders were debarred from membership of the AWU until the 1970s, and although all of these legal provisions applied only to the original immigrant generation, not to Australian-born South Sea Islanders, in the early decades of the century because of the strength of Melanesian kinship that bound them to their elders, all Islanders were effectively banned from the only employment available in a district like Mackay where cane was a monoculture.

Political Economy

Elderly Islanders eked out a bare existence on small farms leased from the last plantations, on marginal hill lands not useful for mechanised agriculture. Mackay had 150 of these farms in 1908 but by the 1930s only a handful remained. Mechanisation of the farming process, which necessitated greater financial outlays, and refusal of banks to loan money to Islanders, soon meant that in an industry that had undergone a transition from plantation to family farms, none was owned by the Islanders whose labour founded the industry. There were ways around the discrimination, such as putting cane assignments into the names of white friends and cutting cane by lantern light at night, but largely by the 1920s the original Islanders had been totally marginalised to more menial poorly paid itinerant farm work and to a part-subsistence existence. Further mechanisation, this time of the cutting process in the 1960s, took away what were major seasonal jobs as cane-cutters, ending a century of association between South Sea Islanders and the sugar industry.

This discrimination and technological change have had long-term results in terms of employment and depressed socioeconomic indicators, leaving the Islanders unwanted on the fringes of prosperous but conservative white farming communities. However, since the 1960s when indigenous Australians were finally recognised as citizens with rights similar to the white population, the South Sea Islanders have benefited. Nonetheless, this positive discrimination has also been a threat to their survival as a separate community. Because there were so few Islander women among the first generation, probably around one-third of the Islander families are descended from Aboriginal or Asian mothers. Even up until the 1970s many Islanders denied their indigenous ancestry, partly because of a Melanesian arrogance about Aborigines, to whom they felt superior, but also largely because the wider Australian community saw the Islanders as racially superior to Aborigines. The Islanders were almost at the bottom of society anyway, and there was no advantage to them in stressing their indigenous Australian ancestry. Aboriginality is defined by your identity: whether you acknowledge your indigenous ancestry, and whether the indigenous community accepts you. South Sea Islander identity had been achieved at the expense of rejecting any indigenous identity. Then from the mid-1960s onward, after a 1967 referendum that gave the federal government the power to legislate for indigenous Australians, overriding state powers, the Commonwealth began to fund schemes to improve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health, education, housing, legal facilities, employment, and business opportunities.

Mackay district Islanders were in a difficult situation. Between the 1860s and 1890s the original Aboriginal population had been decimated by deliberate extermination and disease, and the remnant Aboriginal community absorbed into the South Sea Islander community, which was then the only black community. There are now around twenty-five hundred Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the district, but they are mainly Torres Strait Islanders who are recent immigrants and a few hundred Aborigines who have come from other areas. For some South Sea Islanders there was never a choice: they were proud of their island ancestry and would not claim indigenous status. But many families have altered their primary identity to indigenous so as to receive the special benefits. This has led to a great deal of division in the community and is the major threat to the survival of the South Sea community. There are situations where one cousin has chosen to identify as indigenous and another as South Sea Islander. And even though the total indigenous funding for the

Mackay district is swelled by the South Sea Islanders who have identified as indigenous, there remains resentment among Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (who, to complicate matters, also in some cases have South Sea Islander ancestry from early maritime workers in Torres Strait) that South Sea Islanders are jumping on the indigenous "gravy train" although they have no rights to special assistance.

Education

The immigrant generation were either illiterate or barely literate, taught to read and write as a by-product of mission Christianity. Their children began to attend primary schools from the 1890s, but often for only a few years, and up until the 1940s education remained very limited, with an attempt at segregated education at Mackay in the 1930s. Like low-income rural Queenslanders of all races, South Sea Islanders never went beyond primary school. Equitable access to education and a natural progression through to secondary school did not occur in Queensland generally until the early 1960s. Thus the grandparents and parents of today's Islander children still do not place high value on formal education, provide less learning stimulus at home, and feel that the education system is not geared to the needs of their children. In the 1970s Islander students seldom matriculated, enrolled in commercial and industrial courses terminating at grade ten. Since that time the South Sea Islanders have benefited educationally from financial assistance and programs developed for indigenous Australians. The 1980s and 1990s saw changes for the better: ten percent of Mackay's high school students are black, presumably about half identifying as South Sea Islanders, with quite high retention rates through to grade twelve and some now continuing to university level. However, high retention rates do not necessarily mean good results, and many black students merely "mark time," staying off the welfare line a few years longer.

Housing

Identifying as indigenous Australians has produced educational benefits for Island children but has had some negative consequences as well. It has also led to the rehousing of many South Sea Islander families, either through indigenous housing schemes or through the Housing Commission. Earlier in the century all of the Islanders lived in rural or semirural areas, usually in traditional leaf-thatch houses or fairly dilapidated European-style houses on flood-prone river banks. The rehousing, although a relief in terms of physical comfort, has been destructive to the Islanders' sense of community. They are now relocated within suburbs, by housing cooperatives that value the quality of their property investment more than the maintenance of any sense of community. Young Islander families who are not able to take advantage of any special assistance, like all Australians at the bottom end of the job market, find it very difficult to make the transition from renting to buying their own house.

Cultural Practice

Another threat to survival is the erosion of their original Melanesian culture. As mentioned, the first major change was the creation of a pan-Melanesian culture, one community formed from an amalgamation of dozens of different island cultures and extensive intermarriages. Indigenous languages died out with the first generation, and only a few words and phrases remained. Even pidgin English, used by the first to third

generations, is now no longer spoken, replaced by English with an element of indigenous and Torres Strait (locally referred to as "Broken") Islander creole. Indigenous religious practices finally died out in the 1940s, although the older second- and third-generation Islanders maintain strong belief in a spirit world beyond Christianity. There remains a preference for particular foods - fish and root crops like taro and sweet potato - but these are limited to special occasions. Typically, at a large Islander party all of the meat and root vegetables are cooked in underground stone ovens down by the river. More important for cultural survival, there remains a sense of caring for an extended family, but even this is eroding fast. Until the 1980s there were some members of the Islander community who behaved as classic Melanesian "big men" and "big women," expecting and receiving allegiance from a wide family group. The lack of these leaders is now very evident in Islander politics. Up until the 1970s the elders usually managed to enforce their wishes about marriages, strongly preferring that their children and grandchildren marry their own kind. This practice is now long gone. South Sea Islanders now marry white Australians far more often than they link with Aboriginal or Melanesian Australians.

RESPONSE: STRUGGLES TO SURVIVE CULTURALLY

Demographic trends

South Sea Islanders could easily have died out, just as authorities expected early this century, but their demographic survival was assured by the 1940s. The first-generation families contained four and five children, then the second and third generations had very large families; families of ten and twelve children were not unusual. There were probably around one hundred first-generation families in Australia; six and seven generations of some very large families have produced a South Sea Islander community numbering about fifteen thousand. This was not a calculated response, but it certainly has worked in their favour.

The community is spread over 2,000 kilometres (1,240 miles) of coast, with several major centres, the Mackay district the largest of these. Inter-marriage ensures that although there remains a broad division between Solomon Island-identified families and New Hebridean (Vanuatu)-identified families, a web of blood relationships has been created. Although the Australian South Sea Islander community is renowned for its divisions and inability to unite politically and has no geographic centre, there is still a real sense of being part of the one big South Sea Island family.

Religion and Sports

Demographic survival was not a calculated response, but it was a necessary component of the community's survival. In similar vein are religion and sport. Until the 1970s sporting activities, and Christian religious beliefs and practices, were two very important strengths that enabled the Islanders to survive as a community.

Worship provided a weekly focus for the original immigrants and later generations to come together. The religious separatism that had characterised the mission churches was carried over into the Adventist and Assembly of God churches for several decades. Islander churches were fairly autonomous until the 1960s and 1970s, after which there was much more incorporation into the parent churches. For the first six or so decades of this century white clergy were not really welcome to

interfere in the running of Islander churches - there was a sense of pride in handling their own finances and controlling decision making and authority. The present younger generation are by and large not churchgoers. Religious influences have often been superseded by an interest in sport and gambling, particularly bingo for women.

Sports have been an important leveller in Australian society and remain an all-consuming interest and pastime for many Islanders. Through sports they have readily gained acceptance for several decades, whether it be women in *vigoro* (a game like cricket) and basketball, or men in cricket and football. However, in the first half of the century there was a strong degree of separatism, as all-black teams played against white teams. Some soccer players of South Sea Islander descent are household names in Australia (Mal Meninga, Sam Backo, Wendal Sailor), and one Mackay sporting trophy is awarded in the name of a prominent Islander man. National and state politicians called upon to give speeches about the Islanders always mention these sporting heroes as individuals of high status, worthy of community pride. At school, Islanders also excel at sports, which may in some cases cloak less exceptional academic results.

Politics and Identity

Since the 1970s unity has been achieved by directly political means and through reestablishment of links with their islands of origin. Along with this has come further stimulus from media and academic interest, which has provided a clear profile and national legitimacy for the fragmented Islander community. In the 1900s the Islander communities along the northeast Australian coast united to form a Pacific Islanders' Association to protest their deportation. For its time it was the most significant protest organisation among Melanesians anywhere, and it did manage to achieve some modification of Australia's callous racist plans to deport all "Kanakas", the name given to the Islander immigrants in the nineteenth century. The 1900s political movement was long forgotten by the 1970s, and unity in the intervening decades was provided only by separatist church congregations. In the 1960s, however, some leading South Sea Islanders became involved in movements to gain rights for indigenous Australians. The benefits gained, alluded to previously, provided necessary special funding for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders but inadvertently drove a wedge between South Sea Islanders and their indigenous kin. Although some Islander families had indigenous ancestry, until financial rewards accrued there was little indigenous identification. Since then the next generation of South Sea Islanders has increasingly placed emphasis on their indigenous ancestry, which has alienated Islanders with no indigenous ancestry and produced a degree of ill feeling among "real" indigenous Australians. All of these events brought issues of identity to a head.

The process of campaigning for a remedy to the injustice of their situation took twenty years. Finally in 1994 the Commonwealth government recognised the diverse South Sea Islanders as a disadvantaged ethnic community and announced a package of special grants, programs and funding.

By the 1970s Australian South Sea Islanders lacked any solidarity except that gained through kinship, religion, and a shared past. Just as had occurred in the 1900s, various community leaders recognised the need for a political organisation to link all communities. The Australian South Sea Islanders United Council (ASSIUC) was formed in 1974 with branches in all major centres of Islander settlement and in the east-coast capital cities. It is significant that at the two recent periods (1974-75 and

1990s) when the Islanders have been most successful politically, Australia has had a Labor government in Canberra.

During the intervening years of the 1970s through the 1990s there had been other changes that aided the Islanders. The Queensland government announced official recognition of its South Sea Islanders as a distinct ethnic group and appointed Mackay's leading Islander, Noel Fatnowna, as a Special Commissioner for Pacific Islanders within an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). South Sea Islanders managed to re-form strong links with their islands of origins, which caused a cultural and genealogical resurgence. Radio and television "discovered" the Islanders in a series of programs, which brought them more attention from all Australians living away from the sugar coast. And at the same time, academic studies, utilising oral testimony, restored to the community some of its own history, making it possible, for instance, for some of the Australian families to relink with their families in the islands. In the 1990s this renewed Islander search for their ancestors and history resulted in Islander input into a set of government-funded curriculum materials, which now enable teachers to incorporate information on the Islanders into the school system.

ASSIUC and the many other Islander-based organisations that have been created since the 1970s work on a combination of traditional Melanesian values and modern political lobbying skills. In 1990, through Faith Bandler, Australia's most influential South Sea Islander, the Commonwealth government once more recognised the problems of the community. Survey findings revealed a South Sea Islander population of between ten thousand and twenty thousand, many of whom chose to identify as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. Their unemployment rate was two and a half times the national rate, and their home-ownership rate was half the national average. The report concluded that South Sea Islanders were the poorest immigrant ethnic group in Australia. Medical surveys indicated high rates of diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, obesity and renal disease, comparable with those of indigenous Australians. The final government recommendations in 1994 combined basic assistance for education, housing, health, and culture with a program to increase public awareness of the South Sea Islanders and their role in Australian history. This enabled South Sea Islander identity to survive as separate from indigenous identity.

International Links

The Islanders have through their own initiative created a substantial relinking with their families in Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea. This has been made possible by improvement in air service between Australia and the islands as well as Islanders having access to disposable incomes that can be spent on overseas holidays. Since then there has been a cultural renaissance, a strengthening of identity, a sense of assurance of their place in Australia and as Pacific Islanders. It is now commonplace for individual Islanders and whole families to visit relatives in the islands, and for return visits to occur, sometimes on an annual basis. Church groups from the islands and Australia have been making trips back and forth since the 1980s. Honiara, capital of the Solomon Islands, is Mackay's sister city. In 1988 the Prime Minister of the Solomon Islands stopped off in Mackay to visit his people there, and later that year a group of twenty-two Solomon Islanders led by a cabinet minister took part in a reenactment of the arrival of the first Melanesian labourers brought to the district in 1867. Then in 1990 the Solomon Islands appointed a consul-general for Australia, based in Brisbane, not the national capital Canberra (although the main

consulate was shifted to Canberra a few years later), in recognition of trade and communication links with Queensland and the large number of Australian Solomon Islanders living in the state.

The process of relinking two sides of families separated for sixty years is both exhilarating and bewildering. Australian South Sea Islanders are Australians first and South Sea Islanders second. Depending on how much influence they have had from more traditional older members of their families, they have absorbed some idea of Island customs, some understanding of the cultural powers that remain vibrant in the islands. Often precise details of customary names and village identification back in the islands have been forgotten by Australian Islander families. It is a remarkable experience to return to their ancestral homes, to go back to the villages their grandparents and great-grandparents left so long ago. Instead of being marginal Australians, always obviously black within a white majority, they suddenly find themselves indistinguishable from their kin, except for their broad Australian accents. The impact of discovering that they have close relatives, land, and ceremonial rights in the islands is overwhelming. So too is residual fear of the potency of sorcery and the problem of dealing with false claims of relationship and avaricious relatives who unthinkingly demand reciprocity of wealth. Even the poorest Australian South Sea Islanders seem rich by village standards in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The long-term ramifications of this relinking are probably far more significant than any government assistance, which is intended to be short-term and is fickle, depending on the whims and goodwill of politicians.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The South Sea Islander community at Mackay is the largest in Australia, and many of its problems are a mirror of those in other areas, although it does have its own peculiarities, which make it operate differently. One is seemingly unbridgeable political divisions. The government agencies dealing with the approximately fifteen thousand Islanders have never really comprehended the extent of these deep-grained divisions, between individuals, families, and island groups. There are six South Sea Islander community organisations operating in the Mackay district. All of these organisations operate on the remnants of the original pan-Melanesianism, new Western values and skills, and newly created supposedly "traditional" values about elders and leadership that owe much to indigenous Australian modern politics and have no real basis in handed-down traditions. Significantly, women have been the most successful political leaders in the Islander community Australia-wide since the 1980s, a phenomenon that has no basis in traditional Melanesian politics.

Although political lobbying and access to government funding are unifying factors, other features of the community are at the same time causing it to disintegrate further. Christianity is losing its force as a unifying and stabilising factor. Today's churchgoers are really those born in or before the 1960s and 1970s. The 1980s and 1990s generation is not interested and has rebelled, removing one of the long-term foci. There was also once the unity of intermarriage, which created a sense of community. Despite animosities and the enormous geographic spread of the Islander families, the complex web of intermarriage created since the 1920s ensures that each family is in some way related to all the others. Since the 1970s there has been continuing out-marriage, into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and into the white community. Now there is immigration of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders as well as Polynesians, mainly from Tonga and Samoa. This group of

recent nonwhite arrivals for the most part has no respect for tradition and is no longer willing to obey or take the advice of their elders. In the 1990s Mackay developed quite severe problems with youth violence, perpetrated by youths of Islander ancestry who have nothing in common with and cannot relate to their conservative religious elders. Black American influences such as rap music, which give credence to premarital sex and violence, often predominate over older values. This leads to severe problems of cultural identity. Today there is no longer a clear South Sea Islander identity and the younger generation sees themselves as black Australians rather than South Sea Islander Australians.

NOTES

1. Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay* (Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and the University of Papua New Guinea, 1985), p. 25. The best overall statistical source is Charles Price and Elizabeth Baker, "Origins of Pacific Island Labourers in Queensland, 1863-1904: A Research Note," *Journal of Pacific History* (11, 1-2): 106-21, 1976.
2. Ralph Shlomowitz, "Mortality and the Pacific Labour Trade," in *Mortality and Migration in the Modern World* (Brookfield, Vt: Variorum, 1996), pp. 34-55.
3. Patricia Mercer, *White Australia Defied: Pacific Islander Settlement in North Queensland* (Townsville: Department of History and Politics, James Cook University, 1995), pp. 75-110.