



UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent 32nd session

Presented by:

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Our communities embody the resilience and determination of our South Sea Islander forebears for we are the blackbirded descendants who have sustained displacement through rising above adversity through self-determination. Truth and justice unpack *the misbehaving of history* as we pay homage to the thousands stolen from their island states. The labour contribution through the heinous act of colonialism has contributed to a world economy of continued wealth building as part of the global history of slavery.



Image provided by Lola Noter and Emily May Enares (nee Sedy, Santo) ; Image provided by Kristal Brown family archive for thesis 'Children of the Sugar Slaves 'Black and Resilient'.

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Australian South Sea Islanders (ASSI)

An insight to blackbirded Pacific generations based on the Tweed Heads region of New South Wales.

Australia's geographical location is the southern hemisphere between the Indian and Pacific Ocean. It's lands were never ceded by our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are the worlds oldest living cultures for well over 65,000 years. Before colonisation there were some 500 clan groups with 250 surviving and 120 languages still spoken.

Today across Australia we acknowledge the lands on which we live and work and for me it is the lands of the Gadigal people one of the 29 clans of the Eora nation namely Sydney New South Wales (NSW) Australia.

This paper is written from my lived experience with some refence to desktop research by non-indigenous historians. I am a second generation born Australian South Sea Islander to Nellie Kias Enares who was born and raised on a farm in the northern NSW region of Tweed Heads and one of 11 siblings. The lands mum grew up on are the lands of the Bundjalung nation an area called Eungella and Aboriginal word meaning 'honey bee' situated just ten kilometers inland from Murwillumbah. Her father was trafficked to Australia at the age of 12 from the Pacific Island nation of Vanuatu and her mother was born on a farm in the state of Queensland to a trafficked house girl on a Maryborough plantation. My father is from the Caribbean and was a travelling musician his name Clayton Augustine Davis. Dad migrated here in the late '50s' from Grenada via London and is a descendant of the Atlantic slave trade with heritage being nine countries of Africa.

Terminology:

The below context gives a brief insight to the evolution of Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) community history and identity in finding the balance through desktop research (conventional academia) and oral histories and lived experiences of our people from the Tweed Heads region which is where my mother was born and raised in the state of New South Wales, Australia.

ASSIs are 'a distinct cultural group' who value our islands of origin, cultural heritage, historical and contemporary identity.

- Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) refers to the descendants of an era in Australian history where people from the eighty three islands of Vanuatu, Solomons and other Small Island States were Blackbirded to build the economy in sugar, agriculture and railway industries.
- Blackbirding is a practice derived from the Atlantic Slave trade which involved frontier warfare, displacement on en mass through coercion, kidnapping, stealing and trafficking of targeted Indigenous communities from their islands of origin.
- South Sea Islanders (SSI) – refers to our forebears historically Blackbirded to Australia between 1847 - 1908.
- Some 800 shipping route voyages operated under colonisation of the Pacific region
- Sydney NSW has been a receiving port for Pacific labour since (key dates) 1790s, 1847 and the 1860s deployment of SSI labour to the Torres Strait Islands beche-de-mer and pearling industries as important demographic facts of this history.
- The most significant ASSI 'colony' is on Mua (St Pauls) Island in Torres Strait, established by the Anglican Church in the 1900s. Today Torres Straits celebrates what is called 'Coming of the light' or 'Zulia 1' in recognition of Christianity work by SSI evangelical missionaries.
- New migrants of today that arrived freely after 1908 are also referred to as SSI or South Pacific Islanders.

Narrative:

Australian South Sea Islanders are the descendants of some 62,500 men Blackbirded from the eighty three Melanesian islands of Vanuatu and Solomons. Records show that 5% of the trade were women and the children were unaccounted for, however, oral history research from first, second and up to sixth generation descendants of those children that were taken identified through their family history records stolen generations as young as eight years old. It was illegal to traffic children under 16 years of age. (Waskam) Emelda Davis refers to her grandfather who was stolen at age 12 with two of his friends off the beach at Tanna Vanuatu in the late 1800s forced to work in Bundaberg sugar cane farms. Phyllis Netouka Corowa (nee Enares) of the Tweed speaks of her grandmother aged 14 stolen from Ambae (Aoba) in Vanuatu and was trafficked to a Irrawarra Plantation-Dennison as a house servant.

As a people going through the process of decolonisation, some in our community have discussed and use 'Australian' as part of our cultural description giving sense of place and belonging as stolen generations bought to a foreign land.

The term 'Australian South Sea Islanders' has been coined by those who headed up the grassroots community research led nationally by 1975 ASSIUC based on the Tweed Heads region. The 1992 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Report *'The Call for Recognition'* exemplified the continued resilience by our communities and identified severe disadvantages for ASSIs. This ground breaking work led to the 1994 Commonwealth Government recognition statement for descendants of the trade.

In 1847 NSW received the first 200 South Sea Islander men trafficked by celebrated politician and entrepreneur Benjamin Boyd to Slave on the East Coast, Eden NSW across his whaling and cotton industries. In 2022 the infamous landmark formerly known as Benjamin Boyd National Park has undergone a historical name change to Beowa National Park as a more culturally appropriate recognition that gives back to the traditional owners of the land as a sight of great significance and includes recognition of our South Sea Islander forebears and the atrocities they endured. This historical achievement was secured through the leadership of (Waskam) Emelda Davis as chair of ASSI-PJ campaigning for over a decade.

Cheap labour was seen as a necessity by colonialist in making plantations economically viable and the solution in the 19th century was to reap island states of their young men which saw in many cases entire male populations stolen from their families and communities. Main islands were Vanuatu as identified as having the largest numbers taken making up three quarters of the trade, Solomons a close third and other Islands such as Papua New Guinea, New Caledonia, Rotuma (Fiji), Kiribati and Tuvalu were included.

The 'Town and Country' newspaper in 1872 stated that the Pacific Islanders being kidnapped and brought against their will to labour in Australia, "in the cant of the age is called the 'labour traffic,' but which was formally known to Englishmen as the 'Slave trade'." There were so many abuses by ships 'recruiting labour' that in 1872 the English Parliament passed the Imperial Kidnapping Act which allowed the Royal Navy policemen in the West Pacific to enforce the regulations governing recruiting vessels bringing Islanders to Queensland. It was not until 1880 that the Queensland Parliament provided a comprehensive system to regulate conditions for the Islanders. Nevertheless, death rates for Islanders in the 1800s remained very high, over 60 per thousand. Some 15,000 died within the first six months from exposure to common disease or were dead on arrival in notwithstanding the devastating voyage.

Despite many Islanders not being able to read or write or comprehend the English language, recruitment was eventually introduced and was usually an agreement to work for an employer for renewable periods of three years. However, regulations or not, their conditions were described by Australian historian E.O. Shann, "... they were, in fact, if not in law, chattel Slaves."

Traders who brought the SSI into Queensland did not understand the many languages, so they gave each person a surname based on the name of the place or island that they had come from or a phonetic version of the name the Islander gave. They then gave them a first name like Tom or Willy, or a Christian biblical name like Enock, so, for example, 'Vitune' from Apia in Samoa became 'Peter Appie'.

Culturally diverse and distinct different clans of these Blackbirded islands were forced under colonial rule to learn English and French. Therefore historically as a collective they formed new languages such as Pijin English, a combination of English words with grammatical structures from the Pacific region and Indigenous Australia. Pijin English is also called Tok Pisin, Solomons Pijin, and Bislamar, which is the common language spoken throughout the Pacific and more recently, taught as part of the Vanuatu curriculum. Bislamar was developed during the 1860s to 1880s as an organic means of communication between Indigenous peoples of Australia and the Pacific and as a means of communication with traffickers and plantation owners. Creole is spoken mainly in the Torres Strait by descendants of the 'Blackbirding' trade, with a small increase of Bislama and Solomons Pijin on the mainland as descendants have been relinking with our families and cultural practices in Australia and the Pacific. Australian South Sea Islander contemporary culture has adopted specific terminology from the nineteenth century that is used to identify the origins of our heritage. Words such as Nasara, Wantok, Kanak, Tuff Tumas, Yumi Olgeta, Famili, Numba Wan and other more common with Aboriginal English spoken in Vanuatu are deadly, lookout, no good, gamon and too much.

South Sea Islanders are first recorded as being on the Tweed in 1874. The first record is in the diary of Mrs Gertrude Bray, wife of the local Justice of the Peace, Joshua Bray, of 'Kynnumboon'.

However there is some speculation about how and why the Tweed region was settled by our South Sea Islander forebears. At first they helped to clear the land of valuable red cedar, black bean and teak as early as the 1860s. The cedar was taken to Chinderah by horse and bullock team and loaded onto boats for Sydney. These boats were the main means of transport up and down the region for many years. A recent history of the Tweed area by David Rae suggests that many hundreds of our people were also recruited from Queensland by Robb and Co Sugar Mill, which took over from the original Julius Mill at Cudgen, where there was fertile volcanic soil in the 1880s (Rae, 2019). In his estimation, over 500 Melanesian men were employed in the mill and plantation towards the end of the nineteenth century. Clive Moore offers a couple of possibilities:

... they realised that once they crossed the border the Queensland laws specifically designed to control their lives no longer applied. It may also be that they were exploring the possibilities of a new southern area ... the wages were better and they seem to have had more freedom in the Northern Rivers (Moore, 2019).

The viability of the sugar industry was seriously affected as some 7,000 South Sea Islanders and in cases their families under the White Australia Policy were deported from 1906, with the exception of those who were married, had lived in Australia for 20 years, or owned land. This was secured through the 1901 Pacific Island Association in Mackay which advocated for better conditions and gathered some 3,000 signatures presented to King Edward VII in September 1903.

In 1901 there were 394 Islanders in the Tweed Valley. Some 200 had been in Australia for 20 years or more. By 1906 seventy families had children born in Australia. It is this first generation of Australian born children that provided the labour for much of the sugar industry, as well as for the Tweed dairy industry, fishing and banana plantation industries, until mechanisation arrived in the 1950s.

The official number of those allowed to stay were 1,654 but Rae estimates the actual number was higher, probably more like 2,500.

Christine Mann said, “I can remember them coming to say goodbye when they were deported and singing a farewell hymn and we would all feel sad because they were a thoughtful and kindly lot ...”

Scenes at the ports were distressing as the en mass deportation saw thousands sent back to their islands but many were to be displaced again. Pre-signed deportation orders by then Prime Minister Deakin in 1906 were distributed across government agencies to be applied as the authorities saw fit. Among those who stayed on the Tweed were the families Bellair, Ling, Long, Moss, Paulson, Redman, Slockee, Sye, Togo, Watego, Wogas and Itong (Rae, 2019, 123-124). These are just a few of the names that were identified as staying where as many islanders fled deportation and walked to seek refuge and better conditions in Sydney NSW but to no avail and eventually moved back to the Northern Rivers noting Phyllis Corowa’s father was one of those people as spoken of in the 1995 documentary ‘Sugar Slaves’ directed by Trevor Graham (Davis, 2020 – p49).

In 2016 Dr Peter Prince from Australian National Universities’ most recent research on ‘Australia’s most inhumane act of deportation’ highlights that another major cause of the suffering of South Sea Islanders came as a result of their wrongful labelling as ‘aliens’ in nineteenth and twentieth century Australia, when they belonged as much to Australia as other settler groups in this period. Many Islanders who were the subject of the expulsion were not ‘aliens’ under the law but British subjects. To add insult to injury there was misappropriation of the deceased estate wages for the 15000 who died within the first six months of arrival. The Commonwealth used those wages to fund the en mass deportation process coupled by a further payment by each passenger to pay for their own deportation.

In 1916 the Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR) took over Robb’s sugar mill. The business became 68 gradually more mechanised and moved to other places. Johnny Itong’s father Jack was one of these who worked in Bundaberg on plantations until he came with his employer Robb to the Tweed.

The first group were rapidly followed by others. On Saturday 14th March 1874 William Marks wrote in his diary, “a little ketch came in from Nerang with New Caledonians for S.W. Gray.” This was followed by two schooners from Mackay in quick succession.

While Islanders were employed throughout the Valley and in the Condong Sugar Mill for a time, it was the Robb Sugar Mill at Cudgen that provided most of their employment. William Julius arrived at Cudgen around 1878 and set about building what became known as ‘Robb’s Mill’ to process all the sugar that could be grown on the volcanic soil on the Cudgen/Duranbah hill. He had experience working in sugar in the West Indies and was familiar with the plantation system. He bought as much of the land as he could, brought down from Queensland some 200 Islanders who had completed their contracts and got them to completely clear and grub the land and remove all the stones, which were used to build fences. He then leased out the land to Islanders, 10 acres or so at a time, to grow sugar which was then processed in the mill by other Islanders.

John Robb replaced William Julius in 1892. Both men gained the confidence of the Islanders and were rewarded with a conscientious and stable workforce, a rare thing in those days. Wages in 1903 were around £1 per week, plus food, and the plantation site also included barracks for housing, a dining hall, a post office, a pub, police station, guest house, workmen’s cottages, a store, a school and three churches. For recreation they had a choir and a cricket team. The Robb Estate became so well known and regarded that it became a major place of refuge for Islanders escaping from impossible conditions in Queensland.

We are not indigenous to Australia as we know it today. However, in 1993 the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous and Minority Peoples identified Australian South Sea Islanders as ‘population transfer’. (State Library of Queensland website 2013).

Australian South Sea Islanders have an evident kinship and many with direct bloodline with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as they were absorbed under the 1930s Aboriginal protection Act on missions, stations, plantations and reserves.

Of the 348 Islanders so far identified who arrived on the Tweed between 1874 and 1918 most came from the various islands within the Vanuatu and the Solomon Island groups, but not all. In the 21st century our communities are a budding guestimate 70,000 strong with the Tweed Heads region as one of our major communities.

Decolonisation and unpacking truth, identity and family histories is a lifelong challenge for decades upon decades to come for every generation.

Information courtesy of the Tweed Gold Coast Australian South Sea Islander Association, 2021, Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson) 2010 educational resources, University of Sydney (FASS) 'Children of the Sugar Slaves; Black & Resilient. Hardwork: Australian South Sea Islander bibliography with a select bibliography of sugar industry and Pacific labour trade. Documents: <https://www.assipj.com.au/recognition-documents/>
Courting Blackness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GuXApw-7cw>
Aboriginal Lands of Sydney Australia: <https://www.sydneybarani.com.au/sites/aboriginal-people-and-place/>
ABC TV: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aTdYK4UX3Mc>
Shipping route map: <https://www.assipj.com.au/southsea/wp-content/uploads/ASSIPJ-map.pdf>

