



Information Sheet 2: Blackbirding, Kidnapping and Slavery?

Recruitment and Enlistment by Pacific Islanders to Queensland, 1863-1904

The Queensland Government has records of 62,475 indenture contacts between Pacific Islanders and employers between 1863 and 1904. Given the number of re-enlistments, the total number of individuals is likely to be around 50,000. Most were adolescent and young adult males; only about 5% were women. Throughout the 'labour trade' there were allegations of kidnapping and slavery, which have some foundation. The culture of today's Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) community is shaped by their treatment during the indentured labour period and the harsh years early in the 20th century. Their sense of their united history begins in 1863 with the first labour recruits. ASSI refer to themselves as the descendants of slaves and it is clear that the community harbours a deep sense of injustice. This cannot be answered merely by denying that they were slaves.

Slavery?

Legally, slavery was abolished in the British Empire in the 1800s but continued to exist in the West Indies, South Africa and Mauritius until 1833, in fifteen southern states of the United States of America until the Civil War of 1861–1865. It was a legal status that lasted for life and was inherited by slaves' children. Slaves were the property of their owners, and could be sold, bequeathed, gifted, mortgaged or hired out like any other chattel. Slaves could not enter into any contract, own property or give evidence in court. In contrast, indenture contracts were legally enforceable and legally void if the law was satisfied that they were not voluntarily entered into. Indenture is not the same as slavery, but it has also been called a 'new form of slavery', used to keep non-European labourers in servitude. The racism, exploitation and contempt from which ASSI suffered was close to the way that Australians treated Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, which also bordered on slavery. This has now been recognised by all governments and apologies issued. Australians cannot deny the belief in slavery and retreat to legal definitions: it is the lived experience of the ASSI community.

Blackbirding and Kidnapping?

ASSI and other Australians often use 'Blackbirding' to describe the entire indentured labour process: the word as connotations of total illegality. However, historians and some ASSI and their families in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands differentiate between labourers who were forced to recruit, those who chose to enlist, and those who enlisted for different colonies: Queensland, Fiji, Samoa and New Caledonia. The labour trade was a 'moving frontier' through the islands. Everyone agrees that that in the first ten or so years in any area illegality predominated, but historians and some ASSI say that the labour trade developed into a circular migration and that overall probably only 10 to 15% would have been kidnapped as legally defined, and that occasional kidnapping occurred up until the 1890s.

Cultural Kidnapping?

The degree to which Islanders chose to enlist does not undermine the reality of European exploitation. Dividing the labour trade into kidnapping and voluntary enlistment is too simple. Every one of the indentured Islanders was culturally kidnapped. Europeans were taking cultural advantage of Pacific Islanders in taking them from their small-scale societies, paying them with cheap goods, and binding them with legal contracts they did not understand. Even the most willing were disoriented by the experience.

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Sincerely,



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