



Information Sheet 6: Australian South Sea Islanders during the Twentieth Century

After the 1901-1908 Deportation years around 2,000 to 2,500 South Sea Islanders remained in Australia, living mainly along the coast of Queensland and Northern New South Wales. With no regeneration from immigration, the Australian Government expected them to disappear as the original generation died and their children were absorbed into the Indigenous population.

Marriage and Population

Because of their high reproductive capacity the ASSI started to increase by the 1940s, and in-marriage began to create multiple blood links between the families until today all ASSI are related by blood or marriage in some way and they have become one community although not in one location.

Work

Theoretically free to choose their occupations, actually federal and state legislation designed to make a 'White' sugar industry forced them to leave the industry. Trade unions, particularly the AWU, stopped the Islander employment in the industry, even for the children of the original immigrants. The original generation were relegated to menial farm work or subsistence. They lived on the fringes of White society and continued to suffer racial discrimination.

Church, Education and Sport

Their nineteenth century Christian Churches deserted them and they were drawn into the Assemblies of God and the Seventh-day Adventists. Children attended primary school for only a few years. The Islanders main involvement in the wider community was through sport.

De Facto Indigenous Australians

Between the mid-1960s and the 1980s they were allowed to access special programs for Indigenous Australians in education (Abstudy), housing, health and legal services. They were told to forget their heritage and accept Indigenous benefits: some did, particularly if they had part-Aboriginal ancestry but others refused to compromise their heritage.

Political Pressure Groups

As they began to be excluded from special Indigenous funding and as a flow on from Indigenous political activism, from the mid-1970s ASSI began to form local and national political pressure groups. These resulted in a series of government and institutional (i.e. Evatt Foundation) investigations in 1975-1977, 1991 and 1992, which led in 1994 to Australian Government recognition as a distinct disadvantaged ethnic group. These surveys showed ASSI to suffer significant economic and social disadvantage as a similar level to Indigenous Australians.

Culture and Re-Linking with their Islands of Origin

After a sixty-year gap, in the 1960s and 1970s ASSI began to re-link with their families in Vanuatu and Solomon Islands. Today there are inter-marriages, a flow of cultural groups and acknowledgement of land rights in the islands which have restored confidence and identity as a unique Pacific community. ASSI have preserved a Pacific value system with emphasis on qualities such as pragmatism, self-reliance, industriousness, reciprocal generosity and hospitality.

Numbers

ASSI now number at least 20,000 and if Torres Strait Islanders and Aborigines with South Sea Islander heritage are included, number in excess of 40,000.

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Sincerely,



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