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'Blackbirding' shame yet to be acknowledged in Australia

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As a second generation descendant of South Sea Islanders (kanaks) who were ruthlessly recruited (blackbirded) to serve in the most appalling conditions as plantation workers in the sugar industry of Australia, I am part of a family of activists who have sought to attain recognition and social justice for my people.

More than 55,000 people, mostly men, were brought from Vanuatu, the Solomons and eighty surrounding islands under what Australia called the indentured labour trade, which was akin to slavery. They were first brought to NSW in 1847 with an influx to Queensland between 1863 and 1904.

My grandfather was taken off the island of Tana in what is now the Tafea Province of Vanuatu in the late 1800s. He was one of the many children whose birth right of freedom was stripped from him at the age of 12 when he was taken to work in the sugar cane fields. He never returned home. The experience and belief of our South Sea Islander communities, passed down through oral histories, is that our forefathers were enslaved regardless of the pretence of contracts. Most definitely this was a legal framework for what was in fact criminal activity, which saw the early deaths of 30 per cent of these "labour recruits", buried in unmarked graves across north-eastern Australia.

It was illegal to bring children under the age of 16 unless accompanied by an adult. However, there are many community stories - including my grandfather's - which contradict those regulations.

In the 1995 documentary *Sugar Slaves*, my grandfather's story is told by his eldest surviving daughter, Phyllis Corowa. She describes how he escaped deportation from Australia by the 1901 Pacific Island Labourers Act, which inhumanely deported 7000 people en masse, tearing established families and loved ones apart after 40 years living in Australia.

University of Queensland professor Clive Moore has recently written of this; the wages of 15,000 deceased Islanders were used for this deportation and the low and hard-earned wages of the Islanders were used to pay part of their fare to return to the islands that in some cases had seen their entire male population kidnapped.

This was a cruel, heartless process and one of shame to all Australians.

It gives me great pleasure, however, to know that the efforts of my grandfather and our kanaka men and women contributed significantly to building the strong foundations of the sugar, pastoral and maritime industries in Australia and that we are now the third largest sugar provider in the world as well as being one of the wealthiest countries.

And what I find uncanny - and what seems to me like a strange quirk of fate - I discovered several years ago. From where I have worked in my home for the past 19 years at Pymont, in inner Sydney, I overlook Pirrama Park, which was once called the "Sugar Wharf" managed by CSR, and, yes, sugar ships docked there with the brown sugar from the cane farms in Queensland to be refined nearby.

These ships were managed by Burns, Philp & Co - the same company that operated over labour recruiting and trading ships throughout the Pacific. CSR and Burns Philp were companies built on the backs of kidnapped Islander labourers. Notorious blackbirders Robert Towns and John Mackay both have cities - Townsville and Mackay - dedicated in their names. Benjamin Boyd was another in this history who has been commemorated, with the naming of Ben Boyd Road on Sydney's north.

Our lobbying has been arduous and has fallen on deaf ears with trinkets of acknowledgement and funding. Our

community is 40,000 strong, with 60 per cent Torres Strait Islanders of South Sea Islander descent due to the "labour trade" and the "Coming of the Light" (Christianity) via missionaries, and also east coast Aboriginal Australians, since 40 per cent of whom are married into or have Islander heritage.

Faith Bandler and our patron, the Honourable Bonita Mabo, are amongst the most distinguished of our elders and activists.

Part of our work is to establish a forum to assist Islander communities in the Pacific to gain access to meaningful work opportunities in Australia and to reconnect with our disposed families.

We have a long way to go for the successful establishment of the Islander people within that of the great nation of Australia.

It is journey to empowerment that I am proud to be part of.

Emelda Davis is the president of the Australian South Sea Islanders (Port Jackson).

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/blackbirding-shame-yet-to-be-acknowledged-in-australia-20150603-ghfn9c.html>