



## Information Sheet 8: The Demography of Pacific Islander Migrants in Colonial Queensland

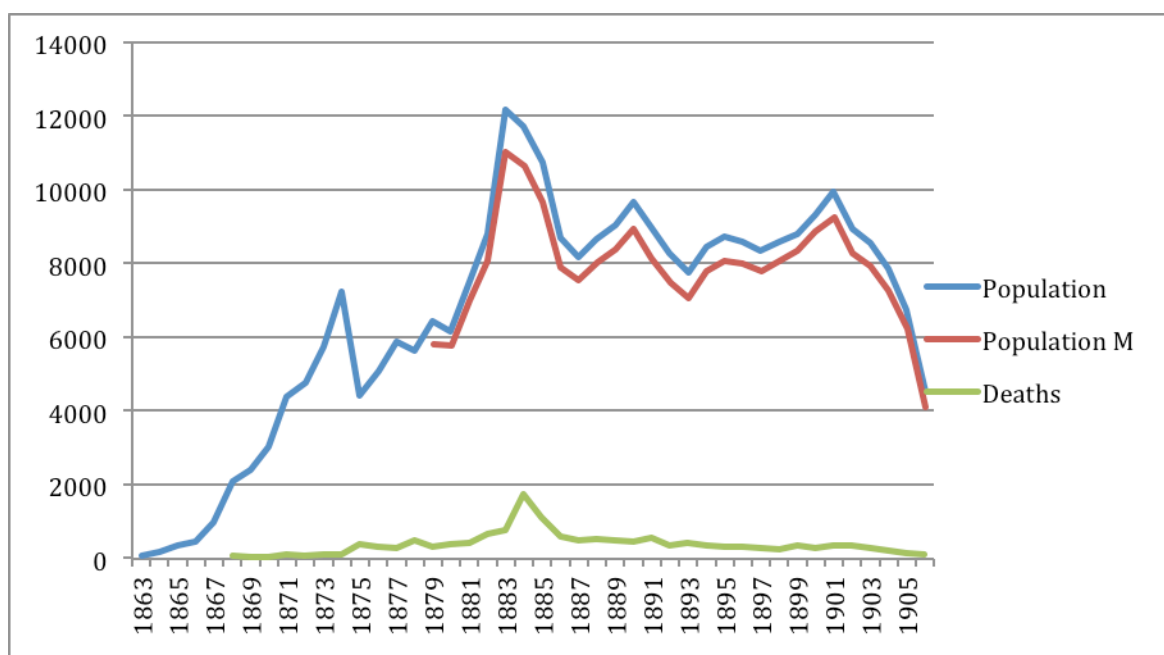
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### Categories and Numbers

There were around 62,000 indenture contracts issued for Pacific Islanders to work as labourers in Queensland between 1863 and 1904. We do not know how many individuals were involved, but from knowledge of the rate of re-enlistments from the islands it seems likely that there were about 50,000 individuals. The vast majority (95 per cent) were adolescent and young adult males. The government records show that in excess of 14,564 Islander labourers died in Queensland between 1868 and 1906; and given the lack of statistics for 1863-1867 and possible other inaccuracies, the total figure is probably closer to 15,000.

**Figure 1: Pacific Islanders In Queensland and Mortality, 1863-1906**



**Source:** *Votes and Proceedings* of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1867-1907, from a variety of sources available on request; Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Mortality and the Pacific Labour Trade’, *Journal of Pacific History*, 1987, Vol 22, No. 1, p. 50; The figures for 1863 to 1875 are very approximate. Mean population figures are available only for 1863 and 1868. The figures between 1863 and 1874 have been calculated by adding up immigrant numbers recorded for each year, which takes no account of mortality until 1868. And the mortality figures come from registered deaths, which would not be accurate. The spike in 1873 seems false and the graph should show a much more gradual increase.

### **First-Indenture Labourers and Acclimatization**

The average crude death rate declined as the labour trade progressed, mainly because their numbers included a decreasing proportion of **first-indenture** labourers, not from any European-inspired improvement in working or living conditions. Over time, three more categories emerged: re-enlistments from the islands; time-expired labourers and ticket-holders. **Re-enlistments** occurred onwards from the late 1860s, and by the early 1890s more than one-quarter of the newly-arriving labourers were re-enlisting: in 1897, 230 of the 934 recruits (24.6 per cent) had previously served terms of indenture—116 in Queensland, 24 in Fiji, 5 in New Caledonia and 40 in Samoa.<sup>i</sup> **Time-expired** labourers were those who had completed one three-year agreement but opted to stay in Queensland and entered new agreements. The time-expired segment of the Islander work force grew increasingly important over the four decades of immigration. By 1895, time-expired Islanders made up 65 per cent of the Melanesians in the Mackay district and could be found in similar proportions in other districts.<sup>ii</sup> **Ticket-holders** were 835 Islanders who had resided in Queensland for five years before September 1884, who had no restriction on the types of work they undertook. In 1892 there were 716 ticket-holders, 704 in 1901 and 691 in 1906. Expressed as a proportion of the overall Islander population in Queensland from 1885 to 1906, in any one year ticket-holders constituted between seven and eleven percent of the Islander population.<sup>iii</sup> The present-day Australian South Sea Islander population is largely descended from the time-expired and ticket-holder Islanders.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Mortality**

At home, Pacific Islanders lived in an isolated disease environment lacking many of the common diseases of large land masses. They were unused to regulated field work, the climate from which they came had no winter, most were not used to wearing clothes which caused health problems when they continued to wear damp garments, the food they received was quite different from food in the islands, and there were large conceptual differences between nineteenth-century European and Pacific Islanders views of causes of sickness and death. These things were not primarily responsible for the high mortality rate but they certainly exacerbated it. A large proportion of the Melanesians who died in Queensland were first-indenture labourers—those who had not previously participated in the labour trade. Ralph Shlomowitz’s statistical analysis clearly shows that the longer a Pacific Islander lived in Queensland, the more chance they had of a normal life expectancy. However, the labour trade was not designed for immigration; rather it was a circular-migration over three years, which only compounded the death rates. Respiratory tract infections are the most frequent minor illnesses of humans. For Islanders, particularly those newly arrived in Queensland,

tuberculosis, pneumonia, bronchitis and pleurisy were more than minor illnesses—they were major killers.

Over the four decades of the Pacific Islands labour trade, each year on average 74 Islanders in every 1,000 in Queensland died. These were young men and women in the prime of life, aged mainly between sixteen and thirty-five. The death rate amongst Europeans in Queensland over similar years—of all ages—was 15 per 1,000. The death rate amongst European males in Queensland of similar age to the predominantly male Islander population, was closer to nine or ten in every 1,000. The general Queensland mortality rate was average for colonial Australia and acceptable by world standards. The Queensland Pacific Islander mortality rate, which at its height in 1884 was 147 per 1,000, was unacceptable by humane standards anywhere.<sup>v</sup>

**Figure 2: 426 Samples of Islander Deaths in Queensland, 1867-1895, indicating the Cause of Death**

Cardiovascular System	5
Respiratory System	131
Gastro-Intestinal Tract	65
Nervous System	11
Genito-Urinary System	8
Blood System	0
Endocrine Gland	1
Bones, Joints and Collagen Disease	5
Infectious Diseases	70
Skin Diseases	3
Degenerative Diseases	0
Fever, Debility and Unclassifiable	38
Chemical Agents	5
Trauma	33
Suicide	19
Murder	32

**Source:** Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1985, p. 247.

Two Figures are included in this paper. The first is an overview, 1863 to 1906, of the population of Pacific Islanders in Queensland, giving males and females but not differentiating children (who grew in numbers in the 1890s and 1900s), and giving the government mortality figures. The second Figure is my attempt at an analysis of a 426 person sample of Islander deaths which occurred in the Maryborough and Mackay districts during the 1863-1906 years. In the 426 cases the cause of death can be defined reasonably accurately: 202 of the cases came from the Maryborough Islander Hospital Register (1884-1888). The remaining 224 are all from Mackay, drawn from a cemetery register (1875-1884), the Mackay Base Hospital Register (1891-1895), a thorough reading of the *Mackay Mercury* (1867-1907), and a sampling of Queensland Government archival records. The combination of records gives a wide chronological and source outline, providing a fair balance between deaths from diseases and those caused by trauma, suicide or murder. The number of deaths from trauma, suicide or murder is likely to be reasonably accurate, given the level of public interest.<sup>vi</sup> The sample is less accurate in its listings of deaths from natural causes, although the emphasis on respiratory, gastro-intestinal and infectious diseases is accurate. The legislation governing the Islanders' living conditions was inadequate and not always enforced. Police Magistrates and Inspectors of Pacific Islanders only occasionally inspected the labourers' quarters and rations. They seldom were able to arrive un-announced and usually only reported on conditions when they were called to investigate a complaint. Conditions of plantations and farms owed more to the discretion and goodwill, or otherwise, of individual employers and managers. Access to hospitals did not begin until the 1880s and even then they were rudimentary with medical practitioners lacking proper understanding of many of the diseases prolific during this time.

Ralph Shlomowitz has calculated that the estimated crude death rate of Islanders in the first year of their indenture was 81 per 1,000, over three times the estimated crude death rate for the rest of the Islander population, which was 26 per 1,000.<sup>vii</sup> If an Islander survived the first three years in Queensland, he or she would probably have lived until old age, remembering of course that in the nineteenth-century people died much younger than today. Shlomowitz calculated that the upper bound of the death rate for ticket-holders was 14 per 1,000, a similar rate to Europeans in Queensland. It was always the newcomers, the first-indenture labourers, who suffered worst in Queensland. During the first two decades of the trade kidnapping and underhand recruiting methods were prevalent. The majority of the recruits were making their first voyage to Queensland and the plantation conditions were primitive. In the final two decades voluntary enlistment was more the norm, many recruits were no longer novices in the labour trade and were actually re-recruiting from the islands. Working and living conditions also improved and an ever-increasing proportion of the Islander population were time-expired labourers working for small farmers, and ticket-holders. This is not to deny Australian South Sea Islander testimony that some kidnapping

continued into the 1890s and 1900s, but analysis of all documentary records indicates that this was not the norm.

That death was more prevalent in the first year of residence in itself disposes entirely of any suggestions that overwork, insufficient and unsuitable food or lack of medical care (or any combination of these) was the cause, since these would obviously have had a combined effect, making the death rate increase with length of contract. Exposure to the new disease environment was the fundamental cause of death. Neither employers nor government can be blamed for the initial high death rate, nor for failing to foresee it. But they can absolutely be blamed for persisting with the system for forty years when it had become clear that the death rate was the price. There is a heavy burden of guilt borne by the colonial Queensland Government and those it represented.

Sincerely,



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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> Clive Moore, ‘Pacific Islanders’ in James Jupp (ed.), *The Australian People: An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, its People and their Origin*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1988, p. 724.
- <sup>ii</sup> Clive Moore, *Kanaka: A History of Melanesian Mackay*, Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1985, pp. 160-164.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Markets for Indentured and Time-expired Melanesians in Queensland, 1863-1906: An Economic Analysis’, *Journal of Pacific History*, 1981, Vol 16, No 2, p. 73. See also Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Mortality and the Pacific Labour Trade’, *Journal of Pacific History*, 1987, Vol 22, No. 1, pp. 34-55.
- <sup>iv</sup> Clive Moore, ‘“Good-bye, Queensland, Good-bye, White Australia; Good-bye Christians”’: Australia’s South Sea Islander Community and Deportation, 1901-1908’, *The New Federalist*, 2000, No. 4, pp. 22-29.
- <sup>v</sup> Moore, *Kanaka*, pp. 244; Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Mortality and the Pacific Labour Trade’, *Journal of Pacific History*, 1987, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 51.
- <sup>vi</sup> Clive Moore, ‘The Counterculture of Survival: Melanesians in the Mackay District of Queensland, 1865-1906’, in Brij V, Lal, Doug Munro and Edward D. Beechert (eds), *Plantation Workers: Resistance and Accommodation*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993, pp. 69-99.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ralph Shlomowitz, ‘Markets for Melanesian Labour’, 29.