



Information Sheet 13: Solomon Islands Labourers in Queensland, 1870-1906

Beginning in the early 1870s, Solomon Islanders took part in the labour trade to and from Queensland, Australia and Fiji, and smaller numbers worked in Samoa and New Caledonia. The largest numbers went to Queensland. Labourers were employed mainly on plantations and farms. Usually this was to process sugarcane, although some also worked in maritime industries, sheep and cattle industries and even in domestic service. Overwhelmingly the labourers were men in their late teens into their mid-thirties; only about 5 per cent were women. The beginnings of this indentured labour trade came after the abolition of slavery as a form of forced labour, and it was formally based on contracts. However, particularly in the 1870s and 1880s, the participants were illiterate and could never have understood the contracts. Furthermore, master and servant contracts were designed to favour the employers, and not to achieve equality of employment conditions for the labourers. Some of the early recruiting practices involved kidnapping and other illegalities and they were often said to resemble slavery. The death rates in the labour trade were high. Even at its best, the indentured labour trade was 'cultural kidnapping', in which Europeans took cultural advantage of the Solomon Islands. This is not to say that Solomon Islanders over the decades between 1870 and 1911 did not come to understand what was involved, as sons followed fathers and uncles to far away plantations. Nor was the exploitation only one-sided since many passage masters and bigmen participated in arranging the labour supply. The labourers were not all 'kidnapped', and many enlisted more than once, some three times, perhaps once to Fiji and twice to Queensland. There were 17,554 contracts and probably around fourteen thousand individuals involved. Most of the contracts were for three years and these could be extended for various periods. They worked mainly in the sugar cane industry but also in maritime and pastoral industries and as domestic servants.

Mortality rates were high. In Queensland 25 to 30 per cent of the labourers died, mostly because recruits lacked immunity to the many new diseases to which they were exposed on European-operated plantations and farms. However, those who participated in this circular labour migration process and survived were immensely changed. The first labour recruits began to return to the Solomons in the mid-1870s, but some stayed away for many years. Others chose to stay in Australia and were forced to return in the 1900s when Australia legislated for a White Australia Policy. One such person was Joe Lovë, Headman of the Vololo area of Guadalcanal in the 1930s, who had been bartered by his chief for a Snider rifle when he was about twelve years old, and worked in Queensland for many years. He petitioned to be able to remain in Australia in the 1900s but was deported, returning home only to find his parents dead and himself forgotten. He gradually reincorporated himself into his descent group. Others returned from Fiji in the 1910s.

In 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia legislated to report all Pacific Islanders, although in 1906 for humanitarian reasons around 2,000 were able to stay. About half of these were Solomon Islanders.

Today there around 10,000 to 15,000 Australian of Solomon Islands descent who are related to the original generation of indentured labourers.

Solomon Islanders who returned from overseas service had a significant influence on the development of the Solomon Islands and helped to introduce Christianity and literacy. They were often middlemen at the forefront of negotiations with missions, plantations and the government.

Solomon Islander Indentured Labourers in Queensland, 1870-1906

Province	1870-1877	1888-1906	Total
Central	971	1575	2546
Choiseul	58	0	58
Guadalcanal	1575	2613	4188
Isabel	92	116	208
Makira	509	520	1029
Malaita	2216	7082	9298
Rennell & Bellona	65	0	65
Temotu	26	6	32
Western	130	0	130
TOTAL	5642	11912	17554

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Sincerely,



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