

LOBBYING, ETHNICITY AND MARGINAL VOICES; THE AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS CALL FOR RECOGNITION

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In 1997, "Australian South Sea Islanders", a set of curriculum materials for primary and secondary schools was distributed in an attempt to convince schools that the study of Australia's South Sea Islander community was important and that long overdue recognition of their role in Australian history and society could be achieved if teachers adopted these materials in the classroom. The following article offers an overview of the "call for recognition" campaign and an analysis of the context in which it became one of the most successful lobbying campaigns on record.

In the 1970s and again in the 1990s, conscious of attempts being made by state and federal governments to incorporate indigenous and immigrant ethnicity in a nationing process, a small immigrant community spoke out. Australian South Sea Islanders, as they prefer to be known today, trace their life histories back to perhaps a hundred families. Their call for recognition drew attention to the discrimination and disadvantage suffered as a black labouring class and minority and highlighted the racism underpinning the social, economic and cultural positioning of both immigrant and indigenous Australians as Australia shifted from an Anglo-Celtic majority to the multicultural or plural society of the present era.

The life histories of these 19th and 20th century immigrants, presented in two recent histories of this small Islander community, Patricia Mercer's *White Australia defied* and Carol Gistitin's *Quite a colony*, resonate with the experiences of other immigrant communities in Australia. As Mercer notes, South Sea Islanders suffered miscarriages, died in industrial accidents, lobbied Prime Ministers, submitted petitions, played in racially segregated "All-Black" teams, served as Australians in the World War II Civil Construction corps. Their experiences were equally marginal, rewarding, tragic or discriminatory. This history and their

experiences suggest their lives may not have been different from many other isolated, rural, immigrant or indigenous Australians who remained alienated from and unacknowledged by the dominant culturally constituted nation and the politically constructed state. In a 1996 book, *Aboriginal sovereignty; reflections on race, state and nation*, Henry Reynolds described the changing status of Australia's two indigenous communities, Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and this analysis may be tentatively applied to Australian South Sea Islanders. Borrowing from his phrasing, Australian South Sea Islanders, in relation to governance, were also beyond the pale, ignored and voiceless in the apparatus of state and polity. Although not a nation within the nation, as Aboriginal Australians were proclaiming, the South Sea Islander immigrant community sought incorporation on the basis of a similar record of marginality.

Their call in the 1970s for recognition as a disadvantaged ethnic immigrant minority was overlooked. European and Asian immigrant communities were also demanding acknowledgment and South Sea Islanders remained in the background as Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders campaigned for reconciliation, land rights, regional autonomy and federal and state assistance. After a generation of rebuttal in the late 1970s and 1980s it was a remarkable turn around when the Australian government, in 1994, formally recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as a discrete immigrant minority and introduced a series of financial packages to alleviate many of the educational, employment, cultural and social disadvantages which Australian South Sea Islanders faced.

The following discussion falls into three parts; an introductory survey of the period from the deportation era, which left a small residue Islander community ambiguously placed in rural Queensland,

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a brief account of the lobbying campaigns of the 1970s and the successful call for recognition in the 1990s, and finally comment on the constructions of ethnicity and the nation being contested in Australia in the last quarter century.

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A ban on the importation into Australia of indentured labourers from the nearby Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and other Pacific Islands was one of the earliest Acts of the parliament of the newly federated Commonwealth of Australia. It also declared that those Islanders already in Australia would be sent home. Between 1906 and 1908, 7068 “Kanakas”, also known mistakenly as “Polynesians”, were deported and another 194 left voluntarily, leaving behind around 2500 who were able to claim long residence, property ownership in Australia, personal danger should they return to their home island; or who went “bush” and hid until the deportation campaign quietened down. These Melanesian Australians were the remnants of an indenture era between 1863 and 1903 when just over 50000 Pacific Islander labourers came on three year work contracts to the colonies and later states of Queensland and New South Wales.

In the 1901-1908 period, “Kanakas” lobbied Parliaments and Prime Ministers, addressed Royal Commissions, travelled south to distant Melbourne and formed associations in cities along the Queensland and New South Wales coast to coordinate a campaign against deportation. This was quite an achievement in an era in which an anglo-celtic hegemony was un-questioned. Discriminatory colonial legislation had already been directed at Chinese and Japanese labourers who were imported or came voluntarily to Australia and the new work place and immigration regulations of the so-called “White Australia Policy” were manifestations of the popular belief that Australia was a nation for “whites”. Although South Sea Islanders failed in their attempt to rescind the deportation regulations they were able to achieve more humane treatment and to influence some government policy in their favour. Clive Moore’s 1985 study *Kanaka; a history of Melanesian Mackay* suggests that these achievements were far more remarkable than those of the 1970s and 1990s pressure groups and in the curriculum materials released for schools as part of the 1994 federal government package, the three authors concluded that to organise and speak out for an

ethnic minority while policies and opinion were dominated by ‘White Australia’ fervour was indeed notable. At the turn of the century it was certainly a challenge to the established order when coloured or black peoples organised and spoke at the highest level of government and indeed successfully influenced policy.

After the deportation era, the remaining small South Sea Islander community disappeared from the anglo-celtic historical record for sixty years, living as fringe dwellers, marginalised from mainstream society, marrying into Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander extended families and dispersing along the eastern Australian coast looking for a home and work. They remained a fragmented community. Small clusters were spread, as they had been during the nineteenth century indentured labour period, across a variety of rural industries and domestic service stretching from the Torres Strait to the agricultural districts of the northern New South Wales coast. During this period, a trickle of government assistance was being directed towards Australia’s two indigenous communities, and many South Sea Islanders were forced to rely on support available through these Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander social security, education, community and other assistance programs. Faith Bandler, a well known activist for Aborigine and later Islander rights, lamented that her fellow Islanders accepted being identified as Aborigines in order to obtain government benefits. She feared they would lose their identity. She saw that choosing to be identified as an Aboriginal Australian in order to receive scholarships and housing loans was a denigrating rejection of their Pacific Islander identity. South Sea Islanders like Faith Bandler were active contributors to a rising black consciousness in Australia, but eventually South Sea Islanders realised they had to distance themselves from Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander programs. If they were to be acknowledged by the the distant Brisbane based state government and Canberra based federal government they had to stand alone as a discrete ethnic minority.

In the 1970s, after a hiatus lasting sixty years, Australian South Sea Islanders organised campaigns hoping to exert enough influence on state and federal governments that they might be rewarded with a share of the funding for cultural, social, educational and economic advancement being directed to Aboriginal Australians, Torres Strait

Islanders and recent immigrant ethnic groups, but from which they, as a long term black immigrant group were excluded. The forming of ASSIUC (Australian South Sea Islander United Council) signalled the start of an active but brief period of lobbying. In a widely dispersed and open ended community, the awareness that lobbying could be influential grew out of the 1960s Aboriginal Australian citizenship campaigns in which many South Sea Islanders played an active part. This was a period in Australian political history when the power of lobbying became apparent and single-interest groups rushed to create formal, representative and bureaucratic organizations in the cities where decisions were being made. The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) campaigned nationally and successfully over the 1967 referendum, and in the early 1970s with Aboriginal Australians having gained a victory (partially), South Sea Islanders adopted a similar lobbying pathway. In 1973, ni-Vanuatuan descendent Faith Bandler, who had been a central figure in the campaign for Aboriginal Australian citizenship, had a chance meeting with newly elected Labour Party Prime Minister Gough Whitlam at an electorate meeting in northern New South Wales. She pointed out that the fuzzy haired supporters at the back of the Labour Party meeting “were all my mob” and that they had several grievances particular to their South Sea Islander community. In 1994, on the SBSTV program *Australian Biographies*, Faith told the story that Whitlam replied by throwing a question back to her - “Why don’t you form an organization Faith?” Following informal and formal meetings along the coast, ASSIUC was formed in 1975 and branches were set up in areas of concentrated South Sea Islander population. The first national conference was held in Mackay in May 1975. Although there was considerable coverage in the Mackay *Daily Mercury*, in the southern, capital-city based newspapers and media the event passed by virtually without notice.

The aims of ASSIUC were succinct, easily translated into dollars and included along with other more specific demands, action “to get legislation passed which will provide the additional assistance necessary to enable South Sea Islanders to attain quality of life with other Australians”. (*Daily Mercury*, Mackay, 10 May 1975). These were aims which resonated in the 1970s with national debates

on participation, equity and access, and particularly with a rising consciousness that Australia had a complex immigrant population and that a national policy of inclusiveness was preferable to policies of assimilation or plurality. Well organised, with educated, articulate leaders, acknowledged in high places and benefiting from a national debate on ethnicity and multiculturalism, it seemed South Sea Islanders were poised to make significant gains.

The lobbyists of the 1970s were unified in purpose and clearly cognizant of the mechanisms and intrigues necessary to become a successful lobby group. They were widely spread along the eastern seaboard and there were more women at the forefront compared to the mostly single-male membership which had characterised the Islander community during the anti-deportation campaign in 1901-1908. Leadership was voiced through families and extended cousin-brother relationships and leaders were adept at manipulating the conventions of print and non-print media and propaganda. Cultural and community groups, disguising their overtly political agenda, found funding was available through state and federal agencies to promote local advancement. Transport and communication between communities spread along two thousand kilometres of coastline was now quicker and more accessible. Also there had been a revival of consciousness inspired by several trips made to the south west Pacific in search of ancestors and family links.

These visits, beginning with a trip in the 1960s made by the father and uncle of Patricia Kruger (nee Corowa), and then Patricia Kruger’s own trip from Bowen to Tanna in 1970, were a dramatic and inspirational experience for people who had lost contact with their origins for most of the last seventy or more years. In his 1989 autobiography, *Fragments of a lost heritage*, Noel Fatnowna recalled that as a young man “Malaita could have been on the moon or around the other side of the world. We only knew it was in the Solomon Islands”, (p.57) He finally visited Malaita in 1973 and discovered his home land. More trips followed and then Vanuatu and Solomon Island groups started visiting Queensland. The affirmation of Islander-ness was significant in drawing Islanders together against an imposed or borrowed Australian-ness, and hastened the signing on of members and the formation of committees to campaign for recognition as a discrete community within the nation.

The flurry of community interest and involvement in the early 1970s seemed to bear fruit. A study of the Islanders situation was initiated by the newly elected Labor Party federal Government (1972-75) led by Gough Whitlam. But this report, the *Interdepartmental Committee report on South Sea Islanders in Australia*, was not released until 1977, by which time a less sympathetic Liberal-Country Party coalition of conservatives had returned to power. In the same year the report of a *Royal Commission into Human Relationships*, which had collected evidence in 1975 about the Islanders situation, was also released. Neither report had any impact on the new federal conservative government's policy or funding. Further obstacles arose when South Sea Islanders, seeking to distance themselves in order to gain separate recognition as a disadvantaged minority, were alienated from the Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander bureaucracy they had helped create in the 1960s and early 1970s. By the late 1970s fragmentation of the Islander community also occurred with culture and *kastom* over-riding the expediency of a single political voice. Family, region, island-of-origin, gender and age differences acted to break up the sense of community being promoted. Although the majority of nineteenth century indentured labourers had been from Vanuatu, with others mostly from the Solomon Islands, family and specific island allegiances ran across this division. These family, kin and island-of-origin identities added to the difficulty of maintaining cohesion between organizations spread along a long coastline. Unity collapsed under the impact of personal and family allegiances. The few newsletters which circulated within the Islander community in this period did not bridge this widening gap. (1) This complex mix of competing identities, geographic dispersion, and marginality meant the promises of the 1970's lobbying were not realised.

At the same time the historians Peter Corris, Deryck Scarr, Clive Moore, Doug Munro and Patricia Mercer were re-writing the history of the labour trade in the Pacific Islands and it was shown that Islanders had been willing participants in the labour reserve, signing on for Queensland knowing the dangers but well aware of the benefits. This removed from Australia's South Sea Islanders one of the main planks of their argument that they had been victims of a coercive, cruel and unjust plantation labour system. The Islanders had long argued, and it was an accepted paradigm in early

texts, curricula and the media, that they were slaves, had been mistreated and contributed to Australia's economic prosperity without reward. If accepted that they were, as Moore, Munro and others showed, active agents in their own indenture in the recent past, then Islanders lost political ground by not being able to use the victim tag to gain the sympathy of present day Australian voters and parliaments.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, South Sea Islanders were again forced to rely on government support through Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander programs, or if rejecting that denigrating submission, slipping through the social security net into a state verging on underclass. Forced to the fringe, many Islanders lacked avenues which other Australians enjoyed in order to improve their standard of living. The 1980s was an era of disillusionment. ASSIUC state branches disappeared and as both Patricia Mercer and Carol Gistitin have noted, Islanders were forced to retreat into anonymity. They did not re-emerge until the 1990s when a new set of dynamic social and political parameters affected policy and opinion in Australia.

The seriousness of the Islanders situation came under notice at the start of the 1990s because of the convergence of several significant national events. The first was an unexpected attack on the so-called prosperity of the Australian way of life - an attack which shocked the full spectrum of society - when it was belatedly discovered that Australia had a huge homeless children problem, a large underclass (in a supposed lucky country), drug usage of unexpected proportions, widespread failure in Aboriginal Australian health and housing programs and an embarrassing and tragic record of Aboriginal Australian deaths in custody. Coincidentally with the sudden awareness that policy and action was needed on all these fronts, ASSIUC reformed initially in Mackay in 1990 and then nationally. This rebirth was also given impetus by an awareness among Islander leaders that Australian governments were now under pressure to respond to calls for assistance from disadvantaged, ethnic and other minority groups. A network of local branches was re-established. The most important catalyst occurred when a link was made with the Evatt Foundation in Sydney, an independent social and political research organization with a record of supporting indigenous and humanitarian causes. At the same time in

central Queensland the Rockhampton South Sea Islanders Co-operative Association was formed by a group with strong church and Vanuatu links, leading the next year to the forming of a Capricornia South Sea Islanders Association. The convergence of these national and local actions, and the personal efforts of Faith Bandler, convinced the Evatt Foundation to commission a census, interview, consultation and fact-finding trip along the coast. This had a dual impact, renewing enthusiasm for community action along the coast, and down south making public the fact that on nearly all socio-economic indicators, Islanders were a disadvantaged community, suffering from both government neglect and racial discrimination. The Evatt Foundation report was published in 1991. The federal Labor Party government which had returned to power in 1989, responded immediately and commissioned a major report by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC). By the end of 1992 this had been published, and although it took until August 1994 for the report to be tabled in parliament, in the intervening period a package of funding schemes, cultural grants and federally funded community projects were agreed upon.

The shape of this package was partly in response to a meeting convened by the Queensland government's Bureau of Ethnic Affairs at the request of the Queensland and northern New South Wales Islander community. The two day 'summit' meeting, held in Mackay in October 1993, was attended by thirty community representatives. Discussion ranged over fifteen agreed upon issues and a needs-analysis-strategies document was drafted. Little that was included in this 'wish-list' was eventually implemented, but the angst, the deep probing by South Sea Islander leaders into existing bureaucracies and agencies and the demand for advancement that permeated its strategies was compelling evidence. The federal government, working to draft a response to the HREOC report, could sense there was a "genuine show of strength and determination in pursuing common goals" at the summit (*Australian South Sea Islander Summit Mackay, 1993, p.1*) In August 1994 the HREOC report and the federal government package of funding and policy directives were tabled in parliament by the Attorney-General.

The HREOC report began by stating that South Sea Islanders were "the only race of people in this

country's history to be subjected to mass deportation" and that "they have not been recognised as a discrete ethnic and cultural group by Australian legislators and policy makers". (*The call for recognition; a report on the situation of Australian South Sea Islanders, 1992, p.2*). In his speech to parliament when tabling the document, the Attorney-General chose his words carefully, noting that some were brought against their will and treated no better than slaves. The decision to commission the Evatt Foundation and HREOC research was clearly victim-driven.

The government package promised a "boost for South Sea Islander culture" including funded trips by Australian South Sea Islanders back to their homelands, a national schools curriculum package, a travelling historical exhibition, the funding of two community liaison officers, a scholarship and educational support scheme, a departmental research project to gather data on the community (embarrassingly not available despite the army of bureaucrats and quasi-government agencies which monitor housing, health, education, employment, social security and poverty in Australia) and the restoration of two Bundaberg buildings with heritage ties to the "Kanaka" recruitment era. The community was also declared to be a "distinct ethnic group" and a high-need "access and equity" group. Two months later in October 1994, the federal government formally and publicly launched the "Call for Recognition" package of benefits and other policies and shortly after a travelling exhibition on Australian South Sea Islander culture and history was launched at the Australian Maritime Museum, Sydney and later at the Queensland Museum in Brisbane. The exhibition subsequently travelled along the eastern coast and will possibly be shown in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands.

Several Islanders voiced disapproval of the guest lists at the Sydney and Brisbane functions, claiming that the selection of a "chosen few" from the Islander community was an insult to the unrepresented majority. A Mackay group called "Concerned members of the South Sea Island Community" wrote an open letter calling for unity within the Islander community and between Aborigines, Torres Strait Islanders and South Sea Islanders. The writers demanded that care be taken to represent Islander families accurately by always making it clear on whose behalf statements were being made. These responses, in a climate of

largesse and increasing competition between ethnic groups for government funding and support, reflect the lingering sentiments and divisions which characterise the South Sea Islander community in Australia. Older loyalties had surfaced and the allegiance to island-of-origin, extended family and geographic locality, tended to challenge attempts to establish unity and a leadership elite. By the time the government response to the HREOC report was tabled in parliament, the revitalised ASSIUC central executive was again failing to attract membership from what is a relatively a small community and it was being challenged by groups and committees formed in opposition and reflecting localised interests.

The history of South Sea Islanders in Australia related above is little known by other Australians. School books repeat the now contested slave trade-sugar plantation version of South Sea Islander's early involvement and the print media continues to ignore both the historiographical debate about kidnapping and the Islanders wider contribution in the pastoral, agricultural and industrial economy of Queensland. For example, a recent atlas commissioned by the Queensland government and widely used in schools, *Reef, range and red dust*, acknowledged that most came to Australia voluntarily, but still highlighted kidnapping and blackbirding"

The debate over slaves-kidnapping-blackbirding versus voluntary indenture surfaced in the cooperative curriculum writing venture funded as a result of the federal government's 1994 policy package. The question of whether Islanders should be portrayed as voluntary indentured workers, or as kidnapped slaves of the Australian capitalist economy, caused strains between the mostly non-islander text book writers and the wider South Sea Islander community. The idea to develop curriculum materials for schools which would allow students to study Islander history and culture had been initiated by a committee formed in Mackay in 1992. A group of local Islander teachers had been worried that a package of materials on Aboriginal history and culture, "*Harmony in between*", which was being introduced in Mackay schools, would further marginalise Islander history. They wanted to introduce a parallel set of materials on South Sea Islander history and culture. Over the next two years the group lobbied politicians, state and federal education authorities, gathered the support of Senator Margaret Reynolds and finally with support from the Queensland Education Department, won funding

in August 1994 for a \$150000 national curriculum writing project as part of the federal government's "Call for recognition" package. (2) The management committee of the project, representing the Education Department, regional Islander groups, teacher associations and universities, held its first meeting in Brisbane in September 1994. It subsequently met several times either in Brisbane or by tele-conferencing facility. It was from the start an exciting concept, marrying Islander voices with educators, curriculum developers and university scholars.

During the preparation of the materials Islanders questioned the process of writing, noticeably centred in Brisbane, the lack of Islander teacher representation, the over-centralised control of the development stages and the lack of consensus within the Islander community as to who should serve on the management committee. The main point of debate, however, was over the 'history' that should be conveyed in the materials. The Townsville Community Reference Group reviewed the materials and insisted that the text book contain a rebuttal of the interpretation offered by the writers on the question of slavery. Their insertion in the published text reads, "This does not acknowledge the truth of history. It favours the testimony of white historians and not the oral history of the elders". (Moore, Quanchi, Bennett, 1997, p.37) The writers took the opposite view that all evidence was open to scrutiny and that history, as everywhere, was a contested, texted domain. On the crucial point of nineteenth century kidnapping, the writing team agreed that the majority of Islanders had not been kidnapped. This denial of victim status annoyed South Sea Islander committee members and regional respondents who were invited to critique the early drafts of the material. This came to a fine point when debate centered on the use of the phrasing "came to Australia" or "brought to Australia"; the former was judged to be denying Islanders the harsh treatment and discrimination they suffered - the latter being preferred because it stressed the slavery story line. Other respondents queried the mention of "bachelor families" claiming it suggested the mostly single male Islander population had lived in homosexual relationships. Others wanted to remove extracts in which Islanders were recorded by scribes speaking in "pidgin English" before the 1906 Royal Commission into labour in the sugar industry. It worried respondents when reviewing the material, that this depicted Islanders as uneducated and having

difficulty conversing with Europeans. That today's Islander community needed to be seen as victims in the past in order to gain political advantage in the present was a discourse acknowledged by the writers but not by the Islander community.

The final draft of the two school text books reflected Islander community opinion, and this was appropriate as the project had originated in that community, had been pursued by that community through to funding and publication, and as a nationally distributed set of curriculum materials should reflect Islander community attitudes. The difficulty with this resolution was that it was never clear to the management committee, or writers, whether the assumed community opinion represented the voices of a few with access to the management committee, or was derived from a wider community consensus. The underlying principle for Islanders throughout was that they wanted to tell their version of the past and that if certain Islander or non-Islander teachers, educators or scholars had contrary ideas they could be heard but not allowed to prejudice the telling of the "Islanders as victims" story. In the end the issue was left hanging and the materials distributed with a warning that all versions of the past are open to challenge, and that teachers and students need to be aware of the contested domains they enter.

The announcement of the federal government's package of benefits was a remarkable turn around in the long campaign for recognition. Success, finally in the 1990s, was due to South Sea Islanders efforts but they had the advantage of a receptive federal Labour Party government, and benefitted from related campaigns to convince Australians that reconciliation was needed with Aboriginal Australians to atone for past sins. The Evatt and HREOC reports also attracted publicity in a legislative climate that had just seen Mer (Murray) Islanders in the Torres Strait granted 'native tenure' and recognition as the original landowners of their islands, over-turning the *terra nullis* principle that had allowed Europeans to alienate land in Australia for over 200 years. This occurred in a climate affected by the International Year of Indigenous peoples (1993) and growing public interest in the fate of indigenous South Africans emerging out of apartheid and of Maori in Aetoroa/New Zealand seeking to re-define the meaning of the Waitangi Treaty and to put into place benefits arising from the "Sea Lord" judgement over fishing rights and

Maori entitlements. In what might be described as a national ferment, other immigrant communities in Australia emerged to run their own radio and television programs, participate in a plethora of so-called multicultural fiestas and festivals and proudly and vocally proclaim their dual Australian-Laotian, Australian-Maltese or other dual national identities, (3) As other immigrant minorities benefitted from increased government and community support, the time was also opportune for South Sea Islanders to claim and be rewarded with a place in constructions of the nation. The South Sea Islanders efforts in the 1990s, after several decades of failure, was ultimately one of the most successful lobbying campaigns in Australian political history.

However, media response to the gains by Islanders demonstrated that long-held myths about slavery and kidnapping would not fade away. The major Brisbane daily newspaper responded to the HREOC report with a headline - "Forgotten people" - but the bulk of the supporting story was about battleships on recruiting trips, whippings in the fields and individuals who had been "bought and sold". A suburban Brisbane newspaper used the headline - "Blackbird descendents" - and followed it with a byline calling on Australians to remember there had been "a black slave trade here". In Mackay *The Daily Mercury* offered a more balanced response, highlighting the discrimination that existed because of Islanders skin colour and calling for action to be taken so the report did not just gather dust on the parliamentary library shelves. The success so happily celebrated by South Sea Islanders along the Queensland coast, passed virtually un-noticed by the state and national media, and therefore by the vast majority of the Australian population located in southern states and capital cities.

Any chance of recognition or inclusion in a problematic Australian national identity was also obscured by the Australian media practice of associating leading South Sea Islanders with the indigenous Aboriginal community. In the 1960s the most prominent person to emerge from the South Sea Islander community, Faith Bandler, was usually identified as an Aboriginal spokesperson for the black Australian community in their struggle for citizenship. Australia's most famous national and international rugby league player, Mal Meninga, a hero to South Sea Islanders, was regularly described as an Aboriginal Australian. Even in districts where South Sea Islanders were a

significant population, they were excluded from the local histories of conquest and celebration written about local sugar mills and pastoral districts, appearing only in token photographs as sugar cane field workers or standing before their bladey-grass homes and cook-houses. (4)

In the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth century, Australian South Sea Islanders had not been acknowledged as a distinct ethnic community and in the eurocentric and racist manner of the day were considered “blacks” and categorised along with Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders, denying them both their Pacific Island identity and full Australian citizenship. This situation was further confused after the deportation era by inter-marriage, the lack of any obvious unity, smallness of population and geographic isolation in rural and coastal Queensland, with the majority living far to the north of Brisbane; the state capital, and nearly completely cut off from the Sydney-Canberra-Melbourne nexus which dominated Australian social, political and economic life.

But in national identity debates since the 1970s anglo-celtic identities have been in retreat, surrendering to the pervasive claims of Aboriginality and to a lesser degree, western and southern European and Asian immigrant identities. Discussions on Australian national identity in this period were dominated by acquiescence to the centrality of indigenous Australian culture, but the descendents of Pacific Islanders, who were claiming to be Australia’s third indigenous community, were rarely if ever considered in this debate. This exclusion and rebuttal occurred despite a series of texts, films and biographies which highlighted aspects of their 130 years of marginality.

These books and television documentaries were greeted warmly by the few academics familiar with this history, and by Islanders, but the impact on the attitudes and opinions of the wider reading and viewing public was probably minimal. With Clive Moore’s *Kanaka; a history of Melanesian Mackay* (1984), Carol Gistitin’s *Quite a colony; South Sea Islanders in Central Queensland* (1995) and Patricia Mercer’s *White Australia defied* (1995), the histories of this community had been well traversed. (5) In addition to Faith Bandler’s autobiographies and fiction *Wacvie*, *Marani*, *Turning the tide* and *Welou my brother*, Mabel Edmunds published *No regrets* and *Hello*

Johnny and Noel Fatnowna published *Fragments of a lost heritage* ,

Australian South Sea Islanders also featured in a series of radio and television documentaries starting in the active lobbying days of the early 1970s- “The Islanders” on Bill Peach’s *Australia* on ABCTV (1975), “Forgotten People” in the *Big Country* series on ABCTV (1978), “The Forgotten people” on ABC radio (1978, also released as book), “Kidnaped” on SBSTV (1989), “Return to Vanuatu” on Dateline on SBSTV (1993) “Australian biographies; Faith Bandler” on SBSTV (1994) and “Sugar Slaves” on *The Big Picture* on ABCTV (1995). However, acknowledgement and recognition arising from this exposure was limited. The impact may be judged by reference to the flood of histories and descriptive accounts published during the 1988 bicentenary of European invasion-settlement. Islanders were overlooked in these publications, with the exception of one lengthy entry in the officially commissioned *The Australian people; an encyclopedia of the nation, its people and their origins*. (6)

Although most Australians had heard of “Kanakas,” when Islanders achieved prominence their ancestry as Islanders was overlooked. When Noel Fatnowna was appointed inaugural Commissioner for Pacific Islanders by the Queensland government in 1977-1983, Faith Bandler was awarded an Honorary Doctorate from Macquarie University in 1994, Mal Meninga captained Australia and retired from a glorious rugby football career and Baden Choppy became a hockey medallist for Australia at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, their achievements were widely publicised in the Islander community, but nationally their South Sea Islander origins were either unknown to commentators or ignored in the state and national media.

There have been campaigns more recently to conserve heritage sites linked to South Sea Islander history such as the Homebush Hall, Yeppoon’s wagon trail, the old sea wall at Rockhampton and “Kanakan” sections of cemeteries at Joskeleigh and Bundaberg. This was overdue acknowledgment of the heritage value of many Queensland buildings and sites, especially considering the *Illustrated Register of the National Estate*, a seminal and world recognised inventory of “things worth keeping” in Australia, had not included one South

Sea Islander item among its 6600 sites. More recently, Islanders have won acknowledgement in national indigenous reconciliation campaigns, sharing space with Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islanders in locally published material such as the Mackay City Council's "Comingtogether" pamphlet released in 1994.

These signposts in the local, state and national arena, impressive in terms of what some Australian South Sea Islanders have achieved in recent years, were not visible outside their own community and were not dramatic enough to change policy, practice or levels of public awareness. (7) These minor gains in terms of recognition were swamped in radio, television and print media by constructions of multicultural Australia, Aboriginal Australia and particularly debates about Mabo, Wik, native title and local autonomy for the Torres Strait Islands. The Torres Strait attracted exceptional media attention in 1992, after a ten year court battle, with the granting of native title to Australia's original and indigenous landowners, referred to as the "Mabo" decision. The sovereignty question continued with the federal government calling for submissions in August 1996 for a Parliamentary inquiry into "greater autonomy for the Torres Strait Islanders". In 1996, the High Court of Australia passed judgement on the potential for extinguishment of native title throughout Australia in instances where it conflicted with pastoral leases, known now as the "Wik" decision. The small Islander community lacked newsworthiness against these more radical, indigenous Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal Australian campaigns and events.

The South Sea Islander's marginality was evident in media and popular culture concentration on what might constitute an Australian nation. This nation was said to be explicit or implied in the songs of Aboriginal rock band Yothu Yindi and Torres Strait Islander singer Christine Anu and in the Aboriginal flag carrying of athlete Cathy Freeman (15). Calls for a stronger Asian-Australian alignment also pushed the status of South Sea Islanders further to the fringe of debates and in the nationing of Australia and the association of images and symbols with national character and future prospects, South Sea Islanders remained an invisible, ignored minority. Graeme Turner, in *Making it national; nationalism and Australian popular culture*, suggests the form of nationalism which prevailed in Australia was "incapable of incorporating and is

therefore implicitly hostile to the multiplicity of identities and histories currently competing for representation within the discourses of nationality". (1992 10) This nationing process was a contest in which ethnic communities asserted their traditions, histories and separateness against the weight of the dominant state formation and assumed cultural identity which threatened to overwhelm them. We should not forget that in this contest, marginalised minorities suffer actual discrimination. While the nationing process may be the subject of academic debates about social justice and full citizenship, Islanders in their lived experiences have endured a long struggle for cultural survival and the qualities of life which other Australians take for granted.

Australian South Sea Islanders do not form an homogenous ethnic minority and are not being defined by colonial boundaries, occupational categories, shared beliefs, or a common culture or *kastom*. They are not an original indigenous community. Furthermore their identity has been modified by transportation and divorce from their islands of origin, and by their status as a black labouring class in the post-deportation era, and by marginality and partial immersion in a dominant anglo-celtic polity and society. South Sea Islanders were not state-less, being under the protection of the British empire before 1901, and later the Commonwealth of Australia, but they were nation-less. Any potential incorporation as a community in the so-called Australian national identity or Australian way of life was confused and mediated by South Sea Islanders being categorised as Aboriginal Australians and Torres Strait Islanders. Two further elements of incorporation are relevant. In recent times both Aboriginal Australians and South Sea Islanders have been incorporated into the state through government action, called by Jeremy Beckett, a liberal, solicitous "welfare colonialism". This welfare colonialism, or incorporation, is a state strategy for "managing the political problem posed by the presence of a depressed and disenfranchised indigenous population in an affluent and liberal democratic society". (Beckett 1989, p. 122) This incorporation, both the seeking to manipulate it and the seeking to deny it, is central to understanding the complex dynamics through which Islanders emerged to claim a small space in their adopted home.

Identity as a South Sea Islander in Australia, determined by island-of-origin differences, multiple

ancestry, anglo-celtic hegemony and competition from black cousin-brothers in the wider indigenous community, does not fit existing models which are based on conflict between an indigenous minority and an urban elite or immigrant majority. Australian South Sea Islanders remained citizens of the state and did not seek separatism or threaten to fragment the dominant polity or society. Their campaign has similarities to that of Solomon Island contemporaries, the Santa Isabel Islanders, who sought to define their position internally (on their own island) as a discrete cultural entity. Externally (off-island) they wanted to position themselves advantageously against the colonial-driven construct or state known as the Solomon Islands, benefitting from membership of that state, but protecting and preserving their own local polity and identity. Similarly, the Ilongot of northern Luzon in the Philippines do not regard themselves part of the nation state, but have been drawn into and seek to benefit from the non-Ilongot Filipino nation as consumerism, development and capitalism encroach on their lands, Santa Isabel Islanders, Ilongot and Australian South Sea Islanders, and others, have negotiated this contested domain, asserting their identity and maintaining a degree of separateness against an imagined national community and encroaching assimilationist trends, while still seeking to benefit from what the state and nation can provide.

Amid the clamouring of other ethnic, minority and immigrant groups in the contested space that is Australia, South Sea Islanders briefly repositioned themselves as a distinct culturally constituted group within the imagined nation and gained, albeit briefly, recognition and acknowledgement for their contributions to the nation. For the descendents of a small dispersed community of black immigrant workers, that was quite an achievement.

Notes

A longer version of this paper appears in the *Journal of the Pacific Society* 1998.

- 1 A study of 160 years of Aboriginal Australian newspapers (see Michael Rose 1996, *For the record; 100 years of Aboriginal print journalism*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin) revealed that Aboriginal commentators, and opinion leaders, suprisingly echoed mainstream, anglo-celtic opinion about appropriate government policy and advancement, rather than a radical, alternative indigenous voice. There were no equivalent South Sea Islander newspapers. However, this trend is evident in the few occasional and short-lived South Sea Islander newsletters which were neither overtly political nor asserted a radical or unified platform. Newsletters in the 1990s such as *Nuise Blong Yumi* (Rockhampton), *Yumi Tok* (Sydney) and *Wantok* (Mackay) carry both community and political news, but refrain from provocative editorial comment.
- 2 The Queensland Education Department's contribution of \$AUD75000 was on a 1:1 basis with the federal government. See National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NAEP) Islander sub-committee, Correspondence Mar 10 1992-Dec 16 1993. (Mrs Cynthia McCarthy kindly provided this material); *Papers and Correspondence, Australian South Sea Islander Curriculum Project Management Committee*, 1994-1996, (held by the author, a participant in the management committee and the writing team). The following paragraphs are based on the recollections of the author as a participant in the events outlined.
- 3 There is little evidence that Australian South Sea Islanders feel a common purpose with Maori, Native American, Inuit or other indigenous disadvantaged minorities, or have tried to establish a link with their campaigns. This is unusual given an irregular but noticeable coverage of international indigenous movements in national, Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra newspapers and the ethnic television broadcaster, SBSTV.
- 4 South Sea Islanders fare no better in pictorial histories. Two photographs appear in Michael Cannon's best selling Australian collection (*Australia; a history in photographs* Sydney, Currey O'Neil, p.92) and seven in a Queensland collection (Waterson, Duncan and Maurice French, 1987, *From the frontier; a pictorial history of Queensland to 1920*, St Lucia, University of Queensland Press. pp.26-9 and 189).

Feature Articles continued

- 5 To this date there is no historian from within the South Sea Islander community, though the autobiographical works of Noel Fatnowna and Faith Bandler may be considered in this category.
- 6 The entries on South Sea Islanders were written by Kay Saunders and Clive Moore.
- 7 Prior to 1995 there was no university subject devoted to the study of Australia's South Sea Islanders. This was partly corrected when the author began teaching an undergraduate course "HUB627 Australia and the Pacific Islands" in which a third of the subject matter was on South Sea Islanders in Australia.
- 8 A South Sea Islander popular rock band, sports star, public figure or actor has yet to claim national attention, claiming space in the nationing process in the way that singer Christine Anu, for Torres Strait Islanders, land rights lawyer Noel Pearson, athlete Cathy Freeman and rock band Yothu Yindi, for Aboriginal Australians, represent their past possession of Australia and present struggles for recognition. Ironically, after 1900, Islanders in the open labour market or escaping deportation, who moved to the Torres Strait, inter-marrying with Torres Strait Islanders or the large Pacific Islander community that had migrated there in the 19th century, thereby gained the Australian citizenship denied their compatriots who stayed as "Kanakas" in Queensland.

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