

Origins

Australian South Sea Islanders have a unique place in Australian and Queensland history as a distinct cultural group. Their story is unique because they do not have an Indigenous or immigration heritage.

The original South Sea Islanders were first brought to Queensland between 1863 and 1904 from eighty Pacific Islands, primarily Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, to work in the fledgling sugar industry. Of mainly Melanesian descent, they were for nearly 50 years the industry's principal labour source.

Like some aspects of Australian history, the treatment of South Sea people would not be accepted in today's society. They were often lured into coming or kidnapped through "blackbirding". They worked long hours in physically demanding tasks for little return. To many descendants this treatment was akin to "slavery".

And while there is evidence that the Government eventually legislated to control the worst excesses of the system, the harshness of their existence is shown by a death rate five times greater than European settlers of the time.



A postcard of a Melanesian family, Mount Britten, Mackay, circa 1900

John Oxley Library neg. no. 33263

Unfortunately legislation was also used to regulate their movement and employment and to eventually exclude them from the sugar industry. One of first acts of the new Commonwealth Parliament formed after Federation called for mass deportation of the community. The "White Australia Policies" added another chapter of hardship. By this stage many South Sea Islanders had started families and had been separated from their former homelands for extended periods of time. Through community protest some exemptions were obtained to deportation. The descendants of those who remained are Australian South Sea Islanders.



Deportation from Bundaberg

John Oxley Library neg. no. 18058

Australian South Sea Islander Recognition

*The Queensland
Government formally
recognises Australian
South Sea Islanders
as a distinct
cultural group.*



The Community Today

Australian South Sea Islanders live predominantly in coastal Queensland cities and towns.

The community has played a major role in the economic, cultural and regional development of Queensland, contributing to many industries and fields of endeavour beyond the sugar industry.

South Sea Islanders are very proud people who have retained significant aspects of their culture and customs. They tend to be family oriented, Christian and have great respect for their elders and believe strongly in kinship.

Organisations within the community are usually established within the extended family network. And while South Sea Islanders have much in common, the cultural background of communities is influenced by religious affiliations and the island origins of families.

Many individual South Sea Islanders have excelled in their chosen professions. There are South Sea teachers, nurses, business people, public servants, artists, clergy, athletes and defence personnel, to name but a few. The community also has a strong tradition of doing voluntary work.



Mal Meninga AM - one of the all-time greats of Australian sport making the most rugby league test and State of Origin appearances.



Clay pots from Wusi Village, Vanuatu, collected between 1885 and 1895.



Clacy Fatnowna - officer in charge Mackay Queensland Ambulance Service.

Formal recognition

The Commonwealth and Queensland Governments and some local governments have formally recognised Australia South Sea Islanders as a distinct culture group.

In a move to promote greater understanding and knowledge of the community, the Queensland Government adopted a formal Recognition Statement in July 2000. The statement acknowledged social and economic disadvantage suffered by the community as well as their unique contribution to the State's development and cultural landscape.



Shell ornaments from Malaita, Solomon Islands, collected between 1867 and 1900.

Further Information:

Useful publications for more information include:

- Evatt Foundation, A Report on the Current Status of South Sea Islanders in Australia, Sydney, 1991
- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, The Call for Recognition, 1992
- Mercer P, White Australia Defied: Pacific Islander Settlement in North Queensland, James Cook University, 1995
- Moore C, Kanaka: a history of Melanesian Mackay, Port Moresby: Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies and University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1985
- Fatnowna N, Fragments of a lost heritage, Angus and Robertson, 1989



Three generations of Australian South Sea Islanders - Kerri Dorman (nee Leo), Joe Leo OAM and grandson Caleb Dorman, father and son Darryl and Jasiah Dorman.

