



SPIRITED

After 150 years, Queensland's shameful history of "blackbirding" still burns for South Sea Islander families whose ancestors were enslaved.

AWAY

Story Susan Johnson Photography Russell Shakespeare

Identity theft ... (above) Townsville resident Sonia Minniecon, descended from Vanuatans who were brought to Queensland to work on plantations; (opposite page) indentured South Sea Islanders in Cairns, circa 1890.

Next month, when the chilly winter westerlies of Ekka time start blowing, you might chance upon a boisterous procession making its way through Brisbane city. Some rugged-up marchers will be carrying placards bearing the names of small Pacific islands and others will be holding up their family names, French-sounding, unusual: Bel-Bachir, Merrypor, Quakawoot. The marchers will be Australian South Sea Islanders, the descendants of people

who were brought to Australia during one of the most shameful – and controversial – periods of the nation's history.

Kidnapping, "blackbirding", enticement, or whatever you wish to call the 40-year trade in human cargo to Queensland's farms and canefields began in 1863, the same year president Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the end of slavery in the US. Vanuatu in the South Pacific (1750km off North Queensland) lost about half its adult male population during these years, in effect because of a prevailing belief that white people could not



of working for nothing, workers were paid a pittance and most lived and worked in appalling conditions.

Among the marchers next month will be 73-year-old “Aunty” Valda Coolwell, from the inner-west Brisbane suburb of Milton. Her late grandfather, Jimmy, came from Tanna, one of the southerly islands of Vanuatu. At the age of about 12, he was enticed off a beach and onto a cargo ship. “A lot of South Sea people don’t talk about these things – whether they don’t know or whether they just don’t want to tell their children and bring them into sad business – they just don’t talk much about what happened before,” she says. “But my family *did* talk about it and this is the story my grandfather told my mum [Dorothy], and then my mum told us.

“[Jimmy] went to the ship with these men and the men said, ‘Down there’ [into the hold], so when they went down there, well, that was it. They closed down the [hatch] and he never saw his family again. Today, I feel very emotional when I think about it, because if I was to be taken away from my mum and dad, I would be so upset. It’s another Stolen Generation, really.”

It was Coolwell who suggested marching behind the lovely-sounding names of the South Sea islands – Pentecost, Tanna, Malaita. “We want to be holding up big placards, with the island of our origin and behind those, all the different names that come from those areas. You see the Aboriginal people marching, but they don’t hold up their names, but this is to let people know who we are.”

The march is one of many events taking place this year to mark the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first of the 62,000 Pacific Islanders who came to Australia between 1863 and 1904, working on “indenture contracts”, before the Queensland government unceremoniously sent them packing

back home when it no longer wanted them (it changed its mind, deciding the Islanders were now stealing white people’s jobs).

The vast majority (95 per cent) were teenagers and young adult males like Coolwell’s grandfather and, tragically, more than 15,000 of them perished, largely because of a lack of immunity to European illnesses such as colds, influenza and bronchitis. Australia’s pre-eminent expert on the South Sea Island trade, Professor Clive Moore from the University of Queensland School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, says the practice was cruel and shameful. “These people came from the tropics and they were used to being semi-naked. They’d been issued with poor-quality clothing, with poor food and poor-quality blankets at night; they were freezing, and caught colds. In Queensland in winter, working out on the Logan River in June, you can imagine what it was like.”

Moore says historians agree that between ten to 15 per cent of the islanders who ended up in Australia were kidnapped, “unarguably, beyond any justification in law”. “The islanders themselves would say a much larger percentage was forced to come, but were they physically forced or were they tricked?” he says. “Did they understand what they were doing when they agreed to get on a boat? The answer is that a lot didn’t. Even the most willing didn’t know really what they were doing. You might say that those who weren’t physically kidnapped were culturally kidnapped.

“This was one of the most disreputable chapters of Australian history, and the Queensland and commonwealth governments should be running for cover. The whole process was exploitative from one end to the other. I wouldn’t say it was slavery exactly, but certainly these people lived ▶

survive working in tropical conditions but black people could and therefore should be brought to work in Australia by whatever means possible.

At the beginning of the trade, “blackbirders” or recruiting agents worked directly or indirectly for plantation owners who sought free labour, simply grabbing people off beaches or tricking them aboard boats. However, five years later, under pressure from missionary groups, the Queensland government passed the Polynesian Labourers Act as a means of controlling the trade, forcing employers into practising a system of indentured labour. Instead

under slave-like conditions. If it wasn't slavery, it was something very close to it."

Moore argues that once the Queensland government realised the alarmingly high death rates, they should have ceased the whole operation. "But they didn't; they kept it going for another 40 years," he says. "These people were treated as subservient, indentured labour, and not calling it slavery doesn't justify the way they were treated, which was with general racial contempt."

The scheme ended as shamefully as it began: in 1901, the first Australian federal government passed the Pacific Island Labourers Act, part of a package of "White Australia" legislation. The aim was the forced deportation of the very people who had been kidnapped or tricked into coming, and their descendants, and to compensate the state's sugar industry with a financial bonus for sugar produced using only white labour.

Many who returned to the islands faced problems readjusting to their old lives and some were killed. A trust set up by the state government, the Pacific Islanders Trust Fund, took money from deceased estates and, rather than sending money back to the families of the dead, used it instead. "Only about one-tenth of the money was returned," Moore says. "The rest was used to run the administration system for the implementation of the labour [before it was shut down]."

Those who remained in Australia were left with no real chance of employment (the Australian Workers' Union even tried to stop them from working in the sugar industry) and, according to Moore, banks wouldn't lend them money. "It was ethnic cleansing," Moore says. "No other immigrant group has suffered in the same way or been subject to an act of parliament to deport them."

"It's not just about what happened in the 1860s," he adds. "It's about what has happened over the 150 years since then. In the 20th century these people were still on the fringes of white society, unwanted. In 2000, under former [Queensland] Labor premier Peter Beattie, there was a recognition statement and some assistance given, but it didn't really address the socio-economic conditions under which these people are living."

In 1994, a report on the community undertaken by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission resulted in the federal government formally recognising Australian South Sea Islanders as a unique minority and distinct cultural group. In the 2000 Beattie statement, the Queensland government acknowledged the Islanders were brought to Australia as a source of cheap labour for the state's primary industries. It initiated an Action Plan for the South Sea Islander community with the aim of improving its access to government services, reducing discrimination and prejudice, and instructing government departments to act on this commitment through policies, programs and services.



But Moore argues that if you look at the last census (2010-2011), the Islander community still shows up as socially disadvantaged. "They don't live as long as the rest of the community, they still die earlier, they have poorer education and income levels," he says. "Most are still small-town, rural Queenslanders. By comparison, the descendants of Italian cane-cutters who came in the '30s and earlier have left the working class and joined the professional class. They might have started off as sugar labourers but they've ended up with a far different outcome to the Islanders."

Australia's South Sea Islander community now numbers about 40,000 (many also have Torres Strait Islander and/or Aboriginal heritage and population figures depend on how people identify themselves). Among its members are Queensland's State of Origin coach Mal Meninga; Bonita Mabo, widow of Eddie Mabo, who successfully fought for the establishment of Indigenous Native Title; and civil rights activist Faith Bandler, who led the fight for the 1967 referendum that saw Aboriginal people included in the census for the first time. It's a proud and resilient community despite – or perhaps because of – its past. But if discrimination and neglect are constant historical refrains, then so is a strong oral history tradition. Stolen children are remembered and those spirited away on ships are kept close in memories, stories and songs.

ALL FOUR OF SONIA MINNIECON'S GRANDPARENTS descended from people coerced into leaving their homeland islands of Vanuatu. "It needs to be acknowledged," Minniecon says. "We want people to know who we are and also how we've grown. We're not just sitting back, feeling sorry for ourselves." She smiles. "There are so many successful people who've come out of the adversity of what happened. What our forefathers, our ancestors, gave us was this attitude of 'Yes, this happened and we have to remember it, but also remember that we come from strong people.'"

Minniecon's own journey to track down the past



and find her true place in the world began more than 20 years ago. Now 40 and a resident of Townsville, she is the third-youngest of the ten children of Maureen and Arnold Minniecon. Her dad – now deceased – was part of a large South Sea Islander crew who worked for Queensland Railways, and for many years the family lived in railway camps all over the state before settling down in Sarina, North Queensland, where Minniecon grew up. The search for her origins began in earnest with her dad's decline and the family's wish to take their ailing father and husband back to the land of his ancestors.

"We really wanted to take Dad back; he got quite ill at the end of his life and never made it," she says. "He was born in Australia and never went back and, really, I felt like I was going back for him. I went [to Vanuatu] for the first time about ten years ago and it was very emotional. You look around and see people who look like you. You realise you're a majority and not a minority any more. You feel very proud – it's lovely, amazing, learning about the culture that you've lost." Her eyes fill with tears, remembering.

What Minniecon hadn't expected was that it wasn't only the people who were kidnapped or signed up – and their descendants – who carried the sadness, but also those who remained. "You go to villages over there and they know exactly who they lost, they still remember. That's the other side of it – when we went back to my grandfather's village, they were shocked to know that he had survived and gone on to have 15 kids; and all those kids had ten kids each so there's potentially hundreds of us who are blood relations."



Burden of shame... (from far left) UQ historian Clive Moore says what happened to South Sea Islanders was a form of "ethnic cleansing"; SSI workers in Innisfail, early 1900s; descendants Valda Coolwell and Matthew Nagas.



Minniecon and her mother ended up taking part in a welcome home ceremony on the island of Ambrym in Vanuatu and being given "custom" names (particular family names associated with particular villages). Two years ago she married Michael Smith – a white Australian – in a "custom" wedding and together they run the website blackbird.vu, helping people all over the world reunite with their lost Vanuatuan families. The organisation is also involved with fundraising and community development in Vanuatu. "[At some events] we had people coming from all over the islands wanting to find family," Minniecon says. "Some of them are over 100 years old and it was, 'Well, this is his father, this is his sister'. They could tell you what happened the day he was taken. They have a very strong oral history."

One of the outcomes Minniecon hopes for from this year's 150th anniversary celebrations is recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders' cultural identity. "There still needs to be work done on differentiating between Aboriginal people and Australian South Sea Islander people," she says.

LATE LAST YEAR, BUNDABERG REGIONAL

Council confirmed that ground radar technology had identified 29 unmarked graves of South Sea Islanders under a former sugar cane plantation east of the Queensland Wide Bay area city. The graves were in rows: 28 adults and one child.

For Matthew Nagas, 60, a longtime resident of Bundaberg, the graves were personal. Both his late father, Gordon, and late mother, Dixie, were the children of men Nagas has no hesitation in calling "slaves". His maternal and paternal grandfathers

were taken from islands in Vanuatu and the Solomons in the early 1890s and those bones lying in that unmarked grave might have belonged to the relatives of people exactly like him.

Nagas has a long association with the cane-cutting industry of Bundaberg (most of his family worked in the industry at one time or another and he began cutting sugar cane himself at 13). He is president of the Bundaberg and District South Sea Islanders Action Group and was recently awarded the John Oxley Library Fellowship together with his co-author, academic Kathleen Fallon. The \$20,000 award is for work towards their proposed *Commemorative Pilgrimage of Significant Sites: Australian South Sea Islanders from Tweed Heads to Torres Strait* project, which includes research into the history of "blackbirding".

The unmarked graves were found on the potato farm of former Labor member for Hinkler, Brian Courtice, and initially identified by Bundaberg

Council cemetery supervisor Gail Read, who told local media that, unlike the nameless Islanders, white settlers in the 19th century were never buried in unmarked graves except in rare cases of suicide. She said she knew of many similar South Sea Islander graves scattered throughout the district but that some elderly members of cane-farming families were still reluctant to admit they are on their properties.

Courtice told *The Courier-Mail* that confirmation of the unmarked graves belonging to South Sea Islanders is the first official recognition of its kind in Queensland. "To my knowledge, this is the first confirmed mass grave on an old sugar plantation," he says. There could be hundreds more. Townsville, for example, was founded on the backs of Islanders working the cotton farms of Robert Towns, who gave the town its name, and a man long believed to have initiated Queensland's shameful "blackbirding" practices.

Matthew Nagas had an elderly aunt who once worked at the Courtice site, and his grandmother had lived across the road before her death in a fire at a local sugar mill. "It's a story of heartbreak, loss and death," he says. "But it's also the story of the survival of a forgotten race of people."

At the Oxley Fellowship Award night, Nagas told how when was about ten or 11 he asked his grandfather about the past and the old man replied in broken English: "You fella no need to know that. We fella olgetta now livem long Australia. We fella olgetta livem the Australia way now."

Much later, he asked his mother why his grandad didn't like speaking about the past. She said it was because he didn't want anyone in his family to go through life with a chip on their shoulder because of "all the bad things that happened".

Nagas says his own South Sea Islander identity was further confused by events that followed the 1967 referendum recognising Aborigines, which effectively caused a split in black political circles because Australian South Sea Islanders were no longer lumped in with Aboriginal people. "My father would say we are not accepted by our indigenous brothers and sisters and we are not of a white race. We must be Mr and Mrs In-between," he says.

It wasn't until Nagas began piecing together his own family story, finally visiting Vanuatu and being ordained as Paramount Chief Balanga (Balanga meaning "always searching for better ways") by chiefs from his grandmother's island of Epi, that he began to gain self-confidence.

It's been a long journey, not only for Nagas, but for his people. "We were robbed of our history," he says. "So many people are still searching for their families. They poured their blood, sweat and tears into those [cane] fields. We must remember them." ● Australian South Sea Islander Anniversary March, Aug 17. The State Library of Queensland, the Queensland Museum and the Queensland Art Gallery will present related events until November. See slq.eventbrite.com