The tangible link: Historical archaeology and the cultural heritage of the Australian South Sea Islanders

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Over 20,000 people today identify themselves as Australian South Sea Islanders. They are the descendants of people brought to Australia from the Pacific Islands of Vanuatu, New Caledonia and the Solomons (among others) between 1863 and 1904, mainly to work in the Queensland sugar industry. Their history, which is stained by exploitation and the effects of the White Australia policy, has left many of these descendants feeling like strangers in the country of their birth. Although loosely organised as an ethnic group, their historical identity is often stereotyped, by Islanders and non-Islanders alike, as that of a victim of the past. Unlike Indigenous and European Australians, they also lack a defined sense of place, or at least knowledge of many places or objects that provide that tangible link between their past and present. Until fairly recently, the relevance and importance of such places and objects has not been closely examined.

This paper explores the identity of the Australian South Sea Islanders and how archaeology, among other heritage disciplines, can help provide a conduit to the past which will assist Islanders in their efforts to assert themselves on the historic landscape. Theirs is more than history of exploitation and victimisation and we are privileged to be in a position to help tell the story of a triumphant, active and resourceful survival. Having survived physically and culturally against the odds, the descendants of Melanesian indentured servants flourished and carved out for themselves a unique and substantial cultural identity—as neither Australians nor Pacific Islanders—but as Australian South Sea Islanders.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER HISTORY

The nineteenth-century history of the Islanders (or Kanakas, as they were often called) in Australia is somewhat controversial (see Moore 1992; Shlomowitz 1993; Munro 1993). Although many recruits came willingly, there was a considerable amount of illegal recruiting, including kidnapping, commonly referred to as 'blackbirding', a term borrowed from the Atlantic slave trade. While many historians assert that the extent of kidnapping in the Queensland Labour Trade has been largely exaggerated, numerous Australian South Sea Islanders insist that their forebears were kidnapped or lured from their island homes and committed to a life of slavery or quasi-slavery (Moore 1981, 1992; Munro 1993, 1995). My observation, from speaking at close quarters with many Australian South Sea Islanders, is that they are distressed by what they perceive to be academic denials of gross injustices. This serves to marginalise them further from the telling of their own history and from ownership of their own cultural heritage.

In Queensland, Islanders were recruited to do the labour that Europeans would not do: the back-breaking work of forest clearance, ploughing and planting cane, and the long hours of cutting and loading cane in the crushing season. Living conditions on many plantations were seldom adequate, and the Islander populations suffered horrific death rates. In some years mortality among Queensland's Islander population was in excess of twelve per cent (Graves 1993: 75). With little immunity to European diseases, some plantation populations were devastated by diseases such as measles, dysentery and tuberculosis.

Then, in 1901, with a new Commonwealth government, legislation under the White Australia Policy (Pacific Island Labourers Act [1901] and later amendments) mandated the end of Pacific Island labour in Australia and the deportation of all Pacific Islanders by 1908, with few exemptions. While many Islanders were happy to return home, thousands, for various reasons, wanted to stay. The deportations were a bitter event for the Islanders, splitting families and sending individuals home to an uncertain future (Moore 1999). In the end, approximately 1000 Islanders were permitted to remain in Australia, while estimates suggest another 1000 or so managed to remain illegally (Mercer 1995: 88).

By 1910, it seems that the Islanders were all but forgotten, hastened by Australia's endeavours to have the world's first sugar industry to be produced entirely by white labour. Islanders remaining in Australia were refused union tickets and were thus unable to find work, facing the prospect of surviving in a country where they were both unwelcome and unemployable.

They did survive, however, in many ways due to the skills and cultural traditions of their Melanesian homelands. They also multiplied, to the point where, 90 years later, their numbers are estimated to be somewhere between 20,000–30,000 people.

In the years from 1908 to the late 1940s the Islanders existed on the margins of society. They survived through subsistence gardening and living in grass huts on the fringes of the sugar towns or in the scrub and mountaintops. Essentials or luxuries were paid for by basic wage labour such as collecting firewood, or cutting sugar cane illicitly at night for sympathetic farmers. During this period, Islanders were unable to buy land, and very few were able to lease it (Mercer 1995).

Because they were marginalised politically and socially, they ultimately disappeared from historic records and from public consciousness. Their identities blended into those of local Indigenous communities, with whom many of them intermarried. By the early 1970s, the Islanders had been, for all intents and purposes, absent from written records for over 60 years.

With the relative success of civil rights campaigning in Australia in the 1970s, the Islanders returned to the surface as an ethnic entity, forming political associations and lobbying both the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government for recognition (see Quanchi 1998).

At the same time, they began to develop a new sense of
identity, both through academic interest in their history and the renewal of kinship links across the Pacific with people from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. Developing ties with their ancestral homelands especially affected many Islanders and their sense of self (Quanchi 1998: 33). The increase in academic studies certainly enhanced their profile among the broader intellectual community, although it is a story that even today does not seem to have captured the interest of the general public.

Today they have achieved recognition as an official ethnic group in Australia, from the Commonwealth in 1992, and from the Queensland Government in 2000. With this has come acknowledgement of the many unsavoury episodes and policies of the past. While recognition was a huge victory for the Islanders in principle, it is still uncertain as to what it will mean for them in material terms, although the Queensland Government’s Action Plan document (Queensland Government 2001) provides a promising direction. The Action Plan provides some exciting initiatives for the recognition of Islander heritage, including heritage places. But what and where are these places?

The places in Australia which are, logically, the legacy of the South Sea Islanders’ ancestors—the sugar fields they cleared, planted and harvested—have been usurped by the broader mythology of the White Australian Sugar Industry. In the folklore and history of many northern Queensland sugar towns it is the Europeans, often Italian, Spanish and Maltese migrants, who are regarded as having developed the sugar industry. Being denied this part of their heritage, many Islander descendants latch forcefully on to the one chapter of Australian history that is still theirs in the popular imagination: blackbirding and slavery. This, however, only serves to perpetuate the perception that they are little more than a victimised people.

It is essential to acknowledge and address the hurtful and damaging aspects of the past. It is also vitally important to focus on and celebrate the achievements and experiences of the Melanesian community in Australia, and their unique contribution to our Nation’s cultural heritage. One way of achieving a balanced perspective might be through the research of cultural heritage practitioners, particularly archaeologists. This would help define a place in the cultural landscape, comprising spaces that represent the full spectrum of the Islanders’ historical experience in Australia.

The remainder of this paper will examine some of the physical manifestations of the cultural heritage of Australian South Sea Islanders in northern Queensland, based on my own research, with some reference to Islander-related sites in heritage lists and the work of other heritage projects.

**HERITAGE PLACES**

**Landing Places**

Landing places, including wharves, jetties and offshore islands, define where many of those first *Kanakas* set foot in Australia. For many Islanders they are still strongly associated with the concept of slavery. However, they could also be seen as symbolic of the arrival of a new migrant community in Australia. Flat Top Island, off the coast of Mackay, is one such place. Here fresh recruits were unloaded before being transferred into Mackay on smaller vessels. What is believed to be the landing place of recruiting vessels on Flat Top Island is marked by an old Leichhardt tree (*Nauclea orientalis*) and an interpretive sign, erected by the National Trust. Conceivably, such places should exist in every Queensland port town where Islanders were landed, including Bundaberg, Brisbane, Townsville, Lucinda and Cairns. Significantly, the wharves at ports such as Brisbane, Mackay and Cairns are also important as the sites of departure of most of the Islanders deported in 1908 under the White Australia Policy (Mercer 1995: 98).

**Plantations**

From 1996 to 2000 I undertook research on the archaeological landscapes of nineteenth-century sugar plantations in the Burdekin and Lower Herbert (Ingham) districts of northern Queensland (Hayes 2000). These landscapes reveal a particular set of social, cultural and racial relationships within plantation society, as well as the ways in which the Islanders, at the lower end of the social scale, coped and survived what was often a distressing and undignified plantation experience.

Plantation sites are examples of early South Sea Islander heritage places which could act as important reference points for the Islander community today and provide insight into what plantation life was like. From the conversations I have had with Australian South Sea Islanders, very few of them know much about the plantations in their district, or where plantation sites are located, except if they are still operating as sugar mills today. In addition, there is a general sense of trepidation and uncertainty where these places are concerned.

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*Figure 1. Remains of the Sugar Mill at Gairloch Plantation, Lower Herbert District. First established in 1872. Gairloch was refurbished in 1889 with a new mill constructed at a cost of £40,000 (Queensland Parliament 1889, vol 4: 208–209). Photo: Lincoln Hayes.*
attached to the historical memories that they represent. However, plantation sites are far more than just relics of an exploitative and abusive past. There is an aspect of them that reveals a people skilled in negotiating and modifying the environment within their own particular cultural framework (Hayes 2000: 371).

Industrial remnants are the most common archaeological elements of plantation sites. These usually occur in the form of sugar mill ruins. Thick-set brick and concrete foundations, and often chimney butts, are still visible at most sites. While they are more prominently symbolic of the European heritage of the industry, they still have significance to Melanesians. They record unequivocally the presence of Pacific Islanders in this region. While the skilled labour in the construction of these places might have been European, the sweat and toil was still Melanesian. Furthermore, while Islanders generally did not work inside the mills, their working life still revolved around them.

The sugar fields themselves are also an important aspect of Islander heritage, although less tangibly so, because of the extent of re-planting and re-clearing that has occurred over time. Without the aid of historic maps, land that was initially cleared by Islanders is difficult to determine. Regardless of how much land was actually cleared and planted by Melanesian hands, however, their labour provided the impetus and the foundation for one of Australia’s vital industries; they should receive due recognition for this.

Contrary to some expectations (e.g. Balanzatagui 1995: 30), there is material evidence of the Islanders’ presence at many plantation sites. Accommodation used by the Islanders on plantations varied greatly, from timber and iron barracks to vernacular grass huts. Grass huts were preferred by the recruits, who constructed them from locally available materials in the same architectural styles as those found in Vanuatu and the Solomons.

At the site of Seaforth Plantation, near Ayr, in the Lower Burdekin district, the remains of several of these grass huts are evident in the form of earthen mounds. These mounds are rich in artificial materials such as ceramics, bottle glass and animal bones (Hayes 2000: 255–257). Seaforth is the only place I was able to locate such features, so preservation of grass huts is probably not very common, although there are many more plantation sites yet to be examined archaeologically.

At Hamleigh Plantation, the remains of another form of accommodation were found. These structures had brick and concrete flooring, timber frames, and were originally clad with thatchwork walls and roofing. While only the concrete and brick floors have survived, the original appearance of this style of accommodation was determined through documentary evidence.

Hut and barracks remains, wherever they are found, provide substantial physical evidence of Melanesian presence on plantations. For present-day Melanesian Australians they provide a physical as well as a contextual link with their forebears.

The sense of place that such archaeological features can evoke might be enhanced further by exploring the context of the wider plantation landscape. The landscape was not just a backdrop in which the Islanders passively existed; it was moulded and transformed into something that contained cultural symbols that would be recognisable to their present-day descendants. The most distinctive signature of their negotiation of the landscape is to be found in the vegetation.

Detesting the Eurocentric diet provided for them, Melanesian workers planted gardens and trees to produce more familiar food. Plants included Pacific cultivars such as yams, taro, coconuts and bananas, while others introduced to them by Europeans, such as guavas and mangoes were also incorporated into their gardens. Few Islanders in Australia would have gone hungry for want of palatable food. These gardens, planted both around their huts and barracks and in plots away from the plantation, also provided a more comfortable and familiar environment—a release from the harsh landscape and lifestyle of the plantations (Hayes 2000: 375–377).

Evidence of these planting practices is usually evident in the archaeological landscape, in the form of remnant gardens and trees. Traces of bamboo, mangoes, cassava, bananas and occasionally taro are frequently found in proximity to the Islanders’ domestic spaces on plantations. Strong similarities to these planting systems can be seen around post-plantation period Islander sites as well, demonstrating some continuity in how the Islanders have influenced the cultural landscape over time (Hayes 2000: 301).

While plantation sites are the most significant reminders of the nineteenth-century history of the Australian South Sea Islanders, a number of other types of places or features survive as important evidence of this era.

In some districts, extensive stone walls and terraces were constructed from large-scale clearing of volcanic rock by Melanesian labourers for sugar planting. These features are
relatively common in the Bundaberg and Maryborough districts. Two such features, at the former Sunnyside plantation and the former Mon Repos plantation, near Bundaberg, have been listed in the Queensland Heritage Register (citation 601700) and Register of the National Estate (database 14739) respectively.

Religion

Religion is one aspect of Melanesian life in Australia today that can be directly traced back to the plantation period. On arrival in Australia, most Islanders retained the ancestor-based cosmology that characterised traditional Melanesian belief systems. These beliefs were left largely unchallenged by Europeans for the first 20 years of their presence in Australia. It is likely that there are places within the Queensland landscape that relate to these traditional beliefs. It is difficult, however, especially through present-day descendants, to get a grasp of what and where they are. Mercer and Moore (1976: 80) were told of the presence of Haus Tambarans or Tarunga huts—which were used for traditional male rituals and ceremonies with direct parallels back in the islands—in the Mackay district, but their informants refused to reveal their locations. In Melanesia, secrecy is an essential aspect of these ceremonial places, and it appears that this tradition was kept alive in Australia. It is unknown whether these Mackay huts still exist, or if there were other such places elsewhere in Queensland. In my experience, there is a general reluctance on the part of Islander descendants to discuss at length this aspect of their cultural history, as most of them are devout Christians and regard such matters with ambivalence (Hayes 2001: 76). At the same time many of them can recount stories and experiences that can only be explained within the framework of traditional Melanesian belief systems.

Christianisation of plantation workers began in earnest in 1882 with the Queensland Kanaka Mission at Fairymead plantation near Bundaberg (Young 1926). While planters initially resisted such efforts, missionaries, including the Anglican and Presbyterian churches, soon had hundreds of Islanders attending Bible lessons and Sunday services. Many Islanders became strongly attached to the Church, often as a substitute for the extensive social and family relationships they had left in the islands (Corris 1973: 95).

Most Australian South Sea Islanders today are closely aligned to the Christian faith. Memberships in the Anglican
and Presbyterian churches are still strong, but many also belong to charismatic denominations, such as the Assemblies of God (AOG). In the town of Ayr in north Queensland, the AOG church was for a long time known as the Black Church, in reference to the fact that the church congregation had long been made up predominantly of Islanders (Hayes 2001: 79).

The establishment of Christianity in the 1890s provides a very strong sense of continuity for present-day descendants. Places attached to early missionary efforts are important links with what is today regarded as a sacred and central part of Australian South Sea Islander identity. Some examples of places associated with this include the former Presbyterian church building in Ayr (Hayes 2001: 99), which was the location of early Presbyterian mission classes for Islanders in the late 1890s; and the Homebush Mission Hall, near Mackay, also the site of Presbyterian Mission activity. The Homebush Mission Hall is highly significant for members of the local Islander community, who still attend services there and maintain the site, which is listed in the Queensland Heritage Register (citation 601705).

Post-Plantation Period

For the post-plantation period, it is somewhat difficult to draw together evidence about the lives and activities of the Islanders that remained in Australia after the deportations. Written history about this period is patchy, but insight into the Islanders' continued survival and existence has been gathered through oral history. It is now evident that archaeology can also contribute to this understanding. I will concentrate briefly on my recent work in the Burdekin district of north Queensland (Hayes 2001) to illustrate this.1 Historic accounts of other districts in Queensland can also be found (e.g. Moore 1995, Gistlin 1995). Mapping and recording of Australian South Sea Islander heritage sites remains in its infancy, although extensive recording has occurred in the Livingstone Shire, near Rockhampton (Livingstone Shire Council 1999).

The difficulties for the Islanders in getting work appear to have been at their worst in the years from 1910 to 1930. At this time, Islander families lived where they could find work. If work could be found five miles out of town, the family would pack up and move to that area and erect a house. During this difficult period the Islanders' homes were dispersed through the landscape. Nonetheless a strong community formed, which came together on weekends for church and social gatherings.

One exceptional situation in the Burdekin was the case of Andrew Puller, who migrated to Ayr from Bowen around 1920. For the 1910 to 1930 period, he was the only South Sea Islander in the Burdekin region to have operated his own farm. He leased a number of acres at Seaforth from a local white farmer and set up a home and extensive gardens for his family beside Plantation Creek. Andrew Puller is also significant to the Burdekin's Islanders as the forebear of one of the district's more prominent families (Hayes 2001: 59).

The remains of Puller's house are still evident today by the banks of Plantation Creek. It is one of the few visible remnants in the district of the first few decades after the deportations under the White Australia Policy. Nothing structural survives here, although artefacts, including pieces of tin and brick, are scattered around the site. Two small Poinciana trees also survive. Many of the older members of the Islander community today remember coming here when they were younger, but have not visited the place for many years. Puller's house, therefore, is a crucial reference point for today's community (Hayes 2001: 101).

By the late 1930s, employment restrictions had relaxed, and fewer Islanders, given their reputation for hard work, were without some form of gainful employment. Yet socially, few of them were accepted as part of mainstream society and they existed—physically and psychologically—on the fringes.

A large proportion of the Islander community came to live on the banks of Plantation Creek, in a fashion that broadly reflected the villages and hamlets of Melanesia. Plantation Creek was an important reference point geographically and socially, being literally the edge of town (Ayr). They lived in clusters of two or three houses with their vernacular huts made of timber, grass, kerosene tins and hessian; their gardens bore a combination of European and Islander fruits and vegetables. The most crucial of them all were their mango trees. Of these sites, very little remains today apart from the mango trees. Yet these trees record, unequivocally, the presence of a South Sea Islander Community.

One specific part of the Plantation Creek settlement was a small group of huts known to Islanders and Europeans alike as The Gardens, because it was so immaculately kept. John Cole, an elder of the South Sea Islander Community in the Burdekin, walked me around this place and recounted stories from his childhood there. There were no structural remains evident, but the trees and surface scatters of artefacts provided evidence of the former residences. Standing proudly on the spot where his family house stood in the 1940s, he recalled the earthen floor that his mother maintained so meticulously that it shone like glass, and the fact that they were the only Islander family in the district to own a piano. He also recounted stories of his childhood, about hunting for scrub turkeys and lizards on the way home from school, fishing in the creek and the huge Sunday church gatherings they would have. The stories and memories that John told me were strongly inspired by and established in the cultural landscape. Each of the families in the district has its own such landscapes, and many families have the same landscapes in common, but younger generations of the Community seem to have lost awareness of their location and their significance.

After World War Two, the Islanders began to be more accepted by the broader community, although social tensions, fuelled by racism, simmered below the surface (Hayes 2001: 73). Islanders gradually became bolder in their relationships with the white community. Some were able to raise enough capital to lease farms or even purchase houses in the town. However, the majority of the Islanders who did move into the town still tended to live on its outskirts, usually a stone's throw from Plantation Creek.

Today, Islander families still tend to live on the fringes of the towns and in close proximity to each other, often in an open, communal fashion. In principle they are fully accepted as part of the social landscape, but there are still pockets of prejudice and exclusion.

Many of the places discussed above are difficult to locate physically, ultimately because they are more often than not part of the landscape rather than imposed upon it. Garden remnants—especially trees—and small artefact scatters tend to represent the lives of Australian South Islanders up until the 1950s. However, they are still important because they define and interpret the experiences and the lifestyles, the stories and the memories of the Australian South Sea Islanders. These places are less tangible in terms of bricks and mortar than the classic historic properties we normally associate with heritage registers but are just as symbolic and significant in heritage terms.

CONCLUSION

It is important to recognise that the places which symbolise the history and heritage of the Australian South Sea Islanders are often likely to be recorded as subtle traces in the landscape. These traces, and aspects thereof, such as geographic locations, vegetation and the remembered stories, are not highly obvious to the average onlooker, but are potentially
deeply symbolic and meaningful to South Sea Islanders. While the essence of the Islanders' heritage remains in the stories and the memories passed through generations, there is a physical aspect of the past, rooted in the cultural landscapes, which is in danger of being lost due to alienation of the community from these areas by the expansion of sugar cane farming. Archaeologists are uniquely situated to help identify and record these types of places, and to stress to land owners and decision makers that while they are not particularly obvious to the wider community, these places have clear and important heritage values.

Finally, by working with South Sea Islander communities and assisting them with actively seeking, identifying, recording and conserving their heritage places, we can help to create crucial reference points for individual and collective memories. As a heretofore excluded and unrecognized group they have had little claim to ownership over their special places. As a result, few sites have been tended or cared for by their owners. However, by moving towards recognition and protection of these sites it is possible to assist the Islander communities with their struggle to assert their position more firmly in the Australian landscape and the Australian identity.

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NOTES

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1 The first substantial group of Islanders introduced to Australia were brought recruited in 1847 by Ben Boyd to work as shepherds on his Monaro properties. Boyd’s experiment was unsuccessful. The first Pacific Island labourers in Queensland were recruited by Robert Towns for his cotton properties on the Logan in 1863.

2 A well-written history of this period has been produced in Mercer’s (1995) White Australia Defied, based heavily on oral histories recorded by herself and Clive Moore in the 1970s. Original tapes and transcripts of interviews are held in the Black Oral History Collection at James Cook University’s Department of History and Politics.

3 This project, a community history of the Burdekin’s Australian South Sea Islanders and places of heritage value, was funded by the Burdekin Shire Council, through the Queensland Community Heritage Incentive Program.

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