

From Blackbirds to Guestworkers in the South Pacific. *Plus ça change... ?*

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Abstract

Labour migration from the Pacific to Australasia has experienced two distinct phases with acute structural similarities. Late nineteenth century migration brought Melanesian migrants to Queensland cane plantations, notably from the New Hebrides (Vanuatu). A century later, early twenty-first century agricultural shortages took migrants from several island states to New Zealand and Australia. Migrants moved from semi-subsistence agricultural systems — where income generation was trivial — in search of incomes, goods and experience(s). Forced migration gave way to conscious choice. Similarities in the organisation of recruitment, acquisition of income and skills and improved material well-being attend both phases. Women have been more likely to participate in the second phase. Overall outcomes have been unequal with the principal gains accrued in destinations rather than by the migrants or their home islands.

Introduction

Blackbirding was the colloquial term for the early labour trade in the South Pacific, initiated as illegal and uncontrolled recruitment, long after such practices had ended in Europe, the Americas and Africa. It accompanied the establishment of a new industrial plantation frontier in Asia, Australia and the Pacific. In the mid-nineteenth century Melanesians — the ‘blackbirds’ — went from the Solomon Islands and especially Vanuatu (then the New Hebrides) to work overseas mainly in the cane fields of Queensland. Early in the twenty first century — more than a century after blackbirding had ended — a new phase of labour migration from Vanuatu and elsewhere in the Pacific began, with labour migrants being recruited to work in the agricultural sectors of New Zealand and Australia. This paper examines the differences between these two phases of labour migration, and the extent to which labour was autonomous, with particular reference to Vanuatu. Vanuatu was the only country involved in both phases. In the first phase, islanders went primarily to Australia and, thus far in the second phase, mainly to New Zealand.

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Early Years

By the middle of the nineteenth century, labour shortages in large-scale agricultural systems in places such as Australia had transformed once-remote Pacific islands into new labour reserves. In the 1860s, Polynesians and Micronesians were forcibly taken from such contemporary Pacific states as Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tokelau and French Polynesia (Tahiti), to work in Chilean and Peruvian plantations and mines. Some never arrived, and few ever returned home, hence several islands lost more than half their population in just three years (Maude 1981). The Melanesian islands of the south west Pacific especially acted as a subsequent and more significant labour pool for extensive German, French, British and, later, Australian agricultural and mining interests in the region.

From 1847 to 1872, a more extended labour trade took Melanesians from many islands, mainly to work on Queensland cotton plantations and later sugar cane plantations, but some also went to plantations in Fiji and Samoa and mines in New Caledonia. Others were employed as shepherds and bullock drivers. Most came from the Loyalty Islands (New Caledonia), the New Hebrides (and especially Tanna island) and the Solomon Islands. A moving labour frontier began in the New Hebrides and the Loyalty Islands in the 1860s, stretched northwards to the Solomon Islands in the 1870s and reached the islands off eastern New Guinea in the 1880s. Particularly in the New Hebrides, the major source of labour, this led to population declines in the southern islands.

Initially labour was coerced, kidnapped, or promised great wealth (and defrauded), until the growth of widespread opposition in various western countries, often resulting from missionary protests, which themselves followed local pressure from islanders who had been exploited. Early on, intimidation meant that it was no more than a 'colonial fantasy' (Bremner 1990) to maintain that employment, let alone contracts, were entered into voluntarily. Diverse interpretations of blackbirding attach varied significance to the extent of kidnapping, coercion or voluntary participation (Howe 1984). Not all labour migrants had to be coerced; many went willingly, lured by the attractions of wealth, new goods and adventure, if not exactly in conditions of their own choosing (Adams 1990). Any deception and duplicity could not have been sustained for long, as local ties and social networks became effective in transmitting knowledge, as they were elsewhere (Brass and Bernstein 1992; Bonnemaïson 1994). However, retaliation to illegal recruiting was often considerable, and the murder of Bishop John Patteson in the New Hebrides was one measure of the strength of local opposition to blackbirding and perceptions of the overly coercive role of Europeans. Migration from the Pacific labour reserves were based on a combination of economic necessity and coercive regulation. Migrants and their households could never entirely rely on the domestic subsistence sector, but were never integrated into the very limited local wage economy.

From 1872 to the end of the nineteenth century, blackbirding was replaced by legal recruitment. Migrants were mainly young unmarried men aged between 16 and 25 years (and initially even younger); over time, as labour migrants signed on for second periods, the age structure changed. By 1891 the islander population of Australia had reached about 9500, less than ten per cent of whom

were women. Most labour migrants returned home, but one outcome was a small descendant population of South Sea Islanders (Kanakas) living in Australia, centred on Mackay (Moore 1985). They were the first phase of a diasporic population of Pacific islanders that became more extensive towards the end of the twentieth century.

Groups of men were often recruited from the same village and, in Australia, would work for the same master. They came from areas that were seen as particularly propitious for labour migration, and came back after a period of two or three years with new goods and money. Workers were highly organised with groups of kinsmen and neighbours deciding themselves whether to re-enlist or return home at the end of their terms (Saunders 1982). Individuals gradually became 'fairly free agents' (Howe 1984: 342). On the plantations, however, inter-island conflicts were not unusual, and masters exploited such rivalries in order to divide and rule, and reduce concerted protests against the authoritarian structure of plantation life. But over time — especially as the rigid plantation system weakened and workers returned — labour migrants were able to engage in effective collective bargaining and negotiation.

Labour migration contributed to significant social transformation in many parts of Melanesia, as money, goods and ideas were brought back. Labour migration influenced changes at the same time as missionisation and the first limited colonial administration. In different ways, islands and islanders were coming under alien influence and control. What was not however changing was the degree to which any autonomous economic development was achieved. In Vanuatu especially, migrants returned to what continued to be subsistence agricultural systems, albeit with new tools and clothes, but with no means of sustaining any change in their economic status. Indeed, that stability partly explains the ease of recruitment of 'old chums' who returned for further employment in Australia.

The economic benefits from blackbirding were almost exclusively located in Queensland, where the cane industry flourished. Melanesians were anxious to withdraw from plantation labour, as soon as some form of local development became feasible (Adams 1990). Recruitment ended at the start of the twentieth century as the Australian colonies entered into federation. By then Pacific island labour had become more expensive, demand had increased in Melanesia (from traders, plantation owners, etc.) notably in southern Vanuatu (Graves 1993: 62–64) though Queensland cane growers were compensated for their enforced shift to employing more expensive European labour.

It is informative to compare the organisation of nineteenth century Pacific migrant labour with recent developments.

The New Guestworkers

By the start of the twenty first century in both New Zealand and Australia, agriculture was experiencing labour recruitment problems. Conventional local sources of labour had dwindled, alongside low unemployment rates, rural-urban migration, and some disdain for agricultural employment. Many agricultural systems were dependent on uncertain flows of labour (for example, from holi-

daying backpackers, 'grey nomads' and undocumented 'illegal migrant' workers) and experienced labour shortages and unharvested products (notably of grapes and stonefruit).

Recent agricultural shortages in metropolitan states have coincided with economic stagnation in Pacific island states, higher levels of unemployment (insofar as these can be measured), a 'youth bulge', and the disappearance of some former sources of migrant labour (notably the Nauru phosphate mine). A growing dependence on remittances from islanders overseas has been accompanied by increased pressure from island states for migration and employment opportunities overseas, in part emphasised by claims of environmental disadvantage related to climate change.

Over the past decade, several external studies have advocated short-term migration, to enable Pacific islanders to work temporarily in agriculture overseas and return home after a period of less than a year (e.g. ADB 2005; World Bank 2006; Maclellan and Mares 2007). Critics have dismissed all temporary migration as 'a new form of indentured servitude' (AMWU 2006), with agricultural employment in Australia potentially creating 'a semi-indentured subservient class of workers', as occurred under the 457 visa program (Betzien 2008). In 2007 New Zealand established a Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) work scheme that provided seasonal employment in the agricultural industry, and Australia established a similar scheme in 2009. Vanuatu was the only Melanesian state to be part of both schemes.

Vanuatu, which became independent in 1980, is classified by the United Nations as a least developed country with a population of 250,000 scattered over some 65 populated islands. It has exhibited only slight economic growth in recent years. Per capita income levels have not significantly increased, more than 40 per cent of the population live below the poverty level, and both unemployment and under-employment are rising. Vanuatu has sought access to overseas employment programmes, to reduce unemployment and boost national income.

The RSE Scheme allowed seasonal labour to migrate to New Zealand to work in the horticulture and viticulture industries 'if there are no New Zealanders available to work'. Employers apply to the New Zealand Department of Labour to recruit workers from five Pacific states, and are then assessed to ensure that the facilities provided for the migrant workers — notably reasonably priced accommodation — are of appropriate standard. By early 2008, some 75 employers had been given official RSE status.

Workers enjoyed the same labour rights and protections as New Zealanders, and received a wage no less than the statutory minimum. Hence the hourly salary was roughly equal to the daily unskilled wage in Vanuatu. Sick leave accrued to workers after six months. Employers are responsible for 'meeting and greeting' the workers at the airport in New Zealand, taking them to the place of work and eventually similarly assisting their departure. After examining the New Zealand experience, Australia followed almost exactly the same model.

The RSE Scheme in Vanuatu

The Vanuatu Department of Labour licenses local employment agents who are the contact points and recruiting agents for New Zealand employers. The agents negotiate fees from employers for finding workers, but cannot charge fees from the workers, and are responsible for pre-departure briefings for the workers (covering topics such as health insurance, trade unions and means of remitting income). Agents are expected to compile lists of 'work-ready' people with police and medical certificates and the support of a community leader — such as a chief or pastor — confirming that they are of 'good character'. Some agents have proved bad choices, and cheated some ni-Vanuatu applicants or gave them unrealistic expectations. Others were biased towards their own family members.

Workers may stay for up to seven months in an 11-month period. However, New Zealand employers may employ the same workers year after year, so providing both an incentive for ni-Vanuatu workers to work well and be law-abiding, and for New Zealand employers to establish long-term relationships and invest in training and skill development.

Workers must pay for a medical and police certificate, a visa fee and have a passport, and must also pay half their airfare (the employers pay the other half) resulting in a large cost before deployment. In some cases, these costs were paid by employers and subsequently refunded. Costs in NZ were more than workers anticipated, for food, accommodation, warm clothes and recreation.

Intending participants were told that they would bring back about A\$4000 — about four times the average provincial income — depending on how hard they worked and what they did with the money. In practice, workers saved and remitted rather less than this (Connell and Hammond 2009; Hammond and Connell 2009). For almost all workers, the income brought home had little long term impact and many returnees had exhausted their income within two or three months.

Communities and leaders played a part in selection. Some younger men were chosen, who had wives but no family, on the basis that this would give them a good start, while some older men were chosen since it was anticipated that they would be reliable and bring more money back. Professionally skilled workers were not selected. At least some workers were sponsored by their communities so that their income might support community needs, such as a shared water tank. As in a rather earlier Fijian bilateral scheme with New Zealand, this phase tended to result in the selection of 'worthy' recruits who were either needy, or regarded as good workers who would not be trouble makers (Levick and Bedford 1988). Those first involved in the scheme were particularly motivated (as would be expected from a first cohort) and made calculations of just how much income was needed for particular objectives such as building a house, setting up a small business or getting children through high school.

Recruiting from Tanna

Many recruits came from the large southern island of Tanna, where domestic remittances have long been a significant source of income. In Tanna at least, unlike any other previous migration experience that Tannese (and most other ni-Vanuatu or Melanesians generally) might have been involved in, people were not allowed to sign up or migrate purely as individuals, but had to be involved in community activities and take part in the preliminary briefings. Participants had to set up bank accounts in Tanna (so that the income would return there), donate NZ\$250 to a community fund, use group flights which would return people directly to Tanna rather than through Port Vila (where the pilot programme suggested that a proportion of funds were absorbed or 'lost'), and abide by a local Code of Conduct (Connell and Hammond 2009) that partly replicated a Tannese moral order.

Workers had to be married, and aged over 25 and less than 55, on the assumption that married couples had clear needs and a measure of stability. One partner would stay behind. Employers sought equal female participation. While the scheme offered an opportunity for women to be more or less independent, and develop or enhance such skills as literacy, women had less familiarity with the outside world and were more likely to be conservative. About 20 per cent of the first group of workers were women, whose skills were preferred for activities such as grading.

Recruits came from throughout Tanna, and were relatively evenly distributed in particular areas, so there was no obvious spatial bias in selection. Thus far spatial equity has involved most parts of Vanuatu, while workers came from many different religious denominations, including 'kastom' religions. Most were relatively young — the average age being 35 for women and 36 for men.

Almost all were subsistence agriculturalists, with market sales their only source of income. A small minority had wage or salary employment. Overall some 73 per cent of the households had incomes less than Vatu 50,000 (about A\$580). Two thirds (65 per cent) had never gone beyond primary school. The recruits were not well educated, had little facility in English and came from low-income households: a reasonable cross section of the population of Tanna, emphasising the considerable degree of income poverty stemming from poverty of opportunity.

The underlying rationale for migration was almost solely income generation. Any general interest and the excitement of it all were at best secondary. Indeed this theme was probably less important than a century earlier, indicating the necessary focus on income. Income generation had three key objectives: notably paying school fees (which are roughly Vatu 40,000 per year, plus transport costs, for high school, and Vatu 9000 for primary school). Education offers the possibility of jobs in the public service, or tourism, and an opportunity to break the cycle of attachment to the land. Some 61 per cent of recruits listed school fees as their first priority. Small business development (i.e. a small store) was the second most important category (25 per cent), while improved housing (13 per cent) came third. The principal direct material goal was therefore house construction, with permanent materials that need less frequent replacement, are dry in wet weather and allow gutters and a tank for collecting drinking water.

From Vanuatu to New Zealand

Both in New Zealand, and later Australia, fewer work hours were available than anticipated, despite guarantees of minimum hours, unexpected pay deductions occurred (mainly for accommodation) and piece work rates did not equate with the minimum wage. In both destinations, work hours were less than promised (and incomes therefore lower) and employers were sometimes exploitative (especially for accommodation). Labour requirements proved hard to estimate.

In most cases, ni-Vanuatu workers remitted money and brought back significant sums, but almost all returned with less than they anticipated. Income was generally used for their initial objectives, though mobile phones were acquired by many, reflecting a familiar pattern of remittance use in the Pacific, initially on education, consumption and then on welfare gains (such as improved housing), eventually followed by investment in small scale enterprises (Connell and Brown 2005). Since workers have been chosen (or chose themselves) according to perceived needs, the scheme makes a further contribution to local and regional equity. Recent village based selection schemes for Fijian workers recruited for the Middle East appear to have had a similar balanced and ethical basis (Pareti 2005), as they were in earlier schemes in Fiji (Levick and Bedford 1988) and Samoa (Macpherson 1981).

The ni-Vanuatu workers acquired some new skills while working in New Zealand, though these were limited to the agricultural sector and the nature of agricultural work also meant they had limited transferability to Vanuatu. About half of those who had migrated sought to return for a second phase. In Tanna, those who remained at home absorbed extra work and responsibilities without obvious problems or rancour.

The experience of the new labour migration from Vanuatu, limited though it is, has thus far been largely positive for New Zealand, Australia and Vanuatu. The ni-Vanuatu workers are available for seven months, and are therefore a more reliable source of labour, so reducing training times and costs. Migrant workers have filled vacancies in the agricultural sector, have not displaced local workers, made some contribution to local society and returned to Vanuatu at the end of the time period.

There is no evidence of overstaying. A minority returned early with relatively little to show, mainly because of dislike of work disciplines, the cold or frustration over lack of work, and a handful were deported for breaches of conduct.

Existing evidence from the recent Vanuatu experience suggests that agricultural guestworker schemes, despite diverse concerns, can benefit countries, businesses and workers. They may serve the needs of the poor more effectively than many forms of aid, and they certainly serve the needs of businesses more than the needs of workers and their families. Fewer than a thousand workers are guestworkers at any one time, hence the actual contribution to the Vanuatu economy remains limited, and few households have benefited directly.

Not Quite the Same?

After a hundred years, Australia, New Zealand and Vanuatu have in some respects turned back the clock towards a 'new blackbirding'. In the first phase, relationships were so unequal and migrant workers so exploited that in this decade there have even been expressed intentions in Vanuatu to sue Australia. By contrast, Vanuatu has now voluntarily entered into a new, more short-term labour migration scheme with both Australia and New Zealand where there are more obvious reciprocal benefits but where little control is possible.

There are distinct parallels in both eras. Regardless of local aspirations, migration was wholly linked to demand for labour. It began and partly ended (in the first phase) in response to metropolitan needs. Similarly, in the interim Fijian scheme, while the coups 'provided a convenient excuse to put an end to the most successful work permit scheme that had evolved between New Zealand and a Pacific country', the real rationale for its demise rested in economic recession in New Zealand and the collapse of demand for labour (Levick and Bedford 1988: 21). In this century, in the second phase, metropolitan labour requirements — rather than for example considerations of aid delivery — have wholly dominated the operation of the scheme.

Migrants moved out of poverty. Alien recruiters and local agents preferred agricultural workers — and sought to exclude educated, or even skilled, workers (and the urban unemployed). This situation was true also of American recruitment of Caribbean cane cutters and recruitment of Javanese for Sumatran plantations (Stoler 1985; Hahamovitch 2008). Preferred recruits were not tainted by radical ideas or previous experiences. Such preferences also partly explain the northwards movement of the labour reserve frontier in the nineteenth century into more remote areas.

In both eras, economic gains were in destinations; surplus value remained in the metropolises.

Labour migrants were actively recruited in their home islands, promises were made of 'full' employment and substantial earnings (but rarely realised) and choice of work was impossible. Elite Melanesians rapidly took on lucrative roles as middlemen (Corris 1973). Where choice was available to them, villagers sought a continued moral order and economy by selecting worthy recipients or local leaders. Migration was effectively embedded in local cultural practices.

Despite the circumstances in destinations, '[w]hile by European standards the work was long and hard and the pay meagre, most islanders found their new life exciting and stimulating, exposed as they were to a totally novel cultural environment' (Howe 1974: 383). Though their labour power was controlled, all had moved from places of limited economic development that were no 'paradise lost' (Brass and Bernstein 1992; Connell 2003). While wage incomes might have been small, they were novel and welcome. Both blackbirds and guestworkers were therefore initially quite different from casual workers in contemporary metropolitan contexts, where limited control over working conditions is exceptionally unattractive.

Few migrants had realistic expectations of what lay ahead of them, in incomes, employment or social conditions, yet labour migration was usually a rational

and conscious choice (Baak 1999). Many expressed a wish to return for a second phase (as it became evident that only limited development could be achieved through labour migration, as few alternatives existed). Incomes, and their utility, were less than expected, but they enabled improved material wellbeing. Skills were gained but were rarely transferable to quite different Melanesian agricultural systems, as they had been in an earlier Samoan episode (Macpherson 1981). Skills could not be transferred to more remunerative urban employment.

The reproduction of labour remained in Melanesian villages and employers played no part in education, health, welfare services and aged care. Migration from labour reserves was no threat to the authority of colonial or national elites. Discursive representations of Melanesian workers portrayed and patronised them as outsiders who were docile but an inferior commodity, while it was metropolitan duty to 'help the Pacific', though in neither phase was this realised. During the brief Fijian labour migration schemes of the 1980s, the Fijian government emphasised the need for skill acquisition and training, rather than on the potential for remittances (Levick and Bedford 1988), but that focus has largely disappeared. In both eras, Aborigines were regarded as inadequate workers prone to absconding (e.g. Saunders 1982: 65–66; Graves 1993: 35) hence the value of distant recruits.

Differences also exist between the two eras. Migrants are no longer so alien and socially marginal. Women were more likely to be recruited in the second phase as the 'subtlety' of agricultural employment changed and required a Melanesian version of Asian 'nimble fingers'. Social niceties were few, but churches and other organisations were more likely to play a part in socialisation, so reducing the purely labour aspects of migration. Likewise, labour regulations and occupational safety were more effective and accommodation superior. Wages were higher in the twenty first century, but work was less reliable and its duration restricted to less than seven months — migrants had no ability to control conditions since their stay was more temporary than a century earlier. In the nineteenth century, 'workers resisted their exploitation creatively and energetically' (Graves 2008: 18; cf. Hahamovitch 2008) a situation yet to occur in Australia and New Zealand.

Guestworker labour was a commodity only in the earliest years of the nineteenth century. The early blackbirds were a little more free — and recruitment less fraudulent or violent — than some early literature would have it. Yet bonded labour was still bonded — even with more enlightened regulations. Over time in the first phase, and with some NGO assistance in the second phase, some local control, the placement of migration in a cultural context and a stress on equity were significant.

Above all, labour migration has had minimal impact in the source regions, though many small islands are particularly disadvantaged (Connell 2010), hence the universal acceptance of a second phase. At a time when Pacific poverty and hardship are increasing, migration is part of a global trend where remittances substitute for aid, and where national investment in rural and regional areas is reduced. But, as in Indonesia, the 'very success' of circular migration may be 'counterproductive in the longer term because it diverts attention from the only

strategy that will ultimately assist the poor in rural areas' (Hugo 1982: 76). But 'success' too has been limited. Consequently, short-term migration becomes even more necessary, and, without choice, labour may be further reduced to a commodity, its autonomy weakened and its price static. The contemporary rise of even more temporary agricultural work — little more than casual work — represents a shift towards treating labour as a pure commodity — with limited ability to control its time, organise collectively or ensure a guaranteed income. What is abundantly clear from both eras is that the limitations of labour migration are evident in the minimal subsequent structural and domestic changes, the impossibility of converting household gains into sustainable development, and the inability of small island states to translate household gains into more effective structures of national development. Uneven outcomes are consequently inevitable. After more than a century, much remains the same and little of significance has actually changed.

Notes

1. This analysis is primarily based on the experience of Tannese workers in New Zealand during and after the first two phases of migration. Early outcomes in Australia, where labour migration began in 2009, suggest that the context is extremely similar, though ni-Vanuatu labour migrants are presently fewer.

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