

THE IMMIGRATION OF SOUTH-SEA ISLANDERS

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One of the curious attempts at controlled immigration was the importation of about 2,500 so-called "South Sea Islanders" in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Drawn from widely scattered points in the Pacific, speaking numerous languages, and nurtured in as many diverse cultural conditions, they cannot be conceived of as a distinct ethnic group. But although few in number—and now completely vanished as a group—their experience nevertheless illustrates significant aspects of the shifting social scene in Hawai'i not readily observable among other groups.

Most immigrant labor for Hawai'i plantations was recruited in peasant communities of high population density, especially in Asia, where workers exceeded the opportunities for a livelihood. The South Sea Islanders, on the other hand, were found in widely scattered islands where population had been severely restricted by limited resources. The assumed readiness of Islanders to escape from their narrowly confined habitat and the taboos of native chiefs, it was assumed, would make them willing recruits for the Hawaiian adventure.

Another, but equally mistaken hope among the missionary and governmental promoters of this venture was the expectation that such immigrants would find Hawai'i a congenial place to live and thus help revitalize the seriously depleted Hawaiian race. As early as 1855, Kamehameha IV had proposed "bringing in Polynesian immigrants to . . . reinvigorate the native Hawaiian stock." And in 1859 an American schooner brought ten islanders, probably from Rarotonga, described as "young, healthy, and in personal appearance resembling the Hawaiians" to work under contract for five years on the plantation at Kōloa, Kaua'i.¹ In the mid-1860s arrangements were made to introduce fifty adult laborers from the Caroline Islands on the assumption that "the people were anxious to leave home on account of the occasional suffering for want of the necessaries of life and . . . to escape from the onerous taboo laws," but it was possible to obtain only half the number.

Except for another small group of Marquesans brought in 1865—eight under auspices of the Board of Immigration and seven by the American Board of Commissioners of Foreign Missions—no serious effort was made to attract additional Islanders until after signing of the reciprocity treaty with the U.S. and the consequent increased demand for plantation labor.

In the meantime, interest had continued in official channels in bringing people who were "cognate" to the Hawaiians and who would amalgamate with them. According to Kuykendall,² however, the notion of race in those days was so vague that "nearly all Pacific islanders, including Malaysians and even Japanese, were thought of as cognate to the Hawaiians."

Quite apart from the difficulty of persuading Islanders under no special compulsion of imminent starvation or political harassment to emigrate, both missionary and government sponsors wished to avoid undue pressure in recruiting and the odium of a traffic known as "black-birding" in which Pacific Islanders were literally kidnapped and forced into labor on plantations or mines, elsewhere in and around the Pacific.

Beginning in 1878 and continuing sporadically through 1884, 1,707 South Sea Islanders, according to best estimates, were introduced as contract laborers by the government, a number which, combined with those brought by private sponsors, makes the 2,500 estimated total. Reports by ship captains indicate they had to travel vast distances through all three major ethnic areas of the Pacific and visit countless islands to obtain even that limited number over a period of seven years. Natives were recruited from Rotumah in the Marquesas, from Manihiki in the Cook Islands, from the Gilberts and Carolines of Micronesia, and from the New Hebrides and Solomons of Melanesia, among others.

Having been drawn from such diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, it is no surprise that the immigrants did not, within the short period of their labor contracts, develop any sense of ethnic unity, though this was what their employers—and people in Hawai'i generally, expected of them.

Other immigrant labor groups brought to Hawai'i were also from different dialectal regions, but there were usually enough individuals of a common heritage to provide a congenial social setting in the new

environment during the early adjustment period. Moreover, they usually remained long enough to have accepted the common identity as Chinese, Portuguese, Filipino—however the community had labelled them. But this was not possible among the South Sea Islanders, who were too few in numbers and left Hawai'i too promptly for their home communities after finishing their contracts to have acquired such a sense of a common identity among themselves.

Like most of the other immigrant labor groups, the Pacific Islanders were predominantly adult males (77 percent), with women and children about evenly divided among the remainder. The disproportion of males among the Islanders, however, was much less extreme than among the immigrants from all the countries of Asia, although considerably higher than those from the European countries.

Probably the one common trait which most markedly affected the experience of the Islanders in Hawai'i was a sense of having been isolated from all that was familiar and precious to them. Although that feeling occurs to some degree among all immigrants, no other group in Hawai'i seems to have suffered so acutely, nor to have availed themselves to the same extent of transportation back to the homeland immediately after their contract service expired. Thus, of the nearly 1,300 Pacific Islanders brought by the Bureau of Immigration between 1878 and 1881, well over half (62.7 percent) were returned to their home island within a year of completing their contract with a plantation in Hawai'i.

In 1900, sixteen years after the last official immigration, there were 415 Islanders of both sexes and various ages listed by the U.S. census, but it was obvious that, even as a statistical group, they had been rapidly disappearing. By 1910 they were not listed at all. The decline in numbers employed on plantations was equally dramatic, from a peak of 902 in 1882 to 474 just four years later. By 1902 only twenty-six Islanders were so employed.

Statements by planters and sponsors were generally favorable to Islander immigration at the outset, but that sentiment gradually shifted to reluctant recognition of failure. Reports from planters regarding Micronesians, introduced in 1865, mentioned their "giving very great satisfaction" and being of "very gentle disposition," so that further importation was desired. Somewhat more than 200 Rotumans brought in 1878 were described by government

officials as having "proved good plantation hands, with the cultural drawback of their unacquaintance with our language, but they are generally quiet and tractable." In 1870, however, one planter reported that, of thirteen Bukabukans assigned him, three had died, eight were sick, and that he would "be glad to pay a reasonable amount to be relieved from the responsibility of supporting a lot of people that are not only of no use . . . but a considerable expense for food and medicine."

Dissatisfaction was openly expressed by the immigrants very soon after their arrival on the plantations, with complaints centered chiefly on the physical isolation and separation from their countrymen, the reduction of wages from a promised seven dollars to five dollars a month, inadequate medical attention, and unacceptable food consisting of "indifferent salt salmon and poi." These and other difficulties, they contended, resulted in "extreme disappointment and discontent" and high mortality. Criticism among other immigrant groups was not uncommon, but the discontent of the Islanders was obviously more widespread and serious, judging by the urgency of their desire to return home.

Despite conflicting evidence, both planters and government officials, supported by missionaries, continued during the 1880s to express confidence in immigration from the South Pacific. An endorsement appeared in the missionary journal, *The Friend*, in May 1880.

. . . it is emphatically stated that the South Sea Islanders are preferred to any other immigrants. We look upon this work of procuring immigrants from a cognate race with the Hawaiians as one of paramount importance and as intimately connected with the question of the recuperation of the race and the perpetuity of our national independence.

Less than two years later a meeting called by the Interior Department received high commendation of the Islanders as laborers from some of the merchants and planters, while others vigorously opposed the expenditure of further funds on such immigration on grounds that "they don't increase our population, they don't breed, and they don't remain."

A final lament on the whole experiment appeared in the 1886 report of the Bureau of Immigration:

The South Sea Islanders were given a long and fair trial, and great hopes were entertained of their being induced to stay here and become a part of the population of these Islands. So far as labor is concerned, the natives of certain groups and islands were considered highly desirable, while others were quite unfit for hard work and unable to support the change of climate.

Of all that were brought here at great expense, but few remain in the country. And of these islanders it may be said that, as a general rule, they have been a failure.

Those that showed themselves truly valuable on plantations were of tribes so small that they alone could do little towards supplying the labor market of this Kingdom.

NOTES

1. *Report of the President of the Bureau of Immigration to the Legislative Assembly, 1886.*
2. Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom, 1854-1874* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1953), p. 182.