MELANESIAN WOMEN IN QUEENSLAND 1863-1907: Some Methodological Problems Involving the Relationship between Racism and Sexism*

by Kay Saunders

This paper will analyze the sexual division of labor on Queensland sugar plantations within the context of emerging planter-capitalist relations in a colonial society. It will focus upon the motives which induced owners after 1863 to introduce laborers from the precapitalist societies of the westem Pacific into Queensland. The crucial factor of their preference for young single male rather than female servants will be explored. The demographic characteristics of the Pacific island women who engaged for a term of servitude will be discussed, as well as the ramifications of the traditional Melanesian sexual division of labor upon their colonial experience. The type of work performed and, in particular, the changes that accrued from the 1884 legislation which decreed that all first contract islanders had to perform routine tropical agricultural labor will be examined. It will be argued that the necessity of securing an increasing labor force for the sugar plantations during an unprecedented expansionist and speculative phase in Queensland's economy took precedence over the usual patriarchal ideology which confined females of all ethnic origins in the role of the domestic and/or sexual servicing sphere. Clearly, the position of the Pacific island women who were introduced as indentured servants for a three-year term of bondage differed markedly from that of the conquered, colonized, indigenous women who were forced into domestic service, prostitution, and concubinage. Lastly, patterns of sexuality, marriage, reproduction, and the impact of Christian morality and religion will be explored within the context of the diverse pressures which were exerted to maintain or to modify traditional patterns in the alien culture.

Queensland parliamentarians and rural capitalists from the inception of the labor trade in 1863 strongly adhered to the principle of recruiting,

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as far as possible, young single males. As the Attorney-General assured the Governor in April 1869, "our policy should be so defined as to make their [Melanesian] immigration a temporary aid to us and not to encourage its permanent settlement in the country."[1] Women, who would produce children, could constitute a threat to their plans, for they might form an unwanted, permanent, and unassimilable segment in the community. Certainly, Queensland masters were conscious of the limitations of slavery in the southern states of America and, like planters in other areas of the British Empire, they desired a highly mobile, unencumbered and expendable labor force. Indentured service of young unattached males, whether they were Indian, Chinese, or other Asian coolies or Melanesians, possessed these criteria; for masters envisaged the individuals within the system being exploited as a temporary and expendable commodity while the institution of indenture itself remained as a permanent feature. Upon these rationales, non-European women were discouraged from entering the colony as indentured servants. Recruiting agents were made aware that they should not attempt to persuade females to enlist but, at the time, always to ensure that those women who did "sign-on" were married to their male companions. For colonial masters shrewdly realized that they could not hope to maintain a regular supply of male recruits if they offended the Melanesians' customs.

Charles Price and Elizabeth Baker have calculated that some 62,475 Pacific islanders entered Queensland from 1863 to 1904.[2] They note that the colonial records contain notable discrepancies and inconsistencies. These statistics designate recruits on the basis of "island of origin" and not gender, so that the number of women were determined, rather unsatisfactorily, on the basis of the ten-yearly censuses, an exiguous source.

TABLE 1.
Sexual Distribution of Melanesian in Queensland 1871-1901

Year	No. of Males	No. of Females	% Female
1871	2,255	81	3.5
1881	5,975	373	6.2
1891	8,602	826	9.6
1901	8,656	672	7.7

[1]Attorney-General to Governor, 13 April 1869. Qeensland State Archives (hereinafter cited as QSA). GOV/Al.

[2]Charles Price and Elizabeth Baker, "Oigins of Pacific Island Labourers in Queensland 1863-1904: A Research Note," *Journal of Pacific History*, 11 (1976), 106.

On these figures, if women constituted an average of 6.5 percent of the total Melanesian population in Queensland, this paper is therefore concerned with just over 4,000 females. It should be stressed that this figure represents a statistical probability based upon known data and should therefore only be used as a guide. Attempts to enhance these rather dull demographic characteristics by endeavoring to determine their island of origin is once again beset by almost insurmountable difficulties. The resolution was to apply this statistical average to the data on "island of origin." This crude mechanism seemed the only means by which some knowledge could be obtained on the culture of the female recruits. The areas of Melanesia from which individuals were either coerced into or voluntarily engaged for colonial servitude presented a rather neat, albeit unrefined, anthropological dichotomy between the basically patrilineal communities of the eastern Solomon Islands and southern New Hebrides and the matrilineal societies of the northern New Hebrides and Banks Islands. Employing the figures calculated by Price and Baker, it is estimated that 37 percent recruits emanated from the matrilineal societies whilst the remaining 63 percent came from the patrilineal groups.

In a patrilineal system, descent (the organizing principle in these nonliterate, classless societies) is traced from a common ancestor through the male line and in a matrilineal system through the female line. It should never be imagined that the latter system implies that women thereby maintain power, for males are dominant in all aspects of life in both systems. Slight modifications in the pattern of male hegemony are the most that can be detected in the Banks Islands or northern New Hebridean islands such as Espiritu Santo, Aoba, and Pentecost. As E. A. Corlette maintained, these communities allowed females a modicum of choice in marriage partners and were not so obsessed with female and, for that matter, male chastity. Homosexuality was common in both sexes though the strict rules of exogamy which applied to heterosexual union were here rigorously enjoined. Abortion was more widely resorted to, and accepted.[3] Yet as R. H. Codrington stated in his classic and perceptive study on Melanesian society published in 1891, in the matrilineal Banks Islands the rules of kin avoidance and reserve are very strict in the categories of brothers and sisters, mothers and sons, men and their wife's mother. He continues that: "There is certainly nothing more characteristic of Melanesian life than

[3]E. A. Corlette, "Notes on the Natives of the New Hebrides," *Oceania*, 5 (1934-35), 474-86; G. Sebbelov, "The Social Position of Men and Women among the Natives of East Malukula," *American Anthropologist*, 11 (1913); W. H. R. Rivers, *The History of Melanesian Society*, vol. 1 (Oosterhout, Netherlands: Anthropological Publications, 1968).

the presence of societies which celebrate mysteries strictly concealed from the uninitiated and from all females."[4] Subsequent research in the 1930s by Deacon, Humphreys, and Hogbin and by Allen, Lane, Keesing, and Cranstone more recently confirmed and elaborated upon these arguments. Certain broad principles can be detected which were subsequently to affect vitally both male and female Melanesians in Queensland.

In all western Pacific island societies, economic, political, military, and religious power and autonomy resides totally in the male segment, Strict sexual segregation in all areas of life is rigorously maintained. The common ideological premise upon which male hegemony is preserved maintains that females represent dangerous vessels of contamination and pollution which must be guarded against by resort to complex magical and ritual ceremonies. The argument is self-fulfilling, for women are prevented from gaining access into the crucial areas of religion and ritual because their gender precludes initiation which is, in turn, to teach men how to nullify female evil and profanity.

In all patrilineal areas of Melanesia, sexual segregation was extremely crucial. Women who would leave their own patrilineal clan on marriage to reside among their hubands' kin were necessarily isolated in a hostile and unfamiliar community whilst men remained within the security of their own kin groups. If adultery occurred with a married woman, both she and her lover could expect to be either severely maimed or killed for this gross infringement and violation of the husband's and his cognates' property rights. If the lover's patriclan sought to retaliate, warfare could and often did ensue. Recruiting vessels from Queensland might offer such a couple an escape from certain retribution. Bishop J. R. Selwyn in an article in *The Guardian* of 4 May 1892 argued that this was quite a common phenomenon, whilst the British Deputy Resident in the New Hebrides agreed.[5] The people of a village on Walla Island fired on the crew of the recruiting vessel *Boro Belle* in August 1889 to avenge the enlistment of an eloping married woman which had occurred several months previously on the *Meg Merrilies*.[6] Three Aoban women, Tamwah, Arroohono, and Wyule, enlisted on the *Helena* on 20 April 1895 supposedly as married

[4]R. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians. Studies in the Anthropology and Folk Lore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), p. 69; refer also to M. R. Allen, *Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1967).

[5]British Deputy Resident in the New Hebrides. Report of 1902. Public Records Office, London. CO 880/11.

[6]Captain H. C. Kane to Rear Admiral Fairfax, 15 August 1889. QSA Colonial Secretary's Correspondence in letter 3977 of 1889.

women which Queensland law demanded. The next day the tribesmen fired on the vessel, a sign that these women were, in fact, eloping. The Queensland officer in charge of the Pacific Island Labour Branch, John Brenan, rather contemptuously and inaccurately asserted: "The Aoba people are full of tricks and dangerous to deal with, their women are nearly, if not all, prostitutes, and with or without the chief's consent are probably brought when they do come to Queensland for the purposes of prostitution alone."[7] In 1895, Lieutenant Gordon Bremer of the British Navy investigated the case of Pinaa who had run off to Queensland with Roferi who masqueraded as her husband.[8] Occasionally, a very dissatisfied secondary wife would enlist for colonial servitude to escape her unrelenting drudgery and the intolerable humiliations of her status. Sepan-Millig from Ambrym, one of the many spouses of a chief, after quarreling with the other wives, absconded to Bundaberg in 1880. Her case was brought to the attention of the British Secretary of State for the Colonies who reminded Queensland's Governor Kennedy:

> It appears to be very desirable that ship masters and government agents, before receiving a native woman on board, should ascertain as fully as may be practicable, not only whether she is a willing passenger, but also whether she is attempting to escape from the authority of a father, husband or other person having, according to native usage, control over her.[9]

Certainly, the assertion that many of the women coming to Queensland were either girls eloping with lovers of their own choice or were already married women with lovers cannot be statistically verified, for the data is far too scanty. Yet, much of the information concerning the enlistment of females revolved around this question. It is likely that most of the Melanesian women who came to Queensland were in these categories, for the strict chaperonage, avoidance rules and the control exercised by men over women would suggest that men would not voluntarily allow women to leave, thereby losing women's reproductive and labor capacities.

Until 1884, those women who were brought to Queensland were predominantly employed as domestic servants and childrens' nannies. Like the men, they would be required to work for their master for a legally

[7]J. Brenan to Under Home Secretary, 18 July 1895. QSA Colonial Secretary's Correspondence in letter 8483 of 1895.

[8]Lieutenant Gordon Bremer to Commander E. G. Rason, 15 November 1895. QSA Colonial Secretary's Correspondence in letter 3116 of 1896.

[9]Secretary of State for the Colonies to Government Kennedy, 22 February 1882. QSA Colonial Secretary's Correspondence in letter 2180 of 1882.

bonded term of three years initially for £6 per annum. A small number of islander males also worked as domestics in the capacity of grooms, coachmen, and liveried servants to the more wealthy or pretentious sugar planters.[10] Most men and boys were employed however as either shepherds on pastoral stations (until 1877) or as menial agricultural laborers on the expanding sugar estates. The initial experience of servitude would have been extremely traumatic for all Melanesians coming from small scale societies so dissimilar in structure and ideology from that of colonial Queensland. They were harshly thrown into a bewildering and frighteningly strange environment where the whip and the irons were frequently used on them; where their labor was extracted from them and where their own sacred values had little meaning. Sissy Tarenga, an elderly woman of New Hebridean ancestry, recalled in 1977 the traumas her grandmother had endured as a domestic servant. Her grandmother had her ears pierced so that pig's teeth or other ornaments could be worn, though these were discarded in Queensland. On one occasion, she had been given orders by her mistress but failed totally to comprehend the language and thus the requirements. Tarenga stated that: ". . . the mistress hooked her finger into the lobe and pulled her over to what she wanted her to do. She couldn't understand what she was talking about . . . and it was still like that when we were young [at the turn of the century].[11]

In 1884, the Liberal government under Samuel Griffith introduced a bill regulating the employment of Melanesians in Queensland. Pacific islanders, except those with special exemption tickets, henceforth were to be confined within the single occupational category of unskilled tropical agricultural laborer. Certainly the liberals imbued with the ideology that all non-Europeans in the colony had to be economically and socially contained as a prelude to their eventual exclusion, also wanted to prevent islanders competing with white workers in the sugar mills. The implications of this legislation were extremely far reaching. First, it meant that the liberals were ensuring the maintenance of a caste-based society which denied any socio-economic mobility to non-Europeans. In this regard, they were inadvertently reinforcing their political opponents, the conservative sugar planters' economic base.

The early 1880s in the Queensland sugar industry witnessed an unprecedented expansion in capital formation, the number and size of plan-

[10] *Queensland Parliamentary Debates (QPD)*, XLVII, 1885, 1067; XXIII, 1877, 60; *The Queenslander*, 8 February 1880.

[11] Mrs. S. Tarenga interviewed by Matt Peacock on Australian Broadcasting Commission program "Broadband" session entitled "The Forgotten People," December 1978.

tations and more sophisticated manufactories. Rural capitalists, having located sufficient capital, land, equipment, and skilled technical staff, needed to secure an ever-expanding unskilled work force to perform the menial routine labor involved in cane production on the gang system.[12] To this end, various experiments with a wide variety of ethnic groups were conducted. But for the Melanesian communities in the colony, it had two crucial implications. First, it meant that islanders could not find employment in more financially rewarding occupations outside the cane fields. Secondly, it meant that females would be taken out of the domestic sphere and would henceforth be required to perform the same labor as their menfolk. Essentially, it can be seen that capitalism's need to provide an ever expanding number of service workers for the cane fields took precedence over patriarchal ideology which defined the sexual division of labor. This apparently unaccustomed reversal was comprehensible and acceptable only insofar as it was subsumed within wider patterns of race relations. Though colonized aboriginal women were usually engaged in domestic duties, and at the same time were also forced to provide sexual services, a common experience of all domestic servants, they might be expected to assist in strenuous pastoral work. This invariably occurred in remote areas where there was a chronic labor shortage.[13] Therefore, under special conditions, certain labor capacities, usually designated as "male occupations," could be performed by non-European women. Such females would be, therefore, defined by their racial rather than sexual identity when it suited their masters. They were regarded as racially inferior bondswomen who could be forced to engage in a variety of occupations, whereas the sexual division of labor for Anglo-Australian females was clearly defined and adhered to. Moreover, in conjunction with this pattern, it was usual for routine plantation agriculture to be undertaken only by imported nonwhite indentured servants. Until the reorganization of the sugar industry in the early 1890s on the basis of the small farm/central cooperative mill system, plantation field labor was disparagingly dubbed "niggers' work" and white men never engaged in it. It was, however, acceptable to engage in unskilled labor in the sugar mills. So, upon the convergence of quite distinct political, ideological, and eco-

[12]Kay Saunders, *Workers in Bondage. Masters and Servants in Queensland 1874-1916* (forthcoming, 1981), chapter 3.

[13]Raymond Evans, "Harlots and Helots," in R. L. Evans, K. Saunders, and K. Cronin, *Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination. Race Relations in Colonial Queensland* (Sydney: ANZ Book Co., 1975); Ann McGrath, "Aboriginal Women as Workers in the Northern Territory, 1911-1939," *Hecate: A Women's Interdisciplinary Journal*, 4 (1978).

nomic factors, it was therefore acceptable for islander women to be taken from the domestic sphere and relegated to plantation gang labor systems.

Some islander women had previously been made to perform field labor by certain masters before these regulations; Alfred Brown, a wealthy planter at Maryborough and member of the Legislative Council, testified to the 1876 Select Committee on Conditions of "Polynesian" Labourers (as these Pacific islanders were frequently and erroneously dubbed) that he had some gangs composed of four or five women doing "light work."[14] William Truss, a ganger (an overseer's assistant) on an extensive plantation likewise informed a Royal Commission in 1889 that he was in charge of sixteen islander women, seven of whom had small children who were also required to perform moderate labor services. He reported that as he never gave them any "heavy work nor are they hurried in any way," they "show no unwillingness to work."[15]

Such assertions are quite contrary to the overwhelming evidence of the long hours of harsh toil which broke the back and sometimes the spirit and which was often coerced from an unwilling labor force[16] and, therefore, cannot be entertained as representative. Sissy Tarenga affirms that:

> My grandmother was in the house some of the time and then she had to go out into the fields to clear the scrub, the trees, burn-off, dig out the stumps because they [the masters] wanted cane . . . they worked beside the men, worked as hard as the men . . . from daylight till night. . . . It was very hard for the women . . . they didn't understand. They had to be forced.[17]

Normally women were kept in their own gangs and did not work alongside men, though they did perform the same excruciating and unremitting toil.

The change in their usual labor patterns wrought by the exigences of the plantation regime afflicted both male and female Melanesians. Men in traditional society normally were engaged in cooperation with their kin in work considered either prestigious or dangerous--clearing scrub in preparation for garden plots, hunting, hut and canoe-building, and deep sea fishing. Unmarried girls would assist their mothers in tending the smaller

[14]"Select Committee to Enquire into the Condition of Polynesian Labourers," *Queensland Votes and Proceedings (QVP)* 1877, 111, 133.

[15]Royal Commission to Enquire into the Depression in the Sugar Industry, *QVP,* 1889, iv, 169.

[16]Kay Saunders, " 'The Black Scourge.' Racial Attitudes and Responses to Melanesians in Queensland 1863-1907," in Evans, Saunders, and Cronin.

[17]"The Forgotten People" interview.

children and acquiring basic agricultural and animal husbandry skills. Married women would plant and weed their husbands' gardens, hand-rear their pigs, and collect shell fish and vegetable products in the forests. It can be seen that not only were various subsistence activities subject to a sexual division of labor, but males and females worked within quite different patterns. Men were accustomed to cooperative labor with a wide kin network, whilst women performed their tasks often aided only by their young daughters, though married women might forage in small groups. Women's labor in traditional society was therefore much more private and isolated than men's. The colonial industrial patterns of working in supervised gangs for wages all year round was entirely foreign to the experience of both sexes. Melanesian women who were employed as domestic servants were placed in an alien, segregated environment. Those who were field laborers would be forced to work in apparent harmony with total strangers, which was a traumatic and unfamiliar experience. There were never sufficient women from any one tribe coming together to Queensland as a group who could form the nucleus of a coherent efficient work gang. An islander woman entered colonial servitude invariably because of her relationship with a lover. On the other hand, Melanesian males often came in kin-based groups from the same tribe. A common pattern was for five or six pubescent unmarried youths from one tribe to "join up" together. In Queensland, most planters maintained these kin-based groups as the nucleus for a gang. This was to ensure efficiency and harmony. In this respect, men were allowed far more stability, cohesion, and continuity than women even though both sexes were entirely unfamiliar with the capitalist mode of production. These patterns of mutual support and dependence for male islanders were reinforced by the tendency on large estates to contain a number of groups from very divergent areas of Melanesia. This allowed intertribal rivalry 'to flourish; this, in turn, depended on very strong patterns of intratribal solidarity. Planters calculatedly employed this "divide and rule" syndrome which allowed no possibility for a concerted and organized rebellion.

Masters normally housed unattached males in barracks which could accommodate up to sixty men. These were very unpopular with and unacceptable to Melanesians, as it forced men to sleep near strangers who might perform sorcery against them. Frequently men from one tribe would build their own communal dwelling. This accords with traditional Melanesian practices where men and boys over seven years would spend

[18]C. Brown, *Melanesians and Polynesians* (London: Macmillan, 1910); B. A. L. Cranston, *Melanesia. A Short Ethnography* (London: British Museum, 1961).

much of their time in the men's house to which females were forbidden entry. In Malaita, from which over 9,000 people alone enlisted for Queensland, a married man who had intercourse with his wife would leave her homestead before dawn to return to the men's house. In Malekula, villages contained two distinct spatial areas, one for men and one for females and small children.[19] In Queensland, islanders were forced to come to terms with a preexisting mode of spatial arrangements into which they were forced to accustom themselves as best they could. Certainly, it was possible, if sometimes difficult, to maintain some semblance of a men's house. Women would be totally excluded from their dwellings. Heterosexual couples were domiciled in small separate cottages situated away from the barracks and would be thrown together far more than would occur in their traditional society. Masters, in this regard, were applying their own ideas of the necessity of privacy and isolation for the nuclear family which were culturally unfamiliar to Pacific islanders.

This would engender a whole series of problems within the Melanesian community on each estate; for it was not usual for men and women to spend the night together and this cultural imposition would violate traditional avoidance and seclusion patterns. In traditional society, menstruating women would live alone in a special hut, for it was considered that women were then particularly defiled and capable of pollution. Any food and water touched by her was contaminated, and any man who had intercourse with his wife at this time might expect to die. In the colonial environment, several logical possibilities which could maintain these crucial seclusion restrictions suggest themselves. Historical documentation is very sparse on the question of this particular aspect of the islanders' material life in Queensland. Several do however seem feasible.

First, during menstruation the women would necessarily have to stay in their cottages, but whether the men retreated to a barracks containing kin or at best nonhostile men or stayed and risked contamination is not mentioned in the documentation. Ian Hogbin's research, conducted in the early 1930s in Malaita in areas where many men had formerly enlisted for Queensland and had returned fervent evangelicals, discovered that among Christians, men would still reside in the same house but in a separate room during a woman's menstrual cycle.[20] Cottages in colonial Queens-

[19]H. I. Hogbin, *Experiment in Civilization. The Effects of Civilization on a Native Community of the Solomon Islands* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1939), p. 51; A. B. Deacon (C. Wedgwood, ed.), *Malekula--A Vanishing People in the New Hebrides* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1934), p. 23.

[20]Hogbin, p. 201.

land, at least for first contract indentured servants, were very primitive in construction and would have afforded little scope for seclusion. Noel and Christie Fatnowna, whose family were Malaitans, were brought up in Mackay in the 1920s and 1930s and were secluded from women after the age of six. They ate and resided in a grass hut but with other kinsmen; when they entered their mother's house they were only allowed into the kitchen or the parlor and never into the bedroom of either their mother or sisters. They were reared in an environment which reproduced an indigenous Malaitan culture as far as was possible under the trying circumstances; they learnt the correct rule of marriage, avoidance, authority, obedience, magic, and ritual.[21]

In traditional society, the parturient woman could be isolated in a hut also, several weeks antenatally and for up to three months postnatally. Often no midwife attended the birth. During this time both mother and child were ritually unclean and underwent purification ceremonies on release from this enforced seclusion.[22]

Little documentary evidence exists on the subject of reproduction and childbirth practices of Melanesian women in Queensland. One extremely well documented case which only was investigated on the insistence of an unusually humane and diligent Justice of the Peace will be analyzed. J. A. Gibson, J. P. at Yatala, reported "a most horrible story" to the Colonial Secretary in November 1884. Tomvater, uncontrollably in tears, had stated:

> Massa had compelled me to go with the others and work in the field and leave picaninny at home and when me and my husband came home from work, we saw a big black dog run out of the humpy and on looking at our baby, I found the dog had been eating it.

Gibson stated the unfortunate new-born baby lived for several days after "one of the arms and a portion of the breast . . . had been eaten by the dog," though the government medical officer who was sent to perform an autopsy alleged that the infant lived only a few hours and "died from exposure alone. It was a very warm afternoon." At the inquest, Tomvater stated that she had been very ill during the unassisted birth. The overseer, James Fulton, on the estate, *Yellow Wood,* confirmed that he had made

[21]Noel and Christie Fatnowna, Mackay. ABC "Broadband" program "The Forgotten People," No. 2, January 1978. My own brief interview with Noel Fatnowna in January 1977 confirms this.

[22]S. Lindenbaum, "Sorcerers, Ghosts and Polluting Women. An Analysis of Religious Belief and Population Control," *Ethnology,* 11 (1972), 972.

her work right through her pregnancy as "I didn't see any harm in letting her work till the last minute. I've seen white women do this." Both Tomvater and her husband Paper testified that she was forced back to heavy manual labor within forty-eight hours of parturition. No facilities or care were provided for their son who was left neglected and exposed to the fatal attack by a savage dog. Gibson wrote a series of heartfelt, emotional letters to the Colonial Secretary, stunned that "such inhumanity was being enacted in my neighbourhood." He was now the subject of taunts and ostracism as "certain persons do not relish my interference in dragging those things to the light of day." He concluded perceptively: "These atrocities, as I cannot help calling them met with concealment, and by analogy, silent approbation on the part of the white community. Can it be possible that the finer feelings and instincts of their nature are being deadened?" Gibson then made exhaustive enquiries throughout the district and uncovered other cases of inhumanity to black women and their children. On Winfield's plantation, for instance, an unnamed woman with a seven-month-old baby was forced to leave it "in a hut all day by itself whilst she was at work in the fields. I often heard the child crying piteously when I went past." Furthermore, "everyone else passing knew what was going on." Originally the mother worked as a domestic in the planter's house but as the infant cried continuously, she was relegated to the fields, despite her pleas "to stay in the house for the child's sake." The woman confided to Gibson that she wrapped her baby in an old dress and often kept it near her as she worked but even this was "unbearable."[23] The visiting Irish politician Michael Davitt confirmed this latter type of practice.[24] Ethnographic research demonstrates the extent to which mothers in Melanesia tended their children, so that this particular modification caused by colonial servitude would be unendurable.

Extensive oral research conducted by Patricia Mercer and Clive Moore has revealed the hitherto unsuspected tenacity of certain Melanesian practices, especially in the area of magic.[25] The most widely consulted and accepted speciality occurred in the area of love-magic; many young men would consult tribal elders and experienced sorcerers to assist them to enhance their sexual attractiveness to women. Certainly, the vast discrepancy in the sex ratio in Queensland encouraged these practices.

[23]Correspondence of J. A. Gibson to Colonial Secretary (including Record of Inquest into death of Melanesian baby), November-December 1884, QSA CSO in letter 9000 of 1884.

[24]M. Davitt, *Life and Progress in Australia* (London: Metheun & Co., 1898), p. 272.

[25]P. M. Mercer and C. R. Moore, "Melanesians in North Queensland. The Retention of Indigenous Religious and Magical Practices," *Journal of Pacific History,* 11 (1976), 78-79.

TABLE 2
Marriage Patterns among Melanesians* in Queensland, 1906

Locality	Total adult male population	Total adult female population	Married own Islanders	Married other Islanders
Ayr	333	14	4	10
Beenleigh	77	2	--	--
Bowen	34	4	3	--
Bundaberg	552	13	12	1
Cairns	651	--	--	--
Childers	176	7	5	2
Innisfail	375	7	6	1
Gin Gin	24	1	1	--
Ingham	500	14	5	--
Mackay	918	44	27	7
Nambour	119	21	24	7
Pt Douglas	400	6	--	6
Proserpine	37	7	--	7
Rockhampton	117	22	12	8
Thursday Is	232	32	--	32
	4,545	175	89	81

*Source: Royal Commission to Enquire into Deportation of Melanesians, 1906. These figures refer only to those to be deported.

This disparity between the sexes had major repercussions. First, the whole structure of marriage collapsed with a considerable proportion of Melanesians marrying totally unacceptable partners in terms of their own culture. This particular cultural change was crucial when the newly formed Australian Commonwealth proposed deporting them, as a strategic area which had to be tackled if a "White Australia" was to be effected. As a Malaitan, Keeseru testified to the 1906 Royal Commission, he would be killed on his return home as his wife was from another island. This was recognized by the Commissioners who confirmed this in its official report and added that many had fled to Queensland initially "to escape a vendetta or punishment for transgression."[26]

[26]"Royal Commission to Inquire into the Deportation of Pacific Islanders," *QVP* 1906, IV, 786.

It would seem that Melanesians who contracted liaisons and families in Queensland, which would be incorrect at home, were also not considered permanent or binding. If, for instance, a woman who was living with an "incorrect" partner in Queensland was able to contract a marriage in the right kin categories, a bride price was paid to the first man. This seems to be a skillful expedient. Henry Caufield, an experienced inspector of Pacific islanders, related one case he had investigated where

> . . . a man whose real wife came to Queensland unexpectedly, and, when this gentleman found it out, he very quickly severed his Queensland connection in order to take up with his original wife, because she was insisting on the fulfilment of his part of the compact. That showed me that he looked on the first with very different eyes and that he considered the Queensland marriage as the less binding of the two.[27]

Secondly, in many other respects the formidable restraints and the certainty of revengeful retribution for any sexual transgressions were substantially weakened or even absent in Australia. Despite the prevalent stereotype of Pacific island males as lascivious rapists who brutally defiled white women, this was never an accurate appraisal. They seemingly realized all too well the nature of the colonial power structure and only in very rare instances violated their masters' property rights in the form of his dependant females. These restraints did not apply so readily to white prostitutes who solicited in the bushes near the plantations.[28] Melanesian males would also frequent the brothels known as Yokohamas where Japanese prostitutes worked.[30] Historical documentation is extremely sparse on the question of sexual relations between white men and islander women in Queensland. It would seem likely that islander women might be forced to provide sexual services to their masters, like the women in the ante-bellum South or aboriginal women in Australia. One fully documented case involved a woman, Rambroke, who was seduced by her master, Harry Wessel of *Belle Vue* Plantation, Bundaberg. Rambroke's male kin assaulted Wessel in retribution for disgracing them and their kinswoman.[31] But it is impossible to determine how common or typical this particular case really is. Certainly masters saw islander and aboriginal women as

[27]"Royal Commission," pp. 457 and 499.

[28]"Royal Commission," p. 499.

[29]*Maryborough Chronicle,* 3 January 1855.

[30]Raymond Evans," 'Soiled Doves.' Prostitution and Society in Colonial Queensland," *Hecate: A Women's Interdisciplinary Journal,* 1 (1975), 6-24.

[31]QSA COL/A 815 in letter 5175 of 1896.

transmittable commodities. A valued male Melanesian servant might be summarily given a Melanesian woman by his master. Jarronah, a San Cristobal islander who arrived in Queensland in 1875, was engaged as an indentured worker on Gairlock plantation on the Lower Herbert River. Her masters, the Mackenzie brothers, made an arrangement with a neighbor whereby she was separated from her husband and "given" to the latter's cook. Jarronah objected strongly and absconded, only to be recaptured and "locked up at night to prevent her escaping."[32]

Kyassey, employed at *Seaforth* plantation at Ayr, was charged with "unlawful shooting" of a black woman who "wouldn't go down to the lagoon with him" for sexual intercourse. He was given three months hard labor.[33] The Police Magistrate at Cardwell brought the case of a Tanna woman employed at *Hamleigh* plantation who had been raped to the attention of the Colonial Secretary in 1882. No enquiry was forthcoming as a competent interpreter could not be located![34] Charles Forster, an observant government protector, reported in 1885 that "much trouble has occurred at times on the plantations in consequence of disputes about the women."[35] In November of the previous year, the police were required to maintain constant patrols in the Maryborough districts to prevent skirmishes between Solomon and Aoban men over possession of women.[36] Cases of extremely violent rape were perpetrated upon black women by other Melanesians from antagonistic subcultures. Forster detailed an incident involving a Bugga Bugga islander who was viciously raped by seven Solomon Islanders (who themselves were from different areas, Guadalcanal and Vella Lavella). The woman's husband was forced to watch the rape. A white farmer "heard the woman screaming but did not go near to interfere, having my own house and family to look after." Forster's superior, Alexander MacDonald, reported in a confidential memo to the Immigration Agent in Brisbane that "I don't attach much importance to what Mr Forster says." The case came before the Magistrate's Court but was again dismissed for "want of an interpreter."[37] Forster was still

[32]QSA CSO in letter 643 of 1876.

[33]Regina vs Kyassey. Townsville Supreme Court, 14 November 1894. QSA. Supreme Court Records, Northern Registry: Criminal Cases, A 18314.

[34]G. Giffen, P. M. Cardwell to Colonial Secretary, 15 May 1882. QSA CSO in letter 1397 of 1882.

[35]C. Forster to Sub-Inspector of Police, Mackay, 16 November 1885. QSA CSO in letter 9527 of 1885.

[36]P. M. Mercer, "Pacific Islanders in Colonial Queensland 1863-1906," *Lectures on North Queensland History*, (1974), p. 105.

[37]Forster Correspondence.

anxious as another woman on Costello's farm had been warned she would also be raped and lived in fear and trepidation. A case at Port Douglas in 1889 showed that eight or nine armed Pacific islanders abducted some black women, obviously with the intention of rape.[38] Such cases were not investigated, though any Melanesian convicted of sexual assault on a white woman was executed.

Sid Aoba in 1977 related a significant incident which illustrates these changes in morality engendered by colonial service. His father enlisted with a party of nineteen other young men. On their return to Aoba, New Hebrides, one of these former recruits waylaid a girl at night and raped her. She informed her father and the tribal chief who gathered together all the warriors to administer retribution. " 'Tie up the culprit,' the chief said" related Sid Aoba's father, and

> . . . burn this man alive. Just to show you other fellows and anyone else who goes to Queensland that you don't bring the Queensland laws here. . . . We're not born of animals; we're born of human beings. Therefore, no man waylays a girl here . . . and no woman runs around with a child by a bloke that's not enough to father it [sic]. Let this be a lesson to you all.[39]

Some Melanesian men in Queensland realized that they could rape other islander or aboriginal women with virtual impunity, for in general, the law was only applied when a white woman had been assaulted. Without kinsmen to avenge her, a woman was isolated and vulnerable. The rape of black women was not regarded as serious or worthy of investigation. In the Kyassey case, the Judge, in ordering a three month gaol term on a charge of "unlawful shooting," was handing down the same punishment that the *Masters and Servants Act* (1861) provided for a disobedient absconding servant!

Other powerful forces were however instrumental in transforming these modes of behavior among Melanesians. By the late 1880s, many of the Pacific islanders who enlisted for service had previously served a term in either Queensland or Fiji and, on coming to Australia, decided to remain permanently. Having been alienated from their traditional culture, these people were particularly susceptible to cultural adaptation and in particular to Christianity. Certainly too there is considerable evidence in the early phases of indenture that some indentured Melanesians had already been converted at home by the Presbyterian and Anglican mis-

[38]E. Eglington, Port Douglas, to Under Colonial Secretary, 3 February 1889, QSA CSO in letter 3024 of 1889.

[39]Sid Aoba interviewed by Matt Peacock, ABC "The Forgotten People," January 1978.

sionaries active in the New Hebrides. The Anglican priest, Frederick Richmond, observed in the 1870s that Pacific islanders ". . . would meet daily for prayers and the singing of hymns until the station hands, to whom devotedness was bad form, jibed them out of it. The zealous clergyman in Maryborough kept them well together, instructing them and baptising those that were still heathen."[40] Masters were extremely reluctant in this period to engage literate and English-speaking islanders for they could complain of ill-treatment and abuses.[41] But the mid 1880s witnessed a reversal of policy on the part of planters who, fearing that their supply of cheap servile non-European labor was rapidly diminishing, encouraged Melanesians to remain in the colony. Since the whip and the lash would hardly constitute very inviting incentives to stay, Christianity was rather crudely exploited to provide an earnest, obedient work force. As Theo Pugh, the Bundaberg Police Magistrate, observed in 1889: "The Planters universally admit the advantages that have arisen from religious training and the police are in accord with the planters on this point."[42]

The activities of the Queensland Kanaka Mission (QKM) established by Florence Young, a zealous member of the Plymouth Brethren and one of the proprietors of *Fairymead* plantation at Bundaberg, were encouraged. Within three years of its commencement, the organization in 1889 could boast of over 1,500 Pacific islanders under its tutelage.[43] By 1895, there were six schools and three lay missionaries in Bundaberg instructing Melanesians, and at Mackay some fifteen night and Sunday schools catered for over 1,000 people.[44] The QKM stressed an emotional and fundamental approach, relying upon a literal interpretation of the scriptures, evangelical fervor, open-air singing, testimony and mass baptism. The morality continually reinforced the virtues of thrift, self-discipline, sobriety, and continuous application to hard work and duty. Above all, the Christian nuclear family was vaunted as the ideal to which the earnest convert should aspire. Christianity was a crucial agent of social change within the

[40]F. Richmond, *Queensland in the 'Seventies.' Reminiscences of the early days of a young clergyman* (Singapore: C. A. Ribeiro, 1928), p. 49.

[41]H. Finch-Hatton, *Advance Australia! An Account of Eight Years' Work, Wandering and Advancement in Queensland, NSW and Victoria* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1886), p. 129.

[42]T. Pugh to Under Colonial Secretary, 14 December 1889. QSA CSO in letter 11120 of 1889.

[43]Pugh to Under Colonial Secretary.

[44]Premier Hugh Nelson to Governor Henry Norman, 1 August 1895, QSA CSO in letter 8768 of 1896.

Melanesian communities in Queensland, for it provided the most tangible basis upon which former indentured servants could transform themselves into hardworking if ultimately unwelcome members of the host society. The heterosexual couple, by the uniqueness of the new situation, was forced into a more ready acceptance of the Anglo-Australian model of residence and family structure. The Right Rev. C. H. Frodsham observed that "most married Kanakas are Christian."[45] *The Queenslander* disparagingly commented on 11 February 1893,

> The time expired boy, as a rule, has adopted the household customs of civilization. He has a bedroom and a living room; . . . his kitchen boasts of table and chairs and pots and plates; his wife becomes a fairly good cook and . . . suppers prepared in kanaka huts an epicure would not disdain.

Christian women in Queensland could attend literacy, Bible-reading classes and church services with the husbands. In the new culture, the role of men and women as part of a Christian congregation were far more equal than anything in their traditional society. This, though, is not to assert that Melanesian customs and ideology were totally discarded, merely that they were adapted and became increasingly cultural vestiges.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the experience of Melanesian women delineates a crucial, if hitherto neglected aspect of the relationship which exists between racism and sexism in emerging colonial societies. Islander women were not ever really acceptable indentured servants for colonial masters, for their reproductive capacities could endanger their whole structure of an easily replacable, fluid servile labor force. Those women arriving before 1884 were confined to the domestic sphere decreed by patriarchal ideology. But a crisis in capitalism, in this case the need to secure an expanding labor force for the sugar fields, could lead masters to nullify their sexist ideology and stress instead those which were racially determined. If field labor was "nigger's work," then island women could be allocated with impunity.

As individuals, Melanesian women found themselves in an environment that was extremely hostile and savage; where they were "unprotected" by traditional mores which secured their integrity. In Queensland, they could be raped by strange islanders and had no kin to avenge their dishonor; they might simply be accorded the status of a commodity and unilaterally transferred by their masters from one islander to another; they might be forced to return to hard physical labor within days of giving birth. Ironically, it was the evangelical Churches, those pillars which

[45]1906 RC, p. 852.

supported racist and sexist ideologies in colonial Queensland, which ultimately offered the means by which more acceptable and negotiable modes of behavior could be accomplished. For by giving sanctity and support to the formerly alien structure of Christian marriage and the nuclear family, the lives of Melanesian women were transformed.

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