

# The ongoing legacy of Pacific mobility in regional Australia

by Kaya Barry and Robert Mason

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Start of lemon picking shift, Gin Gin. Photo by Melino (Tonga), 2024

*Photo Credit: Kaya Barry/Seasonal*

Marking the 30th anniversary of the National Recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders, two exhibitions in Queensland celebrate the enduring presence of Pacific communities in Australia and the vital contributions of migrants to Australian society, while emphasising ongoing connections to the Pacific region.

The Australian government first recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as a distinct cultural group in 1994, responding to decades of advocacy and community activism. Since the 1860s, the community has been an integral part of Queensland, enduring the lasting impacts of indentured and forced labour in the sugar cane industry. This official act of recognition acknowledged the persistent social and economic disadvantages faced by Australian South Sea Islander people over decades. However, progress to reverse this **remains limited**, and the community continues to pursue cultural and social justice 30 years on.

Pacific communities have played a vital role in the development and expansion of Queensland's horticulture industry for hundreds of years. Without minimising the terrible **injustices of blackbirding**, it is important to recognise that diverse Pacific communities have contributed to industries such as sugar throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Beyond their initial labour in the sugar cane fields, more recent arrivals from the Pacific now **play a crucial role** in sectors such as horticulture, meat works, and care industries through the **Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM)** visa program. Pacific communities have often been portrayed in museums and galleries through a limited, historicised lens, typically represented by archival materials or black and white photographs of unnamed people from the distant past.



South Sea Islander cane workers on a plantation in North Queensland, ca. 1868. Photo credit: State Library of Queensland.

Even contemporary art that reaches international audiences, such as Fiona Foley's compelling *Sugar Cubes* in Mackay, or Dylan Mooney's recent exhibition *A Story of My People*, draws on historical stereotypes to reflect on the enduring presence of Pacific communities. Now, two current exhibitions showcase the stories of contemporary Pacific communities, giving voice and agency to the experiences of labour and migration that connect Australia with the Pacific region.

The *Say Our Name* exhibition at Queensland Museum honours the fight for recognition by the Australian South Sea Islander community, celebrating their cultural resilience despite historical and contemporary marginalisation. Hundreds of community members, many of whom travelled long distances to attend, gathered to celebrate the launch. Curated by Imelda Miller, Queensland Museum's Curator of Torres Strait Islander and Pacific Indigenous Studies, the exhibition demonstrates the depth of the partnership between the community and the museum. A powerful and moving testament to decades of advocacy, *Say Our Name* acknowledges the ongoing pain of historical injustices while highlighting the community's resilience and continued pursuit of a fairer future. The touring exhibition *Seasonal*, curated by Kaya Barry, showcases the experiences of migrant farm workers through their own eyes. As part of a research project, people on the PALM visa captured photographs taken on disposable film cameras, revealing the highs and lows of working in horticulture across regional Queensland.



Fast-paced work environments. Photo taken by Dani (Timor-Leste), Avondale, 2023. Photo credit: Kaya Barry/*Seasonal*.

*Seasonal* captures the grit, weary moments, and joy in exploring local landscapes on well-deserved days off — perspectives of the PALM workers that are rarely heard, often overshadowed by the very real concerns about exploitation or the **wellbeing of workers**. Together, these exhibitions present alternative narratives and contemporary stories of mobility between the Pacific and Australia, while connecting with historical narratives of Pacific migration.



New-found friends. Photo taken by Ilaisaane (Tonga), Bundaberg 2023. Photo credit: Kaya Barry/*Seasonal*.

Public educational spaces such as galleries and museums serve as vital and vibrant sites in which to story Pacific migration, affirming the culture and ideas that these communities continue to bring. The opportunity to represent contemporary Pacific heritage in the state capital resonated powerfully with the community, **many of whom celebrated** the strong connections that bind people with their heritage in the Pacific Islands.

Rather than a migration museum, dedicated to foregrounding the stories of the past, *Say Our Name* offers a space to reflect on the relevance of the past to the present; weaving stories of historical injustice together with newer stories of Pacific connectivity, mobility, and cultural practice. Exhibitions such as these are vehicles for providing contemporary recognition and justice for often overlooked migrant communities.



Queue for the morning shuttle bus. Photo taken by Jude (Solomon Islands), Lakeland 2022. Photo credit: Kaya Barry/*Seasonal*.

Likewise, the *Seasonal* exhibition created space for Pacific Islanders to affirm their contribution and presence in contemporary farming communities across Queensland. Exhibitions such as these **focus attention on the dynamic contributions of Islanders** to Australian industry; creating spaces for encounters, for listening and recognition, for practices of reconciliation, and to imagine future connections across Australia and the Pacific.



Enjoying a day off. Photo taken by Jeffrey (Solomon Islands), Gin Gin 2024. Photo credit: Kaya Barry/*Seasonal*.

The **ebbs and flows** of labour migration programs are a crucial part of how Australians tell stories about life in the regions. The enduring presence of Pacific communities should not be reduced to a historical legacy of indentured labour. Instead, representations must include contemporary experiences, inviting the Australian public to reflect on our connections with our Pacific neighbours and the temporary migrants in our local communities.

*The **Say Our Name** exhibition runs at Queensland Museum until July 2025. The **Seasonal** exhibition will tour regional galleries during 2024 and 2025.*

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## **Author/s:**

### **Kaya Barry**

Kaya Barry is a senior lecturer and cultural geographer at Griffith University working on a three-year Australian Research Council fellowship on the experiences of migrants living and working in Queensland horticultural communities.

**Robert Mason**

Robert Mason is an associate professor in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science at Griffith University.

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