

4

Pacific stories and human rights

Contact history and rights

The Pacific Ocean was one of the last places on earth to be explored by European seafarers. Their voyages and contact with the indigenous peoples of the Pacific brought about an exchange of ideas but also many changes to the Pacific peoples' ways of life. Where the first explorers went, other people followed – missionaries, traders and whalers. Pacific colonies provided a range of resources (human, agricultural and mineral) to the European powers, as well as an advantage to those countries that were able to establish a military presence in the Pacific. In World War Two, many islands became military bases, and later the extensive ocean was seen as a suitable testing ground for nuclear weapons. After the war came a period of decolonisation and independence for many Pacific island countries, but many still have ties to old colonial powers as they provide important trade and aid to the Pacific region.

Stories from each new phase of contact show us that Pacific islanders managed to maintain their own traditional values, beliefs and customary codes of behaviour at the same time as accommodating new, often imposed, foreign rules and regulations. But on some islands where intrusive colonial exploitation or development occurred, there was a decline or loss of culture and human rights as well as economic rights to resources.

Key words and concepts

convert, decolonisation, indigenous, missionaries

Early European explorers

The Pacific islands were among the last places on earth to be charted by European explorers. The explorers were captivated by the beauty of the islands and the generosity of the people. By the beginning of the 20th century, every island in the Pacific had been brought under the 'protection' or colonial rule of Britain, France, Spain, Germany and America. Most islands had gained their independence by 1980.

timeline

- 1519** Portuguese explorer **Ferdinand Magellan** (1480–1521) was the first known European to sail into the Pacific Ocean. He sailed through the Straits of Magellan at the tip of South America and across to the Philippines, making contact with the people of Guam and the Marianas Islands.
- 1526** Spanish explorer **Alonso de Salazar** was the first European to see the Marshall Islands.
- 1577** English explorer **Francis Drake** (1540–1596) sailed across the Pacific Ocean from 1577–1580, but he did not have any contact with Pacific islanders.
- 1634–1643** Dutch explorer **Abel Tasman** (1603–1659) visited the islands of Tasmania, New Zealand, Fiji and Tonga.
- 1767** British Captain **Samuel Wallis** landed in Tahiti.
- 1766–1769** French explorer **Louis-Antoine de Bougainville** (1729–1811) circumnavigated the world between these years. On his way across the Pacific Ocean, he passed Tahiti, Samoa, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The Pacific journey ended at the Bismarck Archipelago. The island of Bougainville, off Papua New Guinea, is named after him.
- 1768–1779** British explorer and cartographer **James Cook** (1728–1779) made three Pacific voyages mapping Tahiti, New Zealand and the east coast of Australia from 1768–1771. On his 1772–1775 voyage he landed at Easter Island (Rapa Nui), New Caledonia and Vanuatu. Cook mapped Hawaii on his third voyage.

Thinking about

1. Represent the information in this timeline on a map.
2. How might people in the islands have responded to the arrival of the explorers? Find some accounts of European explorers' first encounters with Indigenous Australians. What similarities are in their responses?



Vaitupu church

Samoan pastors from the London Missionary Society introduced Christianity to the Tuvaluans in the 1860s.

They implemented religious restrictions to many customary practices as they had been taught.

Missionary contact

In the late 1700 and 1800s, British Protestant and French Catholic missionaries travelled to the Pacific to convert the islanders to Christianity or 'to spread the knowledge of Christ among heathen and other unenlightened nations'. Tales of cannibalism and promiscuity by early explorers convinced them that the indigenous peoples of the Pacific were 'savages' who had to be saved.

In 1797, missionaries from the London Missionary Society, a non-denominational group of Christians, set off on the first overseas missions to Tonga and French Polynesia. They faced many difficulties on the long journey and resistance to their message. After many years, they were able to convert an influential Tahitian chief, Pomare II, and by the 1820s they had succeeded in translating the Bible into Tahitian and in discouraging some of the traditional cultural practices such as worshipping idols.

From this starting point, Christianity spread throughout the Pacific. Tongan, Tahitian, and then Samoan teachers and pastors from the London Missionary Society made converts rapidly throughout the Samoan Islands from the 1830s.

Missionaries changed the way of life for Pacific peoples forever. Although the missionaries are credited with preserving some Pacific languages and stories by printing Bibles and recording local legends, there were many negative effects on Pacific island cultures. In many places, the missionaries imposed their authority over the local chiefs and changed the traditional social structures. They replaced traditional ways of life with their own and made new codes of law. Many customs, such as tattooing, were banned and cultural artefacts and sacred places destroyed. Christianity is still a strong feature in the lives of many Pacific islanders today.

Thinking about

1. Why did the missionaries go to the Pacific?
2. Which culture does the church building reflect? How appropriate do you think this type of building is for the climate?

Thinking more deeply

List the changes to Pacific island culture and society made by the missionaries. Decide whether each change was positive or negative and write a statement assessing the overall impact of the missionaries.

Australian South Sea Islanders

Between 1863 and 1904, about 55,000 Pacific islanders came to Australia to work on the sugar plantations and farms of northern Queensland. They came from many islands, including Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Kiribati, and worked mainly around Maryborough, Bundaberg and Mackay. They were known as Australian South Sea Islanders.

In the 1850s, Britain stopped transporting convicts to Australia but large numbers of manual labourers were still required to work the farms. Many landowners in the area, such as Captain Robert Towns (a cotton plantation owner after whom Townsville is named), started looking towards the Pacific islands to fill the labour gap. At the time, many people called the islanders *Kanakas*, a Polynesian word for 'people'. This term is a source of pride to some South Sea Islander descendants, while others find it offensive.

This period in Australia's history causes much debate. To some people, the South Sea Islanders came of their own free will (indentured labourers who signed contracts voluntarily), while others say they were tricked or kidnapped ('blackbirded') and compare the conditions under which they worked to slavery (which the British had abolished in 1833). Two groups who opposed the practices during this time were the missionaries and the labour organisations.

After Federation in 1901, the Australian government passed the *Immigration Restriction Act* and *Pacific Island Labourers Act*, which ordered the deportation of South Sea Islanders to their home islands. These Acts, along with other events at the time, have come to be known as the White Australia Policy. Many Pacific islanders lobbied against deportation, arguing that they had married local residents, had children at school, owned farms and horses and were Christian, hard-working and law abiding. The forced deportations began in 1904.

Only about 2,500 remained in Australia but today there are about 25,000 descendants of the South Sea Islanders. In 2000, Mal Meninga, one of the more famous members of the Australian South Sea Islander community, launched the Queensland Government Recognition Statement at Parliament House in Brisbane. This was a formal attempt by the Queensland government to recognise the contribution of South Sea Islanders to the development of farming, mining and pearling industries, acknowledge the islanders as a distinct cultural group and recognise the unjust treatment experienced by them.

Story of Cissy Tarryango (circa 1880)

They were on the beach and a recruiting boat sailed up and had all pretty things on the deck, and her father paddled his canoe out to see what was there. While he was there they pushed his canoe away from the ship and the ship started to sail. Only then, too late did her father see what they were doing. She said they were crying on the beach, watching him go, thinking they were taking him. But he jumped off the boat and as he was swimming and diving they were shooting at him.

Story of Willie Ebeda from the Solomon Islands (circa 1870)

... Afio and Tobebe ran and ran but it was hard because the crew, I think twelve men in all, chased them. They were caught and held, everybody had a hand in it, and tied their legs, tied their hands, and put them in the dinghy and took them out to the ship. When the crew put them in the ship they put them down below. Then they shut them in down below and departed, off they went.

Na Loot, Bundaberg (circa 1892–95)

Na Loot was a Solomon islander. He was a 'bushman' living inland on Malaita Island. In 1892, the Helena sailed along the Malaita coast. On board were sixty-four Malaitans who were being brought home. The Helena was also recruiting a new group of islanders to start work in Queensland. Na Loot gave his ornaments and carry bag to his friends and went on board. His father was paid the usual trade goods of knives, fishhooks and other items in return for permission for his son to travel to Queensland for three years.

Na Loot worked as a field labourer at Bundaberg on a sugar plantation for three years. Work included clearing, ploughing, harvesting, leading horses and wagons and other jobs such as ditch making, bridge building, cutting firewood and general plantation maintenance. An overseer controlled his daily working life, with each day's passage signalled by a bell or siren to start, rest and knock off. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were free days. His annual wage was A\$12 plus food, accommodation and a clothing allowance. In 1895 he returned home with a trade 'box' full of gifts. He then collected his ornaments and carry bag and returned to the village life he had left behind three years before.

Source: Accounts from Education Queensland (1997), *Australian South Sea Islanders: A Curriculum Resource for Secondary Schools*.



Pacific Island recruiting ship Para, c 1880

The 'Para' was chartered by the Colonial Sugar Refinery from 1882 into the 1890s to recruit labourers for its plantations and sugar mills in Queensland and northern New South Wales. The English artist who produced this drawing, William Twizell Wawn, captained ships between 1875 and 1891.



Pacific islanders arriving at Bundaberg, 1895

This posed shot shows more than 60 Pacific islander men, women and boys and one European on the deck of a schooner at the dock. The islanders are dressed in clean Western-style clothes. The women, numbering around ten, are clothed in modest smocks. Women never made up more than nine per cent of the islander total at any one time because the Queensland government had insisted that female recruits must be accompanied by their husbands and have obtained their chief's consent. This ruling protected the families of unmarried women who would lose their bride-price and suffer economic disadvantage if they were recruited from the islands before marriage.



Cartoon supporting Pacific Island Labourers Bill, 1901

This *Bulletin* cartoon was intended to show support for the Pacific Island Labourers Bill, ending the recruiting and setting a timetable of deportations of Pacific islanders which Prime Minister, Edmund Barton (1849–1920) was introducing into federal parliament. At the time, islanders were campaigning against the Bill's harsh provisions, largely through petitions.



Former Pacific island indentured labourers waiting for deportation, 1906

From the mid-1880s, with the rise of organised labour unions and the consolidation of the racist view that Australia was for the 'white man', white Australian workers opposed the importing of Asian or Pacific island labour. Their unions believed that white labourers were being deprived of work, wages were being maintained at artificially low levels and a non-white underclass was being created. In the lead-up to Federation in 1901, the six Australian colonies agreed that the trade would stop and all Pacific islander labourers would be sent home. From 1904–1908, about 7,000 islanders were deported.

Thinking about

1. Why were Pacific islanders brought to Australia?
2. Do you think the process of recruiting Pacific islanders and bringing them to Australia, and their subsequent treatment in Australia, was fair? Give evidence based on the stories and images above.
3. Why might labourers from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands find the title *Kanaka* offensive?
4. Suggest reasons why some Pacific islanders fought against being deported in 1901–1906.

Thinking more deeply

1. Debate: Bringing Pacific islanders to work in Australia was beneficial for them and for Australians.
2. Compare and contrast the drawings of the Pacific islanders by the captain of the recruiting ship with those of the Australian cartoonist. See the **gallery** on the CD-ROM for enlarged versions.



gallery

Indian indentured labourers in Fiji

Fiji's population is made up of two major groups – Fijians and Indo-Fijians. How did the Indo-Fijians come to be in Fiji?

In 1874, Fiji became a British Crown Colony after Ratu Seru Cakobau (later known as King George) and 12 other chiefs ceded to Great Britain a country that European settlers felt was facing anarchy and bankruptcy. The First British Governor, Arthur Gordon, believed that the indigenous Fijians needed to be protected against European settlers and traders and decided to introduce laws to prevent Europeans from owning Fijian land. If they wanted to use the land for plantations, they could only lease it. Gordon also believed that Fijians should not be forced to work away from their traditional village, so in order to provide the necessary labour for planters, he introduced the indenture system or *girmit*, under which Indian men and women were brought from India to work in the sugar industry. These people were known as Girmitiyas.

In 1879, the steamer Leonidas arrived in Fiji carrying the first Indian indentured labourers. Their contracts stated that they were to work for five years, after which they were free to return home. However, many stayed on as they could not afford to pay the cost of the passage back. If they stayed for another five years, the Fiji government would pay the cost of the return journey. Still, many stayed on, leased land and became sugar cane farmers. In 1920, the last of the contracts was negotiated, after pressure to stop the system came from Gandhi during the independence movement in India.

Today, descendants of indentured labourers are now a significant ethnic group, with Indo-Fijians making up 37 per cent of the population (2007 census). The Fijian ethnic mix is an uneasy one though, with many recent stories of social and political unrest in Fiji being traced to conflict between Indo-Fijians and Indigenous Fijians. Many Indo-Fijians have emigrated from Fiji for fear of violent attacks.

'One of those recruits was Totaram Sanadhya, who came to Fiji in 1893 at the age of seventeen. He was fooled into signing on by a recruiter who promised lots of bananas and relaxation in a beautiful land. In fact Totaram found himself on a plantation where everyone got up at four o'clock so as to be ready for work at five: "Women with children bring their children to the fields. Almost every person is given a lane of cane 1,200 to 1,300 feet long and six feet wide to weed with a hoe. This is called a 'full task'." At first Totaram was given a full task, but he could never do it: "The overseer used to harass me a lot. Whenever he came to see my work, a couple of blows were deposited on my face!" A Brahman, Totaram keenly felt the loss of caste involved in living and eating with Muslims and those of lower castes and was humiliated by the discrimination practised by most Europeans against Indians: "We are not allowed to come on to the verandah of the company offices. If by mistake we go, we are shoved off. We have to suffer ... every day because of our black colour". The sugar plantations were mostly those of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, which began operations in the early 1880s and became the single most important business enterprise in Fiji for the next ninety years.'

Source: Totaram Sanadhya, *My Twenty-One Years in the Fiji Islands*, translated and edited by John Dunham Kelly and Uttra Kumari Singh, Fiji Museum, Suva, 1991

Thinking about

1. Why were Indians brought to Fiji and how were they treated?
2. Why did they find it difficult to return home?
3. How did these conditions violate the human rights of Indians?
4. Traditionally, Hindu people of India were born into particular social castes. Brahmins (the teachers, scholars and priests) belonged to the highest caste, while the servants and labourers were from the lowest caste. Does Totaram's status suggest his situation was worse than that of a person from a lower caste? Why?

Thinking more deeply

In small groups, drawing upon the information presented, create an imaginary dialogue between an Indian worker in Fiji and an Australian South Sea Islander about their experiences of indentured labour in each country.

World War Two in the Pacific

The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on 7 December 1941 making the Pacific islands strategic points during the war. The war briefly brought a cash economy to many islands but their contributions were not recognised for many years. In Australia, the story of the Kokoda Track in Papua New Guinea and the assistance of the 'fuzzy wuzzy angels' is one of the most celebrated accounts of the war. Other Pacific islands were the sites of major battles. United States forces set up military bases in Noumea in New Caledonia, Santo in Vanuatu, Tonga and Tuvalu.



From left:
A Japanese war tank left behind
after World War Two in Buka,
Bougainville.

One of the Papuan carriers

Private A Baldwin, 2/33rd
Battalion, receives a drink of
water from his Papuan stretcher-
bearers in October 1942.

Fighting on the Kokoda Track

'On 22 and 23 July 1942, a Japanese invasion force from Rabaul, New Britain, landed at Gona on the north New Guinea coast and later another landed at Milne Bay with the purpose of taking control of Port Moresby. The Australian defence forces struggled to halt their progress through the dense jungle, steep narrow tracks in the heavy rain along the 96 kilometre Kokoda Track through the Owen Stanley Range, the village of Kokoda to Owers' Corner 50 kilometres east of Port Moresby.

The people who lived in the villages along the Kokoda Track knew little about the war until it came to them. They had lived a traditional life, with only occasional contact with Australian patrol officers. Then Australian troops began moving over the tracks, some occupying huts and trampling over gardens. As the fighting came closer, most villagers "went bush" to camps away from the main tracks. While they were away, Australian and Japanese troops wrecked many huts and, when villages were occupied by the Japanese, Allied aircraft bombed and strafed them. Hungry soldiers raided the village crops and shot their pigs. With villages wrecked by the two armies, and dead often lying in the vicinity, the villages were no longer habitable and were not reoccupied after the battle. New villages had to be constructed nearby.

Many of the villagers also worked in support of the battle, carrying supplies forward for the troops. Teams carried seriously wounded and sick Australian soldiers all the way back to Owers' Corner. Their compassion and care of the casualties earned them admiration and respect from the Australians, who dubbed these men their "fuzzy wuzzy angels".'

Source: Australian Government Department of Veterans' Affairs

Some 55,000 Papua New Guinean citizens carried supplies, built bases and airfields and evacuated the sick and wounded during the fighting in Papua New Guinea. Their contributions saved the lives of many Australians. In 2009, the Australian government presented commemorative medallions to Papua New Guineans recognising the assistance they provided to Australians during World War Two.

Thinking about

1. Describe the contributions of Papua New Guineans to the Australian or Tuvaluans to the American war effort.
2. List the impact of the war on people of the Pacific islands and the environment. Analyse the list and decide whether the rights of Pacific islanders were respected.



Tuvaluan
contribution
to the war

Thinking more deeply

In small groups, take the role of the Papua New Guineans or Tuvaluans and discuss what might be necessary to compensate you for the loss of life and the destruction of your environment as a result of the war. Write your response as a letter to the Australian or American government.

Nuclear testing

Three of the dominant colonial powers in the Pacific region – the French, British and American governments – were involved in nuclear testing in the Pacific after World War Two. Although the British and United States governments stopped the practice in the 1960s, the French government continued testing up until 1996. In all, about 240 nuclear tests were carried out during this period. Although nuclear testing in the Pacific is over and a South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty has been signed, the health and human rights impacts continue, and many groups, such as the Bikinians, are still fighting for their rights and compensation.

Bikini Atoll

After World War Two, the United States government decided to continue testing its nuclear bombs. From 1946 to 1958, it conducted 67 nuclear tests on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, far away from regular air and sea routes. The 167 Bikinians reluctantly agreed to leave their atoll temporarily for 'the good of mankind and to end all world wars'.

The Bikinians were moved 200 kilometres east to the uninhabited Rongerik Atoll. The islands were only one-sixth the size of their homeland, had little water and food. As well, there was a traditional belief that the atoll was inhabited by evil spirits. Bikinians began to suffer from starvation and fish poisoning. Two years later, the Bikinians were transported to Kwajalein Atoll, where they were housed in tents on a strip of grass beside the United States military airstrip. Six months later, they were relocated to Kili Island, where high waves made fishing difficult. Soon the Bikinians were starving and worried that they would not be able to pass on their traditional skills and therefore the stories of their origin may be forgotten.

In the 1980s, after filing a lawsuit in the United States Federal Claims Court, the people of Bikini received two trust funds from the United States government as compensation for giving up their islands for nuclear testing.

Here is one story told by an inhabitant of Bikini Atoll who was asked to leave his island home:

Pero Joel: 'Once I had heard that the United States government was proclaiming that Bikini was safe and free from poison [radioactive], I immediately began requesting that they send a ship to pick up my family... so that we, could go to Bikini and get involved in the restoration. I worked on Eneu and Bikini planting crops, pulling weeds and in general, refurbishing the islands. I felt so happy, peaceful and proud – and why not? It was our land, our islands and we were content to be working and living there. We felt that we belonged on Bikini because it is the place that God had given us.

During the cleanup... we really didn't have any worries until those scientists started talking about the island being poisoned again. You see, right before they began warning us about the coconuts, pandanus and the crabs being unsafe, the ships had started coming much more infrequently, and so we had to rely heavily on our local food...

Finally, the Americans and their scientists came back a few years later saying that we had to leave Bikini. We were so heartbroken that we didn't know what to do.'

Adapted from www.bikiniatoll.com

No Nukes in the Pacific

No Nukes in the Pacific was a campaign protesting against nuclear testing in the Pacific. In 1985, the Greenpeace ship Rainbow Warrior was preparing to make a protest voyage from Auckland, New Zealand, to the French nuclear test site at Mururoa Atoll, but it was bombed, sinking the ship and killing a crew member.

Thinking about

View the **Marshall Islands nuclear timeline** and photographs of the Bikinians leaving in the **gallery**. Discuss the following questions.

1. Why were the Pacific islands used for nuclear testing?
2. Why did the people of Bikini Atoll allow the United States to test nuclear bombs?
3. What information should have been provided to the islanders?
4. Could this scenario occur today?



**Nuclear timeline
Marshall Islands
gallery**

Thinking more deeply

1. Choose the example of either nuclear testing or **phosphate mining** and review how people affected have sought compensation or redress.
Debate: Pacific islanders have been adequately compensated for the loss of their land and culture.
2. Research how one of these examples has affected Indigenous Australians and compare and contrast their experiences with those of the Pacific islanders.



**Phosphate mining
Nauru
Phosphate mining
Kiribati**

Chapter activities

Collecting your thoughts

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. It outlines which human rights should be protected. Use the simplified version at www.un.org/cyberschoolbus/humanrights/resources/plain.asp as a reference to help you assess the level of human rights abuses provided in the examples in this chapter and draw up the following table:

Event	Rights denied	How were rights denied?	Actions taken	What should be done to right the wrongs?

Taking action

Learn more about the protection of the rights of Pacific islanders in their own countries and in Australia. Use the websites of organisations who have connections with Pacific islanders (for example religious, environmental and sports groups, or businesses) to research their experience of human rights. Find out if there are any Pacific islanders living in your area and invite them to speak at your school. Write an opinion piece about this for your school newsletter.