

Australian South Sea Islander Recognition Day

‘A collective community voice for displaced Pacific communities’

by (Waskam) Emelda Davis

The 25th August marks Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) recognition week on our national cultural calendar. Prime Minister Paul Keating recognised ASSIs as a ‘distinct cultural group’ whose identity and community needs were legislated under the 1994 Commonwealth. The domino effect of recognition saw the 1995 NSW Premier [Bob Carr](#) memorandum followed by Queensland Premier [Peter Beattie](#) in 2000 and NSW Member for Sydney [Mr. Alex Greenwich](#) motion in 2013.

ASSIs are a displaced Pacific community as a result of Australia’s first Seasonal Workers Scheme. Historically named the ‘Indentured labour trade’ ASSI communities identify strongly with the truth of the matter that this was a Blackbird trade of the Pacific.

This trade started illegally sixteen years earlier with men stolen from the islands of Tanna in Vanuatu and Lifou in New Caledonia. The first 200 men on round adventures were brought to Eden NSW by entrepreneur politician [Benjamin Boyd](#) in 1847 to labour alongside Maori and First Nations peoples.

In 2017 Jeff Mc Mullen [bitter truth](#) about the Blackbirding trade was also commemorated in NSW some 170 years later remembering the mass deportation and the men’s escape to walk back to Sydney seeking passage home to Vanuatu on a recruiter ship and were denied passage. One ‘man Tanna’ is reported in the Sydney Morning Herald under ‘Boyd’s South Sea Islanders’ as having been found deceased in Sydney Harbour. It’s believed the man was swimming out to the heads. Another four men were documented as dying under Boyd’s experimental regime.

Australia’s sugar (agricultural), pastoral, fishing and cotton industries required what followed as the influx of 62,500 men (95%), some women (5%) and children (unknown) trafficked illegally and immorally to Queensland between 1863 – 1908. Human trafficking from across the Black Oceania of Australia the Melanesian heritage region saw the 83 Pacific islands of Vanuatu and Solomon’s included Tuvalu, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and New Caledonia reaped of their populations for over four decades. The stability in our economy today is the legacy of our South Sea Islander forebears and descendants.

Below is the official [Australian South Sea Islander flag](#) initially designed in consultation with the ASSI community and executive of the then Australian South Sea Islanders United Council (ASSIUC) in 1994. The flag was formally adopted in 1998 by ASSIUC. There was a recognised need for a flag that would stand with distinction alongside other flags and represent the ASSI community. That was no small consideration at a time when the condition of the Australian South Sea Islanders was beginning to attract international attention – the Sydney [ASSIUC President](#) having addressed the United Nations Special Committee on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Geneva in 1994 – followed by the belated recognition by the Commonwealth Government.

The flag's design by choice compliments the national Australian flag in sizing and representation. The colour scheme incorporates colours resonant to people with forebears of which the three quarters of the trade were taken from the 83 islands of Vanuatu and are represented through colours green, gold and black, a third of the trade was from the Solomon Islands represented with blue, white, green. The overall flag is inclusive other parts of the South Pacific affected by Blackbirding as we are connected through the ocean blue and white stars.



Australian South Sea Islander flag

MEANING OF THE DESIGN

1. The BLACK column next to the flag pole - the most important part of any flag - is for the people standing strong in community and surviving despite the hardships and injustices of the past.
2. The horizontal BLACK band stands for our continuing in the future.
3. BRIGHT BLUE recalls our origins from the South Pacific, the sea and the sky.
4. BRILLIANT GREEN is for the land and especially islander peoples' contribution to agriculture (including sugar cane) and to the development of our home, Australia. It also stands for our hope for the future and for our children.
5. Deep GOLD stands for the sunshine and the sand of our original island homes and that of our homeland now, Australia.
6. The SOUTHERN CROSS reminds us of our home in the South Pacific, and as it is the badge that Australians associate with, it emphasises that we are also Australians.

ASSI recognition day ceremonies are seeing the flag raised across the nation by government agencies for the first time since 2018. Bipartisan support for motion by Inner West Council (IWC), Sydney NSW [Mayor Darcy Byrne](#) saw the inaugural flag raising at Petersham Town Hall

with the support of the [Local Metropolitan Aboriginal Land Council](#) (LMALC), Indigenous Peoples Organisation (IPO), Torres Strait Islander representatives and our communities.

The [Australian National Maritime Museum](#) followed suit in 2019 with a Dignitary National Flag Raising for [ASSI 25th Anniversary](#) since Commonwealth recognition and design of the flag. Some 200 guests inclusive of speakers Foreign Ministers the Hon. Marise Payne and Vanuatu Foreign Minister the Hon. Ralph Regenvanu.

Christian Brothers Lewisham (CBL) - Sydney NSW & IWC Mayor Darcy Byrne raised the flag in recognition of ASSI 25th Anniversary and in the name of a shared community remembering South Sea Islanders (SSI) that came and lived and worked in the area from the 1800s. My grandfather Moses Enares and Mr. Togo were among other families who were connected to John Street in the suburb of Ashfield. Oral histories said this was SSI go to house where Moses worked as a dish hand and others sought refuge. Assistant Principal of CBD - Mr Dan Valencic says "Cristian Brothers is the first school in Australia to fly the ASSI flag on our external flag poles". This annual acknowledgement is in-lieu of the school flag every August 25th marking ASSI recognition Day.



Christian Brothers School, Lewisham Sydney NSW
Image by CBL, 2019 ASSI Recognition Day

[Vanuatu Independence Day](#) falls annually on July 30th and this year marked 41 years since Vanuatu gained their independence from Britain and France. [Bundaberg Regional Council](#) (BRC) gathered local communities and the Vanuatu Seasonal Workers for a momentous

occasion and first for an Australian government agency where the far north Queensland Mayor Jack Dempsey made an historical [‘apology’](#) to Vanuatu and their ASSI descendants for the pain and suffering caused through the history of Blackbirding.

The symbolism of raising the Vanuatu flag on the countries special day sent a message across the Pacific and Australia reaffirming the Councils genuine commitment as part of the signing of a historic ‘Sister City’ agreement with Luganville Municipal Council on Santo Island, Vanuatu. [Streaming live](#) on social media, Australian and Vanuatu communities witness this great partnership between two great cities. This is the first agreement of its kind for a ‘Sister City’ between a city in Australia and a city in Vanuatu. His Excellency, Vanuatu High Commissioner to Australia Mr. Samson Vilvil Fare met with Mayor Dempsey in March this year to initiate the partnership in recognising that both cities have a strong bonded historical relationship and wide diverse community. Bundaberg and Luganville share a lot of common traits being (i) coastal cities, (ii) touristic and (iii) agricultural as well as we have a direct latitude connection from port to port which received our forebears and Seasonal Workers still today on the traditional lands of the Taribelang Bunda, Gurang, Bailai, Gooreng Gooreng country. Mayor Jack Dempsey was the former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island minister for QLD state and has demonstrated a long standing commitment to the Bundaberg First Nations and ASSI communities which was evident when he attended the inaugural national [Wantok 2012](#) conference funded by federal government (PMC). Wantok 2012 witnessed the Vanuatu Council of Chief conduct an apology ceremony to traditional of the Bundaberg region for their SSI forebears [damage to country](#).

Today the Bundaberg region is home to one of the largest communities of Australian South Sea Islanders of which many were able to trace their roots back to the Island of Santo, Vanuatu. Santo families in Australia are the largest families married into our First Nations families across QLD to the Torres Strait Islands.



‘Sister City’ agreement 2021 signing with Mayor Jack Dempsey Bundaberg Regional Council QLD & Mayor Peter Patty Luganville Municipal Council Santo Vanuatu.

The Vanuatu and Aboriginal flags were raised in recognition by local associations Yumi Olgeta Wellness pastoral carers Jane & Geoff Smith with the Bundaberg ASSI Heritage Association President Coral Walker.

Such heroic gestures have given the ASSI community a greater sense of belonging and the energetic field is nationwide for a continued and collective community advocacy for rightful inclusion of a community that has gone unnoticed for some 174 years.

The Tweed Heads Australian South Sea Islander United Council (ASSIUC) was [founded in 1972](#) by Mr & Mrs Les & Marg Togo, Mr. & Mrs Phyllis & Zane (Robert) Corowa, Ms. Rita Dodds, Mr. Bill Wogas, Mr. Bernard Carter joined by Mr. Lance Skinner in 1980 to date. By 1974 there were approximately 14 ASSIUC branches across NSW and Queensland. The Tweed community representatives drove the [1992 HREOC Report](#) '*The Call for Recognition*' census campaign initiated through the support of Sydney's Evatt Foundation headed up by [Mrs. Faith Bandler AO](#) who is also renowned for championing the '[1967 Vote Yes](#)' campaign that saw Indigenous Australian's included in the census. with ASSI leaders in NSW/QLD to gather statistics on the situation of Blackbirded descendants. Findings identified ASSIs suffered the same disadvantage as their First Nations families and peoples.

The once ASSIUC head office has morphed into the Tweed Gold Coast Australian Sea Islander Community Association (TGCASSICA) an organisation that has maintained the cultural heritage teachings of ASSI people since it was founded in 1972. Some 49 years of national, northern NSW and Gold Coast representation today the organisation is championed by Ms. Fiona Mount and Ms. Jodie Togo with continued support by local knowledge keeper and community historian Mr. Lance Skinner former secretary.



Tweed Gold Coast Australian South Sea Islander Community Association (2019)
Special general meeting on 'Rockwall's' chaired by Ms. Fiona Mount & (Waskam) Emelda Davis

The TGCASSICA membership is representative of a proactive ASSI elders advisory along with next generations who have sustained the political and local challenges as they continue to advocate for greater inclusion across programs and services.

More recently the membership have played a key role working with NSW Health Infrastructure on the developments for the new Tweed Valley Hospital. The new hospital will incorporate the repurposing of the heritage from the region in 'Rockwall's'. In respect for the knowledge base and deep seeded ASSI history and established body of cultural maintenance work by the Tweed association the infrastructure and public displays will be complimented with a combination of digital imagery of ASSI history narratives that commemorate, recognise and celebrate the contribution of ASSIs to the region. This public historical monument is a first of its caliber under the NSW Government that recognises five decades of resilience and [cultural maintenance](#) by the organisation. Many of the local Tweed Heads families have an entrenched ASSI and deep seeded knowledge and connection to the local area as a demographic that moved away from community control before Federation and what we call today the state of Queensland.

Our languages matter:

As a result of the trade culturally diverse languages such as Pijin English are a combination of English words with grammatical structures from the Pacific region and Indigenous Australia.

Pijin English is also called Tok Pisin, Solomon's Pijin, and Bislamar, which is the common language spoken throughout the Pacific. Bislamar was developed in Bundaberg far north QLD during the 1860s to 1880s as an organic means of communication between Indigenous peoples of Australia and the and as a means of communication with colonisers. Today Bislamar is Vanuatu's national language and Blackbirding (since 2013) is taught as part of the [Vanuatu curriculum](#).

Creole is spoken mainly in the Torres Strait Islands by descendants of the 'Blackbirding' trade with a small increase of Bislama and Solomons Pijin on the mainland as descendants have been relinking with our families and practices in Australia and the Pacific.

We share Aboriginal English slang with common words of 'gamin', 'savvy', 'deadly' 'humbug' and use interconnected words like 'South Sea', 'Kanak' or 'Kanaka', traditionally the Hawaiian term for bushman.

The term 'Wantok' is a Melanesian custom word that identifies kinship systems and means a bond and knowingness across our Melanesian regions. It is used as a term of endearment in dialogue amongst members mainly of the Australian South Sea Islander community.

Formidable Truth - stori blong Ms. Shireen Malamoo

This Australian South Sea Islander recognition day tribute goes to Aunty Shireen Malamoo as 2021 marks her 85th born day. A force to be reconned with Aunty Shireen remains a proactive founding board member and [honorary patron](#) of Sydney based Australian South Sea Islanders - Port Jackson (ASSIPJ).

[ASSIPJ](#) was inspired through the continuum of national work by ASSI organisations such as TGCASSICA.

The rebirth of a Pyrmont, Sydney NSW based ASSI representative gave platform to a collective of families from northern rivers and Queensland that have spent their working careers south of the border. ASSIPJ started as a working group with the support of the City of Sydney Council Deputy Lord Mayor Ms. Marcelle Hoff in 2009 followed by official company registration in 2010.



Shireen Malamoo image by Mervyne Bishop – Australian Museum (2012)

Aunty Shireen Malamoo identifies herself as Aboriginal / Kanak woman who has made great strides in educating Australia on a shared history. A proud mother of five Aunty Shireen spent four decades in Sydney throughout her career living in Redfern on Pitt Street NSW. The above image hung in 2012 as part of the permanent Indigenous [Sydney Elders](#) portrait exhibition at the Australian Museum by photographer Mervyn Bishop.

Aunty is the granddaughter of a Sugar Slave Blackbirded from the island of [Tongoa](#) in Vanuatu with a direct descendant from chief Tom Tiplomata. Many ASSIs are also of dual and tricultural First Nations heritage which sees Aunty Shireen as an Aboriginal traditional owner from the Birrigubba, Juru clan on Plantation Creek of the Burdekin in Ayr far north Queensland.

During the 1860s Blackbirding islands inclusive of Tongoa saw entire male populations stolen, communities devastated with [kastomary systems](#), and cultural practice freedoms were tormented. To add to the generational trauma of this heinous act some forty years later under bipartisan government support and union push came the mass deportation of some

7,000 people and their families under the [‘1901 White Australia’](#) policy. These policies shaped Aunty Shireen’s view on her life’s path in witnessing the suffering of her people under the oppressive Queensland regime, growing up on a town camp, really shaped her illustrious fifty year career of unwavering advocacy in social justice for Indigenous and ASSI communities. Aunty Shireen’s measured and determined focus has always been the simplistic act of ‘Truth telling’ and ‘Growing up’, this terminology is today reflected in the political narrative, embraced by many eminent politicians and activists.

In recognising Aunty Shireen’s body of social justice work we share some of the highlight of her career that brought about political change and in many cases better outcome for her peoples.

From 1996 – 2017 NSW [Justice Health](#) & Forensic Mental Health Network, Aboriginal Health Medical Research Council (AHMRC). [Roberta Sykes](#) Indigenous Education Foundation. 2010 Represented Aboriginal Australia in Rome in 2011 at the recent beatification of Mary Mc Killop. 1991 to 1993 as one of the first Commissioners of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission ([ATSIC](#)). 1999 Citizen Award presented by Minister Andrew Refshauge from South Sydney Council for saving Douglas Street park from developers. 1974 saw Aunty Shireen’s political activism enhanced when she spent time in Papua New Guinea (PNG) doing a 12 month community development course it was there she met and worked with PNG’s first Prime Minister [Michael Somare](#). In the 1970s work for the Department of Social Security in Townsville, Queensland. The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care included membership of the Finance Committee and the establishment of the Goodo Day Care Centre on Palm Island.

Ms. [Freda Glynn](#) co founder of Central Australia Aboriginal Media Association ([CAAMA](#)) says... “The tenacity of Malamoo who was then one of our first ATSIC Commissioners assisted greatly in establishing our training program. Shireen lobbied for Bicentennial money so hard as no one wanted to take it up. We received 3 Million dollars that supported a three-year training program service for local Indigenous kids. The money covered administration of production, radio staff, interpreter services and general staffing.” Today the world celebrates many of those first Indigenous filmmakers with the likes of Rachel Perkins, Warwick Thornton and Erica Glynn.

As a representative to the City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island advisory panel in 2011 Aunty Shireen’s work was insistent on the inclusion of the word [‘Invasion’](#) to accurately describe the 1788 arrival of the first fleet in the 2030 city plan preamble, the council included the term, which caused a split among councilors who believed it was "divisive". Aunty Shireen received threats as a result however she was not perturbed.

Simultaneously the ASSI [social justice](#) issues were put back on the public agenda with elder members as part of a working group that were excited to support the revival of the ASSI call for political change in policy and legislation. Aunty Carriette Pangas (nee Togo) designed the ASSIPJ logo, Aunty Nellie Enares, Dr Bonita Mabo, Uncle Graham Mooney, Aunty Avis Deguarra, Victor Corowa and Aunty Shireen Malamoo. The elders called on community and their political cohorts on the road once again to recognition for a forgotten people. The [next](#)

[generation founders](#) are still today's directors chairwoman (Waskam) Emelda Davis, [Mr. Shola Diop](#) and Binette Diop.

In 2020 ASSIPJ marked 10 years since its formation under Auntie Shireen's and the elders' honorary patronage and political leadership defying odds and pushing the political agenda on not only a local but national and global scale.

Auntie Shireen Malamoo featured as part of the '[Footprints](#)' documentary as an important education resource for the 25th Anniversary since Commonwealth recognition. This resource was complimented with the ASSIPJ compilation of an academic reference guide namely [Hardwork](#). This term was used by the South Sea Islander forebears around the dinner table when drinking tea one would say 'pass the hardwork' referred to the sugar.

The arts paved a foundation of resilience for Auntie Shireen as a self-proclaimed artist her personal works were exhibited in the 2009 Pondering the Spiritual, Washhouse Gallery. In 2011 she exhibited in Woora Moorditj Yorgas (Wild Deadly Women), Agathon Galleries - Sydney. Her works are held in collections across Australia and more recently acquired in 2020 (2019 works Black People of Elegant Grace, A Choir to Heal) by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to gift the Vanuatu Halls of Justice Museum.

Our first celebrated jazz artist having Auntie Shireen performed with her band [The Pacific Main Stream jazz band](#), internationally acclaimed [Johnny Nicol](#) and the New York Jazz Qt [Mimi Jones – Camille Thurman](#).

Auntie Shireen's national and global reach sees her portrait hang in the Australian Museum, Old Parliament House and she has been the subject of three Archibald prize nominations (2016,2017,2018).

As an Aboriginal/Kanak artist Auntie Shireen's work is influenced by her determination and deep interest in Black affairs from a world scale perspective.

Awards include:

2019: Blackmores Mercie Whellan Women's + Wellbeing – Life time achievement Award.

2016: NSW Council for Pacific Communities 'Overall Outstanding' and 'Education' Award.