Samoa's First Labour Trade 1884-1914

Malama Meleisea[15]

In the years between 1880 and 1914, Samoa was a major importer of labour, bringing in thousands of labourers from other Pacific islands. During this period, foreigners, notably managers of German trading and planter companies, established plantations in Samoa on land they had acquired from Samoan chiefs during the civil wars that racked Samoa between 1870 and 1900, when Samoan leaders sold land for guns and other supplies.[16]

Thousands of young men and some young women from Melanesia, including from the various islands of the Bismarck Archipelago of German New Guinea and the pre-colonial Solomon Islands, eagerly signed contracts for three or more years of work in Samoa's plantations. These workers, like those who participate in today's Recognised Seasonal Employer scheme and Pacific Australia Labour Mobility scheme, hoped for better lives. They had heard they would be given coveted foods such as meat and rice every day, and many had seen with their own eyes other workers who came home with boxes of goods, such as clothing, steel axes, knives, muskets and many other valuable rarities that were treasured in those days, and they saw that such workers became important people in their communities when they returned home. Like the young Samoans who today go abroad as seasonal and longer-term workers, the Melanesian workers could renew their contracts, but they could not remain abroad permanently and most returned home.

German Samoa

In 1900, Germany annexed the western islands of the Samoan archipelago, which mainly comprised the two main islands of Upolu and Savai'i, where German plantations were concentrated. The assets of the biggest German trans-Pacific plantation company, J C Godeffroy & Sohn, had by that time been acquired by the Hamburg-based Deutsche Handels and Plantagen Gesellschaft

[15] Part of this article is abridged from my 1980 book *O Tama Uli: Melanesians in Samoa*. The research was conducted for my University of Papua New Guinea –Australian National University Honours Thesis (see also Meleisea 1976). I thank Penelope Schoeffel for editing this material for the current article.

[16] At that time, the Samoan leaders did not understand that the sale of land permanently alienated ownership, thinking that they were selling only the use-right of it.

(DHPG). The main plantation crop was coconuts, but cocoa and other crops were also grown. Godeffroys had developed a method of drying coconut meat – copra – so it became light and was easy to pack into sacks for shipping. In the pre-petroleum era, coconut oil was extracted from the copra in Germany and used to make soap and many other products. After the oil was extracted, the residue was used for winter animal feed. The coconut husks were used to manufacture mattresses and floor matting.

The DHPG and its predecessor had long been the dominant economic interest in Samoa, with large land holdings, and in 1900 the German administration awarded the company a monopoly on importing and employing Melanesian labour. This was facilitated when Germany annexed north-eastern New Guinea and the western Solomon Islands, where there were also large German plantations and large populations of potential labourers. German plantation companies had well-regulated systems to recruit and transport plantation workers to labour on their large plantations in German New Guinea, Fiji, parts of Micronesia and Samoa.

The extent of the DHPG's holdings and their prosperity has been almost forgotten today. During German rule in Samoa, the DHPG operated three main plantations on the north coast of Upolu at Vaitele, Vailele and Mulifanua, and it had smaller holdings at Vaivase and on the island of Savai'i. Its headquarters at Sogi in Apia was also the head office for its Pacific-wide plantation operations. Thus, Samoa was once the centre of Germany's Pacific coconut empire.

Each plantation had a German manager, as well as overseers, and the Mulifanua plantation also employed a number of European artisans, including carpenters and wheelwrights. In 1905, the Vailele estate employed 130 Melanesians under the direction of four German overseers. The estate covered 2,312 acres of which 1,700 acres were planted with coconuts, 30 with coffee, 27 with rubber, 8 with cocoa and the remainder used mainly for grazing. The estate had 650 head of cattle, as well as horses and donkeys (to carry coconuts), a piggery, a poultry unit and a flock of sheep that were being raised in the hope of obtaining wool as well as meat. The Vaitele estate comprised 3,000 acres, of which in 1906, 1,800 acres were planted with coconuts and 300 acres with cocoa. The estate employed 130 Melanesians and 30 Chinese, and had 500 head of cattle, 42 donkeys and 40 horses. In 1906, the Mulifanua estate covered 3,600 acres. The labour force comprised 300 Melanesians and 16 Chinese, and the plantation had numerous horses

and donkeys along with 2,600 head of cattle that grazed under the coconut palms. In 1910, the Mulifanua estate encompassed over 5,000 acres, divided into management units ranging from 50 to 800 acres each (Meleisea 1980).

Robert Louis Stevenson[17] writing in 1892 described Samoa's plantations as follows:

> *Even from the deck of an approaching ship, the island is seen to bear its signature-zones of cultivation showing in a more vivid tint of green on the dark vest of forest. The total area in use is near ten thousand acres. Hedges of fragrant lime enclose; broad avenues intersect them. You shall walk for hours in parks of palm-tree alleys, regular, like soldiers on parade; in the recesses of the hills, you may stumble on a millhouse, toiling and trembling there, fathoms deep in superincumbent forest. On the carpet of clean sward, troops of horses and herds of handsome cattle may be seen to browse; and to one accustomed to the rough luxuriance of the tropics, the appearance is of fairyland.*
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> *The managers, many of them German sea-captains, are enthusiastic in their new employment. Experiment is continually afoot: coffee and cacao, both of excellent quality, are among the more recent outputs; and from one plantation quantities of pineapples are sent at a particular season to the Sydney markets. A hundred and fifty thousand pounds of English money, perhaps two hundred thousand, lie sunk in these magnificent estates. In estimating the expense of maintenance quite a fleet of ships must be remembered, and a strong staff of captains, supercargoes, overseers, and clerks. These last mess together at a liberal board; the wages are high, and the staff is inspired with a strong and pleasing sentiment of loyalty to their employers (1892:21)*

The prosperity of the German plantations declined after New Zealand annexed Samoa in 1914, at the onset of World War I. Initially, German plantation companies were allowed to continue their operations under the New Zealand military administration that governed Samoa between 1914 and 1920 because the New Zealanders lacked the capacity to operate the plantations, but this changed in 1920 when the League of Nations awarded New Zealand a mandate over Western Samoa. German plantations and assets were confiscated as reparation estates, and German planters and employees were deported. Some Melanesian workers remained in Samoa due to the misfortunes of war. Their labour contracts became invalid under the New Zealand administration, which only had the smallest idea of where the

[17] Robert Louis Stevenson arrived in Samoa in 1889 and lived there until his death. Stevenson became an advocate for Samoan land rights and political autonomy. He died on 3 December 1894 and was buried at Mount Vaea.

workers came from, and which wanted to keep them working on the plantations that New Zealand had confiscated from German owners.

In 1962, the plantations were transferred to the independent state of Western Samoa as “trust estates”. The decline of the plantations continued. Over the years, several plantations were subdivided and sold for residential and commercial use, and today large-scale primary production of tropical crops has ceased in Samoa.

Memories of plantation life

In 1975, only six of the Melanesian workers who had remained in Samoa were still alive. These were among the workers recruited between around 1905 and 1914 and never repatriated due to the New Zealand takeover in Samoa and the end of the trans-Pacific labour trade. Two of the six were very old and ill. The remaining four were still living fairly active lives in retirement with their families.

Between 1973 and 1975, I conducted a series of interviews with these four men, mainly concerning the circumstances of their recruitment and their lives as workers on the plantations. The testimonies of the four men cannot be considered to represent all of the roughly 100,000 Pacific Islanders (Corris 1973) who were recruited as labourers in the nineteenth century, or of the approximately 7,000 who were taken to Samoa between 1870 and 1914, but the overall similarity of these accounts to those documented prior to my research suggests that these testimonies present an accurate picture of life as a Melanesian plantation worker in Samoa recruited prior to 1914.

Tapusini Peni Maluana

Tapusini was born on Nissan Island (about 200 kilometres north-west of the Buka and Bougainville islands) in what is now Papua New Guinea. He signed on for two contracts in Samoa. After his first three-year contract, he returned to his home village for a few years and then signed a second contract. Tapusini thinks that he was about 13 or 14 years old when he first left home. His parents and relatives disapproved of him leaving, but Tapusini had heard stories about life in Samoa from men in his village who had been there on contract. They told him that life was good on the plantations, that delicious food (including fresh meat) was given in abundance to plantation workers and that fine clothes, such as those the Europeans wore, were made available to

them. Tapusini's parents could not change their son's mind about leaving, so they went down to the beach to watch him sail away along with about twenty other recruits from his island.

He remembers his contract being made out. The captain explained to the men that they would be away for three years, after which they would be taken home and each would be given a box of highly prized trade goods as payment. The captain wrote down the names of the recruits after they had made a verbal agreement to the terms of the contract.

On arriving in Samoa, the recruits were lined up for inspection and for division into working parties. As was usual for boys his age, Tapusini became a domestic servant and was sent to the house of the German manager of the Vailele plantation. His duties were gardening, looking after the horses and cart and driving the manager and his wife to town. Tapusini liked his job because he got to see more of town and village life and more of how Europeans in Samoa lived than most other plantation workers did. He recalled his experience as follows.

> *If the master wanted to go to town in the morning to do some business in the main office, I took him. Sometimes I had to wait around doing nothing while he drank beer. When he got drunk, I took him home, then his wife would tell me to get ready to take her to town that afternoon.*

Tapusini had quarters near his employer's residence, but he usually took his meals with the plantation labourers. Sometimes the ‘missus’ gave him food. For three years, Tapusini’s employment was easy and generally pleasant, he said, but he got lonely sometimes and asked to work on the plantation with the other men from his island. However, his boss told him he had to remain in his job as a servant.

When his contract expired, he was reluctant to leave Samoa, which is why, after returning to his home island, he signed on for a second contract. On his return, he was given the same job on the same plantation. When the New Zealand administration took over, his German boss was replaced by a New Zealander. Tapusini felt the new boss was better than the German one because he was much kinder to the ten boys who worked for him and seldom punished them

Tapusini said that the Germans punished the plantation workers by flogging them with horse whips if they were perceived as being lazy or disobedient. Another punishment Tapusini remembered was that of locking up workers in solitary confinement.

In 1918, the influenza pandemic reached Samoa, with terrible impacts. He recalled:

> *People who suffered did not seem really sick but complained of headaches and dizziness. They thought that they could cure themselves by putting their heads under a tap or in a stream. Some of them just died when they were going to the water and others died on the way back to their houses. I was not sick because my boss made me stay in the house away from the other workers.*

Tapusini was due for repatriation in 1918, and he was not clear about why he was not repatriated, but it seems that he was happy to remain in Samoa. He left his job as a servant sometime in the 1920s and joined the labourers collecting coconuts on the plantation. Although this work was more demanding and less varied, he was glad to be in the company of other Melanesians and to meet Samoans, who were by that time being employed alongside Melanesians. He remained working as a plantation labourer at Vailele until his retirement in the early 1960s.

He became a Christian after his second contract. During the German administration, Melanesian workers were not allowed to go to church because services were conducted in Samoan villages, and the Germans forbade Melanesians to associate with Samoans. After 1918 New Zealand relaxed the rules, however, so Tapusini and some of his fellow workers began to attend the Catholic Church in Vailele village. Later, he joined the London Missionary Society (LMS) church because one of its pastors was conducting evening literacy classes in the neighbouring village of Fagali'i. He subsequently became a member of the Seventh Day Adventist Church because his oldest son became an active Seventh Day Adventist and converted the whole family.

Tapusini first met his wife at the literacy classes. He had got himself a guitar and soon became so interested in music that he dropped the evening classes and formed a string band. The band included Samoan and Melanesian plantation workers, with Tapusini as the leader. Soon the band became very popular, and Samoans would come to listen. Tapusini recalled that the village girls who were sent by their parents to the evening literacy classes would sneak off to listen to his band instead. Tapusini's wife was one of them. He said that after they had admired each other from a distance, the girl invited him to meet his parents, and he was given permission to court her. During his evening visits to her, the village girls asked him to play the guitar. His wife went to live with him some time in 1922. They had ten children, eight of

whom were still alive at the time of the interview. After he retired, he lived out the rest of his life in his wife's village.

Ti'a Likou

Likou came from the village of Matong on the south-western coast of East New Britain (now part of Papua New Guinea). By Likou's estimation, recruiting at Matong had been conducted on a regular basis for many years before he signed on in about 1910. This date is inferred partly from his memory of the Savai'i volcanic eruption in Samoa (which lasted from 1905 to 1911); he remembers seeing the smoke rising from the distant crater when his ship anchored in Apia harbour.

Likou estimated that he was about 14 years old when he signed on. His father was dead, and his mother did not want him to go, but he was determined to. He and several other boys from his village wanted the experience of going on a sea voyage, seeing new places and returning home as seasoned men of the world with a box of trade goods that would make them 'big men' in their clans. When the ship was sighted, Likou and his friends waited on the beach for the ship's dinghy to come ashore. In the dinghy were a few returning men from Matong who had completed their contracts in Samoa. Likou recalled that he and his friends assisted the recruiters by escorting some of the Melanesian crew members to inland villages to look for new recruits.

The ship sailed with about fifteen men and boys from Matong and neighbouring villages. It called at several other coastal villages and when it had recruited about a hundred men and boys, it went to Rabaul, the headquarters of German company operations in the area, where all the recruits were examined by a doctor before they set sail for Samoa. Likou enjoyed the voyage and said that the food they were given was good. He ate rice and drank tea with sugar for the first time and thought these were particularly delicious.

On arrival in Samoa, he was sent to the Vailele plantation. His job was to collect fallen coconuts and tend new plants. He recalled that quite a few Melanesian women were working on the plantation, cutting copra or operating the drier. All of them were wives of male labourers. Likou does not think that any women were recruited from his area. The labourers lived in big, open tin-roofed barracks, one for married couples and one for single men.

After two years, Likou was transferred to the Vaivase plantation, a newly developed enterprise where the main task was to clear thick bush for planting.

When war broke out in 1914, Likou was due for repatriation, but the workers were told that there were no ships to carry them, so he continued working at Vaivase. Likou recalled that after the war many Melanesians were repatriated and said that he had expected to be included in the next group when the ship returned, but he was told that the government in his own country had sent a telegram requesting to keep him and his fellow workers there.

When New Zealander managers took over the plantations, the Melanesian labourers began to receive cash wages – initially 3 shillings a day. Some years later, Likou was transferred to the Mulifanua plantation. He remembers that the Mau rebellion began shortly after his transfer, which places it at about 1926.

Likou said that life under German administration had good and bad points. The good side was the food and rations. In addition to fresh beef and vegetables grown on the plantation, each worker received plentiful supplies of tinned meat and fish, tea, sugar, rice and tobacco. They were supplied with *lavalavas* (sarongs) and belts to work in and with shirts and trousers to wear in their leisure time. Likou said that the workers had no knowledge of weekly, monthly or annual wages but understood that when their contracts were up they would go to the company store and fill up a large wooden chest with whatever goods (‘cargo’) they wanted. Since Likou was not sent home at the end of his contract, he was given his ‘cargo’ to use in Samoa.

The dark side of life under German rule was the harshness of the European overseers. These men rode horses and carried whips or sticks, which they used to flog or beat workers whom they considered to be lazy, slow or disobedient. Likou remarked that the overseers did not usually punish without reason. He said that some were kind and fair and did not beat the labourers unless several warnings had been disregarded; others were violent and did things like punch labourers in the face.

Likou said that the 1918 flu epidemic was a time of great fear. It broke out while he was at the Vaivase plantation. People died very suddenly and were immediately buried in mass graves at a place called Avuga behind the village of Fagali’i.

Likou said that few workers knew anything about European medical treatment, and there was no dispensary or doctor on any of the plantations

during the German administration. There was, however, a 'sick bay' (clinic) for the labourers near the DHPG's main office at Sogi in Apia. This was staffed by a German doctor and Samoan assistants. Likou recalled spending two days there while suffering from severe diarrhoea. On the plantations, the workers used various traditional Samoan and Melanesian remedies for minor ailments such as headaches and sores. The principal types of treatment were massages and herbal preparations.

Under the German administration, the lives of the Melanesian workers were very restricted. Association with Samoans was strictly forbidden, and since there were no churches on the plantations, the Melanesians could not attend services. Life consisted of working, eating, talking to one another and sleeping, Likou said. The highlights of the year in those days were the Christmas and New Year holidays when the labourers were given extra rations and got together to eat, dance and sing.

When New Zealand took over, conditions improved as Samoan workers were employed on the plantations, enabling the Melanesians to make friends outside the plantation. They were also allowed to attend village churches. Likou said this made life happier, so he and other Melanesian workers began to worry less about why they had not been repatriated.

Samoans seemed to have been attracted to the Melanesians for material reasons, he said. Melanesians had access to goods that were much desired by Samoans, such as biscuits, tea, sugar, tinned food and tobacco.

He thought that the Samoans in general were racially prejudiced towards the Melanesians, no doubt taking their cue from racist European attitudes to darker-skinned people. He recalled that when Melanesian labourers took strolls along the roads adjoining the plantations in the evenings, the Samoans would call out rudely to them.

> *The girls were the worst, they used to take out their handkerchiefs and cover their noses when we passed them, saying that we smelled. Sometimes they would call out when they saw us that it was going to rain because they could see black clouds approaching, meaning us black boys. Sometimes our boys would get so angry that they would hit Samoans who teased them, especially the young boys. This would make the Samoans angry, and some would complain to our boss on the plantation, but he would defend us.*

The racist attitude of Europeans in Samoa is illustrated by Robert Louis Stevenson (1892:22), who referred to the escape of some indentured Melanesian labourers from plantations in 1888:

A certain number of … wild negritos from the west, have taken to the bush, … the Samoans regard these dark-skinned rangers with extreme alarm; the fourth refugee in Tutuila was shot down … tales of cannibalism run round the country, and the natives shudder about the evening fire.

Like Tapusini, Likou began going to church in 1920 when the New Zealand administration permitted Melanesians to associate with Samoans. The first churches to be attended by Melanesians were the Catholic Church at Vailele and the London Missionary Society (now the Congregational Church of Samoa) church at Fagali'i, which he joined. When he was transferred to Mulifanua, he found that the nearest church was over two miles (three kilometres) away, so he started campaigning for a Samoan pastor to come to the plantation to conduct services each Sunday. He said he persuaded some other Melanesians to support his campaign by telling them that sickness and accidents on the plantation were due to the lack of Christian influence. The London Missionary Society (LMS) eventually agreed to send theological college students and ministers from nearby parishes who took turns to conduct services on the plantation. Eventually the resident plantation labourers, mostly Melanesians, raised money among themselves and built a pastor's house and later a church.

Likou did not go to school and never became literate. Although Likou could not read the Bible, he became a deacon in the Congregational Church in his later years because he was very good at leading prayers. Before he could be appointed as a deacon, however, Likou had to get married in church to the woman with whom he had lived for many years and who had borne him three children. The marriage took place in 1952, by which time all of his children were adults.

Likou's wife was from Tiavea village, which was a long way from the plantation. She had come to work on the plantation with a Samoan group to raise funds for their church when she was a young woman in the early 1920s. When interviewed in 1975, Likou and his wife had seven grandchildren, and all of their descendants were living with them on the plantation. Likou had never met his wife's family or been invited to her village, but his children and grandchildren visited the village occasionally.

In the mid-1950s, men from Sa'asa'ai on the island of Savai'i came to work on the same plantation as Likou for six months to earn money to build a church. They were housed by the permanent plantation workers, who treated them very hospitably. When their contract was up, the chiefs from Sa'asa'ai

rewarded the workers for their hospitality by giving them honorary titles. Likou received the honorary Samoan title of "Ti'a".

Mala Pasi Tevita

Mala came from the Nakanai area of West New Britain but could not remember the name of his village. It is likely that Mala arrived in Samoa sometime between 1905 and 1911. He spoke of seeing people from Sale'aula village (on the island of Savai'i) being resettled at Le'auva'a, a village on the island of Upolu, after their homes had been destroyed by the Savai'i volcanic eruption. Mala said that the Germans used plantation workers to distribute emergency food supplies to the refugees.

Mala said he joined the recruiting boat because he thought it would be an adventure. He had heard of other men who had been to Samoa and returned with boxes of valuable items, and he said that the area he was from had had little contact with the outside world so he was very curious to learn more about it. He thinks he was about 15 or 16 years old when he left. He did not ask his parents' or elders' permission but went to meet the recruiters with a friend and asked one of the shiphands to hide him and his friend on board while the recruiting negotiations were being held ashore. Mala said that he heard from later recruits from his village that his parents just shook their heads when they discovered his absence.

Mala enjoyed the trip to Samoa. He said they were served rice and tinned meat, which he liked very much, as well as familiar foods such as yams, bananas and sweet potatoes. The captain was Danish, and Mala said that he had a Samoan wife. He said that this captain was very friendly, and Mala joked: "We thought that at any moment he would take one of us on his lap and stroke him, the way we do to piglet". There were communication problems between the recruits themselves (who were from different islands and regions) and also between the Melanesians and the white officers of the ship. The recruits tended only to talk with those who spoke the same language as themselves.

Mala made his contract by telling the captain his name; the captain then wrote it in a book. An explanation of terms was not made, but Mala said he knew what to expect (from the returned recruits he had met). Each recruit was issued with a cup, plate, spoon and a *lavalava* (sarong) for the voyage.

The first stop was at Mioko, the DHPG's base in the Duke of York Islands, where medical inspections were carried out by German authorities and

supplies were taken on board for the voyage to Samoa. Mala said several recruits were left behind because they were declared unfit.

On arrival in Apia:

> *We were lined up on the wharf, and after the routine check we were divided into groups and sent off to work. My group went to Mulifanua, the biggest plantation and most distant from Apia. On our way, we saw many Samoan houses and villages, but once we arrived at the plantation we saw very little of Samoa.*

The Germans did their best to enforce racial segregation:

> *We were not allowed to befriend any Samoans, and they were forbidden to visit the plantations. Once we were here, we had to put up with it.*

The men were housed in long tin-roofed dormitories with concrete floors and timber walls, which were partitioned into small rooms shared by two or three people. Mala shared a room with one of his *wantoks* (someone who spoke the same language as himself), which helped a lot during the period of loneliness so common among new arrivals to the plantation.

Communication with others increased as the new recruits learned to speak pidgin.[18] This was the main language of communication on the plantations, and it was used by the Germans to give orders and to talk to the workers.

Mala found it difficult to adapt to the highly regimented life. Work started at 7 am and continued until 5 pm, with an hour's break at midday. A 'boss boy' oversaw each work gang; his job was to make sure that there was no loafing during working hours. A white overseer also checked their work every hour or so. Discipline was very harsh. To quote Mala:

> *Disobedient boys were flogged with a horse or cattle whip. If a boy was very difficult, the manager locked him up in one of the small houses on the plantation built especially for this purpose. The offender would be sent to work during the day, and after his evening meal he would be locked up by himself in one of these little houses all night without a light.*

Mala said that one man was brought to Mulifanua from another plantation to undergo this punishment: "The idea was to separate him from his friends, but this did not work because he started making friends the first day he joined one of our working groups". Mala accepted that from the German point of

[18] The creole lingua franca pidgin (*Tokpisin*) spoken in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands and the *Bislama* of Vanuatu are believed by linguist Pieter Mühlhäusler (1985) to have originated on the Samoan plantations where pidgin was used by workers and German overseers.

view it was necessary to punish disobedience and force labourers to work hard, but he thought the punishments were too severe.

Cooking was done by details of men who were given time off from plantation work for the task. The food was very good, Mala said, especially the abundant supply of fresh and tinned meat. At Mulifanua plantation, taro, yams and bananas were bought by the company from Samoan growers. Mala said nostalgically, "There was a lot of wasted food. Generally, the boys were not great eaters and when we sat down for an evening meal we drank a lot of tea but ate only a small amount of food. Leftovers were given to the pigs. [At the evening meal] we used to dress up like Europeans in trousers, shoes and socks".

Mala said that the New Zealand expeditionary forces (sent to capture Samoa from Germany when World War I broke out in 1914) arrived in Samoa at about the time his contract was due to terminate. Mala's repatriation was delayed by a ban on German shipping after the outbreak of war. When the war ended, most of the Melanesians were repatriated, and Mala said that he wanted to go, but he was told that he had to stay and look after the plantation until more workers were recruited. He received his 'cargo' from the Germans, then continued to work for three shillings a day plus rations under New Zealand management. He continued to hope for repatriation, but it was never mentioned again.

Life on the plantations became more relaxed and interesting under the relatively benign New Zealand administration, and opportunities for outside contacts opened up as Samoan workers began to be employed on the plantations. The New Zealanders allowed the workers more freedom of movement, enabling social visits between plantations. Each plantation took turns to host a big feast on public holidays. In preparation for these feasts, the plantation workers raised their own pigs, planted taro, yams and bananas and pooled their money to buy tinned meat and fish and bags of rice and sugar. On these occasions, each Melanesian ethnic group put on traditional dances from their home areas. Large groups of the labourers' Samoan friends and their families were invited on these occasions. Mala said, "This improved our relationship with Samoans because they always took home baskets of food".

In the 1920s, Mala married a Samoan who had four children from an earlier relationship with a Melanesian who had died of an illness. Mala adopted those children by registering them in his own name and had two children with his wife. At the time of my interview with Mala, his descendants consisted of six

children, forty-seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren. When he retired, he and his family continued to live at Sogi in Apia, which had previously been the DHPG headquarters and where some of the other non-repatriated Melanesian workers had settled.

Tui Sakila

Tui was born on Mussau Island in the Saint Mathias group of the Bismarck Archipelago (now part of Papua New Guinea). Recruiting boats had been calling regularly at Mussau for some time, and Tui knew several men who had been to Samoa. When he was about 12 years old, the ship "Samoa" anchored near his village, and Tui and his older brother decided to sign on and see the world. They did not tell their parents that they were going, and Tui never found out what his parents' reaction was. Tui said he and the other recruits were quite willing to leave their island and understood that they would be expected to work for three years cutting bush and grass and collecting coconuts on a plantation in return for a large box of trade goods.

He was taken first to Mioko, and after the usual checks and provisioning he began the voyage to Samoa, which Tui said took about three weeks. Because of Tui's youth and small size, he was separated from his brother, who went with the plantation labourers while Tui was grouped with a number of other boys. Most boys were given jobs in hotels or in the households of German officials as domestic servants, but Tui was appointed messenger boy at the Mulifanua plantation. His job was to carry written messages and mail from one European to another at their various locations around the plantation. The novelty of this job soon wore off as it involved walking back and forth across 4,000 acres of plantation all day. In addition to carrying messages, he was also required to fetch drinking water and perform other chores for the overseers. Tui said it was very tiring. When he was assigned to regular plantation work after about a year, he found this work much easier.

Like the other Melanesian workers whose experiences are recorded in this article, Tui lived in a large dormitory and thought his standard of living was very good. He said he was very shy and did not socialise much during the German era. He recalled how strictly the rule against mixing with Samoans was enforced, but said that the rules were broken at times. Some of the workers had had missionary contact before being recruited and were Christians. They would get up early on Sunday mornings, wash and get dressed up and sneak off to church in a village adjoining the plantation. They

would come straight back after services, put on their old clothes and sit around as though nothing had happened. Tui never joined them as he was too scared. Such actions were taken very seriously by German authorities and Samoan village leaders and pastors in villages near the plantation had been warned to report such incidents to the authorities. Tui said that the villagers had friendly feelings to the church-going labourers, partly because the labourers generously gave them sticks of tobacco.

The transition from German to New Zealand rule created much confusion among the plantation labourers, particularly when New Zealanders took over the plantations. Their confusion mainly concerned repatriation and what rights the workers had in this regard. Tui gave the following account:

> *Unlike the Germans, who kept a list of those whose contracts had expired and were due for repatriation, the British [New Zealanders] were very disorganised. Those who were living closer to Apia were repatriated first, regardless of the order in which they had been recruited. Those who were working on plantations further out of town were told at first that they would be the next to be sent home, but this did not happen. We were told that we were to stay in Samoa to look after the plantations.*

Asked why he accepted the order to stay, Tui said "In those days we did not argue with white men". Tui's brother went home in 1918, and Tui sent his box of goods with his brother. He said he never heard whether his family received them. After his brother's ship had left, Tui was the only recruit from Mussau left in Samoa, with the exception of a woman married to a Melanesian labourer from another area. At the time of the interview, Tui said that she and her husband had died many years ago, but they had children still living in Samoa. Tui was very lonely after his brother and other *wantoks* had gone. Because of his shyness he had never learned to speak pidgin properly, but now he was forced to learn it to communicate with his fellow workers. When Samoans started working on the plantations, Tui also began to learn Samoan.

Tui recalled many interesting aspects of the relationship between Samoans and Melanesians; for example, Samoans believed that Melanesians were powerful sorcerers and taught one another magical spells. He said that the main kind of 'sorcery' used on the plantation was a kind of 'love magic', although Tui was sceptical about whether those who did the 'magic' really had secret knowledge. Tui said he had no personal knowledge of traditional magic or sorcery, and referred to the Samoan proverb "cowards live longer" to indicate that he was not interested in taking such risks. He said that the

Melanesians conducted practices such as traditional nose and ear piercing on the plantations.

The Melanesians traded with the Samoans, selling imported food such as tinned corned beef and salmon, rice, tea, sugar, cloth and clothes. These items were great luxuries in the 1920s, and it was difficult for Samoan parents to resist when plantation workers courted their daughters. He joked that the parents of a young lady would call out after a departing Melanesian suitor, "Come again tomorrow night and don't forget to bring some sugar!" Tui eventually married but had only adopted children, and he lived all his life on the Vailele plantation.

In retrospect

Melanesian labour was essential to the colonial economies of German Samoa and German New Guinea prior to 1914. In Samoa, this imported labour enabled the Germans to avoid exploiting the indigenous people, just as the British had avoided it in Fiji by importing Melanesian, Chinese and Indian plantation workers.

From 1882, Germany followed ordinances designed to safeguard the welfare of Melanesian labour on recruiting vessels and on plantations. Recruits were to be provided with daily rations, and each recruit was to have 40 cubic feet of living space below deck. In addition, an adequate supply of medicine was to be carried on recruiting vessels, and recruiters were required to have government licenses. The care, feeding, housing and length of service were similarly specified on the German plantations.

According to the four men whose experiences are described above, as long as they were treated in what they considered to be a reasonably kind way and survived their three years' indenture, they were satisfied with the terms of their contract. All four informants agreed that they were very well fed, both on the ship and on the plantations. All of them enjoyed the voyage, and while none understood the concept of "40 cubic feet" they thought their accommodation was comfortable on board.

In the matter of health care, the problem lay in the difficulties of communication rather than in the availability of medicine. The recruits had no conception of Western medicine, so treatment was only given when they were so ill that their illness was obvious to their European employers. Likou said that a fellow recruit died during his voyage to Samoa, but no one knew he was sick until he died.

These four men were prepared to work hard in prison-like conditions for three years in order to experience something of the world outside the limits of their small villages. Such a desire for adventure is understandable in young men from any culture and any period of history. To them, the work was not exploitation. The box of ‘cargo’ with which they were paid was a small fortune in the eyes of villagers who had little or no other means of access to manufactured goods.

When comparing the experiences of Melanesian and Chinese indentured labourers in Samoa (see the article by Ming Leung Wai in this volume), the underprivileged status of the Melanesians becomes very apparent. The Melanesians became aware of this in the late 1920s. The Chinese labourers came from a country with institutions recognised by the German and New Zealand administrations, and which provided consular representation from 1909, and there was official Chinese scrutiny of working and living conditions. The dwellings of Chinese workers were inspected by their representatives, who would not allot Chinese workers to plantations where accommodation was below standard (see the article by Stewart Firth in this volume). During the German administration, while Melanesian labourers received no wages, the Chinese labourers received 12 shillings per month, in addition to rations and quarters. In 1905, the Chinese residents were given their own ward in the Apia hospital. Some Chinese were recognised by Germans as having equivalent legal status to Samoans, and in 1912 their status was elevated, allowing them to be legally classified with Europeans as resident aliens. In contrast, Melanesians came from lands that were being disrupted and plundered by colonialism, with no recognised government to represent them other than the colonisers themselves. They received no cash wages, were restricted entirely to working for the DHPG and had no legal status. The only medical service for them was the ‘sick bay’ at the company headquarters in Apia. Melanesians were at the mercy of plantation overseers' whims as far as punishment was concerned and were forbidden to mix with Samoans. The seclusion of Melanesian workers on the plantations, in contrast to the increasing freedom of movement permitted to the Chinese workers over time, made it possible to enforce strict regulations upon them.

Although New Zealand made racist efforts to segregate Chinese from Samoans and cruelly deported many Chinese workers who wanted to say in Samoa with their wives and children (see the article by Ming Leung Wai in this volume), it is clear that the experiences of the Melanesians in Samoa was

worse. Their 'contracts' were a form of temporary slavery reinforced by the DHPG monopoly over their services and the German administration's attitude that the company be left to run its own affairs as the backbone of the colonial economy (see the article by Stewart Firth in this volume). This monopoly was also a result of the fact that both the DHPG and the German administration exercised control over the Solomon and New Guinea islands, which supplied the labour. The failure of the New Zealand administration to repatriate 125 Melanesians still in Samoa after 1921 was probably a breach of contract and an act of gross exploitation that has never been compensated.

Longing for adventure and status goods

It is worth considering, a century later, how similar the motives and conditions of Samoan seasonal workers in Australia and New Zealand are to those recounted by Tapusini, Likou, Mala and Tui. Like the Melanesian workers, young Samoans want to travel abroad to 'see the world' and to earn money to spend on consumer goods, which give them and their families high status in their villages, and these Samoans are prepared to work hard for long hours under stern restrictions to get such goods.

The following two articles in this volume describe the experiences of Chinese indentured labourers and workers in Samoa (see the article by Ming Leung Wai) and the motivations of more recent 'imported' workers in the country (see the article by Masami Tsujita).

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