

BLACKBIRDING

In July 1883 a Pacific islander called Bakala left his home in Vanuatu to go fishing. Walking along the beach at sunrise, he saw a ship a short distance away. 'She had two boats, painted red, trying to get men; the ship had been anchored there for two nights,' he later reported. The two red boats slowly rowed toward Bakala, each propelled by the oars of four sailors from a nearby island. As was typical of kidnappers in the western Pacific, one boat landed on the beach while the other stayed close to shore to help in case of trouble.

One of the sailors called out to Bakala, 'Come here, you.' He answered, 'I do not know your ship.' 'Come near to the boat and let us have a talk,' countered the sailor, whose name was Sam. As Bakala walked closer, he was seized by Sam, who dragged him into the boat, which rowed out to sea before fellow villagers could come to his aid. As Bakala remembered, 'the men were all armed with guns; when Sam pulled me into the boat I called out, and cried "Do not steal me, Sam, put me ashore again."' But Bakala was hauled on board the ship, the fifty-ton schooner *Caledonia* from Noumea in the French colony of New Caledonia. The white master ignored Bakala's pleas for release. Bakala got talking with another prisoner called Usi from the Solomon Islands who'd previously been working under indenture in Levuka, which had been the capital of Fiji's cotton boom. Soon afterwards Bakala and Usi were set to work on a plantation.

When the US Civil War shattered cotton production in North America, replacement plantations sprung up across the western Pacific. Their labour was supplied in similar practice to that of the American South: European slave ships used local slave masters to 'recruit' poor Melano-Polynesians. This became known as blackbirding. The bulk of these 'labourers' were taken to

Australia and Fiji, where the British Colonial Office turned a blind eye to practices long banned elsewhere in the empire. Even so, cries from abolitionists grew stronger and a Royal Navy commander called George Palmer, who'd led anti-slave patrols in West Africa, went to investigate in 1869. He found an English schooner called the *Daphne*:

fitted up precisely like an African slaver, minus the irons, with 100 natives on board, who had been brought here from the New Hebrides ... they were stark naked and had not even a mat to lie upon; the shelves were just the same as might be knocked up for a lot of pigs, no bunks or partitions of any sort being fitted, and yet the vessel was inspected by a government officer of Queensland.

Though Palmer set the slaves free, the Queensland courts overturned his ruling and allowed the *Daphne* to continue its trade. In the decades after 1863 Australia imported over 60,000 such 'migrant labourers'. [It kicked most of them out between 1906-1908 under the White Australia policy.] Many Melano-Polynesians also worked outside the British colonies, in California and Chile or as Pacific sailors. They were known as *kanakas*, taken from the Hawaiian word for man. This led to one of the most famous shanties of all:

*I heard, I heard the old man say
 John Kanaka-naka too-lai-e
 Today, today is a holiday
 John Kanaka-naka too-ley-ay
 Too-ley-ay, ooh! Too-ley-ay!
 John Kanaka-naka too-ley-ay*