

## Developing a holistic and collaborative approach for the archaeology of Australian South Sea Islanders in Queensland

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### ABSTRACT

*Australian South Sea Islanders are a distinctive cultural group comprising descendants of over 60000 labourers who came to Australia from Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and elsewhere in the Western Pacific between 1863 and 1904. “Blackbirded” labourers were commonly referred to as victims of a slave trade, though many also came voluntarily to work in the sugar plantations of northern New South Wales and Queensland. The advent of racist exclusionary immigration policies introduced from 1901 further forced South Sea Islanders to the margins of colonial society. Yet many Australian South Sea Islanders would argue their untold history speaks to resilience and overcoming adversity. Australian South Sea Islanders have a distinctive cultural heritage, including material culture, oral traditions embedded in the landscape and connections to places – from sugar mills to domestic sites – revealed archaeologically. This heritage must be approached sensitively given its association with sometimes difficult histories but is crucial to understanding the contributions of Australian South Sea Islanders to Australian society, contemporary communities and identities, and historical and social significance across multiple scales. Collaborative research with Australian South Sea Islanders pushes the boundaries of “community archaeology” by taking a slow approach to research, reframing ethnographic objects and cultural landscapes, and producing an archaeology that can include many voices.*

**Keywords:** Australian South Sea Islanders, historical archaeology, community archaeology, museums, cultural landscapes, Queensland

### RÉSUMÉ

*Les Insulaires australiens du Pacifique Sud forment un groupe culturel distinct composé des descendants de plus de 60 000 travailleurs installés en Australie provenant du Vanuatu, des Îles Salomon, et ailleurs dans le Pacifique Ouest entre 1863 et 1904. Les travailleurs issus du « blackbirding » sont généralement considérés comme victimes de l’esclavage, mais nombreux se sont engagés volontairement pour travailler dans les plantations de canne à sucre du nord de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud et du Queensland. L’avènement de politiques d’immigration excluantes et racistes, introduites à partir de 1901, a contraint les Insulaires australiens du Pacifique Sud à rester en marge de la société coloniale. Parmi eux, nombreux sont ceux qui peuvent affirmer que leur histoire méconnue témoigne de leur résilience et de leur capacité à surmonter l’adversité. Les Insulaires australiens du Pacifique Sud possèdent un patrimoine culturel distinctif, dont une culture matérielle spécifique, des traditions orales ancrées dans le paysage et des connections aux lieux - des moulins à sucre aux sites d’habitat - révélés par l’archéologie. Ce patrimoine doit être abordé avec prudence étant donné qu’il est associé à une histoire difficile, mais il reste pourtant essentiel pour mesurer la portée sociale et historique, à plusieurs échelles, de leur contribution à la société australienne, aux communautés et aux identités contemporaines. Le développement d’une recherche collaborative avec les communautés des Insulaires australiens du Pacifique Sud repousse les frontières d’une « archéologie communautaire » en adoptant une approche plus lente de la recherche, en redéfinissant les objets ethnographiques et les paysages culturels, et en produisant une archéologie plus inclusive.*

**Mots-clés:** Insulaires australiens du Pacifique Sud, archéologie historique, archéologie communautaire, musées, paysages culturels, Queensland

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### INTRODUCTION

Questions of voice, who speaks for the past (and present), representation in research, inclusiveness and equitability

have all become paramount concerns for 21st century archaeology. The language and tropes of “community archaeology” have been well-established now for several decades (see Marshall, 2002), and are strongly represented

in archaeologies of Indigenous Australia (e.g., Greer, 2010; Menzies & Wilson, 2020; Smith et al., 2019) and the Pacific (e.g., Allen et al., 2002; Flexner, 2021; Kawelu, 2015). Community archaeology developed to varying extents in conversation with broader discussions about Indigenous research and decolonisation (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith, 2012), and Community-Led Research (Rawlings et al., 2021). What is distinctive in community archaeology is the disciplinary focus on material remains, long-term understandings of landscapes and collaborating with the people whose ancestors occupied archaeological places. Key principles for community archaeology include participation of the community in all stages of the research, from design to publication; recognition that community is complex, can be widely distributed, and might not agree on everything; that research is actively political and a site of unequal power relationships and that archaeologists have an ethical responsibility to engage appropriately and sensitively with community throughout the research process, which extends beyond the life of a particular grant, contract, or project.

Issues of community archaeology remain extremely important when engaging with diasporic communities. Archaeologies of diaspora, especially a racialised or marginalised diaspora, can raise difficult histories, and always invoke a relationship between past and present, since the unequal dynamics of the past shaped unjust conditions that exist in the present. This perspective has been integral to the development of North American and Caribbean archaeologies of the African diaspora (e.g., Battle-Baptiste, 2011; Flewellen et al., 2022; Franklin, 2001; Franklin & Lee, 2020), relevant here particularly because of the historical and transnational connections of plantations in the modern world (Christopher, 2021). Similarly, for the Chinese diaspora in and beyond North America – again relevant because of related histories of racist exclusion from white society – an engaged, multidisciplinary archaeology is seen as essential to doing socially appropriate research that contributes to community life in the present (Fong, 2020).

This paper contributes to existing research in community archaeology and archaeologies of diaspora by presenting our project focused on the archaeology and cultural heritage of Australian South Sea Islanders in Queensland. Specifically, we present the slow and organic approach to collaboration developed in partnership with Australian South Sea Islander groups. Australian South Sea Islanders are the descendants of Pacific labourers imported into Australia to work predominantly in the sugar industry between the 1860s and the 1900s. Previous archaeological studies of Australian South Sea Islanders have focused on plantation landscapes, materiality and cultural heritage (Hayes, 2002; Wickler, 2014; Youngberry & Rains, 2013), including maritime cultural heritage (Beck, 2009; Gesner, 1991), and the possibility of ritual structures derived from a Solomon Islands style (Barker & Lamb, 2011). From 2016 to 2023, we expanded on previous research through a major, multi-institution, interdisciplinary project focusing on community collaboration.

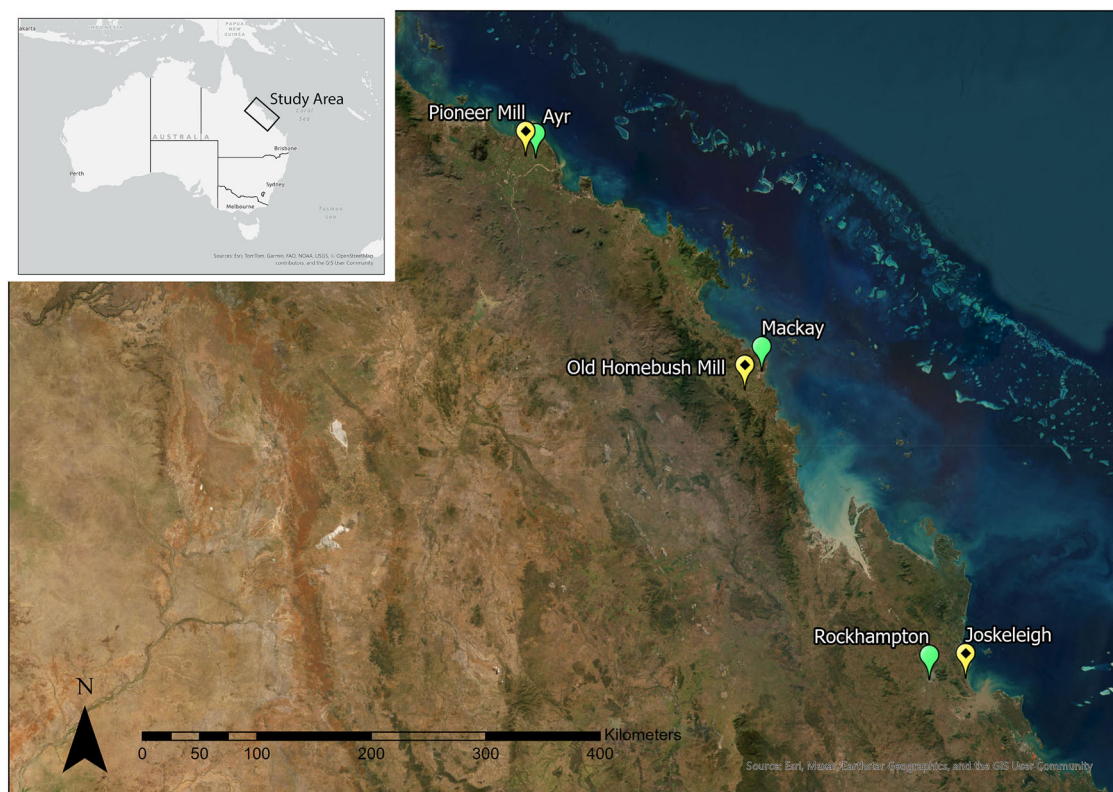
We placed the community at the heart of our project from the outset. However, we do not want to present the results of over five years, and for some members of the team, decades of research with Australian South Sea Islanders, as a simple, unreservedly successful outcome of ethical behaviour and positive relationships. Instead, we seek to unpack some of the complexity and tension in community research with Australian South Sea Islanders (see also Robinson et al., 2021). One refrain from our interactions with people in and beyond this project is the notion that Australian South Sea Islander histories are not well known or represented in stories of Queensland, or Australia more broadly, so we will begin with a brief outline of who Australian South Sea Islanders were and are. From there we will build on how our project developed over time with the main Queensland communities where we focused our efforts, in Mackay, Ayr, Rockhampton and Joskeleigh (Figure 1).

With the foundation in place, the article then discusses several of the multidisciplinary facets of the project, from workshops focusing on objects, stories, cultural landscapes and oral traditions; to museum collections focusing on the Queensland Museum (QM) Australian South Sea Islander Kastom Collection; to archaeological fieldwork in plantation sites. In presenting this research, we seek to demonstrate the complexity and investment of time and energy that community archaeology with Australian South Sea Islanders required, not least because of the once-in-a-lifetime global pandemic that punctuates the project timeline. Equally, we perceive the enormous benefits, both for researchers and community members (several authors of this paper identify as both) when a project is carried out with an emphasis on developing authentic relationships, credible reciprocity, and a view towards the long-term nature of collaboration. While it did not always work in an ideal manner, the “slow science” (*sensu* Alleva, 2006; see also Caraher, 2019; Cunningham & McEachern, 2016; Flexner, 2020; Rizvi, 2016) research approach practised in this project demonstrates the importance of community engagement for an archaeology that can contribute to the present and future, far beyond the boundaries of the discipline (see Black Trowel Collective et al., 2024).

## AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDERS, HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

Australian South Sea Islanders are descended from Pacific Islanders who were brought to Australia in the late nineteenth century as part of a trade of people for cheap labour, mainly on plantations. The labourers were known as South Sea Islanders, Polynesians (despite largely being from islands that may be termed “Melanesian”) or “Kanakas”. The latter term is drawn from the Hawaiian language but was used often derisively to describe Pacific labourers in Australia during the 19th century. Between 1863 and 1904, around 62000 contracts were issued to

FIGURE 1. Map of the main Australian South Sea Islander communities where we carried out fieldwork and research in Queensland, with the regional centres in green and specific research sites in yellow.



South Sea Islanders, mainly men, but also women and children. They came from Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Fiji and Tuvalu. Some came by force or trickery; some came by choice (Moore, 1992; Munro, 1995). As the late historian Tracey Banivanua-Mar emphasised, “[n]o matter the level of choice, [...] we must not lose sight of the relativity of willingness in the context of a trade whose use of force and toleration of Islanders’ wariness was subject to slim profit margins” (2007, p. 45). Denunciation of the Pacific’s apparent slave trade was also made during the period, particularly by missionaries (e.g., Kay, 1872). Missionaries were far from neutral observers given they were literally seeing their converts disappear over the horizon on labour vessels, even when people left intentionally. Nonetheless, archival documents do show some awareness of the, at best, misleading and deeply unequal conditions that shaped the labour trade at a time when slavery was nominally illegal in the British Empire.

South Sea Islanders in Queensland found themselves doing backbreaking work in unhealthy conditions, primarily in cotton and sugar plantations. Their main activities included preparing fields, planting, cutting and harvesting cane by hand, and doing the manual elements of industrial sugar processing in mills. Work was often relentless, involving long hours in the tropical heat with few or no breaks. Labour contracts often stipulated that people had to work for a certain number of years (typically three) to pay

for their return passage (Graves, 1993). This situation was made even more difficult when wages were low and workers had to pay for food, clothing, medicine and other essentials, often through a company “store” that ultimately served as a means of recouping most of the plantation’s labour costs (Graves, 1983).

Many people returned to their home islands but some stayed on in Queensland to build new lives in a new landscape. In 1901, following the federation of Australia, a series of exclusionary immigration acts were introduced, which are often referred to as the “white Australia policy”. Pacific Islanders were among those expected to leave for “home” unless they had an exemption (see Moore, 2000). It is from the 1600 or so Islanders who were permitted to stay that today’s Australian South Sea Islanders are descended. Those who stayed were subjected to racial discrimination and economic and social marginalisation. Nonetheless, South Sea Islanders continued to contribute to the development of Queensland. They were directly involved in establishing and maintaining sugar-focused plantation agriculture that persists today, but also worked widely in industries such as ranching, rail, and roadbuilding (Hayes, 2002).

In August 1994, the Australian federal government officially recognised Australian South Sea Islanders as a distinct cultural group. In Queensland, the state government Recognition took place in 2000. With 2024 marking 30 years since federal Recognition, there are still challenges to

increasing the visibility of Australian South Sea Islanders' rich and unique history, heritage, culture and contributions to Australian society. This is despite there being vibrant and active community voices, and an abundance of historical studies (e.g., Banivanua-Mar, 2007; Graves, 1983, 1993; Moore, 1992, 2000; Munro, 1992). Visibility is seen by some as a necessary strategy of resistance and control of the narrative for individuals and communities, and a means of furthering identity recognition (Ireland, 2015, p. 111; see also Gordon, 2002, p. 132) Community recognition and cultural competency is essential for a more just and equitable environment for all, and for ensuring individual and collective wellbeing among and beyond Australian South Sea Islander communities (Bobongie & Youse, 2021). While a community focused archaeological research project cannot solve these challenges alone, it was a core aim of our project to contribute towards community engagement for Australian South Sea Islanders through cultural heritage research.

### DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER RESEARCH

The imperative that the Australian South Sea Islander community was integral to any kind of research into their history, heritage or culture was central to the conceptualisation of our project from the outset. This is reinforced by various documents outlining the principles of Australian South Sea Islander research protocols and culturally appropriate engagement (e.g., Bobongie & Youse, 2021; MADASSIA & Waite, 2000). A key element of our approach was close collaboration with Australian South Sea Islander organisations, including but not limited to the Mackay and District Australian South Sea Islander Association (MADASSIA), Rockhampton Australian South Sea Islander Community Association (RASSIC), Rockhampton Australian South Sea Islander United Council (RASSIUC), Joskeleigh Community Association (JCA) and the Queensland United Australian South Sea Islander Council (QUASSIC, the state-level body was established in 2019 after our project had started but immediately became a key partner). Simultaneously, we also recognised early in the development of the project that there were points of tension between community expectations, approaches to knowledge, timelines and initiatives, which sometimes sat uncomfortably against institutional priorities and imperatives, ranging from the requirements of government funding bodies to expectations about academic outcomes (Robinson et al., 2021).

Our project was always going to exist somewhere between an idealised community-led principle that guided our approach to research, and a practical environment that would lead to robust conversations, negotiations and compromises. Researchers in the team began discussing such a project as early as 2014, followed by initial rounds of community consultation with Australian South Sea Islanders both in Brisbane and during site visits in Mackay,

Ayr and Rockhampton-Joskeleigh in 2016–2017. The goal was to balance our willingness to listen to and prioritise what we were hearing from Australian South Sea Islanders with the realities of doing academic research that was expected to follow specific aims, achieve objectives in the areas described below and produce certain outcomes. This long lead-in time was necessary to develop the relationships to make an eventual Australian Research Council proposal feasible, building trust between the research team and Australian South Sea Islanders (Robinson et al., 2021) and ensure the communities had sufficient time to listen and reflect in articulating community priorities for research.

Following a successful grant application, preliminary discussions took place during 2018 and 2019, in which the team re-introduced themselves and the different disciplinary elements of the project to Australian South Sea Islander community groups in Brisbane, Rockhampton, Ayr and Mackay. The first major archaeological fieldwork activities were planned for mid-2020, focusing on the site of Old Homebush Mill, a late 19th-century plantation site outside of Mackay that was identified as having high archaeological potential. Critically, we had both landowner permission and community blessing to work on this site.

Our project, like so many, was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The months leading up to planned fieldwork in 2020 saw increasingly severe restrictions placed on travel not only internationally but also between New South Wales and Queensland, the two states where the research sites and most researchers in our project were located. Further, there were often restrictions on travel between the state capital of Brisbane and regional Queensland. As much of our work involved talking to Australian South Sea Islander Elders, we considered the interactions too risky even when it was technically possible to travel to regional areas. As a result, there were basically no in-person research activities in the community with Australian South Sea Islanders during 2020. The virtual alternatives towards which so many activities pivoted during the pandemic were simply unsuitable for community research. This was a major blow to the project's momentum since it posed logistical challenges to maintaining lines of regular and meaningful communication. As a research team, we had to be even more flexible around accomplishing the project's stated aims and objectives during a time when accessing field sites and interacting with community was increasingly challenging.

At the same time, the research team was expanded during 2020 by the addition of two Research Assistants (RAs), one an Australian South Sea Islander living in Mackay, as well as a local Fieldwork Coordinator in Mackay. The RAs and Fieldwork Coordinator played an important role in maintaining communication with the various community groups, and carrying out local research and logistical work on the ground when fieldwork travel was not possible for the rest of the team. One medium for communication we added that was led by the RAs was quarterly community newsletters that helped us to stay in touch regularly during and after the time of pandemic travel

FIGURE 2. An example of the project’s community newsletter from December 2022.



restrictions (Figure 2). Eventually, the local researchers would become critical for re-establishing connections and facilitating work on the ground when activities re-commenced.

Slightly more activity was possible in 2021, particularly for the Queensland-based team members, who were able to run community workshops and carry out preliminary

fieldwork at Old Homebush Mill. By 2022, the situation had stabilised enough that more regular travel was possible again. The long period of travel restrictions had affected our relationships with community members, and we often found ourselves restarting conversations that had stalled during the pandemic. For example, it became necessary to re-establish what archaeology was focused on and what

limitations there would be in archaeological studies, both for community and researchers. Nonetheless we were able to continue and make progress, while still holding to the community-oriented ethos framing the project from the outset. Community members participated in workshops focusing on objects and cultural landscapes, and at a series of public days for Australian South Sea Islanders during our excavations at Pioneer Mill outside of Brandon (see below).

We organised a symposium presenting project results for the 2023 Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology conference, which members of the research team volunteered to host in Mackay specifically to encourage community involvement. The symposium was attended by Australian South Sea Islanders from the community, and crucially several papers were presented by Australian South Sea Islander researchers who were involved in our project. This level of community participation was an important fulfilment of our goal to integrate Australian South Sea Islanders into the entirety of the research process, including bridging the divide between “community” and “professionals” in disciplinary practice. Below we reflect on our ongoing collaborations, offering perspectives of community research with Australian South Sea Islanders within cultural workshops, in the museum collections, and during archaeological fieldwork.

### COMMUNITY WORKSHOPS, OBJECTS AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

In our efforts to implement community-led research, we considered different approaches to ensuring community voices were present and heard. One such approach was the delivery of a series of community workshops that focussed on objects from both inside and outside the museum, and on cultural landscapes. These workshops were entwined with research interests within the project but were also designed to allow conversations to be led by community workshop participants from outside of the project team. In part, the workshops were inspired by work with the Australian South Sea Islander Kastom collection cared for by the QM in Brisbane. We had observed many gaps in the collection, finding that often objects do not actually speak to or reflect the diversity of stories in contemporary Queensland communities such as those of Australian South Sea Islanders. We recognised that we needed to go beyond the museum, where historically stories have been told about people, and not necessarily representing community perspectives. Similarly, we considered that discussions around cultural landscapes – the layers of the landscape in which people have lived over time – can become more relevant and community-centred when they take place in or near the actual locale. We needed to take conversations about objects, places and people into the community to better understand the stories that are important in, for and to, the community.

In approaching the workshops, we were ever mindful of protocols, putting into place the necessary processes to

respect community needs and wishes. There is no “one size fits all” but we based our approach on several fundamental tenets and were guided by established community protocols. First were our responsibilities to people – both for the community and for the research team. For example, in Mackay we organised protocol sessions with University of Queensland students participating in fieldwork, so they could hear directly from community members and be aware of cultural sensitivities and ways of communicating. Second, privacy was a major consideration. Stories would not be recorded without consent, community members could share stories and ask for them not to be shared further, and we respected that some stories were not shared with us. Third, we were committed to continuing relationships, meaning visits before and after the workshops, regularly reporting on them and other project activities, with the option to give feedback. For example, we organised regular community meetings and liaised with local representative organisations such as MADASSIA, RASSIC, RASSIUC, Joskeleigh Community Association and QUASSIC, while also paying respect to and engaging Traditional Owners (many Australian South Sea Islanders also identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander). A fourth fundamental tenet was around respecting time. Working with communities relies on people being willing to share their time and acknowledging that activities connected with a research project may not be a priority. This was also supported by employing RAs from the community, thus recognising the time and expertise of community members, while contributing to capacity building.

Six workshops were run in Mackay, Ayr, Joskeleigh and Rockhampton from 2021 to 2023. Each one was attended by dozens of Australian South Sea Islanders. To embed a community-led approach within our workshops, we gave much consideration to their development, ensuring they were delivered in the community, for the community, and provided ample opportunities for organic conversations and different people’s voices to be heard. Our aim was to create spaces for Australian South Sea Islander community members to come together, with individuals welcome to join both locally and from further afield. The workshops offered a moment in time away from daily life for people to discuss stories and topics that interested and were significant to them. We wanted to embrace alternate ways of history making and telling, by making spaces to sit down together to talk and listen, and to encourage intergenerational sharing (Figure 3). The format allowed the centring of potentially previously overlooked stories that are important or significant to community but might not feature in dominant historical narratives. We discuss the format of the workshops themselves as a form of community methodology here, rather than the actual stories, objects or places we recorded which are a matter for future research.

The workshops created space for the research team to be led by the community in terms of what foci emerged throughout the session. From a museum perspective, we hoped the workshops could help us to understand material culture connected with Australian South Sea Islanders held

FIGURE 3. Community discussions during a cultural mapping workshop in Joskeleigh.



by QM, as well as regional and private collections. The presence and significance of individual stories as well as shared community and family stories that emerged through the workshops, together with the spread of stories over time – from the late 19th century, through deportation at the beginning of the twentieth century, stories of depression era employment and the impacts of the Second World War – all serve to highlight that Australian South Sea Islander history is not just about mid to late 19th-century sugar plantation stories. Underlying the shared stories, and the communities' desire to tell histories beyond the sugar trope, is a compelling objective of reclaiming and celebrating identity. In the longer term, we anticipated this could lead to outcomes such as an exhibition or digital stories, but the direction for this must be led by the Australian South Sea Islander communities.

Another theme that emerged from the workshops was community interest in the continuing Pacific traditions of plant use, especially cultivation of specific varieties of taro, banana and mango that have been maintained from the 19th century. Preliminary discussions also took place about the possibilities for mapping of culturally important trees and other vegetation indicative of Australian South Sea Islander community presence. This resulted in the recording of culturally important plants at Old Homebush Mission Hall and identification of several sites for future recording work.

Practically speaking, the workshops followed a defined framework in terms of the where, why, who and how. They were each planned to run over two days for four hours a day in community-nominated locations, with food provided, and time scheduled to allow flexibility. Within the workshop framework we devised a set of questions for the first day,

inviting participants to discuss objects and artefacts that are important to them, who they felt were the prominent people in the community, what places they identified as significant, and events they felt were important. The second day prioritised what the community wanted to talk about, influenced by conversations that emerged on the first day. We brought with us or borrowed locally different objects, photographs, books, and other ephemera for people to look at and discuss, as well as inviting participants to bring their own materials. Overall, the workshops were not prescriptive, in that there was space for the conversations to develop dynamically. Allowing time for community-style communication was important.

As part of these discussions, place, and the visibility or otherwise of important places to the community, was identified by communities as a key priority in documenting their histories. As cultural landscape mapping was a planned component of the research, and in an effort to again ensure opportunities to learn through doing and skills sharing, we undertook additional trips with community groups in each location to visit places regarded as important for local Australian South Sea Islander histories. Shared stories about places demonstrated the importance of histories beyond sugar and blackbirding, such as the establishment of places for living, worshipping, education and recreation. The cultural landscapes were multi-layered and, for the community, spoke to increasing presence and visibility, linked through time to community agency. The multi-generational aspects of the workshops allowed younger community members to understand more of their history, and the same interactions allowed Elders to share stories with children and grandchildren throughout

workshops, community meetings, interviews, visits to archaeological sites and community trips through a multifaceted landscape.

A fundamental aim for the concept of community-led research was creating a “community of researchers”, whereby project researchers and community members made up one comprehensive research team. We also hoped that by offering opportunities to learn through doing and skills sharing, we were opening possibilities for people to continue this research without us there or even being involved in the future. Each community had familiar yet individual experiences or identities – from family connections to islands of origin, those who live on rivers to people who live near the beach or on farms. The opportunity of learning skills to document these histories, for example by mapping places using GPS and recording sheets, in community by community, afforded by the workshops, was invaluable.

### THE AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER KASTOM COLLECTION AT QUEENSLAND MUSEUM

Community perspective for histories is particularly relevant in thinking about museum collections. As institutions heavily imbued with colonialist ethnographic framing, museums are stepping (albeit at different paces) towards “decolonisation” (Lee, 2023). The collection of artefacts associated with the South Sea Island labour trade and material culture of Pacific islands held by QM provide fertile ground for understanding and working towards re-interpreting colonial collections with a community centred focus and revealing different histories.

The Australian South Sea Islander Kastom Collection was conceptualised in 1998, building somewhat on the official Recognition four years earlier while also continuing a longer-term research trajectory in the QM. It was the outcome of collaborative work between two QM staff; then Senior Curator of Oceanic Anthropology, Michael Quinnell, and Imelda Miller, a curator with Australian South Sea Islander heritage, who was employed specifically to explore collection material connected to Australian South Sea Islanders. Quinnell and Miller saw that QM cared for artefacts with connections to Australian South Sea Islander history and ancestors, as well as some more contemporary materials, but that these connections were not always clear. By conceptualising these items as an assemblage of objects with overlapping and interconnected narratives and interpretations, the Kastom Collection was intended to reframe the material in terms of its Australian South Sea Islander stories, heightening community visibility and opening the door to community-based researchers and projects. This was not intended to obscure those Pacific Islander focused narratives connected to the original makers and owners of material, but rather to acknowledge and celebrate the rich and complex narratives these objects embody. The Melanesian Pidgin term *kastom* (often glossed

as “tradition” but invoking a much broader constellation of practices, materials and relationships) was chosen to reflect Australian South Sea Islander identities, ancestral links across the Pacific, as well as tangible and intangible heritage, including materials and practices that are no longer contemporary in the community.

There were three broad categories of material to be included in the Kastom Collection: things that travelled to Queensland with South Sea Islanders in the 1863 to 1904 period; things that South Sea Islanders made or used in Queensland from that period; and material connected to Australian South Sea Islanders today (descendants). A decision was made to include some items with likely connections to South Sea Islander ancestors, with the idea that later in-depth research might clarify this further. Many of the objects in the first category came to QM through people who were connected to the period of South Sea Islander labour trade in all its forms, including ships’ captains and government agents of labour vessels, immigration officers and, occasionally, South Sea Islanders themselves. The initial survey of what could be included in the Kastom Collection focused largely on material from Vanuatu and Solomon Islands as these are the island nations that South Sea Islanders predominantly came from. In the initial survey approximately 700 objects were selected as part of the newly designated collection.

Collections, museums and communities are not static. Since initial work on the Kastom Collection, developments beyond the museum have led to increased visibility for the Australian South Sea Islander community. Official State and Federal Recognition has brought about more conversations around how the community sees itself and how that is expressed (Hayes, 2002; Wickler, 2014). Likewise, within the field of museums, there has been increasing interest in celebrating and elevating stories of original makers and owners of so-called ethnographic material, as well as connecting that material with related descendant communities and individuals (e.g., Kreps, 2020). While some of the initial criteria for inclusion of material in the Kastom Collection was around connecting it to particular collectors’ histories in the sugar industry, the idea was always to reframe this material and recentre the narrative around South Sea Islanders. In light of developing postcolonial and decolonial approaches to collections within museums, this has continued to be a focus as we expanded research into the Kastom Collection as part of our project.

Our recent research aimed to continue developing our understanding of this cultural material (Figure 4). This included exploring more visible details from the museum documentation about individual objects in the Kastom Collection, such as who put the objects in QM and when, as well as examining less transparent stories. We also wanted to look beyond material from Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Our research examined material from New Caledonia, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and Fiji that could also meet the collection criteria, given that we know that people from these locations were entwined in the broader



FIGURE 4. Work in progress on the Kastom Collection.



Pacific Islands labour trade. Above all, we wanted to engage the community using the collection, both in the physical space of QM, and out in the community by bringing photographs of objects in the Kastom Collection to our workshops. While the pandemic limited our ability to carry out some planned activities, having community represented in the Kastom Collection, and vice versa, remains a significant objective.

Another thing that emerged from community discussions was ideas about gaps or absences in the Kastom Collection, including stories not currently well represented and more contemporary material reflecting Australian South Sea Islanders' lived experiences. We began contextualising other formal and informal collections as part of our work beyond the museum, some of which connect to the collection at QM, but offer new stories too. This includes material cared for and displayed by Australian South Sea Islander community organisations, or family collections at local museums like Pioneer Valley Museum, Mirani. Personal and private objects hold even more stories, which people are keen to preserve within their own families to share with future generations. In addressing absences, there is a need to make spaces for community voices, whether that be in state or national collections, or in regional or community owned and run museums. The community workshops described above were important in this aspect of collections work, opening up dialogue around objects, as well as people and places. However, more needs to be done to continue developing layered and networked narratives around collections, and to promote access for Australian South Sea Islander individuals or communities so that they can take the lead to share their own stories.

### EXCAVATING AUSTRALIAN SOUTH SEA ISLANDER LIVES AT PIONEER MILL

Direct Australian South Sea Islander involvement in archaeological fieldwork was always one of the project's objectives. This could range from observation of survey and excavation methods, to participation in digging, sieving and processing artefacts. Our main excavation site was Pioneer Mill, just outside of Brandon and near the larger regional centre of Ayr. Initial archaeological survey work at Old Homebush Mill outside of Mackay, undertaken in 2021, was promising, but environmental contamination made excavation unfeasible (Mate et al., 2021). At Pioneer Mill we found a suitable location, with an extensive documentary record that permitted us to identify areas with good potential for preserving archaeological remains, specifically of South Sea Islander domestic sites.

The Pioneer Sugar Estate (today the Pioneer Mill) was established by John Spiller and Henry Brandon in 1880 on two consolidated land grants totalling 5064 acres (LAN/AG810, QSA; Connolly, 1964, p. 39). Between around 1881 and 1906, hundreds of South Sea Islanders were employed on the property under agreements ranging in length from one to three years. The South Sea Islander workforce were housed in four large grass huts east of the mill manager and field manager's residences (Drysdale n.d. PMR/Misc/60, CT/1/4b:9). Smaller dwellings, occupied by single women or perhaps family groups, were also recorded on the estate grounds in Queensland Coronial Inquest files (CI ITM2726826 QSA). Following the departure of Pioneer Mill's South Sea Islander workforce in September 1906 (Brown to Donald, 28 September 1906, p. 234 PMR/LB/5

JCU), their domestic landscapes appear to have been left vacant and undeveloped. Today, the land is owned by Wilmar Sugar, which continues to operate an active sugar mill on the property.

As a historical archaeological site connected to Queensland's sugar industry, Pioneer Mill is unique in two respects. First, despite several changes in ownership since 1881, its broader landscape has remained relatively undisturbed and largely intact, with much of its original configuration preserved. Secondly, an almost complete estate archive, dating to the mill's purchase in 1883 by Drysdale Brothers and Company comprising many metres of letterbooks, financial records and photographs, has been conserved and is held at the James Cook University Special Collections Library, Townsville. Work in this and other local archives in tropical Queensland was one of the major activities for Australian South Sea Islander RAs and other members of the research team. Further archives are also stored at the Queensland State Archives and State Library of Queensland in Brisbane, Noel Butlin Archives at the Australian National University in Canberra, and the University of St Andrews Special Collections in Fife, Scotland. These records offer valuable (yet Eurocentric) insights into the lives and conditions of South Sea Islanders who resided and worked on the estate, including notes on their clothing, health, diet and interpersonal relationships. For an estate archive of this scale to survive is rare, particularly one where the materiality and presence of South Sea Islanders is so well documented and the landscape so intact.

Today, direct historical connections between the contemporary Australian South Sea Islander community and Pioneer Mill are complex. While many community members hold associations with the mill through employment within the last fifty years, there are no known surviving descendants from its nineteenth and early 20th century workforce in the Burdekin Shire or surrounds today (pers. comm. P. Mercer 18 November, 2023). Many former workers were young men who either returned to their islands prior to or during the 1906 deportations or became untraceable in the historical record. However, there are several members of the community who descend from employees engaged at other contemporaneous mills operating in the region, such as Seaforth and Kalamia which were established in 1880 and 1881, respectively (Griggs, 2000, p. 633; O'Brien, 1952, p. 239, p. 241). Nevertheless, Pioneer Mill's historical connections to Queensland's nineteenth-century sugar industry and the South Pacific labour trade make it an important place for the Australian South Sea Islander community, simultaneously connecting them to their past and present identities.

Prior to commencement of the Pioneer Mill archaeological programme in 2021, meetings, consultation and information sessions were held in-person and online with members of the Australian South Sea Islander community. Details about the excavations, and requests for community participation, were also shared through the project's quarterly newsletter and social media. Information

sessions were developed to discuss the archaeological process with community members, respond to questions about the proposed fieldwork and seek feedback on our research approach. The first formal session was presented over Zoom due to COVID-19 travel related restrictions. It took place in November 2021 in conjunction with an in-person landscape mapping and Kastom Collection workshop at the Burdekin Sports Club, Ayr. The workshop was attended by at least fifteen community members. While this initial information session was positively received, informal discussions that may have generated questions and feedback between the project archaeologist and community were difficult to develop online. This experience reflects some of the limitations and challenges associated with virtual community consultation and the realities of forming meaningful connections when communicating online, particularly in contexts of initial conversations.

Excavations at Pioneer Mill took place over two seasons in April and July 2022 and ran for six weeks in total. To introduce Australian South Sea Islander community members to the site and archaeological process, a Community Open Day, funded by Wilmar Sugar, was held at the mill on the first weekend of the April field season. This was attended by over 20 community members as well as Wilmar Sugar employees and their families. The Open Day offered an opportunity to engage with the landscape, see the excavation in progress, and in many cases, visit the estate grounds for the first time. We found that this was an important step towards making the landscape and archaeological component of the project accessible to the community. Throughout the remainder of each field season, community members from Ayr, Home Hill and the surrounding region visited the site most days, sharing stories, observing the excavations and assisting with components of the archaeological fieldwork.

Community site visits were a positive experience for everyone involved, and facilitated meaningful connections between visitors, the project team, excavation volunteers and Wilmar Sugar employees (Figure 5). However, there were several challenges involved in this process, most notably the strict work health and safety policies involved in working on an active sugar mill that limited the types of archaeological activities community visitors could participate in. For example, for community members to excavate using hand tools such as shovels and trowels, they were required to complete online inductions, something that was not always practicable for people who only intended to visit the site for a short time or chose to drop by spontaneously. While this created a barrier between community members and aspects of the archaeological excavations, alternative activities such as sieving – which doubled as an opportunity to talk casually with members of the research team – could be carried out. Another challenge was the limited time available for some of the project team and community to be present together in the landscape and discuss the excavations and community's expectations in a mutually meaningful way. Slower, more considered moments together may have benefited everyone, yet this is

FIGURE 5. Australian South Sea Islanders from Ayr attending excavations in progress at Pioneer Mill.



not always achievable when working under strict timeframes and managing large groups of volunteers on complex sites. One way we addressed these challenges was through afternoon teas, dinners and barbeques that were attended by Australian South Sea Islander community members, project volunteers and the project team. From a collaborative perspective, these informal events were important because they generated casual conversations, storytelling and facilitated ongoing connections.

Following the completion of the final field season in July 2022, ongoing community involvement was initiated through workshops, updates in the quarterly newsletter, data processing and social gatherings. In October 2022 and June 2023, two workshops were held at the Burdekin Uniting Church Hall in Ayr to update community members on post-excavation activities. The October workshop was led by members of the project team who presented their preliminary findings and permanent repository options for artefacts recovered during each field season. The June 2023 workshop included artefact processing and analysis and further artefact repository consultation through questionnaires and an information session. Our primary aim was to ensure that community access and engagement with the site and its artefact assemblage could continue beyond the end of the project. Each workshop provided a space to share photographs, memories and anecdotes, which were often connected back to artefacts collected from the site. For example, buttons recovered during fieldwork invited reflections on the significant role that clothing played in the lives of the parents and grandparents of the current

generation, who used fashion as a way to empower themselves and their community.

Another key aim of the project was to make archaeology accessible to the Australian South Sea Islander community, not simply by facilitating access to an archaeological site, but by introducing career pathways into the discipline. While this is an ongoing goal that requires long term planning and community collaboration, an element of this was achieved by working with one of the project's RAs with Australian South Sea Islander heritage to process environmental data recovered from the site.

Archaeobotanical processing was carried out at the University of Queensland in Brisbane and included flotation and analysis to identify seeds and charred food remains. By incorporating this into the archaeological component of the project, we were able to demonstrate the multifaceted nature of archaeology as a discipline, as well as develop an alternative approach to community collaboration outside of the fast-paced and time constrained environment of an archaeological excavation. Archaeobotanical data continues to be analysed at the time of writing, and reports will be returned to the community once analysis is complete.

This component of our paper has demonstrated the methods employed to integrate archaeology into the project through consultation and engagement. While we achieved several of our aims, and excavations had a positive impact on the Australian South Sea Islander community and the project team, in order for a genuinely community-led excavation to occur in the future, communities must have the tools available to develop an approach that works for

and is meaningful to them. Whether this is achieved through encouraging young people and adults who identify as Australian South Sea Islanders to pursue study in the humanities and social sciences, attend field schools, participate in dedicated community archaeological projects, or collaborating with researchers and communities (see Agbe-Davies, 2010; Flewelling et al., 2022), it requires long term planning and consistent engagement. We hope that by continuing our archaeological work with community members in the future, either through ensuring accessible collections and online resources, or through further fieldwork, Australian South Sea Islander individuals and communities will seek to investigate their own research questions through archaeological frameworks.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Ultimately, our application of a community-led methodology in the project achieved mixed results. In an earlier publication (Robinson et al., 2021), we reflected on the ways that the grant application process caused us to compromise or reframe how we presented our approach to community collaboration. Having reached the other side of the project, we can see that the process of community archaeology with Australian South Sea Islanders further altered or redirected us in our pursuit of previously stated aims or objectives. One dynamic that was particularly striking is a contrast between the kinds of overarching, synthetic aims that typify many research proposals, seeking to pull together large quantities and multiple sources of information into a single place, which is at odds with the tendency of community research to fragment, individualise, and focus on specificities at a local level. Our experiences working with Australian South Sea Islander communities have caused us to step back from plans to create a singular, unified story of their histories and lived identities. Rather, our work proceeded through conversations with small groups of people, on the ground, in the unique places they are attached to. This is likely a common dynamic in community archaeology, particularly among Indigenous communities, where concepts like “big data” and grand synthesis are abandoned in favour of following varied and disparate research directions defined with or by the community (e.g., Byrne & Nugent, 2004; Fowler et al., 2014).

On one hand, we can point to a multitude of instances of “successful” community engagement and involvement with the project, from the meetings where we discussed what we wanted to do in partnership with Australian South Sea Islanders, the community RAs employed through the project, collaborative workshops and fieldwork, to community involvement with project outcomes (including the authorship of this paper). On the other hand, there are some frustratingly pervasive ways that we were limited in how deeply and broadly we could draw people in from the community during the research process. The pandemic can be blamed for much of this. Disruption of the project just at

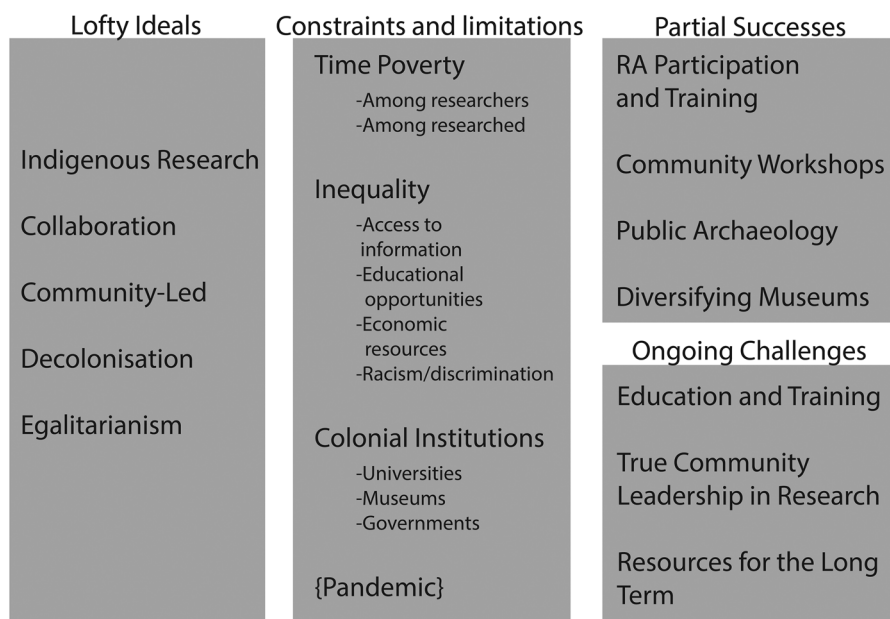
the point where we had developed relationships that would allow us to go ahead credibly and with confidence that we had done enough to justify and support our activities threw things off course at the worst possible moment.

At the same time, there are some institutional and real-world constraints that would have limited how much collaborative research could be truly “community-led” regardless of the chaos wrought by COVID-19. The biggest constraint is the fact that most researchers *as well as community members* are extremely time-poor (Giurge et al., 2020). We are limited by academic or institutional calendars, and our professional responsibilities outside of the communities in which we do our work. For community members, everyday life persists in between and during field seasons or workshops. Children need to be raised and educated, adults have to make a living, birthdays and weddings are celebrated, illnesses dealt with, funerals observed. Within this dynamic in most community archaeology projects, we would be wise to remember that the archaeologists are the only ones for whom archaeology is likely to be the main priority (e.g., Thompson, 2011). We would suggest that this holds true for researchers engaged with Indigenous research in general (see also Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

So why carry on? Because even if archaeology or research is not a community’s first priority, it nonetheless is a collaborative opportunity to learn about new or little-known knowledge, bringing information and ideas into public attention, and providing a space where people have agency in the exploration of their own histories, identities and heritage. In many ways our collaborations with Australian South Sea Islanders could not live up to the community-led ideal, yet we were able to offer people spaces, tools and opportunities to discuss objects and places, or just be together. Archaeological fieldwork included the first excavations of sugar mills and the domestic spaces of South Sea Islander labourers in tropical Queensland, offering community an opportunity to witness their own history as it emerged from the ground. Equally importantly, the project provided a reason for Australian South Sea Islanders to come together and experience their shared culture and history. For some people this included participating in the excavation and artefact analysis processes. For others, it was simply about coming for a cup of tea and a yarn.

The project created potential links for further collaborative research within Australian South Sea Islander communities and opened the door for community groups and individuals to take the initiative in carrying out research on their own terms. Our transparent approach to presenting academia, museums, archaeology, and cultural heritage has helped to raise awareness about what we do, what our institutions are (for better and worse), and the possibilities of Australian South Sea Islander cultural research going into the future. There is still immense and unrealised potential in this area, and at minimum we are hopeful that this project can inspire additional collaborative research within the groups we have engaged with as well as across

FIGURE 6. Diagram of ideals in community archaeology, institutional as well as societal constraints and limitations, areas where we were able to make progress, and ongoing challenges to continue to negotiate going into the future.



other Australian South Sea Islander groups in Queensland and northern New South Wales.

For community archaeology more generally, and especially in archaeologies of Indigenous Australia, we believe our experiences provide valuable lessons for the field (Figure 6). While we acknowledge the unique aspects of working with Australian South Sea Islanders (see also Hayes, 2002; Moore, 1992), there are commonalities that are likely to ring true for many projects going forward. The first point is the need to invest large amounts of time and energy in building relationships, something that goes against the fast capitalist ethos of both universities (Flexner & Frieman, 2024) and contract archaeology (Gnecco & Dias, 2015). There is great merit to moving slowly and carefully in community partnerships, both because of cultural sensitivities and a duty of care, and because a slow approach results in a deeper understanding of communities past and present. Slow science (Cunningham & MacEachern, 2016) and related projects like degrowth (Flexner, 2020) provide important correctives to an increasingly metrics and productivity-oriented field, particularly as research is demonstrating increasing signs of stress, disillusionment and burnout in and beyond Australian archaeology (e.g., Mate & Ulm, 2021).

The second key point is to meet communities on their own terms. As archaeologists, our priorities and pet interests might not match with the interests of the people whose ancestral places we study. For example, the obsession with “oldests, firsts, and biggest” might need to be set aside where people are more interested in a more recent past, or stories of everyday life on the margins. The final point is not to get too comfortable and complacent about community archaeology. Community relationships

are always a work in progress. Compromises are a necessity, created because of tensions between researchers, communities and institutional priorities. Archaeologists need to keep pushing the boundaries both within and outside of the organisations where we work if we want to build a research environment that is more just and equitable for our community partners.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no material conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There are no data associated with this article beyond the cited references.

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