

The team (from left): Jasmine Togo-Brisby, Artist in Residence; Partner Investigator (PI) Prof. Pia Wiegmink, BCDSS; PI Dr Margaret Mishra, University of the South Pacific; PI Dr Oliver Lueb, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne; Prof. Penny Edmonds, Lead Chief Investigator (CI), Flinders University; Dr Kirsten McGavin, Post Doctoral Fellow, Flinders University; CI Prof. Deirdre Coleman, Melbourne University; PI Imelda Miller, Queensland Museum, Kurilpa

'UNFREEDOM, VOICES, REDRESS: PLANTATION CULTURES OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC'- ONE YEAR ON

Project Reflections by Penny Edmonds and Imelda Miller

The Australian Research Council-funded project *Unfreedom, Voices, Redress: Plantation Cultures of the Western Pacific*, developed in partnership with the Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) and Partner Investigator Prof. Dr Pia Wiegmink, has now completed its first year. Bringing together an international team, the project is already reshaping how scholars, curators, and communities engage with the histories and legacies of Pacific labour, slavery, and unfreedom.

This interdisciplinary team of scholars, artists, and curators hope to mobilise cultural, material, and creative approaches to examine the often-overlooked histories of slavery and unfreedom across Anglo and German plantation systems. These histories span Queensland, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, and Sāmoa, regions deeply entangled in nineteenth-century labour trafficking networks and imperial expansion. By linking archives in English and German and foregrounding Pacific voices, particularly those of women, the team seeks to create new knowledge about plantation lives, the unfreedom of the Pacific labour trade, and their enduring legacies. Drawing together rich and understudied archival materials, testimony, material culture, and artistic practice, the project pioneers innovative forms of research that aim not only to uncover the past but also to reflect on and redress historical harm of the Pacific labour trade.



Penny Edmonds
Lead Chief Investigator, Matthew Flinders Professor of History at Flinders University, Adelaide



Imelda Miller
Partner Investigator and Curator of First Nations Cultures at Queensland Museum, Kurilpa

The collaboration between Penny Edmonds and Imelda Miller lies at the heart of this initiative. Having first met several years ago, they shared a vision of working together to connect archival research with community knowledge and museum collections, particularly in collaboration with Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) communities.

Penny Edmonds, Matthew Flinders Professor of History at Flinders University and Lead Chief Investigator on the project, brings extensive expertise in nineteenth-century British empire and colonialism in Australia and the Western Pacific. Her work addresses themes of colonisation, humanitarianism, slavery, unfreedom, and processes of public reconciliation and redress.

"Much of my work has been to place Australia and the Western Pacific back into the big global debates on empire, colonisation, race, unfreedom and slavery, human rights, reconciliation and matters of redress," she explains.

Edmonds' career also spans the arts and cultural heritage sectors. She has held roles at Museums Victoria in Melbourne and the Australian Museum in Sydney, as well as serving as an Andrew Mellon Fellow in Heritage at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. This breadth of experience informs her commitment to interdisciplinary and creative work, and to place the Western Pacific in the world.

"Bringing archives, museum collections, creative practice and communities together in this way is incredibly powerful," she notes. "It's the kind of interdisciplinary work I am most passionate about."

Imelda Miller is Partner Investigator and Curator of First Nations Cultures at Queensland Museum. A museum curator with South Sea Islander heritage, Miller works closely with material culture and archival collections to improve access for communities of origin. Her work is grounded in cultural practice, sustained engagement, and community-led research.

At least 65,000 Western Pacific peoples were brought to the colony of Queensland, voluntarily or by force, to work in the sugar cane fields, farms, or as domestic servants in the nineteenth century. The descendants of these people refer to themselves as Australian South Sea Islanders.

Miller's recent and highly successful exhibition at Queensland Museum, called *Say Our Name: Australian South Sea Islanders* (2024), marked a significant milestone: the 30th anniversary of official recognition of Australian South Sea Islanders (ASSI) as a distinct cultural group by the Australian Government in 1994.



In the collection store looking at the Kastom Collection, Queensland Museum. From left: Jasmine Togo-Brisby, Kirsten McGavin, Deirdre Coleman, Melbourne University; PI Imelda Miller. The collection consists of over 700 objects, primarily focusing on items from Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. It represents the lived experiences and cultural heritage of the descendants of South Sea Islanders who were brought to Queensland to work in the sugar industry. Photo: Penny Edmonds

The exhibition brought together community stories, museum collections, archival documentation, photographs, and contemporary artworks. It offered a powerful reflection on the history, identity, and ongoing experiences of descendants of Pacific Islanders whose labour—both free and unfree—was central to the development of the Australian sugar industry. The exhibition showcased community voices and emphasised the importance of representation and recognition. Miller hopes to travel this groundbreaking exhibit to the Pacific Islands, where origin communities are based.

Edmonds, Miller and the team have a shared commitment to collaboration, innovation, and social impact so that Australian South Sea Islander and Western Pacific communities benefit from this research. Their work asks pressing questions: What does it mean to live in the wake of Pacific slavery and unfreedom? What strategies of resilience and redress can be found through creative arts practice, archives, and museums? And how might new pathways of connection be forged between artists, researchers, museums, and communities?

Over the past year, the team has convened several workshops in Australia, bringing together Australian and German partners, including Pia Wiegmink and Oliver Lueb, Deputy Director, Curator Oceania, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of the World. These gatherings have provided opportunities to share research, develop methodologies, and engage directly with collections and community perspectives.

An addition to the workshop in Brisbane was a day with interested ASSI community members. A day of sharing about our project, community projects and to hear their perspective on their own work as researchers and knowledge holders.

International collaboration has also been a key component of the project. Meetings and research activities in Bonn and Cologne have strengthened ties between partner institutions and facilitated the integration of German-language archives into the project's broader framework. This transnational approach is essential for understanding the interconnected histories of plantation economies and labour mobility in the Western Pacific.

In late 2025, the team presented their research at the Pacific History Association conference in Apia, Sāmoa—an important moment for sharing findings with regional scholars and communities. This year the team met in Bonn at BCDSS for the 'Queen Emma's networks' symposium, led by Pia Wiegmink and Oliver Lueb. Next year, we will hold a conference in Fiji hosted by Partner Investigator Margaret Mishra, and the University of South Pacific.

Unfreedom, Voices, Redress hopes to reframe how histories of slavery, unfreedom, gender and memory in the Pacific are studied and represented. By combining archival research with creative practice and community collaboration, the team is opening new pathways for understanding the past and its impact in the present.



The team at the 26th Pacific History Association conference at University of Sāmoa. The theme of the conference was 'Le Solosoloū: Resilience in the Face of Adversity'. From left, Deidre Coleman, Kirsten McGavin, Jasmine Togo-Brisby, Imelda Miller, and Penny Edmonds

PROJECT TEAM

Prof. Penny Edmonds, Lead Chief Investigator (CI), Flinders University
Prof. Deidre Coleman, Chief Investigator, Melbourne University

Prof. Pia Wiegmink, Partner Investigator, BCDSS, University of Bonn, Germany
Imelda Miller, Partner Investigator, Queensland Museum

Associate Prof. Margaret Mishra, Chief Investigator, University of the South Pacific
Jasmine Togo-Brisby, Artist in Residence

Dr. Oliver Lueb, Partner Investigator, Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, Cologne
Dr. Kirsten McGavin, Post Doctoral Fellow, Flinders University