

# The Invisible Cultural Heritage of the Australian South Sea Islanders

Julie Mitchell, [julie.mitchell@flinders.edu.au](mailto:julie.mitchell@flinders.edu.au)

PhD Candidate, Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia; IPinCH Fellow, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada

## Introduction – Past

Between 1860 and 1901, around 60 000 people were transported directly from traditional ways of life on 80 Pacific Islands to labour in colonial Australian sugar plantations. Evidence suggests that episodes of kidnapping and coercion tactics were used to fill the recruitment ships.

Multiple race relations restrictions controlling the Islanders culminated with most being deported in 1901, as part of a ‘White Australia policy’. Some 2000 Islanders remained however, and the current descendant community is around 40 000.

Effectively silenced from the nation’s history, they have been forced to inhabit a liminal position on the periphery of society. Denied acknowledgement of cultural identity, and separated by generations from the Pacific Islands, they lack a material connection to their Australian heritage.



‘Kanakanaka Story’, Childers



ASSI Local Memorial, Yasso Point



ASSI Memorial, Fishery Falls

## Method - Accessing memory

Remembering the ASSI past has an important role in understanding present day Australia, but memory in itself is not tangible, or static, or accessible in an archaeological context.

Therefore, to assess the current social memory of the ASSI event, while minimising possible inclusion/ exclusion biases, information was obtained from public local tourist information centres, and personal field observations, covering Queensland sugar growing areas.

This approach limited the data to that freely available to community outsiders, tapping local collective memory as these booths are staffed by volunteers, lessening any matrix of power/knowledge produced by either government departments, or ASSI invested stakeholders.

The resultant data base comprises 37 physical locations associated with community memory of ASSI labour.

## Aim - Present challenge

Today the Australian South Sea Islander (ASSI) communities are spread along thousands of kilometres of the Australian Coast, as were the original sugar plantations. This spatial separation, compounded by long standing post-colonial issues of identity, status, and ‘Kastom’ (traditional cultural values) passed down from various Islands of origin, complicates an inclusive ASSI sense of community at a socio-cultural level. Added to this is a distinct paucity of discernible material artefacts.

Several regional Islander organisations are actively collecting intangible cultural heritage, in the form of family and location specific oral histories, but a cohesive connection with the whole ASSI descendant narrative, the broader community, and temporal or spatial themes in Australian history is missing.

A comprehensive physical connection to time and place, positioning the ASSI community physically on the Australian landscape, has the potential to promote the social memory of the broader story of the original Islander labour diaspora and to provide a platform from which to build an encompassing cultural heritage knowledge base to which intangible heritage connections can be linked.

This chronological connection and sense of heritage and belonging for descendant and local communities, informs an inclusive shared history and expands the narrative of life in Australia to include ASSI heritage. The challenge is to identify and link places with social memory honouring of the ASSI event, rather than sites located within colonial Industry landscapes, offering inferred connections to a subaltern past.



ASSI Mosaic panel, Innisfail river front



‘Kanakanaka’ Memorial Hervey Bay Cemetery



ASSI Mural on shop wall, Bowen

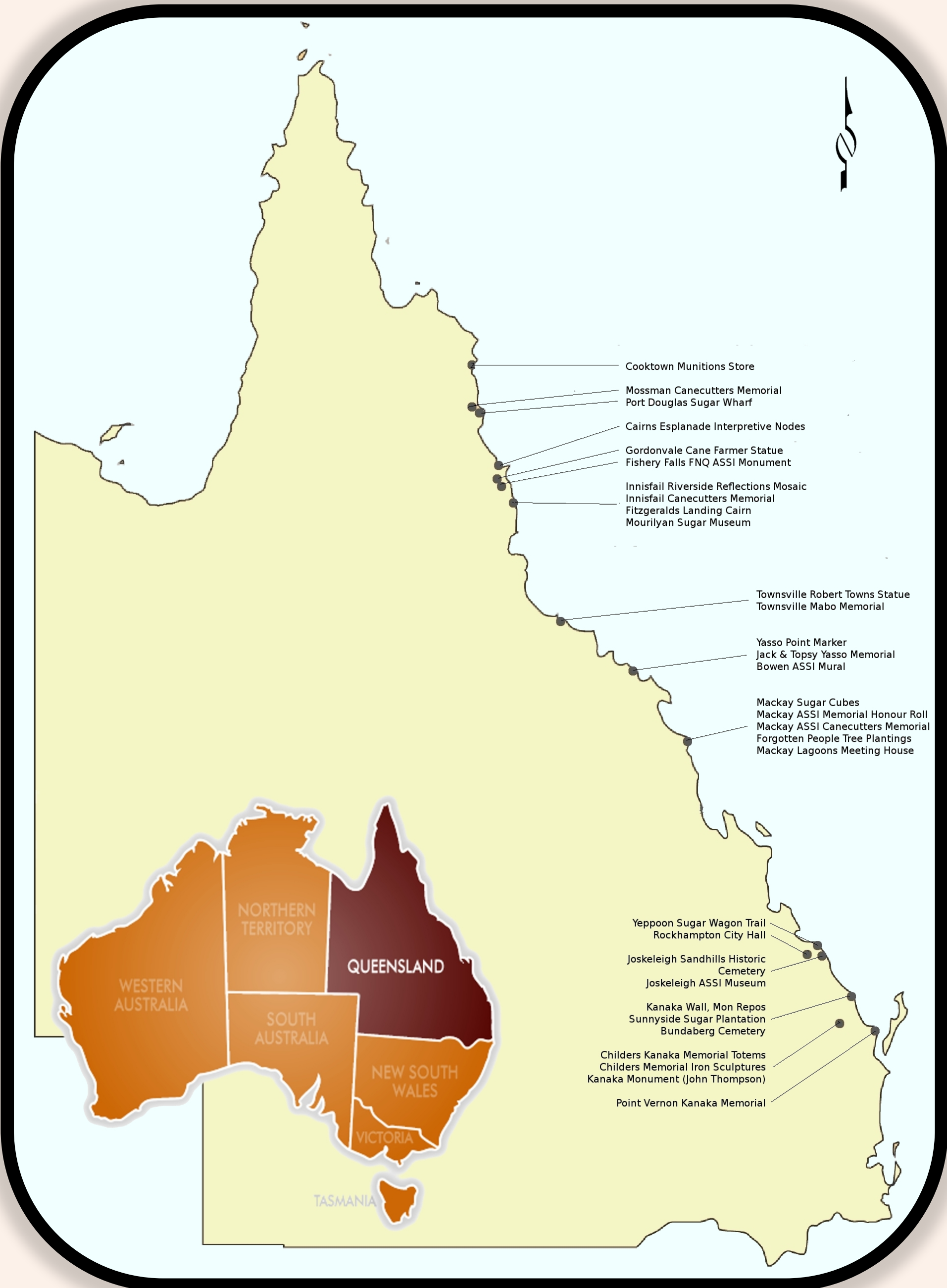
## Results - Material Memory

Physical remembrance of the ASSI appeared in various themes, styles and formats, reflecting changing societal attitudes and distinctive local approaches towards multiculturalism and the past. Local councils and public initiatives, from diverse levels of financial and socially inclusive organisation, created public sculptures and art works while individuals recognised and marked special places such as grave sites on private land.

Locations varied from formally recognised park areas, to sites still in common memory but now built over. Signage was often inadequate, sometimes using outdated terminology. From statues, cairns and memorials, to unmarked dry stone walls and community musical theatre events, the ASSI are remembered in a material form which is often on a local knowledge basis.

## Future

These sites can be seen as artefacts of memory, still present and part of local daily life. As such, they provide a physical dimension to an invisible cultural heritage, capable of change and reinterpretation as communities evolve to understand a more inclusive, multi-voiced past. Connecting and re-evaluating these sites in terms of their roles in constructing identity, locality and social memory in local communities, provides support for ASSI heritage and ideally, a virtual on-line heritage trail.



ASSI Memory Places identified by broader communities