

COMMENTARY

FOOD AND WORKING CONDITIONS ON NORTHERN VITI LEVU PLANTATIONS IN THE 1880s

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Archival research among the Minute Papers and Files from the Colonial Secretary's Office, 1879-1890, in connection with the history of Penang mill has revealed a considerable body of information relating to the food and working conditions of indentured labourers on sugar estates at Rarawai, Penang and Ellington in the 1880's. This was a period when Fiji plantations relied on Fijians, Melanesians and Indians for labour. Sometimes a plantation employed all three at once. Fijians were recruited from other districts on one-year indentured contracts, or if local, on various shorter term arrangements. Melanesians, always referred to at that time as "Polynesians", were recruited largely from the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) or the Solomons on three-year contracts. Although the Melanesians were the most important group in the 1870's, by the mid-80's recruiting had slowed to a trickle. Fortunately for the plantations, from 1879 onwards Indian indentured labourers on five year contracts made up the shortfall. Each group had its own conditions of employment laid down by the labour ordinances, the enforcement of which was in the inspectors of the Agent General for Immigration, and the district magistrates. In an isolated area such as Penang where visits of these officials

were few and irregular, it required only the addition of a harsh and unsympathetic manager for conditions for labour to be very bad indeed. During the 1880's Nathaniel Chalmers at the Penang Sugar Estate was just such a man. The scandal of the treatment of labour at Penang was such that a series of special reports and inspections were made at the direction of the Governor (C.S.O. 1550/87). These have survived when most other such material has not.

At Penang it is clear that conditions for the Melanesian labour were by far the worst. During the three years of their contract the estate was required to provide them with housing, medical care, food, soap, mats, blankets, sulus, and tobacco, and wages of about £3 per year. The estate was also required to bear the cost of introduction and repatriation. In 1887 Dr Bolton Corney inspected the Penang estate for the Agent General for Immigration. He found the Melanesian labour accommodated in a building level. This allowed rain to blow in onto an earth floor which had been worn to several inches below the level of the surrounding ground and had in consequence become a collecting point for moisture seeping in. Corney described it as "ill-designed" and "utterly bad for men to live in." (C.S.O. 1550/87).

The rations fed to the Melanesians were required to be recorded in the estate ration book. The pattern revealed is one of almost complete dependence upon the cheapest starchy foods available. The inspection report for Penang in January 1885 indicated that rice was issued on 31 days, supplemented by biscuits on one day, fish on two days, fresh meat on three days and coconuts on two days. On 21 days rice was the only food issued. Perhaps the inspector's complaints had some effect as the next year in May 1886 it was reported "No yams were issued: coconuts issued on 15 days. Rice, fish, mollases and meat rations all the month. The Fireboys in

addition to above received $\frac{1}{2}$ lb fish daily. The fish is very excellent California salmon." (C.S.O. 1550/87). The supply of yams, the preferred and most satisfactory basic food for the Melanesians was always a problem at Penang.

Local supplies were usually inadequate (yams were said to be "unsuitable to the area"), or totally lacking. Sometime supplies were brought in from Ba. The estates grew some food for the labourers and the 1887 report on Penang noted that there were eight acres in kumala and sweet cassava. The latter was disliked by the Melanesian labourers, some of whom complained that it made them vomit. Dr Corney considered it a valuable supplement and "a salutary change from rice or bananas", but found some of the cassava served to the Penang to be over-age, soapy in flavour and uneatable. He noted that the ration of cassava was recorded as five pounds per meal. At one period, because of the shortage of yams, Penang estate was given a special dispensation from the ordinances and was allowed to feed bread to the labourers for one meal daily provided a qualified baker was employed (C.S.O. 1550/87). On the matter of the scale of meat to be issued under the labour ordinances Chalmers wrote to Dr Corney in 1887 that, "The ration of two pounds of meat is I think excessive - the work on a plantation is not exhausting or long continued," and further justified this view by stating "they rarely see meat in their own towns" (C.S.O. 2629/87).

Labourers were expected to work for long hours on two meals a day. Mr Woods, the inspector reported in 1885 that the "Polynesians" were turned out at 6.00 a.m. and started work at 6.30 a.m. Their first meal came at 10.00 a.m. and their second (and last) when they knocked off at 5.00 p.m. It is scarcely surprising that a constant stream of complaints of theft of goats, turkey, fowls, coconuts and breadfruit from the estate emanated from the manager. While surround-

ing villagers played some part in these depredations there is no doubt that the estate labour force was clearly attempting to supplement and vary their rations (C.S.O. 3348/87). Likewise surrounding villages complained that their food gardens were constantly raided by the plantation labourers (C.S.O. 1648/80).

On many estates and particularly at Penang in the 1880's beating of labourers was normal practice. Numerous reports over the period 1880 to 1887 testify to this (C.S.O. 967/80, 996/80, 1550/87). Two men are known to have died after beatings, and it was the opinion of a number of government officers who minuted the relevant files that the deaths were a direct result of such assaults, even though for various legal reasons only one prosecution resulted. One Melanesian labourer with severely injured ears absconded and walked all the way to Suva to register a complaint which led to the conviction of Chalmers for assault. Yet another labourer who had run away on several occasions was chained to the steam pipes while he worked, and in a nearby hut at nights, for three weeks. Chalmers' own written admission of the facts still exists. He was saved from prosecution because of the lapse of time which made such action legally impossible at the time. Nevertheless, the Governor wrote sternly warning Chalmers of the penalty he might expect if there were any repetition of such behaviour.

Illness was frequent among the labourers, particularly dysentery. Few were admitted to the hospital which the labour ordinances required the estate to provide. The inspectors believed that men were deliverately turned away (C.S.O. 1550/87). Chalmers retorted that he found it more efficient to treat complaints at his office in the mill and that in many cases the labourers refused to go to hospital. He in fact argued for a change in the labour ordinance to make it an offence for sick

men not to report immediately, "I should at once see and prescribe for any 'patient'? with a 'pain in his back.' (Probably caused by the want of laying on of hands) or stick." (sic). Chalmers (unlike his brother Dr C.B. Chalmers) had no medical training whatsoever, and even if the labourers were admitted to hospital in 1886 the attendant, an Indian lad of 15 or 16 was completely untrained and had been ordered by Chalmers not to touch any of the medicines on pain of a sound beating. The only qualified medical assistance to be had was from Ba, but the doctor's visits which should have been monthly were often up to three months apart because of the distance and the doctor's weak eyes (C.S.O. 1550/87).

The mortality rate among the labourers was often extremely high, particularly among new arrivals. Out of 21 labourers who had arrived on the Meg Merrilees in July 1886, six had died of dysentery by December of that year. The epidemic which caused this loss was also responsible for the deaths of 120 out of a total labour force of 1038 on the New Zealand Sugar Company's Rarawai estate at Ba - a mortality rate of 11.5 percent. The state of medical science at the time is indicated by Dr Corney's explanation of these events as the result of the upturning of new soil. He wrote, "It is well known how fruitful a source of miasmatic emanations this has been in most countries, and the evidence of it in 1881, 82, and 84 in this Colony among Polynesians was indisputable. It is well known that those tonic influences in this country develop dysentery and anaemia for the most part."

Not all treatment of labour was considered bad by the inspectors. Conditions at the Ellington Estate (some six miles distant from Penang), in 1887 were held to be favourable in all respects. The "Polynesian" ration book for May, June and July of that year showed yams being fed on an average of 18 days a month and rice,

coconuts and sugar on the other days. Meat issues were not recorded but were said to be "over regulation". (C.S.O. 2186/87). Even at Penang there were on occasions when favourable comments were recorded. Mr J. Carruthers investigating complaints in August recorded "The Polynesians have a well fed and comfortable look that argues against the charge of insufficient food", and concluded that "the charge of underfeeding is wilfully false." The previous year the inspector had recorded that all the Penang labourers looked well except with the exception of the "Bouka Boys" who looked ill fed, a state which he attributed to their being fed too much rice.

Even Nathaniel Chalmers who was blamed for most of the bad conditions at Penang was said to have been exceptionally kind to some whom he considered to be good workers. Carruthers reported that when Chalmers considered such men to be genuinely ill, "he is exceedingly kind to them: takes them up to his house, feeds them broths and soups from his own kitchen, and looks after them well," but also went to say "but he is thoroughly merciless to those he decides are malingerers."

In summary, Melanesian labour arrived in poor physical condition, often suffering the effects of malaria, berri berri and yaws, and were subjected to harsh discipline, and unfamiliar and difficult labour on a diet which lacked a proper balance of carbohydrates and was badly deficient in vitamins and proteins. When to this was added unhealthy and overcrowded accommodation and medical treatment which was often inept and sometimes totally lacking, it is not suprising that mortality rates were so high. The employment of Melanesian labour during the 1880's on many estates, notably Penang and Rarawai is a dreadful chapter in Fiji's colonial history.

Indian indentured labourers seem on the whole to have been relatively better treated than

Melanesians. The Indian government appears to have had at least some favourable influence on the conditions under which their citizens worked overseas. Small though it was, when added to the proportion of Indians who were literate and vocally aware of their legal rights, it seems to have protected them from the excesses which were perpetrated upon the less sophisticated Melanesians. Nevertheless, conditions for Indians were still far from good. Most arrived in poor physical condition and unfit to complete a full daily work task. To ensure that they were properly fed during the commencement of their contracts the ordinance laid down that during a period of "acclimatization" the employer was required to supply rations. A marginal note on a report by Dr Corney on conditions at Rarawai in 1887 commented "5d per diem is allowed the Estate for Rations to Coolies. I think this is rather high. It was not when Ord. vi of 78 was enacted: 1½ lb rice, 1 oz cocoa nut oil or ghee, ¾ oz curry stuff, 2 oz sugar, 1 oz salt." The daily wage rates for completed tasks were one shilling for men and nine pence for women, from which the estate recovered the ration debt on a scale which allowed each worker to retain approximately half of his or her wages and credit the remainder to rations. Few were able to complete a full task and sickness led to days or weeks without income and thus, at Rarawai in 1887 the immigrants owed an average of £2.6.8 for rations at the end of their period of acclimatization (C.S.O. 1550/87).

Examples of tasks required of the immigrants were recorded by various inspectors. These varied with conditions. Women at Rarawai and Penang engaged in trashing and weeding sugar cane might expect to be set anything from 14 chains to 30 chains depending on the age of cane and the density of the weeds. The inspectors considered these tasks to be fair. Examples of men's tasks at one shilling per day included clearing an area of swamp 12 feet wide by three chains long ("disagreeable but not heavy"), cutting a fire-

belt 30 feet wide by $1\frac{1}{2}$ chains long, draining 280 cubic feet ("Not an excessive task in the soil at that place, though under certain conditions it would be much too great ... for a man of second rate physique and digging skill,") (C.S.O. 1550/87), or at Ellington, "loading $3\frac{1}{2}$ trucks: 18 cwt: $1\frac{1}{3}$ chains carry: crop did not look more than 15 to 20 tons: light task but complicated by small number of available trucks." (C.S.O. 2186/87). Some instances of tasks being considered unfair were recorded and in some cases they were reduced at the request of the inspectors (C.S.O. 1550/87), but mostly they were considered to be such that a good worker could complete the task within six hours, allowing them to complete their work by one or two o'clock.

One problem for immigrants was the price and availability of food. Often the only source was the estate store where prices were high. At Ba it was reported that poor quality rice was available at five pounds for one shilling and better quality for four pence per pound. At the same time at Penang rice of good quality was on sale at two pence per pound (C.S.O. 1550/87). Stores appear not to have been allowed to trade on Sundays which was often the only opportunity for the labourer to travel away from the estate (C.S.O. 3349/87). At Vagia estate it was recorded that as a result of a deal between the estate and the storekeeper the labourers were forced to travel five miles to Lindberg's store, the only one available, though they were allowed the use of an estate truck on the permanent tramway. Thus, access to stores selling food at competitive prices appears to have been deliberately made difficult at times and at others was virtually impossible.

If the five pence per day allowed the estate for feeding workers was approximately correct, it would have cost about 35 pence a week to feed a worker. Average week wages in June 1886 at Penang were 4s 8d (56 pence) for men and 3s 9d (45 pence) for women, leaving a little surplus for

other purchases and savings. At nearby Ellington the average weekly earning of 5s 6d at this time would have allowed a rather more affluent level of living.

Food was the root of other problems also. A letter from Chalmers to the Governor (C.S.O. 2629/87) remarked, "Recently the Magistrate decided that coolies could not be punished for buying rice from Fijian labourers on this estate nor could the latter be punished for selling it. Several coolies had bought 50 lbs of rice at a time for one and two shillings from the Fijians and having an abundance of cheap food stayed at home and would not come out to work - some being cunning enough to come to the hospital for medicine and so avoid being entered as "absent" from muster and work." He further alleged that the Fijians after selling their rations, "stripped every breadfruit and coconut on the estate," and thereby deprived the Melanesian labour of that food. Chalmers also complained that his obligation to feed his Fijian contract labour with 14 meals over the full seven days of the week at an alleged cost of four pence per day was too extensive when he could only work them for 5½ days. He claimed that it was cheaper to employ local Fijians at 5s 6d per week and leave them to provide their own food. Comments appended to this letter by Dr Corney indicated little sympathy with Chalmers' point of view and also noted that the relevant ordinance did allow prosecution of both buyers and sellers of estate rations.

On another occasion Chalmers wrote that he served out rations only to those actually at work but that the absentees were plundering his breadfruit and other trees. He commented, "They evidently think they are under no obligation to work - as they say they have no food but the converse of the proposition is correct - and until a magistrate opens their eyes they will continue to be absent." (C.S.O. 3348/87).

The picture which emerges from the reports of the inspectors of plantations and the correspondence between the various government servants and the estate managers is one of an often unhappy relationship. Managers were caught between the falling price of sugar and the demands of their creditors. They sought to get ever more work from their often reluctant labourers. To save expenses wherever possible they reduced rations served out and avoided expensive contractual obligations wherever possible. The tasks set were probably not particularly heavy for a strong healthy adult, but were probably extremely difficult for those who arrived after a debilitating sea voyage and after suffering the effects of years of bad nutrition and the many diseases endemic to Asia and the Pacific in the Nineteenth Century. The food provided by the estates, or available to lowly-paid workers appears to have been lacking in variety, vitamins, and protein, and when combined with bad housing, ineffective medical care, and heavy manual labour, was undoubtedly a prescription for high mortality and misery. One wonders whether more enlightened nutrition and treatment of workers might have been a far better policy for the estates on economic as well as the undeniable humanitarian grounds.