3 Planters, Traders and Labour in the South Pacific

In July 1879, the Dutch Consul General for Australia, New Zealand and Tasmania informed his Minister of Foreign Affairs in The Hague about a treaty just concluded between the German Empire and Samoa. With the French in New Caledonia, the British in Fiji and the Germans having obtained for the first time a firm footing in Polynesia, he concluded that a miniature Europe was taking shape in the Pacific.[1] He wrote about developments in the South Pacific in which the lead in European expansion had been taken by adventurers, enterprising individuals and commercial firms, turning to their respective governments to protect their newly acquired wealth and concessions or to assist them in keeping law and order. The 'civilised powers' as their statesmen continued to refer to their states, here and elsewhere, became caught up in the machinations of their nationals and consuls abroad, who at times with little scruples and backed by warships and Western firepower strove for local hegemony.

Around 1870, the South Pacific was 'empty' land: a part of the world inhabited by what Europeans considered to be uncivilised or semi-civilised peoples, governed by their own chiefs and rulers. Few Westerners had settled there and Western-dominated trade and economic exploitation were still in their infancy. Within years this was to change when cultivation of copra and cotton promised high returns.

An additional reason to turn to the island groups in the Pacific was the strategic importance attached to them for shipping. In a time that steam power was replacing wind power, ocean-going shipping companies, traders and, in their wake, governments started to look at them as a junction of inter-Pacific sea routes. Fiji was said to be located along the 'highway of commerce' between Australia and Panama, and to be well-suited as a place of naval rendezvous (Legge 1958: 29). Among those contemplating establishing a base there was the British Admiralty. In 1859 the British Admiralty wrote that Great Britain had 'valuable possessions on either side [of the Pacific], as at Vancouver and Sydney, but not an islet or a rock in the 7,000 miles of ocean that separates them' (Legge 1958: 32). There seems to have been almost no exception. Invariably, location entered the arguments of

1 Dutch Consul General in Melbourne to Minister of Foreign Affairs 10-7-1979 (ARA FO A-dos. 111).

people pleading for European settlement and control. A prospectus from the Australasian Colonisation Company boasted that a harbour might be developed on the northeast coast of New Guinea, which was 'in such position as would command the Trade of China, Japan, California, British Columbia, and the shores of the Northern Pacific Ocean, with all its Islands'.

Completely unclaimed the South Pacific was not. In Australia and New Zealand politicians and a large portion of the general public considered the South Sea their reserve, advancing commercial and strategic reasons to substantiate their claims. With regard to Fiji, for instance, and nicely summing up the arguments, it was stated in 1870 that rule by a non-British power 'would naturally and necessarily be distasteful and prejudicial commercially in time of peace to the Australian possessions of the Crown and might be dangerous in time of war' (Ward 1976: 200). In Australia the different colonies – New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia – focused on different portions of the South Pacific. Fiji figured prominently in the calls for the annexation made in New South Wales, where as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century there had been a strong belief that Fiji was an integral part of its territory. In Queensland, New Guinea and the adjacent New Britain Archipelago were a major cause of concern. In New Zealand, itself only a colony since 1840, covetous eyes were cast on Samoa, Fiji and Tonga. In all cases, aspirations went further and, in fact, included the whole of the South Pacific. In 1883 Victoria and the other Australian colonies submitted plans to the government in London for an annexation not only of New Guinea but also of the New Hebrides (present-day Vanuatu), the Solomon Islands and – in the words of the then Colonial Secretary Derby – 'those very large and almost entirely unknown islands which lie to the north and north-east of New Guinea, and which occupy, collectively, an area larger, I should think, than that of France or Germany'.[2]

The home government did not look forward to such annexations. They were costly, and an occupation was likely to lead to confrontations with the local population of the islands, which in those days had an image that was a far cry from the tourist resorts they are associated with today. To contemporary Europeans, the islands were populated by warlike, cruel savages, given to cannibalism and head-hunting. Germany initially also acted with prudence. Bismarck contended himself with stressing the principles of free trade, of equal treatment of German ships and merchants all over

2 Derby in House of Lords 2-7-1883 (hansard.millbanksystems.com.lords/1883/july2/motion-for-papers).

the world. At the same time, Germany, like other nations, was not averse to concluding treaties with local rulers; treaties of which the wording and content closely resembled those the European states entered into amongst themselves. Expressions were used such as 'peace and amity' and 'most favoured nation', the latter a phrase to prevent other nations from getting special, exclusive rights (Bennion 2004: 14). If one power acquired unique privileges or concessions these should be accorded to earlier treaty partners as well. Some treaties even included provisions for reciprocal rights. In an early treaty from 1837, France promised the people of Hawaii that when they travelled to France they would 'be received and protected like the most favoured foreigners' (ibid.: 16).

The same bias characterised European-initiated political ceremonies. Public proclamations of annexations were meant to make an impression on the local population, but the firing of the guns of warships and the salutes ranging out only frightened them. The spectacles were, first and foremost, important to the few Germans or Britons who attended such ceremonies. It was the only way in which Europeans knew how to impress. When, for instance, the Germans installed their favourite as king of Samoa in 1887, 'the new king was given a royal salute of twenty-one guns' and 'marched through the town by the commodore and a German guard or honour' (Stevenson 1892: 70).

Figure 3 Station of London Missionary Society on Aroani Island, Papua New Guinea

Source: Finsch 1888

In the South Pacific it was the protection of trade interests and not territorial expansion that first involved the German Empire in an international dispute. The scene was the Sulu Archipelago. For Spain, the islands formed part of the Philippines of which, at that time, it was lord and master. Sulu was also an Islamic region and its inhabitants, just as the Muslims of the Island of Mindanao in the southern Philippines, had resisted the advance of Spanish rule for centuries. In the early 1870s, in order to enforce its suzerainty on the Sultan of Sulu, Spain put up a naval blockade. The aim, the Spanish government stressed, was to prevent Sulu from sending to sea its 'piratical vessels'.[3] The blockade was not only intended to keep ships in, but also had to prevent free trade. In 1873 the Spanish seized a British and two German ships trying to run the blockade. At least one of the three, the German brigantine *Marie Louise*, was declared a 'good prize' by a Spanish tribunal. In early 1875, moreover, on hearing that a German and an English ship were to sail from Hong Kong to the Caroline and Palau Islands, east of the Philippines, the Spanish consul in Hong Kong claimed Spanish sovereignty and the right of his country to levy customs duties in these island groups. Berlin and London protested in concert. In their eyes the islands were free territory, not under the jurisdiction of any European nation. Consequently, no restrictions could be placed by Spain or any other nations on trade there by Europeans merchants. Both governments stressed that they knew of no treaty substantiating Spanish rule over the Caroline and Palau islands. Spain also did not exercise an active administration. Without such evidence of a real Spanish rule there could be no talk of any special Spanish rights. For a similar reason Germany and Great Britain contested suzerainty of Spain over the Sulu Archipelago, backing the authority of the Sultan of Sulu and not the Spanish claim. Or, as the British government insisted in 1882, any right that Spain might have had in the past 'must be considered to have lapsed owing to the complete failure of Spain to attain a *de facto* control'.[4] By that time, Spain had made some progress in extending its administration, but its advance was a hazardous adventure and Spanish rule was far from uncontested. In 1877 a Spanish naval squadron had occupied and destroyed Jolo, the capital of Sulu, but as a captain of a Dutch ship, which visited the island two years later, observed the place was 'still a completely on a foot of war defended seat of a Spanish Governor' (Koloniaal Verslag 1880: 55). The argument advanced for *de facto* control, or, as it was also worded, effective occupation, would only gain in importance as an international

3 Carvajal to Baron von Canitz 22-12-1877 (Papers 1882 I: 6-10).

4 Granville to British Minister in Madrid 7-1-1882 (Papers 1882: 202-5).

legal argument, and thus as a factor in disputes over colonial expansion, after the Berlin Conference of 1884-85. The conference, called by Bismarck to discuss the partition of Africa, accepted the Principle of Effectivity, the fact that effective control was a prerequisite for declaring a region a colony.

In the 1860s and 1870s, when it was still largely a 'free for all' zone, the South Pacific became the arena of fierce competition for companies and individuals, trying to carve out a niche in the international economy. Initially, land was cheap, but as was usually the case when Europeans became interested in land, this soon changed and land titles became a valuable competitive commodity and a prime source of conflict. The South Pacific, which in the past had not attracted much attention, suddenly became a region of great expectations and dreams of unlimited economic prospects, and plantation owners, traders and labour recruiters made their appearance.

Whereas in the 1850s only a handful of Europeans and Americans settled in the South Pacific, a number of its islands suddenly experienced an influx of Western settlers, some with surprisingly good education, uprooting local society. Especially the Fiji islands acted as a magnet. Their 'Sea Island cotton' were of an exceptional quality, and many stories circulated in Australia about how cheap land and labour were and how great a profit could be earned (Forbes 1875: 107-8). Between 1864 and 1870 scores of Australians and New Zealanders were drawn to Fiji and other island groups by an economic depression at home and the prospects of profitable cotton cultivation and quick commercial gains. New Zealanders had yet another motive to leave: the destruction wrought by the Maori Wars (Forbes 1875: 276). The Australian doctor Litton Forbes, who was one of those who tried their luck in Fiji, wrote about a rush and shiploads of adventurous spirits leaving Australia for Fiji, culminating in 1871 in a 'stampede' (ibid.: 2-3). Expectations were high 'and though few had any real knowledge on the subject, all seemed to take for granted that the Islands must be exceptionally fertile and rich' (Forbes 1875: 3). According to a contemporary estimate, the number of foreigners in Fiji grew from 30 or 40 in 1858 to 830 in 1867 and 2,000 in 1873 (Ward 1976: 160).

In Samoa, the growth of the white community was less spectacular, but the consequences were as least as dramatic. We may get an impression of how the Islanders viewed those strangely dressed newcomers, the power they represented, and the conflicts they fought out amongst themselves from what Stevenson (1892: 153) writes about Samoa: 'None would have dreamed of resisting those strange but quite unrealised Great Powers, understood (with difficulty) to be larger than Tonga and Samoa put together, and known to be prolific of prints, knives, hard biscuit, picture-books, and other luxuries, as well as of overbearing men and inconsistent orders'.

The ocean of the future

The Pacific, a Dutchman remarked at the end of the 1870s, promised to lose more and more of its cachet. On the one side, America's west coast was growing in importance and had become linked by rail with the more populous east. On the other side were Australia, Japan and China, countries, he stressed, with great economic potential (Handelingen 1878-1879: 96). Over time its importance, in economic terms and as a source of international conflict, would only increase in peoples' minds. In the United States, Secretary of State John Hay made a similar remark around the turn of the century: 'The Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic Ocean of the present, but the Pacific is the ocean of the future' (Danusaputro 1986: 313). The Pacific Ocean was 'a new-comer into the broad world interests', the renowned naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan (1900: 192) asserted.

People were drawn to the region by unrealistic expectations about its economic potential and the riches to be gained. There were the prospects of opening up new land for agricultural estates, producing copra, cotton or sugar cane, and dreams of striking it rich by discovering valuable minerals and precious metals. Enterprising spirits set out to dig for gold and diamonds, or to locate copper and coal fields. The South Pacific became a region to look to; one where people could still operate freely without the constraints of a strong colonial or indigenous administration. The South Pacific attracted new companies as well as old established ones, along with adventurers and fortune seekers. Some tried to make their fortune by setting up companies and printed brochures conjuring up visions of gold fields and rich mines or profitable agricultural endeavours. Others went to the islands as prospector, planter or merchant, or as commercial agent or employee of the larger plantation or trading companies. A few planters became rich, but many would only cultivate a tiny plot of land and often had hardly any expertise at all when they started to work the land (Forbes 1875: 55-6, 86).

That not many succeeded and that much of the talk about golden opportunities was a mere fantasy did not matter. Nor did the more sober voices of those who rejected economic adventures and political aggrandisement. They usually argued the opposite and stressed the low economic potential of the Pacific islands and the high costs of colonisation. One voice of warning came from the Governor of New South Wales, W. Denison. As early as 1860, he called into mind the havoc resulting from the Maori Wars in New Zealand, in which land had been a main issue, and spoke out against annexation of Fiji:

> The inevitable result of the introduction of a white population except under the strictest possible regulations, will be a war of races, and although the ultimate success of the European element would be certain, yet as the Fijians are more numerous than the New Zealanders and more concentrated, as the climate is less adapted to Europeans, the cost of an attempt to maintain the supremacy of the white population, will be comparatively great and the loss of life enormous (Legge 1958: 33).

Not to be forgotten are the missionaries and their societies – at times powerful pressure groups at home – and who sometimes, as the saying went in the United States, where one primarily had the situation in the north Pacific in mind, were in the vanguard of trade. The first British missionaries to preach on the islands belonged to the London Missionary Society (LMS), which had started its work in Tahiti at the end of the eighteenth century and in the course of the years would send its missionaries to Samoa, Tonga, Fiji and New Caledonia. From Australia the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) had been active in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and the Solomon Islands since the 1820s. Around the same time, French Roman Catholic missionaries established themselves in the South Pacific. The 'Picpus Fathers' of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Maria were mostly active in Tahiti, the Marist Brothers in Tonga, Fiji, Samoa, New Caledonia and the New Hebrides (Press 2008: 46-9).

The presence of the missionaries in the South Pacific and their effort to convert the population contributed, as Legge (1958: 23-4) writes, to 'the problem of anarchy in the islands'. Being successful in spreading Christianity among the Islanders, such missionaries were drawn into local politics and civil wars; if only because conversion was often accomplished through the mediation of local chiefs (Press 2008: 48). Missionaries and priests also tended to side with their co-religionists or with those most conducive to the dissemination of their system of belief. As such, and added to this the antagonism between Roman Catholics and Protestants missionary societies or between different denominations within one faith, they also became party to the rivalries between the powers and their nationals to control island groups. Their nationality and denomination became an argument in the disputes over which power should take control of island groups. Mutual distrust ran deep and mirrored the discussion about free trade. On the British side, for instance, it was feared, as the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Robert Stout, articulated in February 1886, that 'in the Pacific especially, occupation by France is thought to mean the granting of privileges to the Roman Catholic Church that are not

granted to any other religious body'.[5] Not all missionaries, moreover, were saints and occasionally – though this remained an exception – they joined in punitive actions against Islanders. They also, like the other settlers, ran the risk of being murdered by Islanders, which could initiate retaliation.

The white settlers

Whalers, fishermen out to catch *bêche-de-mer* (trepang, sea cucumber or sea slug, for which there was high demand in China), and collectors of sandalwood and tortoise shells also came to the islands, as did sea captains, sailors and deserters of warships and merchantmen. Others set up as shopkeepers or owners of hotels and bars. Arms dealers, agents specialised in the recruitment of labour, and people on the run from justice or their creditors completed the European communities that took shape in the Pacific islands. And, notwithstanding those who behaved well who went there too, they were unruly communities of Europeans, Americans, Australians and New Zealanders that took shape. Race and feelings of white superiority definitely also played a role. The white settlers looked upon the Islanders as 'biologically inferior beings', and acted accordingly (Hopkins-Weisse 2002: 2). While in Fiji, Forbes (1875: 95) observed that the Samoan wife of a poor planter did not join dinner 'because a coloured person is no more allowed in Fiji than in India or the Southern States of America to eat with a white man'.

The way these immigrants conducted themselves often could not pass the moral standards of puritanical outsiders who visited the islands. About one such alien settlement, Apia in Samoa, it was reported as early as 1856 that it was 'composed of a heterogeneous mass of the most immoral and dissolute Foreigners that ever disgraced humanity' (Gilson 1970: 170-80). Apia was, another qualification went, 'the Hell of the Pacific' (Masterman 1934: 173). A similar remark can be made about Levuka, Fiji's former capital and the main foreign settlement on the islands, which had acquired quite a reputation for its hard-drinking population and the many bars in town. In the early 1870s, half of its houses were hotels and bars, many German-owned. 'Swilling gin and brawling', one contemporary wrote, 'are the principal amusements' (Gravelle 1983: 120). Another noted that drinking was 'portentous' and that

5 Stout to Agent-General 27-2-1886 (Papers related to the proposed acquisition of New Hebrides by France, no. 8, atojs.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/atojs?a=d&d=AJHR1886-I.2.1.2.5, accessed 1-9-2012).

'every man seemed harassed by a perpetual thirst' (Forbes 1875: 15-6). He also identified the reason: boredom.

The newcomers operated in an anarchistic, lawless environment. Traders, the British civil servant, Sir Peter Henry Scratchley, wrote, 'are often reckless, unscrupulous, brutal and piratical. They cheat the natives and are apt to appeal to their revolvers' (Legge 1956: 43). Forbes (1875: 155) also noted that the traders lived 'literally, rifle in hand, in the midst of constant danger and excitement', adding that most of the profit usually went to the Australian firms that employed them.

The climate, malaria, dysentery, cholera and violence all took their toll. Trading posts were established and closed down again. One region especially hit was New Ireland. Otto Finsch (1888: 23), an eye-witness of what transpired in the South Pacific, wrote about the island: 'Here a station has to be abandoned because the trader died of climate fever, was killed or chased away, there another one is set afire by the natives in retaliation for ″cooked″, that is by white-men-burnt-down huts, or is left voluntary because it is not profitable'. He hardly had a more optimistic tale to tell about New Britain: 'Since the first trader set foot on the soil of New Britain and shot the first native, triggering the right of blood feud that is in force here, a considerable amount of blood has been shed in the New Britain Archipelago and murders have been committed on both sides' (ibid.: 24). Though rough and cruel, many of these traders, Finsch (1888: 261) suggests, were scaredy-cats. They fled at the first sight of trouble, which is understandable, as on the same page he calls attention to 'the many bloody tragedies' in the still young history of the trade settlements in the South Pacific.

The traders exchanged local products, first of all coconuts, against hatchets, knives, fishhooks, beads, scrap iron, tobacco (especially American 'Nigger Head' Smoking Tobacco appears to have been popular), jaw harps, gin and the like, and, though at different times and different places this was forbidden, firearms and ammunition. Finsch also provides some insight into the life of the smaller traders. For most of the time they lived in isolation in hostile surroundings. They built themselves simple dwellings, out of necessity constructed in the style of the houses inhabited by the Islanders and with the same materials. Most of the time they were on their own, lonely figures in an unfamiliar environment. Equipped with a supply of sugar, salt, flour, petroleum, tobacco, gin and other such necessities, they had to wait for months for the next boat to arrive. Though sometimes their wives joined them, most of the traders were single. Consequently, their affairs with local women were a not infrequent cause of animosity and violence between them and the Islanders (ibid.: 261). Contemporary visitors were impressed

by the amounts of liquor consumed. As in the cities, many a trader in his outpost drank heavily: 'But the gin, the gin! That is usually the source of evil! It plays a rather big, evil role, and how few there are who are satisfied with a moderate enjoyment of schnapps' (ibid.: 261).

Labour traffic

The recruitment of Pacific Islanders as labourers for the plantations, in which British, French, American and German agents and ships were involved, proved a major source of conflicts between Europeans and with the local population. In the South Pacific labour was scarce. Estates were in constant demand of labour that, not insignificantly, in Fiji was called black ivory. On larger island groups, such as Samoa and Fiji, where foreigners established cotton, coconut and sugar-cane estates, as well as in Australia, agricultural workers had to be brought in from elsewhere. Labour traffic was so intense that it could even result in labour shortages on the same islands where the estate workers were recruited. Especially in Queensland demand for labour was high and a steady influx of Islanders – the only non-whites allowed into Australia – was necessary to keep the sugar-cane estates running. In Queensland, where domestic colonisation only took off in the 1860s, the first Pacific workers were brought in in 1863 (Hopkins-Weise 2002: 2-3).[6] Between 1863 and 1904, around 62,000 labourers from the Pacific islands were shipped to Queensland alone to work its estates (Scarr 1990: 172).

Control over island groups meant control over its labour force. One of the regions on which attention focused was the New Britain Archipelago. German economic presence there was strong. In the early 1880s, its islands had become one of the major labour recruiting regions for German estate owners in Samoa and Fiji. Inroads by other traders and labour recruiters, especially from Queensland, were detested. Competition could take a violent form. As an example can serve a conflict involving 'German Charley', a copra collector employed by the German Robertson & Hernsheim Company on one of the islands of the New Britain Archipelago. When a vessel from Queensland started to recruit labour in his resort, apart from trying to convince the Islanders that they would be roasted and eaten in Queensland, he also fired at the Queensland crew, who in return set fire to his hut (*The Argus* 27-10-1884).

6 Recruitment of Islanders in Australia and New Zealand probably started in the late 1840s (See Brookes 1941: 176).

Sometimes Islanders could put up a fight. In other instances they were powerless. Armed with poisonous spears and arrows they had to defend themselves against recruiters equipped with firearms. In 1884 Papuans recruited for work on Queensland estates recalled crews of labour vessels who 'as long as they were within reached of the missionary … were not cruel, but when away from mission influence or supervision … got guns, etc., burnt the villages, and took the men away by force' (Lyne 1885: 125). In cases where Islanders had signed a contract voluntarily it may well be that they did not understand what the consequences were and had no idea of the conditions on the estates they were sent to. They did not realise that they had to work long hours, that the work was strenuous, and that their treatment on the plantations would be harsh. Or, as other Papuans from New Guinea, who had been promised that they would only be away from their home village to work on a Queensland estate for 'three moons', related when they found out that they had to work for three years, 'they wept bitterly, and they ran away from the estate because so many natives were dying, and because they were beaten' (ibid.: 127-8).

The hostility and fear created by the labour recruitment among the indigenous population would only increase over time. Islanders hit back and took revenge, which in turn led to reprisals by white traders and settlers, setting in motion a spiral of violence. It made recruitment of labour a dangerous affair, resulting in the killing of settlers, traders, crews of ships; or, as happened to one unfortunate trader, Berthold, who was shipwrecked on the shore of New Ireland, being stripped naked and forced to work in the Islanders' own coconut gardens (his freedom was bought by Friedrich Schulle, a former employee of Robertson & Hernsheim, for steel strips worth a few pennies) (Finsch 1888: 35-6).

Commerce and politics

On the Pacific island groups the adventurous Europeans, Australians or Americans could win no rajaships, which not so long before had been an additional bonus for people venturing out to the Pacific, but some were able to wield considerable political power (Van Dijk 2008). Indeed, by mingling in the internal affairs of the native states, supporting one of the various factions contesting for power, some even succeeded in becoming Prime Minister, as happened in Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, and to the north in Hawaii. In the end, if they were unlucky, financial ruin or banishment faced them when economic or political tides turned.

Much of it was a game for new arrivals on the colonial scene. Citizens from Germany, the United States, Australia and New Zealand were at the forefront. Some of the companies involved in fact were so new – the most important of them, J.C. Godeffroy & Sohn, actually was not, it was a respectable and politically well-connected firm (Staley 1935: 5) – that in the German Reichstag one of the members could ask Bismarck where those Hamburg 'trade lords' had suddenly come from; those *Handelsköninge*, who were active in the Pacific but of whom he had never heard before (Koschitzky 1887-88 I: 197). Pioneers became financiers, who could cash in on the exploits of others who had come over to strike it rich but lacked the necessary funds and needed loans and working capital. Wealthy planters assumed a pivotal role in the white community. They had their shops, acted as middlemen, provided labour and bought up the crops, and served as a source of credit for starting or less affluent planters, also lending them money to buy daily necessities (Forbes 1875: 100, 116-7).

The pioneers, acting independently or as agents of firms in their fatherland, profited from a booming market for copra or cotton, two products that were in high demand. Copra, or rather coconut oil extracted from it, was used as an ingredient in candles and in a commodity that became increasingly popular in the second half of the nineteenth century: mass-produced soap. Coconut palms were 'the glory and the wealth of the South Sea islands' (Forbes 1875: 52). Cotton growers could profit from a steep drop in American production during the Civil War (1861-65), but for exactly this reason their luck did not last. By the end of the 1870s the Pacific cotton boom had passed.

German traders took a more than fair share. In 1877 their activities accounted for 87 per cent of the export from and 79 per cent of the import into Samoa and Tonga (Graichen & Gründer 2005: 69). The trailblazers in Germany's economic venture in the Pacific were representatives of the Hamburg trading house Johann Cesar Godeffroy & Sohn. With its trading post in Samoa, set up in 1857, as its base the company expanded its activities to other Pacific islands and purchased land for its own plantations for the cultivation of copra, cotton and other tropical products. Business went well for Godeffroy. Within a few years his company became the 'biggest of the early Pacific firms' (Scarr 1990: 150). In fact, it was almost single-handedly responsible for the growth of German trade in the South Pacific (Brookes 1941: 258). The position the company carved out for itself in the Pacific trade was such that the British started to refer to Godeffroy as the 'South Sea King' (Townsend 1930: 73).

Locally, Godeffroy's agent Theodore Weber, a German national, would play a key role in Samoan politics in the 1870s and 1880s. Weber, described

by one author as 'built on Bismarck's lines' – and he would indeed act in that way – used political as well as economic means to advance his own interests, those of the company he represented, and those of his fatherland (Staley 1935: 2). He was also an inventive man. In 1864 he decided that it was more efficient not to produce coconut oil in Samoa, but to ship its dried meat and copra to Europe for further processing (Nuhn 2002: 68).

In Fiji, the German firm F & W Hennings of Friedrich Wilhelm, Gustavus and Wilhelm Hennings acquired prominence. The three brothers were 'the boldest and most successful merchants of Fiji … who had made cotton-growing … a recognised and profitable industry' (Forbes 1875: 23). The first of the three Hennings brothers, Friedrich, had arrived in 1858 at a time when, as a minute presented by the German ambassador in London, G.H. Count von Münster, phrased it, pleading their cause with the British government in 1882, 'the Fijians were yet in their most savage state'. Soon Friedrich Hennings acquired the nickname 'Father of Fijian commerce', and, as the minute was to continue, he and his brothers were always prepared to extend a helping hand to new settlers: 'Neither personal assistance by either of the brothers, nor pecuniary aid by the firm, was refused when needed to any worthy of help'.[7] It sounded noble, and almost all older plantations had been started by advances provided by the Hennings firm (Forbes 1875: 24), but for the loan land had to be put up as collateral security.[8]

In this early stage, Berlin contended itself with treaties with local rulers signed by its naval officers to support the trade of German firms. The first one, a pact of friendship and most favoured nation with King George I of Tonga, an island group in which Godeffroy & Sohn had considerable interests, was concluded by Naval Captain Eduard von Knorr of the corvette *Hertha* in 1876. The treaty between 'His Majesty the German Emperor, King of Prussia … and the King of Tonga' secured Germany a coaling station on the island of Vava'u (Koschitzky 1887-1888 II: 3; Bennion 2004: 14). Two years later, by the end of 1878 and the beginning of 1879, the Commander of the German naval corvette *Ariadne,* Bartholomäus von Werner, entered into treaties with local leaders on a number of islands located in the New Britain Archipelago. There Godeffroy & Sohn had set up its first trading post in 1874. A year later Robertson & Hernsheim would follow. It had its headquarters on the Island of Matupi. All these pacts, 'taking as their base the fact that Germany had the same rights as other countries', emphasised free trade

7 Minute on the land question in the colony of Fiji to advance the claim of F. and W. Hennings 1-7-1882 (PRO FO 534 22).

8 Sahl to Bismarck 18-5-1882 (PRO FO 534 22).

and dealt with the buying of land by foreigners (Koschitzky 1887-88 II: 12, 234; Nuhn 2002: 34). They allowed Germany to acquire tracts of land to satisfy Germany's need for harbour facilities. One of these, concluded with the chiefs of Topulu and Nerakua, King Dick and King Billy, gave Germany a port and a coaling station in the Makada or Fergusson harbour. Another one established Germany's presence in Mioko, a tiny island in the Duke of York group, but with an excellent harbour. Within years, Mioko would become the base for German operations when the decision had been taken to occupy the New Britain Archipelago and the north coast of the eastern portion of New Guinea. When he concluded his treaties Werner was not yet sure how his superiors in Berlin would react to the purchase of land. To be on the safe side, he asked and got a commitment from the firms of Godeffroy and Robertson & Hernsheim that they would step in and take over the land he had bought to build harbour facilities in case the German government or the Reichstag withheld its approval (Koschitzky 1887-88 II: 234). Yet another of Werner's treaties lay at the basis of the Jaluit coaling station, more to the northeast, in the Marshall Islands.

German business interests spread in the Western Pacific from Samoa, Tonga and Fiji, to the New Britain Archipelago and the Caroline and Marshall Islands. In these places the German companies, which drew money not only from Germany but also from Australia and New Zealand, had to compete with companies of other nationalities. Among the British firms, many of them involving people and capital from New Zealand and Australia, were the Sydney-based but German-owned company of Rathbone, Féez, and Co., the Polynesia Company of Melbourne, and McArthur & Co. from New Zealand. Somewhat later, in 1883, they were joined by the mighty Sydney-based Burns, Philp &Co. Of the American firms, the Central Polynesian Land and Commercial Company (CPLCC) deserves mentioning. California-based, it held extensive land claims in Fiji and Samoa. The Société française de l'Océanie, the Société française des Nouvelles-Hebrides and other French companies also played a role, albeit a lesser one.

Conflicts over land

When representatives of such companies felt threatened by unfriendly Islanders or by their business rivals, or when they got caught up in the internecine civil wars rampant on some of the island groups, the white planters and traders turned to their governments at home for protection and diplomatic or naval support. In this way, competition between business communities

turned into rivalries between nations. It was not just trade that made the firms run by people from different nationalities collide in the Pacific and set in motion a course of violence in the South Pacific. An even more important factor was control over agricultural land on which plantations could be laid out. Wherever foreigners settled, conflicts occasioned in part by different perceptions of ownership of land and of what selling land implied were almost endemic. Against the Western concept of individual ownership stood that of the Islanders of communally owned land. A frequently encountered problem was that Islanders sold land without consulting or informing others who, according to customary law, shared ownership. Settlers, ignorant of the indigenous concept of landownership, entered into contracts with lower or higher chiefs only, or did not understand that according to the customs of the Islanders they had only bought the usufruct, not the land itself (see also Legge 1958: 50-5). But there was more. Most Islanders selling land did not realise that this meant that they were barred from it. In Fiji, for instance, 'they do not understand what they have done until they begin to feel pinched by hunger or cramped for room; but as soon as the land has been fenced in, the cocoa-nut trees cut down, and the bananas and yams cleared away to make room for cotton or sugar, they begin to perceive the effect of their rashness, and of course to regret it' (Forbes 1875: 200-1).

The result was not only conflicts and violence among the Islanders themselves, contesting each other's rights of ownership and alienation, or between settlers and Islanders, but also between settlers, who disputed each other's claims to titles of land. It was not uncommon for various Islanders to sell and resell the same piece of ground to different foreigners. In Fiji, 'infinite confusion' was the result (ibid.: 97). In Samoa, the outcome was 'an unusually complicated state of property', as a German diplomat would describe the situation in 1887.[9] In 1889, the total area of land claimed by British, Germans and Americans in Samoa was '1,700,000 acres – some 1,000,000 acres more than the total estimated area of land on all the islands!' (Masterman 1934: 134). Protecting the ownership rights of one's own nationals against accusations by other foreigners or by Islanders that land had not been acquired in accordance with prevailing law, became one of the prime incentives for foreign communities in the Pacific to intervene in the administration and jurisdiction of those island groups where they had extensive landed property, or to ask the home government to intervene.

Suspecting the other of foul play and territorial ambitions, settlers called upon London, Berlin and Washington to protect the interests of

9 Memorandum communicated confidentially by Baron Plessen 7--2-1887 (PRO FO 534 35).

their enterprising countrymen abroad and to annex the regions these estate owners or traders considered vital to their business. Both the German government in Berlin and the British one in London were inundated with petitions. Afraid of losing the possibility of exploiting agricultural land or of being cut off from their supply of labour, German and British businessmen or consuls pointed at the evil intentions of the other. Arguing that if the other side got its way, this would seriously damage, if not ruin, their own companies, they asked London or Berlin to prevent a territorial expansion of the other nation or to take the lead and act first.

Policing the Pacific

Since the late 1820s British warships patrolled the Pacific. The aim was to protect compatriots, punish Islanders who assaulted Britons, act upon the abuses of white settlers and traders, and back up the arguments of the home government when conflicts over control over islands arose. Around the same time, the American navy took on a similar role, and the French were soon to follow. Warships were part of the diplomatic rivalries that emerged over the Pacific Islands, with their captains at times acting more rashly than their governments back home when matters of protection and annexation came up.

In keeping planters and labour recruiters in line, the British fleet was hardly effective if only because their captains could only act against British subjects, and cases had to be brought against perpetrators in courts in Australia. The police role of British warships did not make the British navy popular among British settlers in the Pacific. It also made others reject in advance a British annexation. Forbes, voicing the view of British settlers, complained that when an American was threatened by violent Fijians he could use a revolver, but that a Briton had to react in a different way:

> for should he shoot or wound a native even in self-defence, he will most probably be 'deported' to Sydney by the next ship-of-war and tried for his life. Even if acquitted he will be a broken man, ruined in purse and in credit, his plantation overgrown with weeds, his cotton crop lost, and his soul embittered by what he feels to have been a cruel injustice (Forbes 1875: 82).

At more places in Forbes' book we find denunciations of the British navy's policy. He claims that in disputes with Fijians over land titles captains

of British warships tended to side with the chiefs, putting planters with another nationality at an advantage. Not restricted by British naval supervision, they could take matters in their own hands and defend their claims by force of arms. At one point Forbes (1875: 156-7) even writes that the Islanders respect Frenchmen and Americans because French and American gunboats struck 'terror into the hearts of native wrong-doers', while the Islanders knew 'by experience the dislike which the English have to help their own countrymen or to punish an adversary apparently weak', firing shells '*over* the natives instead of *at* them'. Such an attitude would have given some Britons more faith in other navies. The prospect of the American navy coming to their aid would have motivated at least some British planters in Fiji to become American citizens (ibid.: 110, 157).

Among the abuses the British navy had to act upon were those of the recruitment of labour, a trade described by its opponents as a disgrace to civilisation; and this was probably also the public image labour trafficking had in those days. Recruitment and employment of labour became synonymous with slavery and kidnapping, words often used by contemporary critics when attacking their abuses. Moreover, in the tradition of the older slave trade, in Australian slang Pacific Islanders were 'blackbirds' and Islanders were captured in labour raids and transported in ships significantly called by Islanders 'snatch-snatch' vessels (Brookes 1941: 299). From early on, when Pacific labour was also needed for sheep and cattle farming in northern Australia, treatment of Pacific labourers was harsh. In March 1869 one local resident wrote in the *Brisbane Courier*: 'I have seen slavery in the British West India Islands in 1832-33, and until it was abolished … I never saw or heard of a white man striking a negro with the fist, using a rope's end, or galloping and flogging them with a horsewhip, as has been witnessed on this island' (Hopkins-Weise 2002: 10). The Scottish poet and author Robert Louis Stevenson (1892: 31) noted of Samoa, where he lived in the early 1890s, that it 'is said that the whip is very busy on some plantations'.

Only a few defended the recruitment of Islanders as contract labourers. They tried to convince the outside world that, in general, such labourers were treated well; blaming the bad name the trade had on a small number of excesses. Among them, in 1869, were the American and British consuls in Fiji and the Fijian planters themselves, and a British commission sent to the island group to investigate a possible annexation (Brookes 1941: 300-2; Forbes 1875: 269). Forbes (1875: 41, 246, 268), himself a member of the settlers' community, calls the recruitment process 'fair and honest' with 'neither deception, nor coercion'. According to him, the labour-vessels – which others had described as overcrowded – were 'roomy enough and well-ventilated',

and he was also content with the way labourers were housed in Fiji: 'They are well-fed, not overworked, fairly paid, are protected in the enjoyment of their gains, and are relieved from a daily and hourly fear of being killed and eaten'.[10]

Voices like that of Forbes were ignored. In Great Britain the anti-labour recruitment campaign found support among politicians in the Houses of Parliament and the government, proud of the leading role their country had played in the abolition of slavery. As early as 1869, the British Foreign Secretary, George Villiers, 4th Earl of Clarendon, had called the recruitment of labour 'a systematic slave trade breaking out in a new quarter' (Legge 1956: 10). Many would phrase the problem in a similar way. Five years later, the British Colonial Secretary, Carnarvon, commenting on the labour trade in Fiji described it as 'utter iniquity and barbarity'.[11] In July 1883, Lord Lamington in the House of Lords spoke about 'labourers, whose condition, if not slavery, would certainly amount to servitude' and 'acts of piratical violence which have excited such just and general reprobation throughout the civilised world'.[12] The British Admiralty was also against unrestrained labour trade but for different reasons. It blamed its excesses on attacks on ships by Islanders (Brookes 1941: 297). Even the German Chargé d'Affaires in London, arguing the importance of the New Britain Archipelago for the German estates in Samoa, informed the British government that 'there are few, if any voluntary recruits … some men, too poor to marry, may leave in order to save money to obtain wives; but the bulk of the recruits are slaves sold by the chiefs, or prisoners of war, who are sold for arms, and who will not willingly remain on board' (*The Argus* 27-10-1884).

Great Britain did have its rules for the treatment of Pacific labour, the Queensland Act to Regulate and Control the Introduction and Treatment of Polynesian Labourers of 1868 and the two Pacific Islanders' Protection Acts, enacted in London in 1872 and 1875. The wish to root out the abuses of labour traffic was one of the motives behind the creation of the office of the High Commission for the Western Pacific, headed by a High Commissioner and established in 1877 on the basis of the 1875 Pacific Islanders Protection Act, which it had to enforce. Its jurisdiction expanded to those British nationals living and working on Pacific islands where Western rule had not yet been

10 In a recent study about the contacts between Islanders and Europeans, Thomas (2010: 225) asserts that some Islanders 'found indenture an ordeal', but that because of the goods the labourers could buy and bring home, overall 'the balance of opinion was in favour'.

11 Carnarvon in House of Lords 17-7-1874 (hansard.millbanksystem.com/lords/1874/jul/17/the-fiji-islands-cession-to-the-british).

12 Lamington in House of Lords 2-7-1883 (hansard.millbanksystems.com.lords/1883/july/02/motion-for-papers).

established, or, as it was phrased, on islands 'not within the jurisdiction of any civilised Power'. The High Commissioner had no authority to act upon non-British nationals or the local population, and some Britons evaded its jurisdiction by taking on another nationality, or sailing under a foreign flag, including the Fijian one (Legge 1958: 112; Ward 1976: 212). As they had also done in the past with respect to the British navy, British estate owners and labour traffickers would complain about the High Commission, stressing that it gave their foreign competitors, against whom it could not act, a definite advantage. The other side of the coin was that the High Commissioner did provide the British with legal and physical protection. A French author (Pelleray 1922: 81), in discussing the fate in the 1880s and 1890s of French settlers and traders who had to hold their ground in the then still not annexed New Hebrides, praised the law and order established by the High Commission, which these Frenchmen were lacking. In view of the difficult situation such people found themselves in, the French Governor of New Caledonia was given the additional position of *Commissaire général de la République dans l'Océan Pacifique* in 1901.

Perhaps such evaluations mirrored images rather than actual practice. The High Commission was hardly effective. It lacked funding, personnel and physical back up by the British navy, which up to then had performed the task of protecting the British nationals in the Pacific and controlling their activities. In 1883 a report from an enquiry into its performance concluded that 'as regards the greatest part of the vast area' it had to cover the High Commission had been 'almost inoperative' (Legge 1956: 12). A commission was instituted to enquire into its future. In spite of its poor performance, international relations were considered a factor in favour of the High Commission. Without such an institution things might become worse. The conclusion of the commission of enquiry was that 'the abandonment of control over the acts of British subjects would not be tolerated by foreign Powers having large interests there' (Ward 1976: 290).

The High Commission could not prevent the continued problem of Islanders being pressed by force to become estate workers, while the conditions under which they had to live and work remained bad. On some of the islands, the chances of surviving for any length of time on the estates were small. In Fiji, for instance, at that time already British, between 1880 and 1890, '27 per cent died in the course of their 3-year indenture to the sugar estates, mostly in the first year, with dysentery and influenza-pneumonia adding to physical exhaustion' (Scarr 1990: 178). This percentage was probably already an improvement. One figure from the previous decade mentioned a death rate of 50 per cent (Gravelle 1983: 111).

In view of such facts, pleas for an annexation or arguments to support such a step were given a humanitarian twist. Extension of German or British rule was presented as an effort to end the abuses by labour agents, captains of ships who sailed to islands to recruit labour, and estate managers. Western domination, in particular and of course by one's own nation, was presented as an advance of civilisation and Christianity and their values. It was the other who was to blame for the maltreatment of Pacific Islanders. Germans made the accusation that the labour agents and estate owners in Queensland were engaged in something that was not much different from slave trade and suggested that Islanders preferred German estates near their home islands over those in distant Queensland (Koschitzky 1878-88 II: 219).

In Great Britain and Australia it was maintained that only British rule could be beneficial. Or, as the Premier of Victoria, James Service, phrased it in 1883, 'politics, religion, commerce, civilisation and humanity all suggest the desirability of placing under British control as many of the Western Pacific islands as remain unappropriated' (*The Argus* 9-6-1883). In London one member of the House of Lords called for the annexation of Fiji because this provided Great Britain with 'a vantage ground, from which, by establishing a strong Crown Colony in the centre of Polynesia, a watchful eye may be kept to check the abuses in the labour traffic of the Islands'.[13] British humanitarian societies, such as the Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines Protection Society, and a number of missionary organisations joined in, presenting fair treatment of Pacific labourers as an argument in favour of a British annexation of Fiji and New Guinea. Expanding British rule was a sacred duty. To urge London to take control of Fiji it was stated at meeting of the Aborigines Protection Society that if this was not done the British people would 'be unworthy of the great destiny which Providence has thrown open to their country … to protect the interests of civilisation, and of the native tribes in that distant and interesting region' (Legge 1958: 143).

13 Dutch Consul General in Melbourne to Minister of Foreign Affairs 10-7-1979 (ARA FO A-dos. 111).