

## **THE BROOME RACE RIOTS OF 1907, 1914 AND 1920 (between Japanese and other Asians)**

Our speaker on 6 August 2014 was **Dr Christine Choo**, a Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. She has researched and written extensively about the social history of Asian and Aboriginal people associated with the pearling industry in and around Broome. Her published work includes *Mission girls: Aboriginal women on Catholic missions in the Kimberley, Western Australia, 1900-1950* (University of Western Australia, 2001) and 'Inter-ethnic conflict in Broome, Western Australia: The riots of 1907, 1914 and 1920 between Japanese and other Asians' (*Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Volume 25, Issue 4, 2011).

Christine drew on the latter work to tell us about the Japanese and other Asian people who worked in the Broome pearling industry. She attributed the conflict that occurred in 1907, 1914 and 1920 to animosity between Asian men of differing origins, and she explained how Broome came to be the temporary home of thousands of Asian people—Ambonese, Chinese, Japanese, Koepangers (West Timorese), Malays, and Manilamen (Filipinos). Those people, rather than the Asian business proprietors, workers, wives and children who lived in Broome itself, were the focus of the talk. Christine did, however, mention Dr Tadashi Suzuki M.D. practising medicine in Broome for several years. A Japanese hospital existed there from 1911 to 1927.

Fishing for pearl shell in Western Australia began in the 1860s but did not reach Roebuck Bay until the 1880s, the decade in which Broome was established. Christine alluded to slavery and its abolition in her discussion of the early shell gathering by Aboriginal workers, and she spoke of Asian divers replacing the Aboriginal workers as the supply of shell in shallow waters dwindled. She discussed the employment of the divers and other Asian workers in the context of the Federal Government's Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 (the White Australia Policy) and described the racial hierarchy into which they were slotted in Broome.

The employment phases of the most lowly of the indentured Asian workers in the pearling industry consisted of recruitment in South-East Asia; service aboard a lugger that usually remained on the pearling grounds; a layup period during the cyclone season; and repatriation to the port of recruitment at the end of the indenture. Tensions often built up while the luggers were out at sea, and the animosity sometimes escalated into serious conflict back on land during the layup.

On board the luggers, the work was hard and people faced multiple risks. As well as facing cyclones and accidental injury or death, many men suffered nutritional deficiencies from a poor and unvarying diet.

The Japanese, both because of their high status as divers and their country's rising profile on the international stage, were at the top of the Asian hierarchy in the pearling industry. This led to resentment among the other groups. The Japanese expected to be treated as equals by the "whites" but often they were not. Full-dress diving work was dangerous, and the Japanese preferred to have their countrymen as tenders, to guide their many descents and ascents. That situation set the Japanese apart from other Asians who mostly cleaned and packed the shell, cooked, and fulfilled various other roles in the industry. The prosperity and status of Japanese men who owned and ran businesses in Broome also emphasised the cultural divisions. In speaking of the various races, Christine said that she had seen numerous references to inter-racial assaults and other conflict in police and court records.

On 28th December 1907, two Japanese men ran amok in Broome and officials feared that street fighting would erupt between Japanese and Malays. Subsequent negotiations saw representatives of the two groups agree to sign a treaty of peace, in the presence of the Broome Resident Magistrate and the Mayor, and agree to take future disagreements to appointed officials for settlement.

By 1914, despite a longstanding law forbidding Japanese or Chinese ownership of luggers, some Japanese were using the names of local Europeans in dummying arrangements that hid the true ownership. The Japanese owners employed Koepangers to work on their boats and tensions arose over the way they treated those men.

On 11 December 1914 a group of about 150 Koepangers clashed with around 600 Japanese in Broome. The weapons brandished included axes, revolvers and clubs. The seriously injured included nine Japanese and six Koepangers. One Koepanger died. No Malays took part in the clash. After the police brought the riot under control, they worked with the town's officials and its ethnic clubs to broker peace.

The early years of the First World War impacted heavily on Broome's pearling industry, dramatically reducing the number of luggers in operation. An exemption from the White Australia Policy allowed the continuing employment of Asian workers. Prices for shell improved after the war, and the numbers of indentured labourers increased. Among the various Asian communities in Broome, the Japanese retained their supremacy.

The 1920 riot involving around 2000 men began with fighting between Koepangers and Japanese on 20 December. Armed groups attacked one another at intervals over several days, and the riot ended only after the Riot Act was read, literally. This time 64 were wounded; four Asian men were killed in the fighting; and one police officer, Inspector Herbert Thomas, died of apoplexy.

In the discussion that followed the talk, one Kimberley Society member who had lived in Broome challenged the evening's portrayal of the town's pearling industry as one in which all the indentured crews in Broome were treated abysmally. Having read books, memoirs and reminiscences written by pearlers and members of their families, she said that there was ample evidence of the existence of luggers on which the working conditions were neither exploitative nor particularly unhealthy. Christine responded by pointing to the high number of crew deaths attributed to beri beri and to the incidents of aggression and cruelty, and unhealthy working environments referred to in Broome Police Files, Court Reports and other primary documents. It was the underlying animosity between racial groups that led to the riots in Broome. Other members picked up on her points about how little known the Broome riots are, and how in those times, as well as now, Asian people in Australia are often perceived as homogeneously Asian rather than as coming from culturally and geographically diverse communities.

### **Further Reading**

Black, David and Sachiko Sone (eds). *An Enduring Friendship: Western Australia and Japan – past, present and future*. Westerly Centre, University of Western Australia, Crawley, 2009.

Choo, Christine. 'Asian men on the west Kimberley coast, 1900 – 1940', in *Asian Orientations: Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 16, 1995, pp. 89–111.

McGann, P. "'Malays' as indentured labour: Western Australia 1867 – 1900', in *Papers in Labour History* 5, 1990, pp. 35–54.

Meaney, Neville. *Towards a new vision: Australia and Japan across time*. University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2007.

Schaper, Michael. 'The Broome Race Riots of 1920' in *Asian Orientations: Studies in Western Australian History*, vol. 16, 1995, pp. 112–32.