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Eppawela: Nauru revisted after a century

The Eppawela saga seems to have got submerged under the all important floating substances. But, the march toward globalization proceeds unabated. At an earlier time where the political jargon was different, this phenomenon would have been termed (neo) colonization. The terminology is new but the message is the same: *"get things cheap and make a fast buck"*. The story of Nauru as told by Professor Christopher Weeramantry in his publication "Nauru: environmental damage under international trusteeship" is essential reading to all who tend to forget the message under the new wording. The spin-doctors coin phrases to make us feel happy while we are being taken for a ride. But, such stories from the past may tell you what happens behind all the facade of trade agreements etc. I am reproducing an extract from the book to show how mining of Nauru made a few very rich, and left an island devastated, without any compensation.

Commencement of Mining on Nauru

(Nauru is a small isle and in the Pacific which was endowed with some of the richest possible phosphates in the world. Mining began in 1906, when Nauru was still part of the German empire, leaving it devastated as amply described in the book. Jaluit Gesellschaft won the exclusive right from the German government to exploit the Nauran phosphate)

"With the Pacific Phosphate Company now firmly in the saddle and enjoying a monopoly of the phosphate trade of two Pacific islands containing some of the finest phosphate in the world, the stage was set for the commencement of mining on Nauru.

Mining began in earnest in 1907. Labourers were hired from China and Carolines. Mooring and loading arrangements were made for surf boats and steamers. Facilities were provided for transporting the phosphate and drying it. Shipping interests were acquired in the French line, which transported the phosphate deposits to Makatea in French Polynesia. Housing was constructed for staff and labour.

A half penny per ton of phosphate-about a seven-hundredth part of the price at which the commodity was sold-was paid to the landowners and they received some lease rent and compensation for trees destroyed. They were not consulted on the political, legal or commercial arrangements which lead to this result and had no option but to accept what they were given. The days of half penny phosphate payments lingered long in the memory of the people and are even remembered today in popular songs. As landowners, Nauruans received from 1908 to 1913 £1320 for produce worth £945 000.

When considering these figures, it is important to note that not only was the Nauruan landowner receiving so minute a fraction of the value of the phosphate taken from his land, he was also left with the added burden of the devastation of his land which had been enjoyed by his people from time immemorial. An interesting footnote to the figures is that by the agreement reached between the Pacific Phosphate Company and the Jaluit Gesellschaft on 22 January 1906, the Jaluit Gesellschaft were to receive 50 pfennig "for every ton shipped in excess of 50,000 tons ". At that time, the Nauruans were receiving only 1/2 pfennig per ton, thus making the payment due to Jaluit 100 times as large as the payment to Nauruans, for every ton of phosphate in excess of the stated quantity. A witness, Mr. Kenneth Walker, giving evidence before the Commission, stated that the Jaluit Gesellschaft continued to receive a royalty as late as about 1928/29.

By the commencement of World War I the mining operation of the Pacific Phosphate Company had grown into a vast enterprise which is described with much pride in the literature of the time. The work of this enterprise was described as being "a powerful factor in the present agricultural prosperity of the Commonwealth of Australia and its position of being able to offer abundance of wheat to the people of the allied countries."

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