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Abuse or Slavery? A Look at Practices of Debt Peonage from the 19th-Century Philippines

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Abstract

This article problematizes the work system known as debt peonage that developed throughout the Spanish-controlled territories of the Philippine islands, examining *memorias* and colonial sources to analyze practices of abuse that this system sustained during the 19th century. It illustrates the diversity of work experiences imposed on Indigenous peoples. Debt peonage involved a large part of colonial society and could result in a variety of situations, ranging from the imposition of excessive interest rates to what some scholars have considered slavery-like conditions.

Keywords: debt peonage, debt servitude, Filipino slavery, abuse, 19th century



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I. Introduction: An Uncomfortable Accusation

Referring to debt peonage, Remigio Moltó, Superintendent of Local Branches (*Superintendente de Ramos Locales*) in Philippines, stated that »[t]his issue is generally viewed with indifference, but I find it of great importance.«¹ In 1865, Moltó, a Spaniard, appealed to the governor-general of the Visayas Islands to persecute anyone who abused debt peonage, which he argued was responsible for the »backwardness of the country.«² For him, it was essential »that we rigorously proceed, by all possible means, to punish and prevent the usuries and scams that rich *mestizos* exercise with the Indians, whose lands, fruits, and children have fallen into debt with them, and who truly live as their slaves.«³

His accusation refers to debt peonage, a long-standing system of work in the Philippines that existed prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the archipelago.⁴ Nevertheless, linking it to slavery in the 19th century posed a problem for the Spanish colonial government, for the enslavement of Indigenous peoples had been officially outlawed

since the mid-16th century.⁵ While we know that this practice continued much longer, Tatiana Seijas illustrates that it diminished significantly towards the second half of the 17th century, when, in 1679, Filipinos were recognized as »Indian vassals of the Crown.«⁶

Faced with the prohibition of Indigenous slavery, as in America, new local work systems emerged that sought to legitimize native exploitation based on a legal framework that regulated practices and avoided abuses. These emerged in the American colonies in 1503, when Isabel I signed and sent a royal charter to the governor of Hispaniola, Nicolás de Ovando, obliging the Indigenous population to enter a system of forced labor.⁷ These legal norms attempted to organize and regulate Indigenous labor in order to make natives available for various jobs while simultaneously avoiding their ill-treatment.

Among the most prevalent labor systems of the Philippines, we can identify the *encomienda*, *polos y servicios*, and debt peonage. They all changed and adapted to different conditions over the centuries, making the natives the primary labor force for agricultural development and infrastructure on

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and suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to Thomas Rothe for translating an earlier version of this paper. All quotes are his translation.

1 Informe de Remigio Moltó, Superintendente de los ramos locales al Gobierno Superior Civil con motivo de la miseria, escasez de granos y falta de trabajo que hoy se siente en los Distritos de Visayas y para contrarrestarla y como adición al anterior informe sobre reformas que se propuso en el reglamento del servicio personal, Cebú, 17 de Agosto de 1865. Archivo Histórico Nacional (hereafter AHN), Ultramar 5343, File 4,1.
2 AHN, Ultramar 5343, File 4,1.
3 AHN, Ultramar 5343, File 4,1.
4 MONTERO Y VIDAL (1887) 49.
5 As Patricio Hidalgo explains, in most cases, the abolition of indigenous slavery prevailed with the New Laws of 1542. However, one exception was

with the Mindanaos, who were allowed to be enslaved due to the context of war in the territories occupied by these groups. This lasted from 1570 to 1574, when their enslavement was definitively prohibited. HIDALGO NUCHERA (1994) 63. Another exception was Chile, where Felipe II legalized the slavery of rebellious Mapuches in 1608. For more information, see Contanza López Lamerain's article in this Focus dossier.

6 The New Laws did not immediately affect the Philippines because, as Tatiana Seijas explains, the »quality« of Filipinos was not clearly established from the beginning. Thus, during the 17th century, the Spanish Philippines had a diverse slave population that included Filipino Indians, Muslim war captives (Moors), and foreign slaves. SEIJAS (2014) 89.
7 LUCENA SALMORAL (2000) 55.

the different islands, but often under conditions much worse than the legal stipulations permitted. Historian Josep M. Fradera asserts that the loose control by Manila's political and military institutions led to a quite variable and heterogeneous system of exploitation, in which the subjugation of peasants depended to a large extent on the capacity and greed of senior *alcaldes* or *oficiales*. Thus, in Fradera's words, »their obligations may not have been formally very burdensome [...] but they could be unbearable in practice.«⁸ But what exactly is the difference between unbearable exploitation and slavery?

Traditionally, colonial historiography has classified labor systems as either »slave« or »free« labor, placing Indigenous subjects in the latter category. Nevertheless, accusations such as Remigio Moltó's, denouncing the existence of slavery within the framework of free labor systems, reveal a much more complex reality that requires attention. This article seeks to problematize these complexities, illustrating how debt peonage in the Philippines generated a wide range of abuses, including the collection of excessive interests and situations quite similar to slavery.⁹ This article, therefore, aims to demonstrate that, despite the effective decrease of Asian slavery in the Philippines at the end of the 17th century, human exploitation continued to exist in the archipelago under quite variable conditions until the 19th century.¹⁰ To do so, it is vital to consider the frontier context of the Philippines, where, despite the absence of legalized Indigenous slavery, exercising sovereignty emerged as a difficult task in a multi-ethnic, insular, and distant territory. The archipelago created various spaces

conducive to violating the law and binding workers who were theoretically part of »free« labor systems.

Finally, it is essential to highlight how the human subjugation connected to peonage involved the entire Filipino population, directly affecting poor natives yet perpetuated by Indigenous Christians, *mestizos*, and Spaniards alike. In this sense, this contribution blurs the classic division between »Spanish oppressors« and »oppressed Indians«. In order to delve deeper into the complex social dynamics of the Philippine colonial world, it is necessary to recognize that such abuses were committed by a heterogeneous population.

II. What is Debt Peonage?

Debt peonage, also known as »debt bondage«,¹¹ was a labor system developed in various Hispanic colonies that, in the case of the Philippines, had been practiced by certain ethnicities prior to arrival of the Spanish. This labor system, mentioned since the early conquest of the islands until the late 19th century, was present in various scenarios, such as domestic service, agriculture, animal care, and textiles. Although debt peonage was neither created nor officially promoted by the Spanish authorities on the islands, it was nevertheless implemented in the archipelago by Spaniards, *mestizos*, and Filipinos. As long as it did not lead to abuses and debts were paid according to the stipulations between the parties involved, the practice itself was not criminalized by law.¹²

8 FRADERA (2005) 450.

9 To get out of the dichotomy of slavery/freedom, the Cluster »Beyond slavery and freedom« use the concept of »asymmetrical dependency« to include all forms of bondage across time and space. In this study, I wanted to analyze the similarities and disagreements between slavery and debt peonage in the 19th century. For the concept of »asymmetrical dependency« see WINNEBECK et al. (2021).

10 This article is a revised excerpt from the thesis, *¿Vejeciones o esclavitud? Viaje a los regímenes laborales en Filipinas en el siglo XIX* (Torment or Slavery? A Journey to the Labor

Regimes in 19th-Century Philippines), in partial fulfillment of a Master's degree from the Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez (UAI). It was written within the framework of the research project *Towards a renewed legal history of indigenous labor and tribute extraction in the Spanish Empire*, led by David Rex Galindo at UAI in Santiago de Chile and Thomas Duve, Max Planck Institute for Legal History and Legal Theory, between 2019 and 2022.

11 Debt peonage was a reality that developed in different colonial spaces. In 1682, it was reported that Indians in Guadalajara were being deceived by a clothes lending scheme, which led to the generation of debt among

the Indigenous population. Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Guadalajara 231, no. 5, f. 142v–143v. Likewise, historian Silvio Zavala exposes the existence of debt peonage in Mexican haciendas as early as the 15th century. ZAVALA (1988). Andrés Reséndez also explores the existence of debt peonage on the border between Mexico and the United States in the colonial period. RESÉNDEZ (2016).

12 The *Reglamento provisional para la policía de la servidumbre doméstica* (Provisional Regulations for Domestic Servitude Police), from September 9, 1848, criminalized »usurious treatment« but did not prohibit debt peonage. CLAVERÍA Y ZALDÚA (1880).

Debt peonage consisted of the exchange of labor for a certain amount of money or resources. The work was used to repay the creditor's debt until the contracted debt was fully canceled. In this sense, workers did not receive remuneration for their work since they slowly canceled the debt previously agreed upon between both parties. For this reason, debtors saw their freedom of movement diminished as long as the agreed debt was not fully extinguished.¹³

Problems arose mainly for two reasons: the first occurred when the guarantor, whether due to ignorance or out of economic necessity, agreed to abusive conditions, either low salaries that slowed the process of paying the debt or employing usurious interest as a penalty for delayed payment. The second reason involved the creditor providing the worker with advances, food, clothing, or other items that multiplied their debt. If these further debts were not repaid, the compounding interest only increased the total amount owed. In this way, workers could only resign or move elsewhere once they were debt-free. The Augustinian Fray Martín de Rada, who was on a mission to the Philippines in 1564 during the initial conquest of the archipelago, described the situation as follows: »even if the debt is insignificant, a man easily goes from freedom to slavery; since it is so common in this country for interest on debts to increase enormously, one can fall into slavery even over no more than five or six pesos«.¹⁴

In practice, sources repeatedly report that debt repayment was further exacerbated by low salaries and progressively increasing debts. In this way, »non-payment« became an excuse to retain laborers and force them to work in a context of coercion that led to multiple cases of abuse, a reality evident throughout Hispanic territories. In 1887, the Spanish official José Montero y Vidal clarified that debt peonage was widespread in the Philippines. He revealed that when someone was »unable to satisfy the debt within a certain period, the amount was doubled, resulting in true slavery; an abusive practice that has not yet been eradicated, regardless of the laws prohibiting it, and

whenever these miserable usurers have taken their claims to court, justice sides with them«.¹⁵

Faced with this problem, debt peonage mainly led to the following situations: debtors could effectively manage to pay their debts according to the (fair) terms of the agreement, or more adverse situations could arise: debtors became perpetually trapped in the repayment jobs, designated someone else to repay their debt (usually a family member), tried to escape, or resorted to using the Spanish justice system to end the abuse.

In many instances, unfortunately, debts were perpetuated. In 1865, Remigio Moltó, the Superintendent of Local Branches (*Superintendente de Ramos Locales*) admitted to the Spanish Superior Civil Government that, in the Philippines, »people want things to continue as they are«,¹⁶ because, if the natives were not educated and did not speak Spanish, »they would not be able to understand those who could remedy their situation«.¹⁷ His words paint a picture in which the exploitation of natives underpinned a lack of interest in educating them and preserved abusive practices through debt peonage. Economic reasons would lead to attempts to keep the Indigenous population »out« of Hispanic rule. Since most Filipinos did not consider themselves vassals of the Crown and they remained out of reach of the Spanish justice and legislative systems, it was easier to carry out illegal practices on the islands.

Although Moltó had no intention of prohibiting the practice of debt peonage, he did vouch to punish usurers who carried out »scams«. He further blamed »rich *mestizos*« and the local economic elites of Hispanic villages for abusing natives living outside the scope of Spanish surveillance. Additionally, he described the debtors' need to pawn their property and children, which shows how »the transfer of debts« to the debtor's relatives was a recurrent phenomenon. Yet the question remains whether these debtors were actually »true slaves«, as Moltó claimed.

Faced with these realities, Article 19 of the *Reglamento Provisional para la policía de la servidumbre doméstica* (Provisional Regulations for the Po-

13 ZAVALA (1988) 45–46.

14 MONTERO Y VIDAL (1887) 49.

15 MONTERO Y VIDAL (1887) 52.

16 AHN, Ultramar 5343, File 4, 1.

17 Ibid.

lice of Domestic Servitude) of 1880 prohibited and penalized debt peonage in the following terms:

All usurious dealings with servants and dependents of all kinds are prohibited. Masters who, under the pretext of advances, of having paid debts of those or their charges of tribute and personal services, manage to perpetuate their servant's services, or that of their families, increasing their efforts every day instead of decreasing them with their labor, for failing to pay them properly, shall be punished severely.¹⁸

This regulation provides information on two fundamental aspects of debt peonage. First, these practices were still in use toward the end of the 19th century, and the continued abuses meant that the practice had to be regulated. Second, it proves the existence of debt transfers to other family members. Even at the beginning of the 20th century, the Assembly of the Philippines, a local body with legislative capacity under U.S. colonial control of the archipelago, defended the legal use of the family as payment in situations of voluntary servitude. A document from 1914 clarifies that »if the debtor father voluntarily places his son at the service of the creditor, so that with the salary that he receives he can pay his debt, although the condition seems harsh, such action is not prohibited by law.«¹⁹ The argument is based on the fact that the son did not perform the work forcibly since the father deliberately decided to offer the son as payment for his debt. The Assembly of the Philippines reasoned that »by preserving the son's freedom and not being completely subject to the master's will [...] he can abandon him when he considers it convenient.«²⁰ However, did the son retain his freedom by carrying his father's debts? Was it feasible to abandon the master in case he did not want to assume the debt? Although the source stems from the period of U.S. control of the islands, it is critical to show that inheriting peonage debts was a frequent and even justified reality until the beginning of the 20th century.

In 1871, Fernando Fulgosio, a Spanish historian and writer, lamented in his *Crónica de Filipinas* (Chronicle of the Philippines) that »usury turned

the poorest or most deprived into slaves of the richest or most prudent.«²¹ In this way, he directly accused services performed in debt peonage as a form of slavery, explaining that the lack of resources for a family's sustenance while attempting to pay off debt increased their debt's value, and masters were invested in perpetuating this dynamic to maintain and strengthen their labor force. Thus, while some laborers were tied to their masters, others put another person in their place or a »wealthy patron« paid their debt. »There were masters with 300 slaves, and since these were significant estates, only inferior to gold, they sought every possible opportunity to increase them.«²² Fulgosio recalled, describing laborers' relevance for their creditors. Nevertheless, it also reveals that debts were sometimes paid off and debtors »freed.«²³

Finally, can we consider debt peonage a form of slavery, as some colonial sources claimed? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand what slavery meant in the 19th-century Hispanic colonies, leading us to discuss the enslavement of Africans since Indigenous slavery had been outlawed. The *Real Cédula de Su Majestad sobre la educación, trato y ocupaciones de los esclavos en todos sus dominios de Indias e Islas Filipinas bajo las reglas que se expresan* (His Majesty's Royal Charter on the Education, Treatment, and Occupations of Slaves in All The Possessions of the Indies and Philippine Islands under the Expressed Rules) of 1789 detailed the duties and rights of African slaves, as well as slave owners, suggesting a definition of the »colonial slave« in the late 18th century. According to this royal decree, the slave was considered an object with soul and reason that should be at the permanent service of his/her owner, fulfilling the tasks and labor that were assigned without payment and always with the possibility of being sold to another master.²⁴ Thus, we can distinguish three aspects that made the slave a »possessed thing«: the permanent use and usufruct of the person, the possibility of buying and selling them, and the absence of payment for their labor. Under the premises of the 1789 Real Cédula, the slave's freedom of movement was minimal and their condition was permanent.

18 CLAVERÍA Y ZALDÚA (1880) 9–10.

19 ASAMBLEA FILIPINA (1914) 16.

20 Ibid.

21 FULGOSIO (1871) 94.

22 FULGOSIO (1871) 92.

23 Ibid.

24 REY CARLOS IV (1789) 7.

This definition also raises the question of whether different realities of slavery can be identified within debt peonage. There is no single answer since such wrongdoings range from abusive charges to the debtor's complete subjugation; there were many intermediate situations. A critical element of this labor system complicating the situation is that subjugation ends when the debts are paid off. However, as the sources indicate, problems arose when debts were »eternalized«, producing a system of compulsion akin to slavery. The accounts of Remigio Moltó, Fernando Fulgoso, José Montero y Vidal, and the Provisional Regulation of 1881 illustrate the realities connected with the delay of debt payment to the point that descendants inherit the problem. This is how semi-slavery situations arise: accumulated interest meant that full payment was not possible and lenders could indefinitely make use of the laborer. In contrast to slavery, however, the laborer could not be sold.²⁵ Nevertheless, it should be noted that, although the guarantor could not resort to the debtor's sale, the subjugation experience, in which the debtor has no freedom of movement or payment, is quite similar to slavery.²⁶ Thus, beyond distinguishing whether debt peonage constitutes slavery, it is certainly worth noting the multiple forms of coercion used in a supposedly »free« labor system and how similar it was to the situation of enslaved Africans. To do this, we must delve into the intricate complexities of debt peonage. Taking examples from four groups in different geographical areas of the Philippines – Igorots, Negros, Coolies, and Mangyans – we aim to describe the multiple practices that emerged from this work system.

III. One Thousand and One Faces of Debt Peonage

1. *The Igorot People from the Island of Luzon*

According to contemporary Spanish observers, the Igorots,²⁷ an Indigenous group from the northern central mountains of Luzon, in the present-day province of Nueva Vizcaya, practiced debt peonage before the arrival of the Spaniards. The memoirs of Dominican missionary Fray Juan Villaverde, who lived in the Philippines from 1868 to 1897, is a relevant source that describes debt peonage in the territory in the 19th century.²⁸ According to Villaverde, debt service was an Igorot tradition associated with certain religious beliefs that predated the arrival of the Spanish: people would take out loans to buy animals (mainly chickens or pigs), kill them, and observe their bile.²⁹ Spanish engineer Ramón Jordana y Morera, a mountain inspector in the Philippines from 1873 to 1885, reported that Igorots performed these practices in ceremonial rites called *cañaos*, where they frequently sacrificed cattle, hens, or chickens.³⁰

In the *cañaos* rituals, Igorots communicated with their divinities by means of the internal fluids of the sacrificed animal. If the bile looked healthy, it was a good omen for economic prosperity, health, or security. If the bile of the sacrificed animal looked unhealthy, they would buy and slaughter other animals until a satisfactory result was found. Villaverde's account serves as a pertinent ethnohistorical source. He indicated that »the chickens or pigs, which are usually borrowed, must be paid in gold, according to the horrible usuries that reign among them.«³¹ Thus, their beliefs led them into »an endless series of debts«³² that con-

25 Antonio de Morga documents the sale of some debtors as slaves in punishment for their unpaid debts, but this reality is not frequently described in the 19th century. See MORGÁ (1609).

26 Jean Allain and Robin Hickey point out the importance of distinguishing the existence of slavery in current times by analyzing whether the degree of possession implies that the person is controlled »as a possessed thing.« This is an interesting reflection that can be connected with the colonial world. ALLAIN/HICKEY (2012).

27 The name »Igorot« was given by the Spanish to refer to the »mountain inhabitants« and is generically used to identify a very diverse ethnolinguistic group, including the Isneg, Kaliga, Bontoc, Ifugao, Kankanay, and Ibaloy. These were the non-Christianized indigenous groups who lived in the Central Cordillera. MANCHADO LÓPEZ/LUQUE TALAVÁN (2014) 19.

28 TEJÓN (1982).

29 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 122.

30 JORDANA Y MORERA (1885) 59.

31 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 122.

32 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 123.

tinued to increase depending on how long it took to repay them, per the »commutative justice« generally agreed upon that states paying off a debt with the exact sum owed.

According to Igorot custom, it was understood that if a person deferred paying a debt, the delay had an economic impact on the lender. Therefore, it was fair to increase the debt by means of interest.³³ According to Villaverde, »non-payment« implied the loss of possible chicks (which would have been born if the chickens had been returned on time). According to this logic, if a broiler chicken was not paid off after one year, the debt would no longer be a broiler but a laying hen. If the debtor could not provide a laying hen within a suitable amount of time, the debt would turn into a medium-sized pig. If the debt still had not been paid off after a period of two years, the pig would have to be even larger. A debt that remained unpaid after a period of three years would finally become a *carabao*.³⁴ Additionally, debts could be passed on from parents to children, »and if they have no children«, Villaverde tells us, »to their closest friends and to their children: even if they have no part in the loan, or inherited any of their elders' estates«. ³⁵ The Dominican's report provides an illustrative description of this situation, explaining that people experiencing poverty often resorted to loans so that:

[T]he business of usurers, who only stuff themselves with meat, get drunk, and enjoy a life free of work, is to make sure their loans are paid, slowly. All the burden, then, goes to the orphans, who have to spend almost all their lives sweating blood in the Christian villages, to pay for the countless carabaos that are requested of them, for the chickens and pigs that their parents spent on their foolish practices.³⁶

Thus, when the Spaniards arrived, debt service was a custom among certain Indigenous groups that adapted and perpetuated into common and »fair« practices under Hispanic control. It is also important to note that many debtors agreed upon and paid their debts in the »Christian villages«,

which reveals that these practices also occurred in the presence of Hispanic authorities and not only in the remote Luzon mountain range. These »Christian villages« and »christianized Indians« were Indigenous Filipinos subject to Hispanic rule and its political and social life. Having been conquered and baptized, these people became vassals of the Crown, subject to Spanish jurisprudence, which prohibited slavery and abusive labor practices. However, debt peonage was so common that such abuses could continue unfettered, even in towns where Spain exercised its sovereignty. Showing just how prevalent this labor practice was amongst even the Spanish, the priest explains, »the rich, who are *principales* or nobles, seem to be looking for an opportunity to lend.«³⁷

Villaverde's testimony describes the normality of such practices amongst the Igorot people. I would like to examine one case in particular to illustrate the point:

While I was on the mission of Quiangan, a young neophyte came to tell me that he was going down to the villages. »What will you look for there?«, I asked. »I shall work to pay off the debts I owe because if I fail, I fear I shall be killed or sold.« »What debts are those?« »The ones that my father contracted while he was sick, for the chickens and pigs he spent to cure himself.« »What a shame you must pay for your father's whims!« »It is our custom.« »And how much must you pay?« »I do not know the exact sum; everyone says I owe them, so I assume some forty carabaos.« This neophyte went down to the villages many years ago; he has been working harder than a Negro; he paid many of his debts and contracted new ones; was chosen to follow the customs and practices of the Igorots; and even if he died of old age, he would never be able to pay all his debts. This is how the rich or the *principals* enslave the poor.³⁸

As the debtor explains, he takes on work to pay off his father's debts. His commitment is more than just a burden; he considers this a »custom« or duty that he must fulfill. This raises the question of

33 Ibid.

34 The Philippine carabao, or water buffalo, was used for transportation, fieldwork, and consumption (meat and milk).

35 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 123.

36 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 125.

37 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 124.

38 Ibid.

whether Igorot people reported abuses which, despite their occurrence in the context of Hispanic control, may have been justified based on their [Igorot] normative tradition. For the Dominican missionary, »this is all an enduring practice, and no one mutters a word about [the situation of] others, unless to comment on their misfortune: because they insist it is customary among them, and as customary [practice], it suffices for them to silently venerate and obey«. ³⁹ This description reinforces the importance of tradition for the Indigenous population, despite the fact that it entailed a devastating accumulation of debt.

2. *The Mangyans of Mindoro*

Another interesting source regarding debt peonage comes from the writings of the engineer Ramón Jordana y Morera, who in 1885 described the reality of some Mangyans (the generic name for the ethnic groups living in the central part of Mindoro), referred to as »Filipino Indians« or »Christian Indians«. Jordana y Morera criticized the »Christian Indians« who practiced a »scandalous« form of debt peonage »because, in addition to commercial fraud, there is servitude, widespread even among Christian Indians themselves«. ⁴⁰ The author emphasizes that such abuses were largely committed by Hispanicized natives in small villages subject to Hispanic jurisprudence: they »exploit the Mangyans however they see fit, forcing them into the drudgery of sowing fields and cutting and gathering wood for a handful of rice«. ⁴¹

Hard work for meager pay was not the only way to exploit the Indigenous population: debt peonage was also frequently used. As the engineer explains, »Christian Indians« would grant advances in fabrics and other goods in exchange for work in their fields. According to Jordana y Morera, »this agreement, apparently fair, turns the Mangyan into a true slave«, ⁴² using the same binding system as in Villaverde's description of the Igorot people of Luzon. The engineer further claims that field owners paid meager salaries to the Mangyan (who were already paying off their debt with their work), hoping that necessity would force them to request new loans. Thus, debt would never diminish but

instead only continue to increase, as »these laborers would see the need to work their whole lives for a small sum of money that they only saw briefly«. ⁴³

This description illustrates that the practice of retaining workers by means of loans – whether monetary or products – was typical amongst the Igorots and other ethnicities, as the Dominican Fray Juan Villaverde also pointed out. On the other hand, both Jordana y Morera and Villaverde argued that »native Christians« were involved in this system of abuse. This shows us that such practices occurred not only deep in the mountains or in territories outside of Spanish control but also in the »Christian villages« where indigenous groups had converted to Christianity and were subject to Hispanic jurisprudence.

Finally, Jordana y Morera also stresses that many Indigenous peoples who suffered such abuses accepted their fates without rebelling or protest: Mangyans »resign to these hateful vexations without any resistance when they could easily escape to the woods«. ⁴⁴ This supposed »resignation« may correspond to local traditions prior to Spanish control, which dissuaded Indigenous peoples from seeking justice and freedom within the framework of Spanish law. But it could also be explained by a weak Spanish administration, unable to control and eradicate local practices in territories far from the centers of Spanish power.

3. *Crops on the Island of Negros*

A third region where we find instances of debt peonage is on the island of Negros. As historian María Dolores Elizalde points out, during the 19th century, the Philippines gradually transformed from a subsistence economy based on exchanging Asian products for American silver to an agro-export economy of products such as sugar, cotton, and tobacco. Thus, the domestic economy grew from the products grown on the islands, completely modifying the organization of land ownership and exploitation. ⁴⁵ How did these changes impact native sharecroppers and laborers who worked the land? The answer is manifold since it depended on where haciendas were located, who administered them, and the capacity of state con-

39 Comisión Central de Manila (1887) 123.

40 JORDANA Y MORERA (1885) 101.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 JORDANA Y MORERA (1885) 102.

44 Ibid.

45 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 65.

trol, among other aspects. However, we know that the sugar plantation system demanded an intensive labor force, giving rise to extensive abuses, including debt peonage.

Historian Filomeno Aguilar shows that on Negros, as in Calamba, in addition to regular laborers, sharecroppers – known as *acsas* – were frequently used to cultivate lands. Hacienda owners (typically foreign, Spanish, Creole, or *mestizo* companies) would subdivide their land into smaller lots worked by sharecroppers, who were provided »the animals and equipment necessary to carry out the work, as well as monetary advances to attract them and bind them to the property.«⁴⁶ Thus, while some were kept on the estates through the debt peonage system, others asked for money advances when hired in order to run away with the money.⁴⁷ Aguilar points out that landowners would hire undocumented workers and fugitives, whom they enticed by permitting cockfights and gambling, all illegal practices.⁴⁸ According to Aguilar, landowners constantly sought to attract and retain workers through loans, possibly due to the colonial state's inability to monitor the region. »The colonial state was, for all intents and purposes, irrelevant, and even absent, in the undisciplined island of Negros, where each hacienda, isolated by the poor transport infrastructure, sought to be its own center of power«,⁴⁹ he suggests. This would have created an environment favorable for granting loans adjusted to landowner interests.

Moreover, historian Alfred McCoy argues that by the early 20th century, debt peonage was used quite frequently in Negros, given that labor was scarce. It was thus necessary to ensure the influx of workers by creating sophisticated debt peonage systems.⁵⁰ By 1902, the commander of the constabulary (a police force on the islands created by the U.S. government) appointed to Negros, John R. White, stated that despite the control of the Civil Guard and the local security of the plantations, »the only resource of most workers was flight, often to the autonomous pagan communi-

ties in the uplands of southern Negros.«⁵¹ This system in which workers were »bound« was intensified by physical punishment. White was clear about this when he denounced that those in charge of the haciendas used robust clubs made of *palma brava*, the hardest wood on the island. In this way, White described a »kind of semi-slavery«⁵² in which he had to intervene to free unjustly held Indigenous workers, for he claimed many were imprisoned over debts or working to pay them off. »During my stay in Negros, I was called several times to rescue *Tao*⁵³ from the clutches of their creditors or to free them from illegal imprisonment by municipal officials«,⁵⁴ he claimed. He also observed that the only alternative for many indigenous workers was to escape to the mountains, although it entailed significant risk of persecution and punishment.

In light of the situation described by White, the question of how many workers were retained by landowners under the pretext of paying abusive debts during the Hispanic period emerges. Negros Island had become a sugar stronghold by 1850. In this sense, we can assume that these practices came from Spanish colonial times, especially considering that Negros had a small population and very little institutional presence. As a result, activities on the island were kept on the margins of state control, which only served to facilitate abuses.⁵⁵

White's descriptions reflect a vital control mechanism that curtailed the freedom of people who could not seek other horizons. While there are not enough sources to prove that these practices were carried out on a mass scale, it is nevertheless possible that they were not uncommon, especially given the need for labor to produce sugar, cotton, and tobacco. Likewise, on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, the legal enslaving of African and Afro-descendant populations on the Caribbean Islands, New Spain, and what is now the southern part of the United States coexisted with systems of debt peonage for retaining Indigenous workers on Mexican haciendas from the late 16th well into the 19th century.⁵⁶ We need to further explore the

46 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 115–116.

47 Ibid.

48 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 132.

49 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 115–116.

50 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 140.

51 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 156.

52 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 157.

53 *Tao* means »person« in Tagalog.

54 ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017) 156.

55 See ELIZALDE/HUET DE LEMPS (2017).

56 ZAVALA (1988) 45.

practices of haciendas in the Philippines during the second half of the 19th century and establish comparisons between the methods used to attract workers to the haciendas in the different territories once held under Spanish colonial rule. This would enable us to assess whether debt peonage was a widespread practice throughout the Spanish empire and the later republics that emerged after the 19th-century wars for independence.

Finally, it is relevant to note that two of the sources reviewed (White and McCoy) discuss the haciendas on Negros Island in 1902, after the U.S. occupation of the Philippines in 1898. In this sense, it is evident that the practices mentioned above did not originate from the U.S. invasion of the islands and have existed since the times of Spanish control. We may ask if this was a common practice throughout the 19th century. And if so, how often was it reported to the authorities?

The sources consulted for this contribution repeatedly mention debt peonage as a labor system used in the Philippines, leading us to assume that retaining workers by means of debt could have been an everyday reality in Philippine haciendas toward the second half of the 19th century. However, future research is needed to clarify this issue.

4. *The Case of Coolies*

A final example of abusive debt peonage in the Philippines involved the so-called «coolies». In a broad sense, the words *culi* or coolie are defined as «a worker who emigrated in a context of power inequality between worker and employer, or more generally, any poor migrant worker». ⁵⁷ Coolies were mainly Chinese who traveled to places as remote as Cuba and Peru but also settled in South-east Asia and the Philippines.

Based on 19th-century Philippine sources, historian Mónica Ginés has studied the abuses of coolies through the second half of the 19th century. The large influx of immigrants from China primarily worked in mines, public works, and other forms of strenuous work. Coolies arrived in the Philippines and settled in various places, such as the islands of Mindoro, Masbate, Marinduque, Luzon, Negros, among others. Therefore, their

treatment varied according to the reality of each place and the type of work performed. ⁵⁸

It is interesting to examine how these people arrived during the Spanish period because, as Ginés points out, many settled through «assisted migration», carried out unofficially through a «ticket» credit system. Accordingly, the worker received an advance to pay for their travel to the archipelago, including the price of the ticket and everything involved in arriving in the Philippines, which was then to be repaid through work. ⁵⁹ Ginés stresses that the creditor was commonly a family member, which made the process intransparent and, therefore, offered «little possibility of reporting and escaping abuse and exploitation». ⁶⁰ There was also a complex trafficking network in which some people obtained benefits. According to Juan Mencarini, an imperial customs employee for the Chinese empire from 1881 to 1912, in addition to the profits that the creditor received for transporting migrants, Spanish government employees also took advantage of migrants. They charged fees for an obligatory doctor's examination and the issuance of a personal I.D. as well as ensuring tax-free labor in public works. ⁶¹ Ginés counted many allegations of fraudulent collections by the consulate staff, often adding unauthorized fees. ⁶² A long chain of benefits was thus obtained for the creditor, the contractor, and government employees, which had to be paid by the «unfortunate immigrant» whose travel was financed by debts and significant interests that would later have to be repaid through labor. ⁶³

For this reason, Ginés describes this work system as «unfree work» and shows how creditors illegally perpetrated abuses that were complex to expose. Her proposal aligns with this investigation, providing a concrete example of abusive practices in a working system carried out in a Hispanic territory involving royal employees. Some employees reported these practices and offered testimonies attesting to their existence. For example, in 1887, Spanish diplomat Eduardo Toda y Guell published in his memoirs that, although much remained unknown about coolie migration, «we must discard any idea of individual freedom and personal initiative by these migrants». ⁶⁴ Toda y Guell's de-

57 GINÉS (2020) 462.

58 Ibid.

59 GINÉS (2020) 458.

60 GINÉS (2020) 461.

61 GINÉS (2020) 463.

62 GINÉS (2020) 476.

63 GINÉS (2020) 463.

64 TODA Y GUELL (1887) 274.

tailed testimony can help us decode certain features of this system of debt peonage. He reveals that Chinese compatriots recruited these workers in China, promising them prosperous benefits and a salary four times higher than what they actually received. In addition, Chinese migrants were often offered money advances for their families in China and transportation expenses, all of which would be repaid through manual labor.

According to Toda y Guell, steamers leaving Emuy (also known as Xiamen, located on the west coast of the East China Sea) every three or four days embarked between 200 and 300 Chinese migrants to Manila. They boarded the ships and, in so doing, committed themselves to a debt that would be extremely difficult to repay. He illustrates the migrant's financial tragedy, being charged a 3–4% annual interest. »However miserably that man lives, and however much he works, as luck does not extraordinarily favor him, he will never be rid of the obligation that weighs over him«,⁶⁵ the diplomat pointed out, managing to eternalize a portrait of these migrants.

The trafficking of Chinese migrants was significantly reduced in 1892, when the number of passports became limited for Chinese traveling on British ships to the Philippines and Spanish ships along the Xiamen-Manila route. The coolie experience in the Philippines once again attests to the existence of debt as a form of coercion and abuse in labor systems that were supposedly free. Because debt peonage was a common labor system on the islands before European colonization, it quickly adapted as a system of subjugation. Many Chinese arrived illegally, making it more complex to comprehend their employment situation on the islands.⁶⁶ Public employees also participated in this system of debt peonage, showing that not only natives, »Christianized Indians«, and *mestizos* were involved in the abuses that emerged from this work system, but also migrant labor from China and Spaniards who took advantage of it.

How many Chinese arrived in the Philippines via this practice? How many of them would pay their debts and return to their home country? These fundamental questions have no easy answer

and require new and more in-depth studies. Even if we cannot offer a precise estimate, the number of Chinese who arrived under these conditions was clearly considerable. I mentioned earlier that between 200 and 300 Chinese traveled every three to four days from the port of Emuy to Manila. In addition, some trading companies engaged in this trafficking, whether intentionally or not. In 1876, the Manila Society of Commerce »Ignacio Rocha y Cía.« requested that it be forgiven a fine of 12,600 pesos imposed when the Superior Civil Government of the Philippines discovered 252 Chinese without a passport on a company ship.⁶⁷ In this context, it is essential to ask how many people were unwittingly bound to a debt that would multiply over time.

IV. Debt Peonage: A Slave System?

Abusive practices within the framework of debt peonage were a frequent reality in 19th-century Philippines. Dominican priest Fray Juan Villaverde, public employees such as Remigio Moltó and Ramón Jordana y Morera, and contemporary savants such as Fernando Fulgosio and José Montero y Vidal condemn debt peonage as an oppressive system that developed on the margins of legality. Finally, the Provisional Regulation of 1881 outlawed usury and the indefinite submission of laborers to debt payment, attesting to the widespread use of these practices throughout the 19th century.

In a study of the Mexican-U.S. border between the 17th and 19th centuries, historian Andrés Reséndez explains that debt peonage hardly fits within the limits of accepted labor institutions, resulting in *the other slavery*, which introduced alternative slavery practices that persist into contemporary times.⁶⁸ In his words, »the other slavery continued through the end of the nineteenth century and in some remote areas well into the twentieth century. Disguised as debt peonage [...], this other slavery was the direct forerunner of the forms of bondage practiced today«.⁶⁹

As discussed in this analysis, the Philippines in the 19th century represents a complex situation

65 TODA Y GUELL (1887) 276–277.

66 Misiva dirigida al Gobierno General de Filipinas por la Sociedad de Comercio de Manila »Ignacio Rocha y Cía« solicitando que se levante la multa de 12.600 pesos impuesta por el

Gobierno Superior Civil de Filipinas por la aprehensión de 252 chinos sin pasaporte en un vapor de dicha compañía. AHN, Ultramar 455, File 22.

67 AHN, Ultramar 455, File 22.

68 RESÉNDEZ (2016) 16.

69 Ibid. His view coincides with that of the United Nations, which in 1956 established that debt servitude corresponded to an institution »analogous to slavery«. ONU (1956) 1.

because, according to the sources, some people did manage to pay off their debt. Upon repaying their debt in full, their status of servitude was ended and their freedom restored. Nevertheless, there were many situations where debts persisted and were even passed on from parents to children. We have seen how »tradition« silenced abusive practices, instigating their use in illegal spaces and even beyond Spanish-controlled territories.

Through testimonies related to the Igorots, the Mangyans, the Indigenous groups of Negros, and Chinese coolies, this article has sought to illustrate that debt peonage in the Philippines was a diverse phenomenon, generating forms of coercion as variable as they were difficult to classify within the free/slave labor dichotomy. Likewise, the sources show how Indigenous groups, christianized natives, *mestizos*, Spaniards, and even foreigners were involved in developing peonage. This reveals the importance of problematizing the intricate social dynamics that arose in the colonial world.

Finally, the different accusations of abuse in debt peonage precisely pointed out forms of de facto slavery. This is primarily because creditors accumulated great power over their debtors, coercing them to »stay indefinitely« as servants to gain their freedom once the debt was paid off. »Eternal-

izing« this condition was the way to perpetuate a covert form of slavery, revealing how complex strategies to bind Indigenous peoples emerged from illegal practices.

Even if we find instances of a »perpetuating debt peonage«, debt peons could not be sold or bought, what constitutes a relevant, differentiating element to chattel slavery. From the vital experiences of enslaved people and debt laborers, in some circumstances, we could argue that their lives were similar, for when laborers' debt became »eternal«, their freedom was coerced into wageless labor. Thus, although debt peonage was not legally considered a form of slavery, the similarities between the two systems transcend legal classifications.

Finally, as a corollary, the Philippines today is one of the countries with the highest rates of domestic human trafficking and in terms of exporting to other countries (mainly to the United States, the Middle East, and Malaysia).⁷⁰ Following Andrés Reséndez, I believe that debt peonage before, during, and after the Hispanic domination is undoubtedly a crucial antecedent to understanding the abuses that continue into the present in this region. It is, therefore, crucial to continue research on this system of work during the colonial period. ■

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