

DEBT PEONAGE IN PERU (1780)

After the enslavement of Indians was outlawed, Spanish employers sought new ways of compelling Indian labor. This document illustrates that although many Indians were nominally "free" or "contract" laborers, they were often trapped in a state of virtual slavery or debt peonage. This account is from Spanish royal officials Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa. The labor they described was above and beyond the officially required "mita," or conscripted labor for the government.

The repartimiento, known in Peru as the mita, did not provide Spanish employers with a dependable and continuing supply of labor. As a result, they turned increasingly to the use of free or contractual wage labor. From the first, however, this so-called free labor was associated with debt servitude. An advance of money or goods required an Indian to work for his employer until his debt was paid, often reducing him and his descendants to the condition of virtual slaves or serfs. Debt peonage became extremely widespread in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Spanish royal officials Jorge Juan and Antonio de Ulloa offer a precise description of how debt peonage, superimposed on mita obligations, operated in the Peruvian province of Quito in the first half of the eighteenth century.

On farming haciendas, an Indian subject to the mita earns from fourteen to eighteen pesos a year, the wage varying with the locality or corregimiento. In addition, the hacendado assigns him a piece of land, about twenty to thirty rods square in size, to grow his food. In return the Indian must work three hundred days in the year, leaving him sixty-five days of rest for Sundays, other church holidays, illness, or some accident that may prevent him from working. The mayordomo of the hacienda keeps careful record of the days worked by the Indian in order to settle accounts with him at the end of the year.

From his wage the master deducts the eight pesos of royal tribute that the Indian must pay; assuming that the Indian earns eighteen pesos, the most he can earn, he is left with ten pesos. From this amount the master deducts two pesos, two reales to pay for three rods of coarse cloth, costing six reales a rod, from which the Indian makes a cloak to cover his nakedness. He now has seven pesos, six reales with which to feed and dress his wife and children, if he has a family, and to pay the church fees demanded by the parish priest. But this is not all; since he cannot raise on his little plot all the food he needs for his family, he must get from the hacendado each month a half fanega of maize, costing six reales, more than double the price if he could buy elsewhere. Six reales, times twelve, come to nine pesos, which is one peso, six reales more than the Indian has left. Thus the unhappy Indian, after working three hundred days of the year for his master and cultivating his little plot in his free time, and receiving only a coarse cloak and six fanegas of maize, is in debt one peso and six reales, and must continue to work for his master the following year....

If, to crown his misfortunes, his wife or a child should die, he must somehow find the burial fee demanded by the priest, and so turns to the hacendado for another advance. If he is spared the pain of losing a member of his family, the priest demands that he show his gratitude by paying

for another church ceremony in honor of the Virgin or some saint, which requires another loan. Thus, at year's end, without money or anything else of value having passed through his hands, the Indian owes his master more than he has earned. The hacendado then claims legal control over the Indian and compels him to work for him until the debt is paid. Since it is impossible for the poor Indian to do so, he remains a slave all his life and, contrary to natural law and the law of nations, after his death his sons must continue to work to pay the debt of their father.

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