

LTC No. 83

THE LAND TENURE CENTER
310 King Hall
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

THE COLONATO SYSTEM ON THE BOLIVIAN ALTIPLANO
FROM COLONIAL TIMES TO 1952

by

Peter De Shazo*

*Graduate student in history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

All views, interpretations, recommendations, and conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the supporting or cooperating organizations.

This paper will be submitted for journal publication.

THE COLONATO SYSTEM ON THE BOLIVIAN ALTIPLANO
FROM COLONIAL TIMES TO 1952

Peter De Shazo

The sixteenth-century conquest of Peru and Alto Peru (present-day Bolivia) by Spain marked the beginning of centuries of exploitation for the Indian population of those regions. Almost immediately after the arrival of the first conquistadores, a struggle arose between the Spanish Crown and individual Spaniards over the services and land of the conquered Indians. The interplay between these two forces during the period of Spanish colonial rule resulted in the gradual breakdown of preconquest land tenure patterns in Alto Peru. After independence from Spain was won, the restructuring of land tenure was accelerated, culminating in the colonato system which characterized the Bolivian agrarian sector during the first half of the twentieth century.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the development, structure, and function of the colonato system as it existed on the altiplano of Bolivia, a region of large indigenous population both at the time of the Spanish conquest and at the present time. Although the colonato found its way into the valley region of Bolivia and the lowlands, or yungas, its development on the 12,000-foot altiplano was more dramatic and significant, forming by the twentieth century what Herbert Klein has called "the most exploitative peasant-hacienda system in the New World" (Klein, p. 8). The paper will also treat Indian resistance to the colonato, as well as the system's destruction as a result of the Bolivian National Revolution of 1952.

Colonial Land Tenure Patterns

The basic preconquest economic and social unit of the Aymara Indians on the altiplano was the ayllu, or community. Each ayllu consisted of plots of

land called sayañas, officially held by the community but parcelled out to each individual member family, which enjoyed the benefits derived from the holding and could pass it on from generation to generation. Because each holding was communally owned, no family had the right to sell its land. In addition, some community lands were not divided, but were worked or grazed cooperatively.

Alto Peru was conquered between 1535 and 1550 and incorporated into the Viceroyalty of Peru. All land passed immediately into the possession of the Spanish Crown, which rewarded major contributors to the conquest by granting them encomiendas or repartimientos. An encomienda consisted of the right to the tribute of a group of Indians and control over their land for two generations. Tribute payment could be rendered in cash, kind, or personal services, depending on various legal and practical circumstances. In return, the person who received the encomienda (the encomendero) was held responsible for the christianization and hispanization of his Indian wards. Repartimientos did not involve land, but merely the use of community (non-encomienda) Indians as corvée laborers.

Both the Crown and individual Spanish settlers realized that Indians, more than land, were the basis of wealth in Alto Peru, since mines and agricultural estates were worthless without Indian laborers to work them. For this reason, the Crown maintained a legal monopoly over both land and Indians. Until the end of the sixteenth century no outright land grants were conceded to individual Spaniards, and during the entire colonial period Indians were considered vassals of the Crown and therefore not subject to enslavement. In theory, the Crown was the paternalistic defender of the Indians against other elements of society which were eager to exploit them. In practice, however, this arrangement often broke down, since the Spanish

Kings were at various times forced by financial difficulties to exchange some of their control over Indian lands and services for increased revenues. On other occasions, the very institutions set up by the Crown to protect, hispanize, and christianize the Indians led to the loss of their community lands and their eventual impoverishment. The encomienda, for example, signified the end of communal life for many Indians, while the substitution of tribute payments in kind instead of currency proved detrimental to the Indians, even though it was designed by the Crown as a reform (Peñaloza, 1: 112).

Other processes caused community lands to fall into the hands of individual Spaniards. Perhaps the most important was composición, employed in Bolivia during both the colonial and republican periods when state funds became scarce. Composición was the process by which the Crown recognized the full possession of land by individual Spaniards upon payment of a fee, and the right of Indians to hold their community properties not as legal owners, but as tenants. Philip II instituted the first composición in 1591 to raise money for his fleet, while financial difficulties caused Philip IV to declare another in 1631 (Peñaloza, 1: 118). On both of these occasions, land which had previously belonged to Indian communities but had since been turned into encomiendas passed into the permanent possession of Spaniards. For those Indians whose communities were recognized by the Crown, the fee charged for such recognition also proved burdensome.

Reducción, the process which literally "reduced" the Indians to a more hispanized way of life by forcing them to move their communities from remote areas of the altiplano to zones of Spanish occupation, was another means by which Indians were despoiled of their lands (Peñaloza, 1: 119). Furthermore, increased contact with Spaniards also led to a more extensive use of the

Indian as a source of free labor and tax revenues. Each male community Indian was expected to pay a tribute tax to the Crown, as well as serve periodically in the mita, or forced labor levy for the mines and public works projects. Local Spanish officials called corregidores worked in conjunction with caciques, or Indian chiefs, in collecting taxes from community Indians and recruiting them for mita service, an arrangement which gave rise to countless abuses during the colonial period.

Under the strain of heavy taxes and the dreaded forced labor of the mita, many community Indians fled their traditional holdings to become landless laborers on the private estates of the Spanish landholders, where they were at least safe from being sent to the mines. Their new status was that of a yanacona, which in Inca times designated a person who had been enslaved for life as a result of participating in a rebellion. Since Spanish law prohibited the enslavement of Indians, the term yanacona did not retain its Incaic meaning in colonial times, but was used to describe Indians bound to the services of the owner of a hacienda and was the colonial version of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century colono. The yanacongazgo system was considered a blessing by Spanish landowners, who sought a stable and well-controlled agricultural labor force. According to Luis Peñaloza:

The landowners quickly saw in the yanacongazgo system a means of attracting a labor force to their properties, benefiting from the fiscal avarice which weighed heavily on the 'free' Indian and protecting him from being drafted for the mita. It was in their interest to maintain the Indians as workers within the limits of their estates and was a more benign system than the mines (Peñaloza, 1: 122).

The contradictory policy of the colonial regime, while alienating some community land from its original owners, did nevertheless help to maintain the existence of most of the indigenous communities on the Bolivian altiplano.

The Crown clearly realized that the communities were a significant source of wealth, since tribute payments and mita service fell only on community Indians. In their desire to centralize power as much as possible, the Spanish Kings sought to curtail the power of local elites by limiting their access to land and Indians. The rise of the hacienda as a permanent replacement for the encomienda took place when the Crown was too financially weak to resist the sale of royal lands or to curtail the massive exploitation of Indians. During such moments of financial stress, the Spanish Kings laid the foundation for the colonato system of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by turning royal land over to private individuals while at the same time providing them with a source of extremely cheap labor.

The Republican Period, 1824-1864

By his Decrees of Trujillo and Cuzco, issued in 1824 and 1825, Simón Bolívar attempted to radically alter the economic and social position of the Indians of Alto Peru (Bonifaz, pp. 1-5). Since all citizens of the newly liberated altiplano were to be equal, Bolívar abolished slavery, forced labor, and indigenous tribute payment, and hereditary titles of nobility for both whites and Indians. Community Indians were to be granted individual ownership over their sayafas and landless Indians would receive parcels of land from the state. The Decree of Cuzco also contained a stipulation designed to protect the Indians' land against encroachment by whites and mestizos; no land held by Indians could be sold until 1850. In this manner, Bolívar sought to make small landholders out of the Indians, "yeoman farmers" in the Jeffersonian sense, who would provide a sturdy agricultural backbone for Bolivia. Indian communities could maintain a de facto

existence, but since all land would in theory be worked and owned individually, the community was no longer the semi-legal entity that it had been during the colonial period.

Bolívar's system was extremely unpopular with many Bolivian elites. Creole landholders suddenly found their sources of free Indian labor dried up, the Church lost its traditional right to the unpaid service of community Indians, and the caciques had their power base undercut when the indigenous tribute was abolished. In 1826, these groups halted any further parcelling of land to Indians and saw to it that the registration of lands already given out was drowned in a sea of bureaucratic red tape (Bonifaz, p. 15; Peñaloza, 1: 270).

During the presidency of Marshal Andrés de Santa Cruz (1829-1838), the Bolivian government assumed a role not unlike that of the Spanish Crown in regard to the treatment of Indians. Once again, the state became the arbiter of the Indian's fate, seeking to protect him against abuse while at the same time acknowledging the desire of elite groups in Bolivian society to regain their previous access to indigenous labor. In 1829, Santa Cruz ordered community Indians to resume paying the tribute contribution and two years later reinstated the tithe or diezmo, which every Indian was expected to pay to the state in support of the Church.¹ By a decree issued in 1831, the caciques regained their former position as middlemen between local governmental officials and community Indians. The Church was given the right to draft Indians as unpaid laborers, although this privilege was denied the military. Community Indians were to be paid a wage and humanely

¹For the text of the decrees and proclamations of the Santa Cruz regime, see Miguel Bonifaz, Legislación Agrario-Indigenal (Cochabamba, 1955), pp. 18-80.

treated while working in any other capacity, as previously stipulated by Bolívar. In regard to land tenure, Santa Cruz declared in 1831 that all Indians who had maintained possession of their plots of community land for the past ten years now legally owned them. When it became clear that many Indians had sold the lands granted them in 1825 and 1831, Santa Cruz in 1838 reinstated Bolívar's order that no Indian could sell his land until 1850. To further prevent the alienation of Indian land, an 1838 law decreed that the inheritance of lands held by Indians be governed by primogeniture.

The Santa Cruz stipulations regarding the titling of Indian land were never carried out and de facto indigenous communities continued to operate much as they had done before independence. On December 14, 1842, a decree issued by General Ballivián reestablished another colonial concept, that land held by Indian communities did not belong either to individual comunarios or to the allyu, but to the state. As long as the tribute and other taxes were paid, the Indians enjoyed the usufruct right to their land, but never were legal owners (Bonifaz, p. 89). This stipulation remained in effect until 1863, when General José María de Acha sought to reestablish Bolívar's system of land tenure as specified in the Cuzco Decree. Acha's Decree of February 28, 1863, noted that many Indians were landless and therefore not contributing any tax revenues to the state (Bonifaz, pp. 146-153). To remedy the situation, the decree proclaimed that every Indian would be guaranteed the legal title to his own plot of land which he could sell once he became literate. Unclaimed lands, called baldios, would be sold at public auction to raise funds for the national treasury. Within a year's time, Acha was deposed and his decree annulled by Congress.

The succession of military men who governed Bolivia from 1829 to 1864 generally attempted to protect the Indian's right to hold his own land,

partly for paternalistic reasons but much more significantly because landholding Indians were subject to the tribute, or head tax. According to the regalistic philosophy of the Spanish Kings, the Indian paid tribute and served in the mita as rent payment, since he was living on royal land if he was a member of an indigenous community. Bolívar sought to eradicate this notion, but by 1829 Indian tribute was re-instituted. During the nineteenth century, the size of the head tax paid was directly related to the amount of land held by each community Indian, whether he had a legal title to his land (which was most uncommon) or not (McBride, p. 9). In fact, taxes levied on community Indians constituted the Bolivian government's most important source of income throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, since the nation was during this period in a state of severe economic decline. According to Klein, "whereas the prime sources of colonial government income had been mining production and sales taxes, the republican government obtained the bulk of its funds from a head tax on Indian landholders and received only a minor income from production, trade, or mining and smelting" (Klein, p. 5). The figures given below demonstrate more graphically the importance of Indian taxes to the Bolivian government:

Table 1

Bolivian Taxes and Budgets, 1832-1865
(in Bolivianos)

<u>Year</u>	<u>Indian Head Tax</u>	<u>Head Tax plus Tithe</u>	<u>National Budget</u>
1832	695,000	973,000	1,500,000
1845-46	729,000	990,000	2,000,000
1851-52	919,000	1,100,000	2,100,000
1860	812,000	1,140,000	2,250,000
1865	867,000	1,170,000	2,130,000

Source: Luis Peñaloza, Historia Económica de Bolivia, 2 vols. (La Paz, 1946), 1: 251.

It is, therefore, of little wonder that every government before 1864 attempted in one way or another to insure that the number of Indian landholders remained large. Nevertheless, there occurred during the early republican period a steady movement toward the consolidation of the haciendas, since many governmental decrees were contradictory and only partially enforced.²

Republican Period, 1864-1952

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the process of breaking up the Indian communities was greatly accelerated while the colonato system was strengthened and began to assume its modern form. The man responsible for the most dramatic attack on the communities was General Mariano Melgarejo,

²Opinion of author based on proclamations of the various Bolivian regimes, *ibid.*, pp. 18-153.

dictator of Bolivia from 1864 to 1871 and one of Latin America's most infamous tyrants. Even before Melgarejo came to power, however, there was a movement afoot in the Bolivian National Assembly to completely dissolve the indigenous communities and sell their lands in order to raise funds for the treasury. Such proposals were usually cloaked in terms of more humane treatment for the Indian and of progress. One such government official declared in 1864:

We consider that to conserve the Indian in firm possession of his lands is to perpetuate the eternal ignorance and backwardness in which he himself prefers to dwell...to deprive the Indian of his land is to convert him from a poor and miserable landholder to a wealthy and comfortable colono, since he will continue cultivating the land which he previously owned, but in the capacity of a sharecropper whose master will always be in need of him (Antezana, p. 21).

Due to heavy expenditures for his army and lavish gifts to friends, Melgarejo had by early 1866 drained the national treasury and found it necessary to undertake what was in essence another *composición*. In his Decree of March 20, 1866, the tyrant declared that all land held by individuals in Bolivia must be legally titled, that a heavy fee of 25 to 100 bolivianos would be charged for the service of issuing deeds, and that any land not titled within sixty days would be confiscated and sold at public auction (Bonifaz, p. 168). This decree was especially aimed at the community Indian, hoping to either collect a fee from him or raise money by selling his land. In 1867, Melgarejo broke with established custom when he ordered landless Indians to begin paying the head tax, indicating both that his need for revenue was great and that he was confident that many community Indians would be made landless by his "land reform" (Resolution of February 6, 1867, in Bonifaz, p. 174).

By 1868, the fiscal irresponsibility and corruption of his government forced Melgarejo to take more drastic action. On September 28, 1868, all community land was declared state property and much of it was confiscated to be sold at public auction. In order to insure the success of these auctions, Melgarejo founded the Banco Crédito Hipotecario de Bolivia, which lent funds to those who wished to buy the confiscated ayllus (Antezana, p. 55). The rush to auction off and buy up community properties left hundreds of thousands of Indians landless and with no other recourse than to serve as colonos on the new haciendas which were being consolidated.³

Melgarejo's effective control over Bolivia came to an end during the last months of 1870, when various sectors of the elite groups as well as Indians rose in armed rebellion against the tyrant. Even before Melgarejo was driven into exile in January of 1871, the prefects of the various departments of Bolivia had received orders from the revolutionary government in La Paz ordering them to assure the Indians that their confiscated lands would be returned to them (Bonifaz, pp. 206-7). The primary reason for the revolutionary government's haste in promising reform was the presence of 20,000 armed community Indians outside the city of La Paz, a force which had been raised to help overthrow Melgarejo and could at any moment break into complete rebellion if not placated (Condarco Morales, p. 45). On

³Isaac Grober, La Reforma Agraria en Bolivia. Proceso a un Proceso (Santiago, 1969), p. 43, states that 300,000 community Indians were despoiled of their land by Melgarejo. Another source he cites claimed that 650,000 were left landless after 1868, but this figure seems much too high. Judging by Table 2 of this study, the figure of 300,000 may also be high, given the non-application of the Law of June 31, 1871. The actual number probably lies between 100,000 and the Grober figure.

June 31, 1871, the restitution of Indian lands confiscated by Melgarejo was made legal; those who bought land between 1866 and 1870 received compensation in various forms.

By all indications, very little land was actually returned to the Indians after 1871.⁴ Furthermore, during the following two years, several laws were enacted by the government which prohibited Indians from taking direct legal action to recover their lands (Bonifaz, pp. 224-26, 229-30). Rather unconvincingly, the state declared itself "protector of Indians" and promised that the legal technicalities involved in transferring the land back to its original owners would be taken care of in due time.

The so-called Leyes de Ex-vinculación (anti-entail laws) passed by the National Assembly in 1874, reopened the doors to the total usurpation of community land by whites and mestizos. Cloaked in terms of Bolivarian liberalism, these laws called for the dissolution of the ayllus and the granting of titles to the families living on the sayañas (Bonifaz, p. 231). In a sense, the Indians were being forced to accept the legal responsibility for their land, a situation which placed their well-being in jeopardy, since the laws also gave them the right to sell their land as they pleased. Land not registered as being held by an individual would automatically become government property.

After 1874, the lands of community Indians were virtually fair game for usurpation by anyone who wanted to buy them. Frank Keller, in his

⁴ This assumption is generally held by the authors cited in the study. None gives any figures. See: Alfredo Sanjinés, La Reforma Agraria en Bolivia (La Paz, 1932), p. 210; Grober, La Reforma Agraria, p. 44; Luis Peñaloza, Historia Económica de Bolivia, 2 vols. (La Paz, 1946), 1: 260; Arturo Urquidi, Feudalismo en América y la Reforma Agraria Boliviana (Cochabamba, 1966), p. 175.

study of the colonato on the altiplano, has noted several ways in which the Indian was despoiled of his land. The easiest and most successful way was to get the Indian into debt by tricking or forcing him to accept a loan at an exorbitant rate of interest. When the Indian defaulted on the loan, the local hacendado who had arranged the transaction would then have the legal right to confiscate the man's land in payment of the debt, leaving the Indian with no other recourse than to join the labor force of the hacienda as a colono. Parish priests and local officials also collaborated with the hacendados in tricking the Indians into debt. In one case noted by Keller, the priest in a community where one particular piece of land was especially desired by a hacendado ordered the Indian who held the land in question to sponsor a religious festival, an obligation which required an expenditure of about fifty dollars. Being, like most Indians, obedient to priests, the holder of the land borrowed the necessary money from the hacendado at the priest's suggestion. After the fiesta, the Indian defaulted on the loan and was promptly dispossessed (Keller, p. 43). In yet another instance, a priest assembled the indigenous members of his parish at the church cemetery. After drawing a line through the middle of the graveyard, he declared one half to be heaven and the other half hell; when the next Indian died, the priest ordered him buried on the "hell" side of the cemetery, much to the horror of his relatives. In order to "rescue" their deceased kinsman, the Indians were forced to donate a certain sum of money to the Church, money which could be obtained only by a loan from the ever-present hacendado, with predictable results (Keller, p. 43).

Another means of driving the community Indian into debt peonage was by taxing him so heavily that he was forced to give up his land in payment

of his tax obligation to the government. Corrupt local officials were empowered to collect the Indian head tax, the tithe, and the state tax (primacia) twice a year. If payment was not made within fifteen days, a 25 percent interest rate was added to the amount due (Condarco Morales, p. 33). If the Indian failed to pay in the next instance, his land and goods were confiscated and sold, even to the point of having his simple poncho taken from him as payment (Reyeros, p. 208). Indians in such a situation often had no choice but to enter the service of a nearby hacendado, who managed to obtain the Indian's land from the government after it was confiscated.

The usurpation of community lands and the binding of Indians into a system of debt peonage went virtually unchecked during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. There were several reasons for this development, perhaps the most significant relating to the declining importance of the head tax paid to the state by landholding Indians. In 1865, for example, taxes paid by Indians accounted for more than half of the national budget, while by 1881, the figure had dropped to only 24 percent (Klein, p. 17). In the 1870s, the mining and exportation of silver, Bolivia's traditional source of income during the colonial period, experienced a phenomenal rate of growth which lifted the national economy out of a fifty-year period of decline and stagnation (Peñaloza, 2: 134; Klein, p. 16). Economic growth attracted foreign capital to Bolivia, especially after the War of the Pacific. A rubber industry began to develop in the yunga region of northern Bolivia during the last quarter of the century, and by 1900 tin mining began to take its place as an important source of national wealth. With the growth of urban and mining centers

and the expansion of the railroads along the altiplano, land values rose accordingly, thereby increasing the pressure put upon community lands by whites and mestizos (McBride, p. 26).

A civilian oligarchy, with silver and later tin mining as its economic base, brought a period of relative political stability to Bolivia during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Klein, pp. 15-25). These elites, while acknowledging their economic debt to Europe and the United States by adopting many European cultural norms and importing luxury items from abroad, did nevertheless look to landholding as a traditional source of prestige and profit. The position of the Indian in Bolivian society of the late nineteenth century was perhaps worse than it had ever been in the past. A priest, writing in 1870, described white Bolivia's concept of the Indian: "It is undeniable--the Indian continues to be considered by us as a degenerate being born to serve, to be employed without pay in the vilest of occupations, classified in the caste of the untouchables, and incapable of elevating himself to our own level" (Condorco Morales, p. 37). The liberal argument that the Indian community constituted an archaic remnant of Bolivia's pre-historic and colonial past and therefore was not fit to exist in a "modern" society was often voiced to justify despoiling the Indian of his land. In 1921, President Saavedra accused the ayllu of being a reactionary institution, "because it maintains an odious status quo which impedes all attempts at reform and progress and maintains, in latent form, the ancient hatred of the Indian against the white race which it accuses of usurpation and oppression" (Klein, p. 70). "Progress," by the liberal oligarchy's definition, meant a precarious existence for the few remaining communities and an even harsher way of life for colonos.

The rise of the colonato system at the expense of Indian communities had indeed been dramatic. In 1846, the agricultural population of Bolivia was broken down as follows: 621,000 community Indians, 360,000 colono Indians, 23,000 white hacendados (Klein, p. 7). Between 1846 and 1950, the community Indian population dropped by more than 75 percent.

Table 2

Community Indians in Bolivia, 1846-1950

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Indians</u>
1846	621,000
1877	500,000
1900	250,000
1950	140,000

Sources: the 1846 figure is from Herbert S. Klein, Parties and Political Change in Bolivia (Cambridge, Eng., 1969), p. 7, taken from José M. Dalence, Bosquejo Estadístico de Bolivia (Sucre, 1851); the 1877 figure is from George C. McBride, The Agrarian Indian Communities of Highland Bolivia (New York, 1921), p. 21, and is based on head tax figures for that year; the 1900 figure is based on a map, *ibid.*, p. 25; the 1950 figure is from Bolivia, Censo Demográfico, 1950 (La Paz, 1955), introduction.

The actual number of communities declined from an estimated 11,000 in 1846 to 3,781 in 1952.⁵ Colono Indians probably increased to a million or more in number by 1952.⁶

⁵ The 1846 figure is taken from José M. Dalence, Bosquejo Estadístico de Bolivia (Sucre, 1851), cited in E. Luis Antezana, El Feudalismo de Muzarejo y la Reforma Agraria (La Paz, 1971), p. 12. The figure for 1952 is taken from William E. Carter, Aymara Communities and the Bolivian Agrarian Reform (Gainesville, Fla., 1964), p. 9.

⁶ Estimate by the author, based on Table 2, *infra.*, and Bolivia, Censo Demográfico, 1950 (La Paz, 1955), introduction.

Table 3

Distribution of Farm Land, 1950
(in hectares)

<u>Farm size</u>	<u>No. of farms</u>	<u>% of total no.</u>	<u>Total farm area</u>	<u>% total area</u>
Less than 10	59,988	69.4	132,934	.41
10 to 500	19,437	22.5	1,467,488	4.48
More than 500	6,952	8.1	31,149,398	95.1

Source: Isaac Grober, La Reforma Agraria en Bolivia. Proceso a un Proceso (Santiago, 1969), p. 48.

A closer analysis of the largest landholders in Bolivia shows that in 1950, 0.7 percent of all landholders owned 50 percent of Bolivia's total farm land (Ferragut, p. 5).

The process of the consolidation of the latifundias not only skewed land holding patterns in pre-revolutionary Bolivia, but also resulted in a state of stagnation for Bolivian agriculture: "the agrarian sector remained distant, closed within itself, maintaining itself as a seignorial economic structure, impenetrable to technological progress and centered on production levels geared to subsistence" (Abdie-Aicardi, p. 47). High prices for agricultural products, coupled with an almost non-existent national tax on land (1.5¢ per acre in 1940) guaranteed a profit for the hacendado but provided him with little incentive to increase production or put more acreage under cultivation (Klein, p. 163). In 1950, 0.3 percent of Bolivian land was being farmed, the lowest percentage in all of Latin America (Heath, et al., p. 34). In the same year, 71 percent of all Bolivians were engaged in agricultural pursuits, while only 32 percent of the national income was

derived from that sector (Abdie-Aicardi, p. 47). A full 35 percent of imports to Bolivia in 1950 were agricultural products (Grober, p. 71). Thus, a backward agrarian sector and the colonato system developed together, and were so closely related as to be indistinguishable.

The Colonato in Practice in the Twentieth Century

A colono in Bolivia was an agricultural laborer who, although legally free, was in practice bound to the will of his patrón, the owner of a large estate. Colonos in the twentieth century were invariably Aymará Indians in the northern part of the altiplano (near Lake Titicaca) and Quechua Indians in the southern altiplano and the valleys.

The means which bound colono to patrón was a verbal contract specifying that the Indian would work as an unpaid laborer in the service of the patrón in return for the right to use part of the patrón's land to support himself and his family. This relationship usually involved the colono going into his patrón's debt, from which he would never recover.

By the terms of his contract, the colono received land in one of two principal ways. Application of the sayaña, or plot system meant that the Indian would be granted the right to use one portion of hacienda land to build his house and grow his crops. By the less common aynoka system, the colono would receive a smaller plot in each of the different crop fields (Heath, et al., p. 177). In addition to his sayaña or aynoka, the colono enjoyed the right of grazing whatever animals he might possess on the hacienda pasturage.

Not all colonos were of equal rank on the hacienda. A "full person," or adult colono with a family was allotted more land than a "half person," generally a widow who had her sayaña halved after the death of her spouse.

Because the plot of a "full person" was passed on to the eldest son after his death, other sons became "third persons" and received a smaller parcel of land on the hacienda. After marriage, a family, and longer residence, a "third person" could hope to become a "full person" and receive more and better land (Heath, et al., p. 177). Sayuñas for a "full person" generally ranged from one to several dozen acres, depending on the will of the patrón. The number of colonos on each hacienda also varied greatly. Frank Keller, in his study of 13 altiplano haciendas in 1946, found that the smallest number of colonos on any latifundia was 16, while the largest was 2,867 (Keller, p. 56).

The basic obligation of the colono was to provide three members of his family to work 3 to 4 days a week in the patrón's fields. Keller noted that, on the average, 13 percent of hacienda land was under cultivation, with 37 percent of this land belonging to the patrón and 66 percent allotted to the colonos (Keller, p. 54). The patrón's land was generally more fertile than that of the colono, and on one hacienda, 92 percent of the land under cultivation belonged to the patrón.

In addition to work done in the patrón's fields, every member of each colono family was subject to perform what several authors described as a "rosary" of unpaid service obligations collectively called pongueaje. This labor obligation was considered to be the most oppressive element of the colonato system, for pongos could be ordered to do any job at any time if their masters so willed. Colonos were used as domestic servants, both in the patrón's house on the hacienda and in his home in the city, since only 10 percent of all owners of latifundias lived on their land in 1945 (Abdie-Aicardi, p. 50). Colonos also had to serve as animal herders for

a stipulated period determined by the patrón or his overseer, the mayordomo. Gathering firewood, spinning and weaving cloth, and making chicha (corn liquor) were other obligations. Children, when not at work on their parents' sayañas, were employed in tending animals and frightening birds away from the fields. The colono also had the obligation of cacha, the marketing of the patrón's crops and animals, a process which often meant a long and tiresome journey at the colono's expense.

The colono was also expected to provide his own seed, tools, and draft animals for use on his sayaña. If he could not do so, the patrón would provide them, adding their value to the debt owed him by the Indian and raising the number of hours of work that the colono had to perform in hacienda fields (Klein, p. 41).

The major crops grown on the altiplano were the potato, barley, oca (a root crop), quinoa (a grain), corn, and broad beans. Of the domestic animals, sheep were the market product, while cattle, llamas, pigs, chickens, and cui (guinea pigs) were consumed on the hacienda.

Synthetic fertilizer was almost unknown to the altiplano, whose soil was enriched only by animal manure. Agricultural technology remained at a medieval level throughout the first half of the twentieth century; the wooden plow pulled by oxen was in common use, as was the hoe and an agricultural mace used by women and children to break up clods of earth overturned by the plow. One author told a story demonstrating why pre-revolutionary Bolivia had no use for advanced farm technology:

The owner of a great estate in the Department of Potosí bought a tractor and used it a very short time, returning quickly to primitive forms of work. When questioned about his rapid change of mind, he claimed that the tractor produced too many expenditures; it required a driver, repairs, gasoline, lubricants, etc.,

while the Indian, free laborer that he is, required nothing more than a little cooked corn and some coca (Canelas, p. 18).

In 1950 there were only 280 tractors in use in the entire country (Canelas, p. 18).

Legally, all Indians were classified as nationals of Bolivia and were guaranteed the same rights to hold property, file petitions, appear in court, obtain a public education, pass freely from place to place, and receive just compensation for their work as any other Bolivian. In practice, however, the colono enjoyed none of these basic rights. Since important government officials and hacendados were generally one and the same before 1952, the colono found few means to invoke the law on his behalf (Reyeros, p. 57). According to one author, "The Indian experienced the Bolivian government as an alien power, which when it didn't ignore him, sought to use him and nothing more" (Molloy, p. 27).

Politically, the Bolivian Indian was a non-person, since the Constitution of 1826 declared that only citizens could vote and hold public office, and only literate persons could be citizens. The Constitution of 1861 further stipulated that only a person holding property of considerable value could be a citizen. Before 1952, Bolivian Indians were not permitted to enter certain sectors of La Paz and were not allowed to own firearms (Heath, et al., p. 383).

For all practical purposes, the will of the patrón was law for the colono, since verbal contracts were not bound by law and, even if they were, the government had no desire to control the patrones. Two government social investigators noted in 1940:

no other norm is applicable than the will of the patrón. He can deprive the colono of irrigation

facilities, prohibit him to sell his own animals and the products he grows himself, obligate him to sell them at ridiculous prices, and restrict his movement on the hacienda itself; the colono lacks a means of taking action against the landowner and any attempt to do so would expose him to being thrown off the land. On the other hand, the patrón is bound by no legal obligation or restriction whatsoever.⁷

Colonos rarely left their sayañas for fear of corporal punishment by their patronos, while they could be thrown off the hacienda if the hacendado saw fit to do so (Heath, et al., p. 96). Colonos passed from master to master when haciendas were sold and the price of a latifundia was directly related to the number of colonos it contained (Grober, p. 52). Instances have even been recorded of a patrón selling colonos to other hacendados in return for a certain amount of money and payment of the colono's debt (Grober, p. 51). This was accomplished by forcing the colono to agree to a new debt and verbal contract (Canelas, p. 20).

Such legal powerlessness in the face of greed led to a miserable way of life for the colono. At work in the fields, he was liberally treated to the overseer's whip. As a pongo, he was forced to show docile respect for his white masters. Keller described the protocol of a latifundia in 1946: "While visiting altiplano estates in company with their owners, the writer and his wife found it difficult to cover their embarrassment at witnessing the way in which colonos would come forward and bow humbly at the feet of each person before continuing with their prescribed tasks" (Keller, p. 45). In other places on the altiplano, colonos were forced to genuflect or kneel before their patronos.

A Bolivian author described the colono's home and living conditions:

⁷ Herbert S. Klein, Parties and Political Change in Bolivia (Cambridge, Eng., 1969), n., p. 162. For the text in Spanish from which I made my translation, see Grober, La Reforma Agraria, p. 52.

Peasant housing in the altiplano lacked the most basic elements of hygiene and comfort; the house is built on a very small area and is made up of only one room in which all of the members of the family eat and sleep in complete promiscuity. They have neither light nor ventilation and lack furniture. The houses are built of mud and the roofs of straw. Lacking wood, the colonos use dried llama or cow dung as fuel for cooking. The corrals for sheep generally are installed alongside the hut, while chickens and pigs usually share the one room of the house with the family. Everyone sleeps on goatskins or sheepskins (Grober, p. 54).

In 1950, the average colono received 1,500 calories per day from the food he consumed; 1,500 are considered minimal for a person performing agricultural labor (Ferragut, p. 30). The infant mortality rate among Indians of the altiplano was 50 percent in 1950. Doctors rarely ventured outside of the provincial capitals, so that the Indian had to "cure himself or die" (Heath, et al., p. 20). In 1945, 84 percent of all Indian adults in Bolivia were illiterate, many not even being able to speak Spanish (Grober, p. 46). The chances of a colono child attending even the first grades of a primary school were practically nil.

The colono was almost totally cut off from the Bolivian money economy. If he was lucky enough to have any produce left over after consumption, it would be exchanged for seed or tools or as payment on his debt. As a market for national products, the colono was negligible. In 1950, 59.9 percent of the Bolivian population (read Indians as almost all non-consumers) did not own any manufactured items (Canelas, p. 23).

Indian Reaction to the Colonato

The colono sought to alleviate the misery of his servile condition in one of three ways. The first, and most common, was to dull his senses by drinking large amounts of chicha, which the patrón gladly provided him at certain times of the year, and by chewing coca leaves, which allowed

him to work hard without being aware of his effort. Coca was distributed by overseers and patronos as a tranquilizer which kept the Indians docile. It is little wonder that the white man's idea of the Indian as a drunken savage or an insensitive moron was widespread.

The second means of relief available to the colono was to leave the hacienda, a risky prospect for reasons already discussed.

The Indian's third means of resistance was violent rebellion, a phenomenon which often occurred on the altiplano during both the colonial and republican periods. Before independence, the mita and heavy taxes were the general causes of indigenous revolt, such as the rebellions of Tupac Amaru and Tupac Katari in the 1780s. Although these movements were brutally suppressed by royal authorities, the mita was finally abolished in Alto Peru and the corrupt corregidores were replaced by the intendentes of Charles III's newly centralized bureaucracy (Peñaloza, 1: 263). After 1866, however, "the direct cause of Indian insurrections was the conversion of community land into latifundia" (Condarco Morales, p. 42). Community Indians rose up against Melgarejo on various occasions, triggering bloody reprisals by the dictator's army during which thousands of Indians were killed (Condarco Morales, p. 44). As mentioned earlier, 20,000 Indians were included in the ranks of the revolutionary forces which overthrew Melgarejo in 1871.

The most serious and widespread revolt of community Indians, however, was that which took place during the Civil War of 1899. With Conservatives and Liberals at odds with each other, community and colono Indians in the Departments of La Paz, Oruro, and Potosí rose up, slaughtering hacendados and spreading terror. Hoping to gain permanent benefits for themselves, the Indians, partially united under Zárate Willka, a literate community

Indian, aided the Liberal army and were instrumental in defeating the Conservatives. When the Indian leaders saw that no reforms were forthcoming after the Liberals assumed power, they ordered the massacre of hacendados and the invasions of land to be resumed. The slogan of the Indian cause called for death to all whites and the establishment of an Indian constitution (Condarco Morales, p. 367). The poorly armed and organized Indians were not able to withstand the Liberal army, however, and the rebellion was brutally stamped out, followed by the prompt execution of Zárate Willka and the other leaders.

In 1921, community Indians of the Cantón Jesús de Machaca rose up and killed the local corregidor, usually the first target for Indian wrath, and then the hacendados. The army quickly restored order, slaughtering hundreds of Indians (Klein, p. 69).

Community Indians were generally more apt to revolt, since control over colonos was much tighter. In 1942, however, approximately 50 percent of the colonos in the Department of Oruro staged a sit-down strike of brazos caídos, literally "fallen arms" (Reyeros, p. 241). The strike precipitated the formation of an investigatory committee by the government which afterwards urged that the conditions under which colonos worked be improved.

Such insurrections created a tremendous fear of the Indian on the part of the whites; citizens of La Paz, surrounded by haciendas and the remaining communities, conjured up frightening images of hordes of drunken savages sacking the city and murdering at will. The army seemed perfectly able to put down any revolt, however, with predictable results: "Unfortunately for the Indian, the final outcome of the occasional outbreaks of violence invariably has been a disproportionate letting of Indian blood as government troops restored order" (Keller, p. 46).

The Destruction of the Colonato

Support for the oppressed Indian was hardly widespread during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the 1920s, however, genuine leftist organizations were taking root in Bolivia and labor was slowly and painfully organizing itself against the entrenched oligarchy. Protest against the exploitation of the Indian was voiced by students of the University of La Paz during the 1920s and in 1930, Bolivia was actually invaded from Argentina by a small group of nationalist radicals calling for land and freedom for the indigenous population.

A great watershed in Bolivian history proved to be the Chaco War with Paraguay. Rising out of a border conflict over a practically useless stretch of wasteland, full-scale warfare broke out in 1932 and lasted until 1935, leaving the Paraguayan forces in complete control of the disputed territory. During the war, colonos were drafted en masse for the army, serving as cannon fodder at the front while white officers remained safely in the rear. In all, 25 percent of all combatants, or 65,000 Bolivians were killed or missing, most of them Indians (Klein, p. 187). Throughout the conflict, a caste system was maintained in the army; soldiers were Indian, officers white or mestizo (Klein, p. 187). Defeat at the hands of tiny Paraguay had a staggering effect on the thinking of Bolivian intellectuals and army officers; the corruption and inefficiency of the Bolivian government became so obvious that, in 1936, a reformist coup took place within the army, bringing to power the "Military socialist" regimes of David Toro and Germán Busch.

The post-Chaco War era marked a rebirth of "Indianism," the glorification of the indigenous background of Bolivia and a renewed appreciation of the worth of the Indian as Bolivia's source of production. Indians who

discovered in the war returned to their homes with a broader idea of what Bolivia really was; some learned Spanish while serving in the army and were more prepared to take an active role in resisting the colonato. The year 1936 marked the formation of the first rural syndicates among Indians, the work of José Rojas in the Cochabamba Valley. The Busch government in 1938 also recognized the right of an Indian community to exist as such. When a convention met in that same year to draft a new constitution for Bolivia, the prospect of land reform was brought forward as a possible article in the constitution, only to be rejected in the end (Klein, p. 290).

In 1939 the oligarchy regained power, only to be overthrown in 1943 by a coup led by Major Gualberto Villarroel and the Movimiento Nacional Revolucionario (MNR) of Victor Paz Estenssoro. Strongly popular in nature, the Villarroel government sought to mobilize the Bolivian Indian by protecting him from his patrón. The Villarroel-MNR Constitution of 1945 called for the end of unpaid services, the return of usurped community land to the original owners, placed the colono under the special protection of the state, and adopted the term campesino (country-dweller) to refer to Indians in place of the demeaning word indio (Bonifaz, p. 534). In 1946 a special campesino congress was set up by the MNR.

A military coup in 1946 sent the MNR flying into exile and saw Villarroel hung from a lamp post in the main square of La Paz. For the next six years, Bolivia and the colono experienced the old order all over again, with most of the Villarroel reforms overturned.

The national revolution came in 1952. Backed by the MNR with armed support of miners and Indian campesinos, Paz Estenssoro defeated the Bolivian army in pitched battle and took over control of the country. From his past

experiences with Villarroel, Paz realized that the miners and Indians would become the bulwark of the MNR only after their socio-political positions were drastically improved. In 1952, the tin mines, Bolivia's basic industry, were nationalized, with miner's syndicates given a say in their operation. Literacy and property requirements were abolished by the new constitution, so that the electorate rose from 200,000 in 1951 to almost 1 million in 1952 (Klein, p. 404).

In 1953, the MNR passed the Bolivian Agrarian Reform Law. After the Revolution in 1952, colonos had been engaged in occupying the lands of the hacendados but it was not until after the Reform Law that the colonato was really abolished. The Reform ended the colonato outright by breaking up the great estates, something which all other efforts at reform had failed to do. Each colono was granted the legal title to his sayana and the right to petition for more land. Landholdings over a certain size were expropriated and redistributed to the ex-colonos. Pongueaje was declared abolished and Indians were given the right to move about freely. Campesino syndicates organized by the Indians with government sponsorship worked to stamp out any remaining vestige of hacendado power. Free marketing of products brought the Indian into the money economy, while literacy projects helped to further integrate the Indian into national life.

Thus, the Indian became at a stroke a free man and the stranglehold of the great landowners on rural Bolivia was broken. Most of the great hacendados left the country, as did the tin magnates (Heath, et al., p. 106). By 1967, 20 million acres of land had been redistributed to Indian campesinos.

Conclusion

The rise of the colonato system in Bolivia paralleled the growth of large agricultural estates and the disappearance of indigenous communities. Colonial paternalism and the necessity of early republican governments to mobilize the "free" Indian as a source of revenue held the growth of the colonato to a sporadic and limited pace until Melgarejo seized power in 1864. During the years that followed, the state divested itself of its traditional role as "protector" of the Indians and the indigenous community quickly gave way to the colonato.

As it functioned after 1864, the colonato system served a triple purpose. By dividing and carefully regulating the Indian population, the colonato assured Bolivian elites that Indians would not constitute a political force. Economically, the system provided white and mestizo landholders with a controlled source of practically free labor over which they could exercise complete power. Socially, the colonato reinforced the prestige of the aristocratic ideal, since ownership of a hacienda had long been considered a symbol of socio-economic status.

The bulwarks of the colonato were Bolivia's uneven system of land tenure and racism. Together, they caused the position of colono to be the logical end for Bolivian Indians in the twentieth century. When the system was threatened by indigenous protest, repressive means were available to preserve the status quo.

The colonato system was finally destroyed when nationalistic political forces willing to recognize the Indian as a member of Bolivian society and break the stranglehold of hacendados over the land seized power in 1952.

Bibliography

- Abdie-Aicardi, Raúl Federico. Economía y Sociedad de Bolivia en el Siglo XX. Montevideo, 1966.
- Antezana E., Luis. El Feudalismo de Melgarejo y la Reforma Agraria. La Paz, 1971.
- Bolivia. Censo Demográfico, 1950. La Paz, 1955.
- . Ley de Reforma Agraria. La Paz, 1953.
- Bonifaz, Miguel. Legislación Agrario-Indigenal. Cochabamba, 1955.
- Canelas, Amado. Bolivia. Un Caso de Reforma Agraria. Havana, 1967.
- Carter, William E. Aymara Communities and the Bolivian Agrarian Reform. Gainesville, Florida, 1964.
- Condarco Morales, Raimiro. Zárate, el Temible Willka. La Paz, 1965.
- Ferragut, Gastó. La Reforma Agraria Boliviana. La Paz, 1961.
- Grober, Isaac. La Reforma Agraria en Bolivia. Proceso a un Proceso. Santiago, 1969.
- Heath, Dwight, Charles Erasmus, and Hans Buechler. Land Reform and Social Revolution in Bolivia. New York, 1969.
- Keller, Frank L. Geography of the Lake Titicaca Basin of Bolivia. College Park, Maryland, 1946.
- Klein, Herbert S. Parties and Political Change in Bolivia. Cambridge, England, 1969.
- McBride, George C. The Agrarian Indian Communities of Highland Bolivia. New York, 1921.
- Molloy, James M. Bolivia, the Uncompleted Revolution. Pittsburgh, 1970.
- Pedaloza, Luis. Historia Económica de Bolivia. 2 vols. La Paz, 1946.
- Royeros, Rafael. El Porqueaje. La Paz, 1949.
- Sanjinés, Alfredo. La Reforma Agraria en Bolivia. La Paz, 1932.
- Trigo, Ciro Félix. Las Constituciones de Bolivia. Madrid, 1958.
- Urquidí, Arturo. Feudalismo en América y la Reforma Agraria Boliviana. Cochabamba, 1966.
- . Las Comunidades Indígenas en Bolivia. Cochabamba, 1970.