Variants of Bonded Labour in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

In 1888, the French explorer Pierre-Paul Cupet (2000 [1900]: 38) rescued a young upland Tai[1] girl from Chinese slave-traders. Indignant about the 'uncivilized' practice of slavery in the uplands of Laos, Cupet decided to return the girl to her village. However, on arriving at her mother's village, he did not receive the gratitude he had expected. Cupet's interpreter explained to him: "She has no money to give you […] to buy back her daughter and she believes that you will take her along tomorrow morning" (ibid.: 49). Cupet deplored the 'barbaric' legacy of slavery in Southeast Asia. His position reflected the moral undertone of the French colonial *mission civilisatrice*, even if certain forms of servitude and coerced labour continued to exist under French rule.

Indeed, the French administrative attitude towards labour relations in Indochina was characterized by contradictions and hypocrisy. The colonial administration faced the challenge of providing an indigenous workforce – without resorting to slavery – for labour-intensive enterprises such as plantations and mines, as well as for large-scale infrastructure projects in sparsely populated regions. As in many other colonial environments in late 19th-century Asia and Africa (see Lindner's chapter in this volume), the solution was a combination of forced requisition and voluntary recruitment of cheap labour: in the case of

1 The many different upland Tai groups (not to confuse with the lowland Thai in Thailand) in the Lao-Vietnamese borderlands belong to the Tai-Kadai language family – like the Lao, Thai, Shan, Lü, Zhuang, etc.

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Indochina, from empoverished, landless Vietnamese or, more rarely, from semi-nomadic uplanders. Both groups of labourers were called 'coolies'.

The cultural misunderstanding described above stemmed from fundamentally different views of slavery: on the one hand, as a socioeconomic phenomenon involving exchange and obligations; on the other hand, as a morally problematic form of exploitative labour (even if tolerated by colonial authorities; cf. M. Klein 1998; Testart 2001).[2] In this chapter, I will explore aspects of coercion and bondage in precolonial and colonial labour relations, with a particular focus on continuities and transformations during the colonial encounter. The role of debt within Southeast Asian labour relations – from bonded servitude in 19th-century Siam to the colonial coolie system – will deserve particular scrutiny as key element of bonded labour.

The chapter will focus mainly on the regions that came to be known as Indochina under French colonial rule, in particular Laos and Vietnam and their vast mountainous, ethnically heterogeneous borderlands. For the discussion of precolonial variants of slavery and servitude, Thailand/Siam will be another case in point. After a general overview of variants of bonded labour in precolonial mainland Southeast Asia, I will discuss the Tai-Lao concept of *kha* (slave/serf), which not only refers to a socioeconomic category but also includes connotations of ethnic difference and racial discrimination.

In addition, the chapter addresses the impact of French colonialism on local labour relations and patterns of servitude such as traditional *corvée* obligations (for example, requisition of peasant labour by ruling elites for the purpose of agriculture, public works, and military service). It also investigates the colonial coolie system (indentured or contract labour in the plantation and mining economy), followed by a discussion of debt and indebtedness as a key factor of labour relations in past and present (cf. Reid 1983; Bush 2000; Derks 2010). In precolonial and colonial times, bonded labour was linked with debt as an economic, social, and cultural phenomenon.[3]

2 For a general discussion on the historical variants of unfree labour, see the introduction to this volume, and Brass/van der Linden 1997.

3 This paper was presented during the workshop *Forms of bonded labour: Conceptual approaches towards a new comparative research framework* (University of Cologne, 23-24 June 2014). I would like to thank the participants of the workshop for their helpful comments and inspiring discussions. Special thanks are reserved for my colleagues of the research group 'From Slave to Coolie' at the Global South Studies Center in Cologne (Ulrike Lindner, Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, Gesine Müller, Michael

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PATTERNS OF SLAVERY AND SERVITUDE IN MAINLAND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Precolonial Southeast Asian sociopolitical organization was characterized by a huge variety of forms of slavery and servitude (Condominas 1998). Besides the widespread pattern of debt-bondage in agrarian societies, the enslavement and integration of other people was an important factor for early state-building (cf. Reid 1983; Day 2002; see Mabbett 1983 for the case of Angkor). According to Anthony Reid's pioneering work on slavery in Southeast Asia,

"[…] the movement of captive peoples and slaves was the primary source of labour mobility in Southeast Asia. Typically it took the form of transferring people from weak, politically fragmented societies to stronger and wealthier ones." (Reid 1983: 27; Michaud 2006: 219-220)

Both slavery and servitude implied notions of patron-client relations and control of people.

In contrast to, for example, American slavery, the distinction between 'slavery' and 'freedom' was fluid in many respects. Allegedly 'free' commoners were obliged to supply unremunerated labour and to pay in-kind taxes. Often this burden resulted in a paradoxical phenomenon unknown in other slave systems: commoners selling themselves into slavery or bonded servitude to escape tax and *corvée* requisitions (cf. Campbell 2003; Bush 2000; Reid 1983; Turton 1980). Consequently, it is difficult to clearly classify the different forms of bonded labour in precolonial Southeast Asia as either slavery or servitude. An overview of different regional examples will illustrate these analytical challenges.

In 13th- and 14th-century Vietnam, the class of slaves was mainly constituted by "peasants who sold themselves into slavery to improve their lives, or prisoners of war, or people from other lands brought by merchants. They served many functions from manual laborers to skilled craftspeople" (Taylor 2013: 122). Here, as we will also see in the case of precolonial Tai states, the boundary between so-called slaves and free peasants or craftspeople was fluid. During that period, large estates emerged that were farmed by slaves or by peasants in a slave-like situation. The Vietnamese aristocracy could accumulate slaves and serfs particularly after natural disasters when peasants lost land and harvests, and ended up in debt servitude – while others tried their luck at banditry.

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With the beginning of the Lê dynasty in the 15th century, a new legislation on land ownership and village government encouraged villages that were organized on the basis of free peasants with enough land to support their families and pay taxes (ibid.: 190). Yet bonded servitude remained a basic condition for the Vietnamese peasantry, and debt bondage again resurfaced under French land legislations (see below). In addition, Vietnamese and Chinese pirates specialized in capturing women and children to sell as slaves in China. This practice was only abandoned after French influence and military intervention.

In general, precolonial Vietnamese society was characterized by a huge gap between a landlord class – the mandarins – and the peasants. Sociopolitical organization built upon systems of *corvée* and peasant mobilization in the case of warfare. Peasants were obliged to work in the ricefields of the mandarins, including doing hard work such as digging irrigation canals and dykes. Furthermore, the peasants were exploited for prestigious projects such as the well-known citadels (see Dutton 2006: 137-140). New land legislations under the Nguyên dynasty in the 19th century resulted in an even more explicit asymmetry in the agricultural labour relations (cf. Cleary 2003; Brocheux and Hémery 2009).

Systems of slavery and servitude were arguably more complex in the Tai states such as the early Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (later Bangkok/Siam), the Lao kingdom of Lan Sang, and the Northern Tai kingdom of Lan Na (Chiang Mai). As Terwiel (1983) demonstrates for the Siamese case, the general binary between commoners (*phrai*) and slaves (*kha, that; Skr. dāsa*) was further subdivided into a detailed hierarchy, with different levels of bondage and labour requirements. No form of labour was exclusive to slaves, and – as mentioned above – the boundary between *kha* and *phrai* was fluid (cf. Turton 1980; Rabibhadana 1969). For peasants in times of, for example, misery due to famine it appeared to be more advantageous to enter a relation of bondage since patrons were expected to provide for the subsistence and security of their dependent peasant families.

In the Tai-speaking world, slavery and servitude that resulted from forcibly resettled war captives was also significant, and constituted an important demographic factor (cf. Grabowsky 1999; 2004; Bowie 1996). In his demographic history of Lan Na (Northern Thailand), Volker Grabowsky (2004) shows that a considerable part of the population (one quarter to one third) were categorized as ‘slaves’. Instead of being an outcast part of the population, they were integrated to a certain degree into the social hierarchy of the respective kingdom, although the lowest stratum was consigned to all kinds of hard labour. In Siam, captured agricultural populations were resettled in villages and urban quarters of

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people who shared a common ethno-linguistic background (cf. Turton 1980; van Roy 2009).[4]

Even if Thai nationalist historiography used to describe Siamese slavery as benign and characterized by a relation of royal patronage, the raids and deportations were violent and entailed a considerable blood toll (cf. Bowie 1996). When in the 19th century the whole of Laos, including parts of the upland frontier bordering Vietnam, became the target of large-scale military campaigns and slave raids, many of the deported died on the way to Siam or suffered the harsh conditions of plantation work (cf. Bowie 1996; Grabowsky/Turton 2003).

For James Scott (2009), the lowland state in Southeast Asia was a manpower-generating machine, accumulating people, and thus driving others into the hills if they wished to avoid submission to exploitative feudal states. Scott refers to Karl Marx in stating that "[...] there was no state without concentrated manpower; there was no concentration of manpower without slavery [...]" (2009: 85). He declares precolonial Burmese and Tai states as "slaving states" (ibid.: 89) that either conducted regular slave raids in the surrounding uplands themselves or at least stimulated the emergence of a market for slaves (with some upland ethnic groups preying upon one another).

The historian Victor Lieberman criticized Scott's hypothesis, and specified that at times it was rather over-population that was a problem for lowland states, and that slave raids gained momentum mainly with the transforming global economy of the 19th century (Lieberman 2010: 339). The global trade and demand for Southeast Asian commodities indeed triggered labour demand and different forms of labour requisition, especially in booming port cities such as Bangkok (cf. Reid 1999; Beemer 2009), but according to Lieberman (2010: 341) there is little historical evidence for Scott's hypothesis that the populating of the Southeast Asian uplands was a result of settlement by escapees from lowland slaving states.

What both authors agree upon is the fact that warfare in Southeast Asia was more concerned with manpower than with territory. It should be noted here that it was not only feudal states that engaged in different practices of enslavement. The Red Karen of the Burmese-Siamese upland frontier were notorious for their slave-raiding among neighbouring groups such as the Sgaw and Pwo Karen, and even in the Buddhist Shan principalities (Grabowsky/Turton 2003: 238; Turton

4 The British envoy Bowring (1969 [1857]: 190) estimated that during the reign of Rama III (1824-1851), 46,000 war slaves inhabited the kingdom of Bangkok, including 20,000 Lao, 10,000 (South) Vietnamese, and several thousand Burmese and Malay (cf. Bowie 1996).

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2004). They sold the slaves mainly to the court of Chiang Mai. So lucrative seemed the slave trade in the 19th century that in Burma abolition took place quite late:

"[the British] came to an agreement with the Kachin and Shan chiefs that the freedom of the slaves would be purchased by Government, with the provision that all slaves would be freed by 1 January 1928. This was accepted 'with reluctance' by the Kachin and Shan headmen." (Leach 1954: 294)

Southeast Asian slavery can also be considered as a nexus of cultural transfer, since different groups of slaves were integrated to different degrees into the social fabric of their captor societies (cf. Beemer 2009). For example, when the Burmese invaded the central Thai kingdom of Ayutthaya in 1767, they deported an estimated 30-100,000 Thai to the Burmese realm (ibid.; James 2000). In the Burmese royal chronicles, the slaves are listed and categorized according to twenty skills (van Roy 2009: 492).[5] Thai artisans enjoyed a privileged status within the slave community and were even better off than ordinary Burmese peasants; for example, they were exempted from *corvée* labour.

The Lao war captives in 19th-century Siam are a similar case in point. In fact the origins of the jewellery district in Bangkok today can be traced back to a settlement of Lao goldsmiths who were enslaved and forcibly deported after the destruction of the Lao capital Vientiane by the Siamese in 1828, when many thousands of Lao were deported (cf. van Roy 2009; Ngaosyvathn/Ngaosyvathn 1998; Tappe 2013). Some of them received the privileged status of royal slaves (*kha luang*) and farmed the king's lands along the Bangkok periphery to supply the royal granaries, while others were donated, as acts of merit, to royally sponsored temples as temple slaves (van Roy 2009: 61).

This Siamese practice came to a halt after the British (India, Burma) and French (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) colonial expansion in the 19th century, when Bangkok faced considerable political and economic pressure. Due to economic concessions (e.g. trade privileges for the British in Bangkok) and the Franco-British agreement to allow a Siamese 'buffer state' between British Burma and French Indochina, Siam escaped direct colonization (cf. Thongchai 2011). As part of his path toward Western-style 'modernization', King Chulalongkorn (1853-1910) responded to the European abolutionist discourse and officially abolished slavery in 1905 to underline the allegedly 'civilized' status of his kingdom.

5 For the history of the Thai-Burmese wars see Lieberman (2003) and Myint-U (2006).

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As Edward van Roy (2009: 62) convincingly argues:

"The very existence of captive labour villages became an acute embarrassment. It was imperative that their [ethnic] identity be officially suppressed and their [origins] denied. An obvious first step was the abandonment of the 'captive labour' caste designation within the Thai legal system."

This strategy not only helped the king to avoid the 'slavery argument' as a Western pretext for colonial intervention, but also transformed the political culture within his kingdom. By abolishing slavery, Chulalongkorn deprived local nobles of their traditional source of power and prestige, thus further centralizing Bangkok's power (cf. Thongchai 1994).

Formal slavery may have ended in Southeast Asia, but other forms of dependence continued (Turton 1980). While terms such as *that* disappeared from official rhetoric in Siam, the reference *kha* remained in use as denominator for the non-Tai-speaking groups of the highlands, mainly marginalized groups belonging to the Mon-Khmer language family such as the Khmu, Rmeet, Phong, Katu, Ta-Oy, Katang, Cheng, and many more (cf. Pholsena 2006; Michaud 2006). This convergence of social and cultural classification deserves closer attention.

THE *KHA* CONCEPT

The term *kha* in Lao and Thai language refers both to the category of slaves/serfs and to non-Tai people in general. For European colonial administrators, these two meanings created some confusion between a social and an ethnic category – emblematized by the category *kha* in French colonial censuses (Pholsena 2006: 224). In precolonial Lao and Thai society, both meanings converged in traditional statecraft and sociopolitical organization. An old saying goes: "*kep phak sai sa kep kha sai müang*" ("gather vegetables and put them into baskets; gather [non-Tai] people/serfs and put them into the *müang*/polity"), which refers to the need of underpopulated Tai polities to integrate non-Tai people (cf. Grabowsky 2001; Turton 2000; Condominas 1990) – usually into the lowest strata of the traditional feudal hierarchy, and thus associated with subservient status.

Indeed Mon-Khmer-speaking people such as the Khmu often entered relations of bonded labour or *corvée* for Tai elites, and performed the "hardest and most disgusting jobs to do in the *müang*" (Condominas 1990: 64). In the Tai-Lao speaking world, the term *kha* (*sa* in other upland Tai languages)

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signifies relations of unfree labour – but is also used to refer to the highland people beyond the confines of lowland polities. In consequence, French observers identified the *kha/sa* 'race' as "the most miserable one we know" (Diguet 1895: 27). As the explorer Lefèvre-Pontalis added in 1892: "It is in the final analysis the eternal question of the Thai exploiting the Kha and searching to obtain their workforce at the best price […]" (2000 [1902]: 338).[6]

Figure 1: Colonial visualisation of the Tai-Kha hierarchy: Tai Deng (Red Tai) woman and a Khmu servant (1920s NE Laos).



Source: Foropon 1927.

6 The French also observed considerable differences in the status of the different Mon-Khmer-speaking groups that were classified as *kha*. While the Khmu in the Lao principality of Luang Prabang appeared to hold significant economic and ritual positions (cf. Holt 2009), the uplanders of the Bolaven plateau in southern Laos were targets of ruthless slave raids (Keay 2006: 105; de Carné 1872: 123).

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As mentioned above, the slaves/serfs were integrated into the social hierachy of the precolonial state in Southeast Asia. In principle, the boundary between commoners and slaves was fluid. Poor peasants could enter servitude to avoid taxation or to redeem their debts. Slaves could climb the social ladder through manumission and marriage. We know, from Edmund Leach's (1954: 221-3) seminal book "Political Systems of Upper Burma", the example of a Kachin uplander marrying a Shan girl. The groom had to move to the house of his father-in-law according to the principle of uxorilocality and became a *de facto* slave, including being obliged to do hard work on the family's fields. His children, however, inherited the status of their mother and became 'free' Shan.

Unlike the term 'slave' suggests, some *kha* groups were in an economically advantageous position. In his study of the Rmeet (Lao: Lamet) of northern Laos, the Swedish anthropologist Gustav Izikowitz (2001 [1951]) noted that in precolonial times, the uplanders provided not only forest products but also rice for the lowland Lao in exchange for iron and salt (cf. Jonsson 2014). An English traveler in the 19th century even stated: "Without the Khas, their lazy, pleasure-loving, opium-smoking masters would have to work, or die of hunger." (Hallet 1988 [1890]: 22) The term *kha* here denotes the lowest strata in the Tai-Lao social hierarchy, without necessarily reflecting actual enslavement or servitude.

The situation in other regions of the Southeast Asian massif was indeed very different. Driven by the increasing labour demand of 19th-century Siamese economy, a veritable slave trade developed throughout the highlands. In the mountains bordering China, marauding bands abducted people and sold them into servitude, as the introductory vignette illustrated. Such instances provided a pretext for the French intervention and colonial *mission civilisatrice*, with some French contemporaries partly blaming the practice of slavery for the alleged 'backwardness' of parts of the Indochinese population (cf. Délaye 2002).[7] With the abolition of slavery, exploitative labour relations did not cease to exist, however.

7 The French position towards slavery was ambivalent, however, oscillating between condemnation and acquiescence (see Conklin 1997 and M. Klein 1998 for the French colonies in Africa; see Pétré-Grenouilleau 2004 for the abolitionist discourse as pretext for colonization; cf. Lindner, this volume). It should be noted that the explorer Cupet himself took advantage of porters provided for him by local notables from their own slaves (Délaye 2002: 309).

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COLONIAL CORVÉE AND COOLIE LABOUR: TRANSFORMATIONS AND CONTINUITIES

After the abolition of slavery, variants of servitude and coerced labour still prevailed in Indochina. The French category of coolie[8] referred to three forms of bonded labour: 1) ad hoc recruitment of porters, often uplanders enrolled by force, modification of *kha* discrimination; 2) 'traditional' *corvée* requisitions (e.g. for colonial public works), directed towards lowland (Vietnamese, Lao, and Khmer) peasants and upland slash-and-burn cultivators alike; 3) indentured labour, mainly in the plantation and mining sectors of the colonial economy, with Chinese and Vietnamese labourers working under three-year contracts. The following passages describe the first two forms of coerced labour, while the third – colonial coolie labour *par excellence* – will be discussed in the next part of this chapter.

In November 1901, the colonial gazette *Bulletin Économique de l'Indochine* reported on the ad hoc recruitment of 360 indigenous – possibly Khmu – coolies to transport teak trunks, tied together to form rafts, down the Mekong river at Luang Prabang. The report points out the difficulties of longer engagements and stressed the importance of a trusting relationship with the local population, and of appropriate remuneration. Not mentioned is the fact that seasonal labour migration was common among the Khmu, who since the early 19th century had worked on Siamese Teak plantations to gain money and prestige goods (cf. McCarthy 1994 [1900]; Évrard 2006). This experience certainly made it easier for the French to recruit coolies among them.

In other cases the population resented coolie and *corvée* requisition. It was particularly Lao and Vietnamese mandarins taking advantage of their more privileged status and land appropriation that led to more assymetric power relations and increased the vulnerability of both small tenants and shifting cultivators. Sometimes Lao and Vietnamese landlords insisted on 'traditional' *corvée* obligations for themselves so that small tenants and swiddeners often faced a double burden of labour requisitions. In the case of upland Laos, many subaltern groups resented the collaboration of Lao elites who took advantage of the privilege to collect taxes and to organize *corvée* (cf. Gunn 1990; Foropon 1927).

8 Borrowed from the English term, itself a loanword from Hindi (see general introduction of this volume for a discussion of this concept). On the ambiguity of the term – 'coolie' as signifier for specific kinds of work and/or a social status – see van Rossum, this volume.

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The category of coerced labour that the French called *corvée* – the obligation to provide labour service for the state – was not so different from previous relations of servitude between landlord and serf. While in France the institution of *corvée* was abolished after the revolution, in the colonial context it remained part and parcel of taxation schemes. The French created a perfidious tax system that included considerable *corvée* obligations. While in precolonial times, *corvée* labour was fitted into the schedule of agricultural practice (e.g. in the dry season after harvest), the constant demand by the French for public works did not allow for this. With the new system, both peasants and skilled labourers were forced into *corvée,* which they could only avoid by paying additional taxes – that is, a choice between neglecting field and artisanal work, or risking indebtedness (Adams 1978: 293-4).

The combination of tax and *corvée* with arbitrary labour requisition included the use of force, justified by the alleged reticence of local labour. Public works such as roads and bridges depended on aggressive labour recruitment and subsequent exploitation. As Eric Jennings drastically illustrates with the example of the hill station of Dalat in the highlands of Central Vietnam, such colonial infrastructure "[…] was literally built on the backs of Vietnamese and indigenous minority laborers and peasants" (2011: 4). His account provides disturbing impressions of the abuse of allegedly 'traditional' labour regimes and their colonial modifications. Jennings introduces the colonial functionary Victor Adrien Debay, who was notorious for his violence:

"[Debay] deliberately picked on village chiefs and elders, he strategically terrorized villagers into paying a variety of arbitrary levies, he willfully used the language of requisitions, corvées, and forced labor, and he intentionally turned victims on each other, ordering coolies to beat other coolies. He subsequently pointed to the inadequacy of rules governing labor recruitment to justify his use of force." (Jennings 2011: 32)

This all occurred under the Code de l'Indigénat that denied the 'indigènes' many basic human rights (cf. M. Klein 1998; Benton 1999). Violent assaults on Vietnamese coolies were usually only mildly punished or fined, whereas resistance to labour requisition was severly punished – and again taken as pretext for the necessity of force to get people to work. Beatings or imprisonment could in some cases be replaced by the payment of penalties that, however, added to the already existing financial burdens and increased the risk of indebtedness.

At the turn of the 20th century, Vietnamese and Chinese coolies had already replaced the scarce locally available workforce in the uplands. On the construction sites for mountain roads and railroads, they suffered from a high

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mortality rate, from malaria, accidents, and exhaustion. The construction of the Hanoi-Yunnan railroad after 1897, in particular, witnessed an immense death toll in spite of French claims of improved medical support and work security. 12,000 of a total of 60,000 Vietnamese and Chinese workers died along its tracks (cf. Del Testa 2001; Brocheux and Hémery 2009). In addition, brutal and racist overseers maltreated the indigenous workers as inferior races that had to be beaten to learn discipline and order (ibid.). As a result, labourers often voted with their feet. As Jennings put it with regard to road construction: "After each pay, masses of emaciated, fever-ridden workers simply left" (Jennings 2011: 66).

The term 'coolie' marks the blurred boundary between precolonial and colonial labour relations, since it designates both traditional *corvée*/servitude (induced by economic and/or moral primordial debt, as explained below) and 'modern' variants of indentured labour. Bush (2000; cf. Derks 2010) distinguishes between contract work performed by state agents, and that by private actors, a distinction blurred in the case of French Indochina. Especially the plantation and mining sectors were characterized by entanglements and contestation between the colonial bureaucracy, private enterprises, and various local actors when it came to recruiting and disciplining coolie labour.

COOLIE SYSTEM IN THE PLANTATION AND MINING ECONOMY

Since the mid-19th century the French took control of the territories of present-day Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Coolie labour became a crucial factor for French strategies of economic development and their – in the end, failed – attempt to create a cost-efficient colony (cf. J.-F. Klein 2012). The program of development was known as *mise en valeur* (cf. Sarraut 1923). It was part and parcel of the colonial *mission civilisatrice* that aimed at the modernization of economic practices, modes of thought, and social relations, and the disciplining of minds and bodies according to the norms and the requirements of industrial work (cf. Conklin 1997; Brocheux/Hémery 2009).

This policy had a great impact on agrarian society, starting with the intensification of a rice-exporting economy since the 1860s, followed by a period of industrial, mining, and plantation development, initiated in 1897 by the *gouverneur général* Paul Doumer. When the rubber boom in southern Indochina began in 1926 and continued until 1930, the cultivated acreage jumped from 18,000 hectares to almost 80,000 (Brocheux/Hémery 2009: 127). The rubber industry employed 70,000 coolies, mainly contractual workers from Tonkin and

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Annam, usually under three-year contracts. Labour migration reached its peak in the 1920s with an annual average of more than 12,000 Vietnamese from densely populated Tonkin moving to the south, and around 2,000 moving to the Pacific islands (cf. Delamarre 1931; Boucheret 2008).

The labour migrants worked under a system of indentured labour or contract labour, known in France as *engagisme*. The history of French indentured labour dates back to the 17th century, when French migrants moved to America, mainly in Quebec, under the so-called *trente-six mois* (cf. Mauro 1986). They worked on farms for 36 months and were allowed to buy and own the land they had cultivated after they finished the contract. However, this was a scheme for prospective white settlers, widely differing for later coolie contracts.

These patterns of labour migration happened before the heyday of colonial slavery. Asian indentured/coolie labour migration to Africa and the Americas gained momentum towards the end of slavery in the mid-19th century. European and Asian systems of indentured labour differed in many respects, most notably concerning racial issues (cf. Mauro 1986). In the colonial context the legal framework of contract labour was reframed under the infamous Code de l'Indigenat, which implied considerable legal differences between French citizens and colonial subjects (cf. Conklin 1997; Boucheret 2008). The coolie system became not only a key pillar of the French colonial economy but also – similarly to the labour systems of other colonial powers – a means of control and discipline (cf. J.-F. Klein 2012; Slocomb 2007; see Houben/Lindblad 1999 for Indonesia).

Rubber plantations were established in rather thinly populated regions in many Asian colonies in the late 19th century: well-known enterprises included Goodyear in Sumatra (Dutch colony), Dunlop in Malaya (British Colony), and Michelin in South Vietnam and Cambodia (French colonies) (cf. Tully 2011; Murray 1992; Panthou/Binh 2013). In the latter case, plantations were mainly established on the high plateaus (known as 'red earth'), thinly populated by different subsistence-farming ethnic groups (cf. Aso 2012). The latter were often displaced, and usually resisted requisition as plantation workers. The French colonialists required a large workforce, and found it in the densely populated delta region of the Red River in Northern Vietnam near the large capital Hanoi (cf. Gourou 1955; Bunout 1936; Boucheret 2008).

In the French sources this displacement of labour is often depicted as a 'solution' to the alleged overpopulation of the Red River Delta (cf. Pasquier 1918; Robequain 1939). However, this demographic problem had resulted from previous transformations of property relations in the region. While in precolonial times there was already a clear picture of a feudal society with a land-holding

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aristocracy and a mass of small tenants, French administrative interventions aggravated the situation (cf. Cleary 2003; Hardy 2003). The French developed a land code that privileged large landowners and latifundia capitalism. Colonialism was also characterized by the appropriation and privatization of communal land. Wealthy Vietnamese landlords collaborated with the French and accumulated the farmland while a large, subordinate class of tenant farmers emerged, often working on sharecropping contracts whose detailed conditions were imported from France. The class of poor Vietnamese tenant farmers was dispossessed, often hopelessly indebted, and thus open to the idea of signing coolie contracts.

Indeed, the French were able to recruit thousands of Vietnamese coolies for plantation work without too much effort. Vietnam already had a history of population movements, most famously including the southward move, the settlement of the Vietnamese coast from the North to the Mekong Delta in the South. In contrast to the colonial stereotype of Vietnamese peasants' 'natural' attachment to their villages (cf. e.g. Bunout 1936) – cultivated by the French authorities to sustain population control – Andrew Hardy (2003) shows how especially for land-poor peasants the option of moving around looking for work, either as agricultural labourers or as soldiers, was appealing.

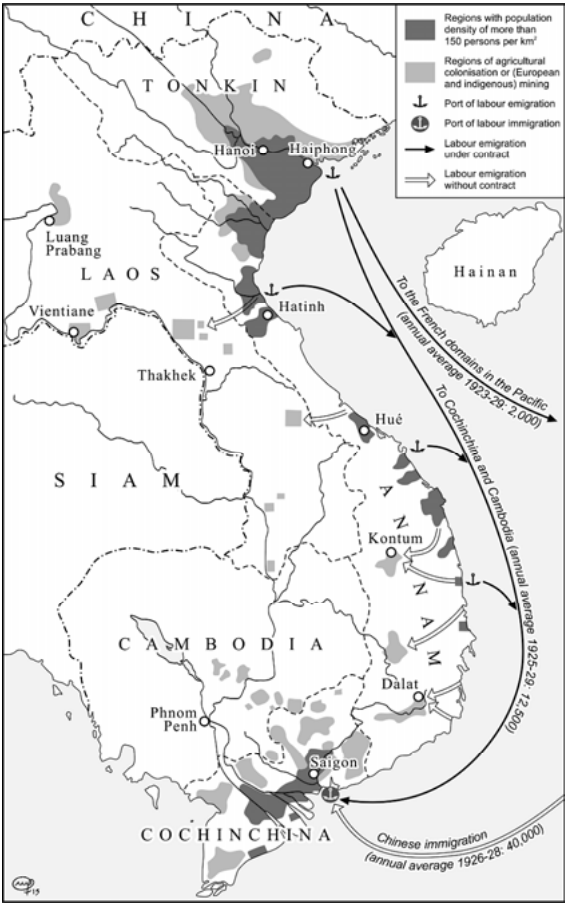
Such mobility was a way of earning the means to start family, to buy land and a house, and to gain higher status after returning to the village. It was not an easy decision, because having to leave the community to look for work and money elsewhere meant to admit one's own poverty, and was thus a challenge to saving face and maintaining dignity (cf. Hardy 2003; Do 2005). Sometimes the socioeconomic conditions left people with no choice anyway. They were forced to move, and the French took advantage of this situation for their own projects of economic development and population management. Thus, we have to consider different economic, sociocultural, and political factors that contributed to the colonial coolie system.

The interwar years, in particular the years just before the world economic crisis, witnessed an intensification of the French policy of economic development. Industrial plantations, most prominently of rubber and coffee, along with the mining sector constituted the pillars of the French colonial economy, which was oriented mainly towards resource exploitation. The demand for labour rapidly increased, and the colonial administration faced the claims of different economic interest groups including the Société Le Nickel in Nouvelle-

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Calédonie.[9] The local administrations in Tonkin and Annam criticized uncontrolled labour recruitment, not least because some provinces had their own agendas of economic development that, for example, involved labour-intensive infrastructure projects.[10]

Figure 2: Coolie migration in French Indochina



Source: Revised map based on Delamarre 1931.

9 Angleviel 2001; Archives nationales d'outre-mer (ANOM), Aix-en-Provence, AF/INDO 111, F81.

10 Les Cahiers Coloniaux de l'Institut Colonial de Marseille, no. 491, 25 June 1928, pp. 254-6 (ANOM, FM/AFFECO 26).

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However, Tonkin remained the main source of available manpower, and the flow of labour migrants towards the Mekong delta and beyond continued. The population of Tonkin rapidly increased under French rule, while the ongoing latifundia system was reproducing a mass of poor peasants, their plight aggravated by regular inundation and poor harvests. The colonial administration agreed on certain quota for migration, though: an annual 25,000 coolies for southern Indochina and 2,500 for the Pacific Islands (ibid.). The economic lobby, represented mainly by the powerful rubber barons, continued to call for more flexibility of the labour market, as it were, for reduced bureaucracy, and free circulation of labour. Also during the rubber boom in the interwar years, critique of the exploitative coolie system emerged both in French colonial newspapers and among the emergent educated Vietnamese middle class in Hanoi and Saigon (cf. Boucheret 2001, 2008; Aso 2012; Brocheux/Hémery 2009; Del Testa 2001, 2002).

In 1927, the colonial government set up a survey of labour conditions by the Inspection Général du Travail (cf. Boucheret 2001). Its agents conducted surveys in different parts of the colony to check the working and living conditions at plantations and mines. They noted, for example, the widespread practice of corporal punishments for the smallest offence, and the scandalous sanitary and medical conditions.[11] On the rubber plantation of Phu-Rieng, inspector Delamarre visited a clinic where half of the patients had been injured by beatings, and he noted numerous dirty sheds containing coolies shackled and close to starvation (Binh 1978: 37).

On the plantation of Mimot in Cambodia, the local Khmer notables complained about the mistreatment of the Tonkinese coolies at the hands of the overseers, who acted like "conducteurs de buffles et de boefs".[12] The Belgian overseer Verhelst was particularly notorious for arbitrarily beating the coolies with canes and whips (Ngo Van 1997: 412). His blatant abuses could not be ignored by Inspector Delamarre, yet still the Mimot company protested against his dismissal, revealing the pervading racism of colonial society that considered the *indigènes* second-class citizens.[13]

11 Some reports are quoted in the annex of Ngo Van's (1997) account of the early years of the Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle; see also ANOM, FM/AFFECO 25; Boucheret 2008.

12 Letter 6 March 1929, Gouverneur Général d'Indochine to Minister of Colonies in Paris (ANOM, FM/AFFECO 26).

13 Ibid.; cf. Aso 2012. The plantation owners in fact argued that disciplinary measures, including occasional violence, were necessary to guarantee a stable and dutiful work-

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The inspections provoked a considerable paper trail within the French administration.[14] However, as the contemporary Paul Monet (an official of the colonial *Service géographique*) deplores in his pamphlet *Les Jauniers* – 'yellow-slaves trader', derived from *négriers* – the inspection failed to change the miserable living conditions of the coolies (cf. Monet 1930). Tran Tu Binh, who in 1930 became one of the leaders of a workers' revolt on the rubber plantation of Phu-Rieng (Cambodia), even indicated that the French inspectors were corrupt and let the enterprises go on, accepting ineffectual promises to improve the working and living conditions of the coolies (Binh 1985 38).

Indeed, the planters' lobby claimed to care about medical support for and the hygiene of the workers, which in the end should improve their living conditions, arguably bringing about greater 'civilization'. This clearly echoed the colonial claim of the *mission civilisatrice*, the French ideology of improving the social, cultural, and moral standards of the colonized (cf. Conklin 1997; Aso 2012). The interests only collided when it came to the aspect of violence and to excessive exploitation of the workers because the colonial government tried to maintain the myth of a morally justified and benevolent colonization. In general, however, it was common sense among the different colonial interests that contract labour and coolie migration was indispensable, for demographic and economic reasons (cf. Boucheret 2008).

Therefore, coolie labour can be considered as a kind of hybrid between wage-labour and forced labour – politically institutionalized and legitimized. According to the law, it was possible to leave the contract when advances and other costs were paid off. However, it was almost impossible for the coolies to do so. They rather accumulated more debts, and the system of exploitation continued (cf. J.-F. Klein 2012; Maurer 2010; Angleviel 2001). Meanwhile, the planters' lobby responded to the growing critical voices with publications defending their efforts for the improvement of the economic and social conditions in the colony. Reports of violence and abuse were renounced as fables and lies of leftist groups.

In 1928, the socialist *gouverneur général* Varenne introduced new labour regulations in response to a growing number of alarming reports about the harsh labour- and living conditions in the coolie camps of the plantations and mines,

force. Underlying this view was a racist attitude linked to the common idea that the *indigènes* were still not sufficiently 'civilized' and, thus, had to be disciplined in order to function according to the requirements of the colonial *mise en valeur*; that is, economic development (see Jennings 2011).

14 See the ANOM files FM/AFFECO 25 and 26.

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and also in response to the International Labour Organization's campaign against forced labour.[15] The French authorities claimed to protect the indigenous workers, but did not even think about abandoning the coolie system as such. The new regulations fixed some of the workers' rights, such as working hours of nine hours per day, a specific number of days off, and the obligation of the companies to explain the contract in all details to the workers, who often could not read them. In general, the labour reforms only secured the existence of the coolie system and consolidated the legal divide between coolies and free workers (cf. Boucheret 2001, 2008).

One example of this was the introduction of the so-called *carte speciale d'ouvrier contractuel*, a specific passport for coolies that replaced the ordinary ID card. This passport was modelled after that created for the *Légion Étrangère*. The place of origin did not matter. Rather, the name and place of the employer, for example a plantation company, was written on the passport.[16] This means that the worker was actually bound to the plantation or mine in that he was not allowed to change either employer or place of residence. In fact, any leave was treated as desertion and severly punished. Only after the contract had finished could the coolies exchange the *carte speciale* for a regular passport. Being a coolie indeed appears to have implied a different identity, a different legal and social status – in fact, a very precarious one.

COOLIE PRECARITY AND THE DEBT FACTOR

Debt provides a key to the understanding of the precariousness of the lives of labourers under conditions of both bonded servitude and indentured labour (cf. Derks 2010). Relations of debt bondage, albeit prone to exploitation, appeared in precolonial times as option in precarious circumstances because it implied mutual obligations. However, such relationships often entailed a vicious circle of further indebtedness and quasi-slavery. The coolie system implied similar ambivalences with regard to the interplay of precarity and allegedly legal security, and the significance of debt.

Jean Michaud's observation for the Southeast Asian uplands can be extended for labour relations in Southeast Asia in general: "In many cases, especially after slavery was made illegal, enslavement became more a matter of usury and

15 Decree 25 Oct 1927, in: Journal Officiel de l'Indochine (9 Nov 1927).

16 Letter 24 Septembre 1928, Gouverneur Général d'Indochine to Ministry of Colonies in Paris (ANOM, FM/AFFECO 26).

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economic exploitation, using the leverage of debt to enslave defaulters. When a debtor could not repay what he had borrowed, the creditor used him as free labor for varying periods of time, sometimes years, even for the rest of his life." (2006: 220) Even the French coolie system can be included in such a definition, since indebtedness was a crucial factor in both entry into and eventual inability to exit the contract (cf. J.-F. Klein 2012; Derks 2010; Testart 2001; Northrup 1995).

Since debt is a crucial factor of present-day contract/indentured labour as well (see Derks 2010; Killias 2010; Huong 2010; Damir-Geilsdorf, this volume), it seems a promising vantage point for the study of labour relations from a *longue durée* perspective. For the duration of the contract, the workers – both in colonial times and the present – faced a temporary suspension of basic rights, and thus experienced vulnerability and di-stress. Precolonial conditions of debt bondage, arguably a temporary state of exception, can also be discussed within this framework.

The historian Baas Terwiel (1983) estimates that in the 18th-19th century a quarter to half of the Siamese population was in a position of debt bondage to someone. As Katherine Bowie argues, precolonial "state power and state policy was integrally involved in the maintenance of human servitude" (1996: 137), and slavery and/or bonded servitude must be considered as the physical imposition of the state, rather than as a mere fiscal option for poor peasants. Instead of a voluntary choice, debt bondage was often a combined result of structural coercion and natural calamities, but was certainly also a consequence of gambling and money lending.

The colonial mechanisms of *corvée* and coolie labour also served the economic and administrative interests of the state (cf. Northrup 1995; Laviña/ Zeuske 2014). After the abolition of slavery, other means of capitalist exploitation had to satisfy the needs of colonial economic interests. Coolies became another form of disposable labour, caught in a precarious interplay of contract security and exploitation, debt and economic opportunity. As a kind of "voluntary slavery" (Angleviel 2001), coolie labour was simultaneously both voluntary and coerced (notably by generally precarious socioeconomic conditions), perhaps including aspects of the conditions of both precolonial servitude and postcolonial wage labour.

The precarity of the contract workers under colonialism is reflected in literary works by Vietnamese ex-coolies and descendants of coolies. The book "The Red Earth" by Tran Tu Binh (1985) describes the hardships of coolie life on the rubber plantations in southern Indochina (cf. Monet 1930; Tully 2011). Tran Tu Binh was a communist activist who went to the plantations to mobilize the workers in the south to follow "the road to proletarianized revolutionary

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struggle" (Binh 1985: 12). His detailed observations of coolie life are written with Marxist jargon, as is often the case with Vietnamese anticolonial literature (cf. Truong 2000). Such accounts offer much material with which it is possible to assess the impact of colonial labour regimes on individual biographies.

Binh provides drastic descriptions of the various corporal punishments the coolies had to endure from the hands of the overseers, "the terrible, cruel demons of this hell on earth" (Binh 1985: 24). The coolies were forced to work from six to six with only a short break. Many of them suffered from exhaustion, injuries (induced by accidents or the overseers' relentless beatings), malaria, and dysentery, and thus many coolies died and "became fertilizer for the capitalists' rubber trees" (ibid.: 27). They received only rice rations of bad quality, for which they had to pay ridiculous prices at the shops owned by the plantations. Though in theory they were allowed to quit the contract after 18 months – given that they had paid back advances and recruitment costs (cf. Boucheret 2001) – the coolies were often already heavily indebted. According to Monet (1930: 26), the suicide rate among the coolies was high, with up to ten suicides per months on certain plantations.

In contrast to Tran Tu Binh, the author of another illustrative book, Jean Vanmai, was not an eyewitness but the son of a coolie in the nickel mines of Nouvelle-Calédonie, born in 1960. The title of his book, "Chân đăng" (1980), refers to the self-designation of the Vietnamese coolies, with *chân đăng* literally meaning 'feet under contract', i.e. contract labourers. This book is based on interviews with Vietnamese coolies, but written in a fictional style. The reason for this was that the Vietnamese community wished to leave this part of its history behind and feared the reaction of the dominant French population of the island. Indeed, the publication of this book caused some heated debate about the dark heritage of Nouvelle-Calédonie, the legacy of the island as a penal colony and labour camp (cf. Do 2005; Angleviel 2001; de Deckker 1994).

Jean Vanmai describes the *chân đăng*'s feeling of exile, vulnerability and estrangement. Like Binh, he sketches the everyday violence in the workplace, from a casual slap in the face to attempts at rape (Vanmai 1980: 100).[17] Generally, the contracts listed punishments for "insubordination", which could mean anything, even fainting from exhaustion. Brutal overseers – some of them veterans of the French army, or even having worked in the Belgian Congo previously – considered the beating of coolies as a legitimate means of enforcing

17 Female coolies were particularly vulnerable, often subjected to sexual harrassment or given as sex slaves to loyal foremen (Binh 1985: 24). The female-male ratio in 1929 was about 1:5 in Cambodia and Nouvelle Calédonie (Delamarre 1931: 36; 44).

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discipline (cf. Angleviel 2001; Jennings 2011). Since it was impossible to quit the contract without becoming hopelessly indebted, as already mentioned, and with running away punished in the same way as desertion from the army, the coolies had to endure the mistreatment at the hands of their overseers. As one protagonist in Vanmai's book laments:

"Que pouvons-nous faire d'autre ici, sur cette petite île? Impossible de fuir. Et nous sommes bien loin de notre pays. Il ne nous reste donc qu'une seule solution: travailler et obéir pour éviter les fouets des contremaîtres et les violences des gendarmes." (Vanmai 1980: 137-8)

Writing about Javanese and Vietnamese coolies in Nouvelle-Calédonie, Maurer (2010) and Angleviel (2001) emphasize the significance of indebtedness for the precarity of the labourers in the colonial plantation and mining economy. Usually food and clothes allowances were guaranteed by the contract. However, often the rice and dried fish were of such poor quality that the workers were forced to buy additional food in the local shops, which were usually run by the companies (see above; Binh 1985: 27). These shops also sold other items like needles for sewing clothes, and sometimes turned into gambling halls in the days following payday. Many coolies bought credit, and the gradual accumulation of debt forced them to sign consecutive contracts – attaching them "as semi-slaves to their employer" (Maurer 2010: 877).

The combination of advances and retainers was another factor contributing to the risk of indebtedness: advances that lured coolies into signing work contracts were deducted from their salaries over the first year, while the company withheld a portion of the salary as so-called 'pécule', an amount of money only paid on the ending of the contract. According to Angleviel (2001: 76), in 1926 the French mining company *Société Le Nickel* withheld 30% of its workers' salaries. Not surprisingly, the reduced salary and the precarious life on the working sites resulted in indebtedness. It thus appears to be only a very small step from contract labour to bonded labour or even forced labour.

Accounts of the everyday lives of the Vietnamese coolies also provide information about the motivation of the peasants from Tonkin to sign such contracts. On the one hand, Binh and Vanmai mention the plight of the Vietnamese peasantry in colonial Indochina, in particular their chronic indebtedness. On the other hand they refer to a kind of moral debt that especially young men feel towards their parents and ancestors. In Vietnam, filial piety is considered a keystone of morality, and thus one can understand why the sons of

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poor peasant families took their chances working abroad to save money for a small plot of land (cf. Vanmai 1980; Angleviel 2001; Hardy 2003).

Tran Tu Binh notes how the recruiters exploited the situation in the Red River Delta, where recruitment stalls mushroomed at intersections and marketplaces:

"When they were unable to recruit enough labor, the French colonialists threw in Vietnamese contractors to coax and con farmers in the Red River delta who had lost their land and were down on their luck with no opportunity to escape their lot. There was an abundance of recruiting activity everywhere. The contracting gangs tried to outdo each other in spinning fantastic images of the out-of-this-world way of life on the rubber plantations, because they received two piasters [four times the daily wage for coolies; OT] for each person they handed over to the French." (Binh 1985: 12)

Examples of both Vietnamese and Javanese coolies in Nouvelle-Calédonie show the chain reactions triggered by the first recruitment, the first contract signed under precarious circumstances – sometimes due to indebtedness, sometimes because of the generally poor socioeconomic conditions. While in the case of the Vietnamese the process of colonial land appropriation aggravated landlessness and poverty, in Java rapid population growth and scarcity of agricultural land led to the acceptance of emigration and coolie labour. Arguably, the legacy of precolonial debt bondage in Southeast Asia enabled the emergence of a disposable workforce for colonial capitalism.

CONCLUSION

The economic anthropologist David Graeber shows in his influential book, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, that since antiquity "the struggle between rich and poor has largely taken the form of conflicts between creditors and debtors – of arguments about the rights and wrongs of interest payments, debt peonage, amnesty, repossession, restitution, the sequestering of sheep, the seizing of vineyards, and the selling of debtors' children into slavery" (Graeber 2011: 8). Graeber considers debt as a means of enacting violence, and a lever of exploitation. This is evident in the context of the colonial and precolonial state in Southeast Asia.

When comparing the coolie system with precolonial forms of bonded labour, we have to distinguish between debt resulting from coerced labour relations, and debt preceding these precarious arrangements. Asian peasants in precolonial and

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colonial times always ran the risk of becoming trapped in a vicious circle of indebtednes and exploitation. Even if we consider certain mechanisms of security (mutual obligations within traditional patron-client relations and legal frameworks of colonial labour), the general precarity of the labourers in the grey zone between slavery and wage labour remains a crucial issue.

Without question, variants of coerced labour shaped socioeconomic relations in precolonial and colonial mainland Southeast Asia to a large extent. In precolonial Vietnam and Laos, as well as in Siam, different forms of slavery and servitude reflected the strong hierarchization of society. Feudal aristocratic and/or landlord classes took advantage of *corvée* obligations and other forms of coerced labour extracted from subaltern peasants, small tenants, or upland swiddeners – the latter classified as *kha* (slaves/serfs) in Laos and northern Thailand.

The French, following the British in Burma, officially abolished slavery in their Indochinese possessions as a keystone of their alleged *mission civilisatrice*. However, some practices such as *corvée* labour persisted as a form of taxation, and the infamous coolie system was established to guarantee labour influx for the booming plantation and mining economy. Both variants can be considered bonded or coerced labour, since they imply different degrees of force, coercion, and violence. Examples of victims of such conditions are the *kha* who were exploited by the French and their Lao allies for *corvée* labour, and the Vietnamese coolies enduring structural violence on the colonial rubber plantations: "Like life imprisonment without jail" (Binh 1985: 28).

The factor of debt exemplifies the historical continuities of precolonial and colonial variants of bonded labour, thus allowing for a *longue durée* perspective on labour relations in mainland Southeast Asia in general. Precolonial debt bondage in many respects resembles the conditions that forced poor Vietnamese peasants in the Red River Delta into signing the coolie contract, sometimes followed by additional indebtedness, and thus *de facto* bondage to their employers.

As Annuska Derks and others have pointed out for the present, such forms of bonded labour have also prevailed in the postcolonial era. Transnational labour migration sometimes follows schemes envisaged by the colonial powers, in particular the new forms of contract/indentured labour (cf. Derks 2010). Vietnamese, Lao, and Thai migrants also form part of this global system of labour relations and mobility. The interplay between poverty and indebtedness on the one hand, and bound contracts and exploitation on the other, remains a critical issue for research into current economic tendencies in the Global South.

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