# Introduction: Global Variants of Bonded Labour

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## INTRODUCTION

When in 1874 the Chinese Commission to Cuba investigated the bad reputation of coolie labour as a kind of semi-slavery, many Chinese labourers in Cuba and other colonies handed in written testimonies and petitions to report their terrible living conditions (Yun 2008: 34; cf. Ng 2014). In Cuba, Chinese coolies lived next to slaves from Africa, and their 'voluntary' contract did not spare them from being treated as chattels. As one coolie testified:

"We were all naked when we were inspected by buyers. We never saw people being humiliated in such a terrible way. We were sold to sugar plantations and treated worse than dogs and oxen. Foreign overseers rode on horses, with cowhide whips and guns in their hands. Regardless of our speed or quality, they lashed us from a distance; they hit us with clubs within reach. Some of us had bones broken and some spat blood right away. People with cracked head and broken legs still had to work instead of being sent into a ward. Countless people died of injury within eight years." (Quoted in Yun 2008: 120)

The same holds true for Indian coolies in Mauritius, who in 1839 – two years after the official beginning of Indian coolie migration to the island of Mauritius and six years after the official end of slavery in the British Empire – were already complaining about abuse, mistreatment and withheld wages.[1] Here, a

1 Report of the Committee appointed by the Supreme Government of India to enquire into the abuses alleged to exist in exporting from Bengal Hill Coolies and Indian

commission was appointed to investigate the problems – but still, after a short moratorium the coolie trade from India to Mauritius continued. Even if such reports became an embarrassment for the 'civilized' world and some flows of coolie migration were stopped, the coolie trade continued long into the 20th century.

Apparently, colonial systems of indentured labour in many respects still resembled the slavery that they allegedly replaced. With the signing of the contract, colonial coolies – like South Asian contract workers in the Arab Gulf States and Malaysia today – gave up basic rights and physical integrity. Even if payment, duration of contracts, and food provisions were usually guaranteed by certain bureaucratic regulations, the workers were extremely vulnerable, subject to arbitrary violence, and in danger of indebtedness. These specific kinds of bonded labour relations were marked by manifold ambiguities that render a free/unfree labour dichotomy analytically questionable.

## FORMS OF BONDED LABOUR

This volume addresses historically and regionally different cases of bonded labour as examples of unfree labour relations, covering the period from the 18th century until today. While aspects of slavery and servitude, of debt, violence, and precarity, certainly play a significant role for the understanding of bonded labour in general, the authors in this collection also acknowledge the aspirations and agency of indentured labourers, thus aiming to illuminate the grey area between the poles of chattel slavery and 'free' wage labour. We try to avoid the dichotomy of free and unfree labour in order to focus more appropriately on diverse empirical cases (in accordance with the arguments of other recent studies of bonded labour relations; cf. Lerche 2011; Derks 2010; Coté 2014; Chalhoub 2011; Zeuske 2015; Houben/Lindblad 1999; Breman 2012, Chalcraft 2009).[2]

In order to achieve a truly global and comparative perspective, we present case studies from different world regions in both historical and contemporary perspectives (18th-21st century). In addition, this volume constitutes a trans-disciplinary endeavour by bringing together case studies from history, social sciences, anthropology, and cultural studies. All contributions explore the econo-

Labourers of various classes to other countries (1839), Calcutta: G.H. Huttmann, Bengal Military Orphan Press.

2 For the ongoing, huge debate on free and unfree labour, see e.g. Brass/van der Linden 1997.

mic mechanisms, historical contradictions, and sociocultural dimensions of historical variants of bonded labour, especially what we call the coolie variant.

Bonded labour in a global historical perspective – including indentured and coolie labour – constitutes the common issue of the various studies. Being an interdisciplinary endeavour, the collection benefits from the productive exchange of ideas, concepts and approaches across disciplinary boundaries. The various chapters investigate forms of contract labour, debt bondage and indentured labour in various regions of the world – the Caribbean, Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East – thus also aiming at a global understanding of the topic. Consequently, we deal with a huge variety of labour situations, in most cases strongly connected with migration movements.

We have chosen the term 'bonded labour' as the title for the edited volume as it seems to incorporate a broad range of labour relations between free and unfree labour, as Annuska Derks has argued in the introduction of a recent special issue on bonded labour in Asia (Derks 2010). We also try to link our volume to earlier research by Emmer, Boogaart, Klein, and Twaddle (Emmer/Boogaart 1986, Twaddle 1993, Klein 1993) who have already called attention to the variety of unfree labour situations in different regions of the world and who have addressed the blurred boundaries between slavery, bonded labour and various forms of coerced and contract labour.

However, there are certain specificities one would find in most of the case studies in the volume. Most investigate the problem of unfree labour, unequal power relations, various kinds of exploitation, graded rights and racial exclusion. The authors consider colonial coolies and modern neo-bondage as embodiments of global inequalities and human states of exception: Labourers are confronted with risky choices and temporary suspensions of basic human rights.[3] We look at forms of labour that are not free, but also not always forced labour. We investigate labour arrangements shaped by contracts that often bind the workers for several years to certain locations, with considerable legal or practical constraints on leaving the contract, and with restrictions of personal freedom and mobility. The forms of labour we are addressing are often shaped by debt relations, as indebtedness forces people to enter such labour contracts, and accumulated debts often prevent people from quitting a coercive contract and, instead, force them to sign another contract (cf. Breman 2008).

3 Severe long-term relations of labour bondage still exist today, as numerous case studies from South Asia demonstrate (cf. Breman/Guérin 2009; De Neve 2005; thanks to our colleague Michael Hoffmann for this clarification).

These forms of work organization and migration can be found up until today. Accordingly, in a report of 2013, the ILO tried to break down legal definitions of unfree labour into 'operational indicators', which can be summarized in the following three dimensions:

1) "Unfree recruitment", which means, in the description of the ILO, coercive as well as deceptive recruitment;
2) "Life and work under duress", with indications such as limited freedom, withholding of wages, forced overtime or task, and the retention of identity papers;
3) "Impossibility of leaving the employer." (Harroff-Tavel/Alix 2013: 37)

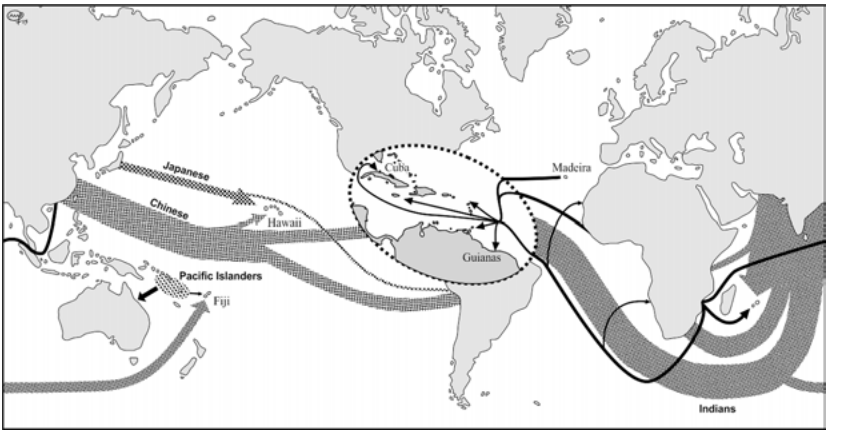
The first aspect seems to be of particular interest for our approach. Often, forms of bonded labour or contract labour are referred to as labour situations with a voluntary entry. However, in practice, the boundaries between compulsory/coerced and voluntary entry are blurred.

In this volume, we investigate the tension between the allegedly 'voluntary' entry into the contract and the real social, economic, and political conditions that generate the forced entry and non-exit-ability of the contract. Indentured and contract labourers often agree to the initial terms of their contract, but are not able to end or alter the duration of the contract once it begins (cf. Allen 2013). Often forms of coercion, such as poverty, debt, or impending imprisonment, are necessary to bring people to agree to this form of contract. The chapters also deal with the ensuing migration flows created by forms of bonded labour. They explore the blurred boundaries of forced and voluntary labour migration, and the precarious conditions of workers under various systems of bonded labour. Other common topics are the ambiguous relationship between (in/voluntary) displacement and subsequent immobilization, and the transformations of social relations during and after periods of bonded labour (ibid.). Moreover, the single case studies consider regimes and bureaucracies of labour organization – in a way, the infrastructures of bonded labour. We also address the inherent violence of unfree labour, and forms of control over the working body.

Many of the chapters concentrate explicitly on indentured labour as a certain type of bonded labour. Indentured work migration was one of the biggest migration movements worldwide after the end of the slave trade and the eventual abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833. Other means of capitalist exploitation had to satisfy the needs of colonial economic interests, particularly in plantation economies and in sugar production. Planters refused or were not able to cope with free labour, and demanded 'reliable' workers in compounds after abolition.

Thus, since the 1830s, Asian workers, mostly from India and China and generally addressed as coolies, were brought to colonial environments to work in plantations and mines in various parts of the world in schemes of unfree labour (cf. Tinker 1974; Northrup 1995; Meagher 2008; Allen 2014; Zeuske 2016a). The British, Americans, French, Spanish and Portuguese were all strongly involved in the export of Asian labour (Yun 2008: 38-39) The colonial mechanisms of *corvée* and coolie labour served the economic and administrative interests of the colonial state (cf. Northrup 1995; Laviña/Zeuske 2014). Coolies became another form of disposable labour, caught in a precarious interplay between contract security and exploitation, debt and economic opportunity.

*Map: Global coolie migration*




Revised map based on Northrup (1995: 3).

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 'voluntary' wage labour. Even if it was officially a voluntary negotiation process, often kidnapping, decoy, and fraud were involved. Conditions in the depots where the labourers were stored awaiting shipment and on the vessels on which they sailed were cramped and inhumane, resulting in sickness, misery, and death. Neither the Western colonial governments nor the Chinese and Indian government made more than a very slight attempt to correct the abuses. As Mazumdar (2007: 129) puts it: "[…] where Asian migrants came in as indentured workers on the heels of slavery, they faced conditions directly inherited from those of slavery".

European indentured labour to the Americas was, on the one hand, the precedent of the colonial coolie system, with migrants working under contracts, mainly in agricultural production. On the other hand, we should not ignore the significance of contracts in traditional forms of bonded labour, especially in China. Asian coolies in colonial times – contracted under penal sanctions – arguably faced more constraints, such as everyday violence and racism, forced immobilization in the workplace, and other elements of non-freedom (Bahadur 2014). The indenture system became not only a key pillar of colonial economy but also a means of control and discipline (cf. van der Linden 2011; Slocomb 2007). In the 1920/30s, the organized system of colonial indenture was coming to an end, even if similar forms of indenture persisted until the 1970s (Martinez 2005) and can also be found today.

The millions of Asian workers that migrated through the indenture system are commonly addressed as coolies. Before colonialism, the term *coolie* was largely reserved for casual day-labourers in Asian port cities, which formed key nodes of early global trade networks (Masashi 2009; Manning 2004). As Matthias van Rossum demonstrates in his contribution to this volume, the term was ambiguous and included a broad range of casual and/or seasonal wage labour – sometimes parallel to slave labour or even performed by slaves, thus making the distinction between coerced and free labour problematic. The term *coolie* obviously stems from two different sources, the Tamil word for a certain payment for menial work, and the Gujarati word for a person from an inferior class or group of society. As Breman and Daniel argue, the English term *coolie* brought together the two words for person and payment, creating a new "category of proto-proletarian individuals devoid of their personhood" (Breman/ Daniel 1992: 270; cf. Hayot 2014; Tappe, this volume). In China, the menial worker in Canton and other port cities – usually a man without master or family, recruited under a contract with (very low) day-to-day payment – became the emblematic figure of the coolie.

Moving away from ideal types of the coolie, Balachandran in her research thinks of a coolie

> "as a social relationship rather than merely a figure, person, or term, even perhaps as a characteristic relationship between labour and capital outside a relatively small part of the West. As a labouring subject, stabilized, nominally unlike apprenticeship and indenture contracts, by coercive mechanisms of indefinite duration that were produced and configured during the very decades of 'slave emancipation' and the emergence of a free-standing working class, the 'coolie' serves also to interrupt narratives of progress from slavery to free labour […]." (Balachandran 2011: 289)

Coolie labourers can also be viewed through the lens of subalternity and hybridity since they often constituted suppressed and alienated communities in ecologically and culturally foreign settings. Colonial – more or less coerced – labour migration implied new sociocultural configurations, emergent processes of creolization, and both the opportunities and the constraints of subaltern agency (cf. Prabhu 2005). Social and cultural change through coolie migration is definitely an important vector of the analysis of translocal labour migration under colonialism – next to the economic relevance of coolie work for colonial and postcolonial societies and economies.

The experience of various forms of exclusion and violence – "life and work under duress" in the words of ILO's 1930 definition of forced labour[4] – implied specific cultural representations of the coolie communities. Coolies often suffered strong racial discrimination. As Banivanua-Mar (2007) shows in her study of Pacific Islanders working as so-called *kanaka* labourers in Queensland/Australia, these indentured workers were ambiguously situated between white settlers and the black aborigines, but were nonetheless a target of racial discrimination and outright violence. Subject to racial stereotypes and limited self-determination, the coolies found themselves excluded from the discourse that forged certain post-abolitionist ideas of contract labour in the colonies. How were the coolies represented by their employers, and how did they represent themselves? (Yun 2008; Bahadur 2014; Gómez-Popescu, this volume).

Considering cultural aspects is crucial for a deeper understanding of coolie history. Coolie migration resulted in radically altered sociocultural and demographic configurations in both home and host societies. Coolies formed temporary communities with exceptional gender and age ratios, often next to culturally and linguistically different societies (cf. Vertovec 1992; Mohapatra 2006). As in the case of slavery before, coolie migration triggered processes of creolization in the labour-receiving countries (even if one assumes that a large proportion of the coolies returned after having finished their contracts).

The formation of plural societies, for example in the Caribbean, is only one aspect of the cultural dynamics of global coolie migration. The radical experiences and shifting world-views of returnees arguably affected the communities and families in the countries of origin. Moreover, the legacy of coolie existence lingers on in individual memories, debates of multi-culturalism, and contemporary literary works (Bragard 2008; Müller/Abel, this volume).

4 For the full text of the 1930 Forced Labour Convention see: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029

Therefore, investigating cultural representations in the context of coolie labour opens a new dimension in understanding the experience of this specific labour relation. In this volume, all authors shed light on coolie life-worlds across the globe and throughout time – including present-day forms of contract labour that strikingly resemble 19th-century labour arrangements. Historical and anthropological accounts of contract labour certainly benefit from models and approaches of cultural studies and postcolonialism that address the very representations of coolie existence.

The concept of *coolitude* (Torabully 1992; Carter/Torabully 2002) provides an alternative to notions of creolization, négritude, and hybridity, inspired from the experience of displacement and transculturation of coolie communities that formed culturally heterogenous diasporas abroad (see below). This approach is certainly useful for the history of insular contexts where numerous coolie families found a new home in a multi-ethnic society – without completely breaking the kinship and cultural ties with the homeland. The legacy of the ambiguous history of coolie communities as in the case of Mauritius (Allen 1999), or former penal colonies such as Nouvelle-Calédonie (de Deckker 1994), manifests itself in literary works and other artistic expression – shaped by past and present discourses of cultural difference and feelings of exclusion.

## CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

The present volume can be divided into four main sections with different yet complementary perspectives on global variants of unfree labour:

1) The historical shift from slavery to coolie labour under colonialism in Africa and the Americas.
2) Historical variants of bonded labour in Southeast Asia.
3) Slavery and sponsorship-systems in the Arabian peninsula.
4) Coolie cultures, identity discourses and representations.

The four main sections of the book reflect different perspectives on specific historical and sociocultural configurations of bonded or unfree labour – from slaves on Caribbean sugar cane plantations to contract workers in the modern Arab Gulf States.

## From Slave to Coolie

By discussing different patterns of coolie labour in the Americas and Africa in the 19th and early 20th century, and by focusing on Spanish, Portuguese and German examples we highlight the global reach of indentured labour. This phenomenon is reinforced by the growing knowledge exchange on indentured labour between colonial empires, as addressed in Lindner's chapter. Secondly, we illustrate the blurred boundaries between slavery and indentured labour, especially in the Spanish and Portuguese Empire, where slavery and indenture co-existed next to each other. As a third point, we address the strong connection between racist stereotypes and fears and the development of indentured Asian migration. The influx of growing groups of Asian labourers in colonial societies with strict demarcation lines between indigenous and European also produced new anxieties and regulations.

Thus we also aim to provide a lens through which to view present-day forms of unfree labour. As Marcel van der Linden (2001: 449-54) points out, labour was always a commodity in relations of slavery, sharecropping, and debt peonage, as well as in free wage-labour. While these systems coexisted under colonialism (and before), European expansion and later industrialization substantially depended on the exploitation of overseas unfree labour in the form of slaves and coolies (cf. Zeuske 2013). The global economy of the colonial empires of the 19th century – marked by labour-intensive resource extraction (cf. Tappe 2016) – used coolie labour to continue with forms of plantation economy during and after the abolition of slavery, to stabilize colonial economies with 'insufficient labour', to exploit new possibilities in the field of mining, and more generally, to disguise new forms of slavery.

This is particularly true when it comes to the exploitation of cheap, unskilled migrant labour under conditions of coercion and vulnerability. The *longue durée* of unfree labour includes forms of slavery, indentured labour, bonded servitude, and contemporary cases of neo-bondage, such as for example Asian contract labourers in the Arab Gulf States (see Damir-Geilsdorf, this volume). In the past as today, different modes of forced labour were compatible with free wage-labour and subsistence production (see van Rossum, this volume), and both today and in the past, capitalism does in fact include and has included many variants of unfree labour (Lucassen 2008; Mann 2011; Brass 2014). The exploitation of labour has always taken advantage of global inequalities and corresponding migration patterns.

As already mentioned, the global coolie trade sent mainly Chinese and Indian labourers to the vast plantations in the New World, to Africa, the Indian

Ocean and South East Asia, and brought about a new dimension of global labour migration during the 19th century – when slavery was gradually abolished by the colonial powers and came to be considered morally corrupt (Northrup 1995). Beginning in the 1820s, the coolie trade became one of the most important factors of global migration in world history (Hoerder 2012), as in the case of the vast plantation enclaves in the Caribbean (Gómez-Popescu, this volume).

As Michael Zeuske alerts us, patterns of slavery did not necessarily cease to exist after abolition (cf. Keese 2014 for forced labour in Africa); indeed, they persisted in two ways: Firstly, the massive transfer of coolies by sea and subsequent coercive labour relations are included as a global dimension in the so-called 'Second Slavery' – that is, persistent patterns of bonded and forced labour (migration) after the formal abolition of the Atlantic slave trade (1820 in Spain, 1836 in Portugal; cf. Tomich/Zeuske 2009; Laviña/Zeuske 2014). Secondly, Zeuske shows how collaboration between colonialists and indigenous entrepreneurs contributed to continual regimes of forced labour, and thus to the blurring of the slave/coolie binary. That this notion of a binary is difficult to uphold is also illustrated by notary protocols and testaments in which *asiáticos* (or *chinos*) appear as subjects. Zeuske provides valuable insights into the exploitative labour relations, precarious living conditions, and experiences of violence and death in the coolie settlements abroad (for the Caribbean context see as well Yun 2008; Hu-Dehart 1993).

In her contribution, Ulrike Lindner addresses the integration of colonial Africa in the worldwide system of indentured labour during the period of high imperialism. Indentured labour in the 19th and early 20th century is mainly seen as a phenomenon of Indian and Chinese contract workers replacing slaves in the plantation productions of the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean (especially Mauritius) and South East Asia. However, there were significant numbers of Indian and Chinese indentured labourers who worked not only in the plantations and mines of British South Africa but in various colonies of the European powers in sub-Saharan Africa, thus also forming part of the history of labour migration and bonded labour in colonial Africa. The chapter discusses some of these developments and investigates the circulation of knowledge between imperial powers regarding the issue of Asian indentured workers. The chapter first focusses on exchange between German and British colonies in Africa, and then deals with the discussions of indentured labour in the Institute Colonial International in Brussels. The institute, founded in 1894, had the explicit aim of facilitating knowledge transfer between colonial powers and was mainly influenced by French, Dutch, German and Belgian colonizers. The discussions were strongly

shaped by racial stereotypes and fears of competition between white Europeans and Asians, especially when bringing Asian coolies to 'black Africa'.

Both Lindner and Zeuske indicate the importance of Asian coolies for the globalized economy of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and for the development of colonial empires.

## Shifting Meanings of Bonded Labour: Slaves and Coolies in Southeast Asia

In Dutch and French colonial interpretations of coolie labour, we can identify a hybridization of different historically and culturally specific regimes of labour. Local labour arrangements were complemented with medieval and early modern European examples of *corvée* and other forms of servitude. When the French in 17th-century Quebec introduced the so-called *trente-six-mois* to organize European settlement in the new domains across the Atlantic, they adopted a feudal framework that inspired later colonial systems of indentured labour (Mauro 1986; Engerman 1986; Stanziani 2014). In French Indochina at the turn of the 20th century, such old labour regimes were emulated to form a coolie system that also took local traditions of tributary labour into account.

An aspect of the colonial tax system, compulsory labour – for example in road construction – was called *corvée*. While abolished in 1789 with the French Revolution, this concept re-emerged in the context of French colonial policy to organize labour relations and taxation in rural Indochina. Indigenous labourers came to be referred to by the English term *coolie* (Bunout 1936). Meanwhile, in the Dutch colonies (West Indies and Indonesian archipelago), different ideas of coolie (Dutch: *koelie*) labour included casual wage labour, slave labour, *corvée* labour, or indentured labour modelled after the British system (Houben/Lindblad 1999).

In his chapter, Matthias van Rossum recovers the different and changing meaning of the concept of coolie, focusing on 18th and 19th century case studies for the Indonesian Archipelago (Batavia and surroundings) and South Asia (mainly Ceylon). As van Rossum demonstrates, the term *koelie* (coolie) was an important, but not necessarily stable concept. The notion referred to labour relations, but could mean different things in different regions and times. In the 18th century, for example, there seemed to have been a strong regional difference between these two important regions within the empire of the VOC, varying from temporary wage labour to tributary labour relations. In the 19th century, the term *coolie* changed, as it also did in the Dutch empire, and became

synonym for the (formally and informally bonded) contract labour (cf. Breman 1989).

Here we find striking parallels with the French colonial context described by Oliver Tappe. In Indochina, he identifies a parallel structure of a coolie system based on the *treinte-six-mois*, the British coolie system, and local arrangements of *corvée* labour where the labourers where also considered 'coolies'. By then, the term *coolie* had travelled from India to the islands in the Indian Ocean and the Asian port cities, finally ending up in the mountains of Indochina, and still carrying connotations of low-skilled and menial workers (Breman 2008). Where Asian port cities became important hubs of the globalized colonial economy – as in the case of Macao, Malacca and Batavia – local concepts of coolie labour became entangled with the emerging colonial labour regime based on indentured labour. Labour relations in Southeast Asia were thus characterized by parallel and anachronistic patterns of unfree labour, partly inspired by forced labour in precolonial Asian kingdoms.

There are both similarities and differences between precolonial variants of slavery and bonded servitude in Southeast Asia. Social responsibility that was largely absent in later coolie regimes often formed part of precolonial bonded labour relations, even though the idea of a 'benign' slavery (still articulated by nationalist historiography in Thailand; cf. Winichakul 1994; Bowie 1996) is difficult to uphold. The ambiguous 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, implied mutual social obligations as well as everyday forms of sociopolitical exclusion. Aspects of socioeconomic coercion, arbitrary violence, and indebtedness, however, characterized both precolonial and colonial regimes of bonded labour (cf. Bush 2000; Jennings 2011).

Models of contract labour in present-day Southeast Asia show striking parallels with the aforementioned variants of bonded labour (Derks 2010). In the case of the migration of Vietnamese and Indonesian domestic workers to Malaysia, the migrants face both economic opportunities and precarious living conditions (Huong 2010; Killias 2010). The work contract here implies both security and coercion, thus creating ambiguous spaces of labour relations that can hardly be described with the free/unfree labour binary. By taking a rather broad concept of bonded labour, our approach allows a comparative perspective on a completely different geographical and cultural context, such as the Arab World.

## Case Studies from the Arabian Peninsula

The introduction of capitalism in Asia created new economic enclaves where migrant labourers found themselves "cast adrift into a category of proto-proletarian individuals" (see above; Breman/Daniel 1992: 270), with basic human rights and even personhood stripped off. As the contributions by Alaine S. Hutson and Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf in this volume demonstrate, this observation is definitely true for different forms of bonded labour in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States as well. At present, the fate of South Asian contract workers on the proliferating construction sites in the Gulf States is perhaps the most prominent example of different degrees of labour bondage (cf. Gardner 2012).

The chapter by Alaine S. Hutson examines the lives of enslaved Africans in 20th-century Saudi Arabia, on the basis of records of the British Legation in Jeddah from 1926 to 1938. By then, the British were liberating and repatriating runaway slaves as stipulated in Article 7 of the 1927 treaty of Jeddah. Her analysis of these records[5] shows the inadequacies of the established scholarly paradigm of a 'benign Islamic slavery' and a more oppressive slavery in the Atlantic World. Hutson's case studies illustrate that slaves in Saudi Arabia experienced patterns of subordination and humiliation similar to those experienced by the slaves in the Americas while doing similar work: for example, owners' naming practices, owners' assignments of labour based on a slave's country of origin, and Saudi Arabia's drafting of fugitive slave laws and treaties in response to slaves' seeking of British manumission and help in repatriation.

Furthermore, her contribution shows that after the end of manumission in 1936, the Saudi slave regulations were not widely known or followed by the Saudi police. One of her case studies for instance documents the example of a Sudanese domestic who had been enslaved while on *hajj* in 1908 at the age of twenty-six, and who after escaping was liberated and repatriated to Sudan in 1927. When he returned to Saudi Arabia in 1937 as a free man and an employee of the British government in Sudan – holding a legitimate Sudanese passport in order to perform the *hajj* – he was identified by his old owner and seized by the Saudi police.

5 These records are archived by Alaine Hutson in her online database for researchers: Runaways Enslaved and Manumitted on the Arabian Peninsula (REMAP); www.REMAPdatabase.org.

In her chapter on the Arab context, Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf analyzes current forms of bonded labour in the Arab Gulf States where both the migrant workers' residency and employment are regulated by a specific sponsorship system (*kafala*). Certain provisions in this kind of guest-worker scheme for temporary contract labourers differ from country to country, but substantial portions of the responsibility for controlling the migrant workers' entry and exit, as well as workers' mobility during their stay, are delegated to nationals and their proxies. Focusing on the examination of legal frameworks, recruitment policies and practices, and findings from fieldwork in Dubai and Qatar, Damir-Geilsdorf demonstrates that the high dependance of migrant workers on their national sponsors, mirrored in requirements such as an exit permit from the sponsor in order to leave the country, or his 'no objection certificate' (NOC) to change employers in order to avoid being categorized in official rethoric as an 'absconder' or 'runaway', subject to immediate detention and/or deportation, clearly violates workers' freedom of mobility (cf. Khan/Harroff-Tavel 2011).

At the same time, migrant workers' experiences in the Arab Gulf States show a high variability. While some of them are able to save substantial sums during their stay, low-income Asian labour migrants often end up in situations of debt-bondage, and in employment situations for which they did not voluntarily sign up at home. This is particularly the case when they fall victim to deceptive recruitment, contract frauds or illegal visa trading in which – not only in the Arab Gulf States but also in the sending countries – a chain of recruitment agencies, labour supply agencies, brokers, contractors, and sub-contractors and other intermediaries is involved (cf. Longva 1997; Kamrava/Babar 2012).

Taking into account these restrictions on personal freedom and mobility; the fact that migrant workers are criminalized and labelled 'absconders' or 'runaways' when they leave their employers before the termination of their work contract; and requirements such as 'exit permits' and 'NOC's from employers, accompanied by exploitative, squalid working conditions, some aspects of contract work under the *kafala* system can be considered contemporary forms of bonded labour. Working arrangements are often defined by an involuntary entry into the relation (Barrientos/Kothari/Philipps 2013: 1038-1039), whereas contemporary forms of non-freedom also arise from the inability to exit from working relations (Brass 2014: 575). These characteristics do not directly apply to contract labour in the GCC countries, since migrant workers come voluntarily, and at least theoretically have the option of cancelling their contracts.

The highly precarious situations of migrant workers are not an unequivocal result of the *kafala* system, though. Rather, they are a result of widespread labour-law violations and illegal practices by sponsors, companies, recruitment

agencies, sub-contractors etc., and the lack of control or enforcement of regulations also contributes to the precariousness (as in the case of contract labour arrangements in Southeast Asia today). Especially low-skilled Asian migrant workers often face contract fraud, such as the substitution of their contracts when arriving at the airport, the withholding of wages, the confiscation of passports, or the requirement to work much longer hours than stated in the contract.[6]

## Cultural Aspects and *Coolitude*

The system of indenture – as an aspect of colonial exploitation in general – has left durable traces on the material environment as well as on people's bodies and minds (see Stoler 2008). Structures such as the Aapravasi Ghat on Mauritius, the remnants of an immigration depot built in 1849 – today a Unesco World Heritage Site – function as *lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1989) of the colonial legacy. With its labour intensive sugar economy one of the first sites of the coolie experiment after the abolishment of slavery in 1833, Mauritius became the destination – and transit zone – for half a million indentured labourers, mainly from India (cf. Allen 1999; 2003).

The social and cultural dimensions of this global mass migration are still relatively poorly understood in comparison to the colonial economic strategies, bureaucratic regulations, and demographic effects. As already indicated, exploring cultural representations in the context of coolie labour opens a new dimension in our understanding of the experience of this form of migrant labour – a specific labour relation which implies precariousness and duress. Postcolonial and cultural studies aim to explore the interplay of re-configuration of the postcolonial self.

In her visual approach, Liliana Gómez-Popescu (this volume), examines a series of photographs (mainly taken by the United Fruit Company) that bear witness to the Chinese and Indian Coolie migration in the Caribbean at the turn of the twentieth century. She tackles the problem of cultural representation of coolie labour through the following questions: What exactly do such images visibilize? How do visual and textual documents re-present and narrate labour? How do they register the Coolie experience? Besides discussing the 'image' of the coolie, Gómez-Popescu also pays attention to the present-day vestiges –

6 Cf. Frantz (2013) for an insightful study of state complicity with regard to bonded labour relations in the case of Sri Lankan domestic workers in Jordan.

environmental degradation, ecological ruins – of colonial economic 'modernization'. The coolie system has imprinted itself on landscapes and bodies, forming part of imagined modernities, global migration, and the dispersal of working bodies, and has shaped both internal and external worlds.

Following Breman and Daniel (1992: 268) coolie-identity "is as much the product of self-perception as it is the construction of a category by those who did not belong to it". We have access to many sources with which to trace back colonial stereotypes and the emergence of the coolie concept as epithet for indentured labour. In contrast, we know considerably less about how the coolies perceived themselves and their predicament as bonded labourers, of how people responded to the feeling of being "mislabeled and degraded, unable to name themselves" (Bahadur 2014: xxi).

Authors such as Yun (2008) and Bahadur (2014) let 'the coolie speak', and engage with the silences of colonial history (see as well Roopnarine 2011; Singh 2012). More directed to the present repercussions of the ambivalent experiences involved in being a coolie, the poet Khal Torabully devoted himself to embracing the heritage of global scattering and everyday experiences of the former coolie communities that today shape the creole societies of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean (Torabully 1992; Carter/Torabully 2002). As Gesine Müller and Johanna Abel show in their chapter, Thorabully's visionary work implies a sense of shared beginnings and a revison of both historical and current globalization processes by including those who have been historically excluded. The poet desires to give speech to all those living subjects who, due to their miserable circumstances, have been forced to hire themselves out as wage and contract labourers.

Torabully's inclusion of the ethnic complexity of post-abolitionist societies in the Caribbean and in the Indian Ocean allows one to grasp the process of creolization in a less essentializing manner. With his concept of coolitude he advances Franco-Caribbean models of archipelagic creoleness, such as Négritude, Créolité, Antillanité and creolization, as well as the concepts of Indianité and Indienocéanisme. The concept of coolitude is not predicated by geographical affiliation or ethnic origin, but by the economic and legal situation of the coolies – contract labourers who made their way not only from India and China, but also from Europe and Africa to various archipelagic regions like the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, and the Pacific. With his mosaic model of combined identities, Torabully introduces social status as a theoretically crucial factor in creolization. While former coolie migrants in many parts of the world – not to mention 'free' migrant workers that were lumped into that category as well (see Balachandran 2011 for the example of Indian seafarers on British

vessels) – had rejected the term *coolie* as pejorative and insulting, Torabully aims to promote a more self-conscious and affirmative stance towards this historically laden concept.

We understand coolitude as a certain ethos stemming from the experience of hard work, displacement, exclusion, humiliation, resistance, and solidarity. How this resonates in artistic works of coolies or their descendants provides another lens through which to focus upon the coolie experience as cultural phenomenon (cf. Daniel 2008). This would also open new perspectives to the understanding of the everyday experience of contemporary contract labourers moving around the globe, and their cultural representations and intra-group dynamics in foreign and precarious environments.

## OUTLOOK

On 31 March 2016, the German newspaper *Die Zeit* reported on North Korean contract labourers working on tomato farms in Poland – isolated in camps, with up to 90 per cent of their salaries claimed by the Korean government (Köckritz/Petrulewicz 2016). In another scandalous case a few months earlier, *The Guardian* uncovered the fate of Burmese migrants working under slave-like conditions in Thailand's booming shrimp industry (Mason et al. 2015). Similar examples of unfree labour haunt contemporary Africa, where human trafficking and forced labour proliferate, from domestic slaves to sex workers (van den Anker 2004).

Such contemporary cases of unfree labour fuelled the expansion of the somewhat misleading catch phrases of 'new' or 'modern slavery' (ibid.; Bales 2004; Miers 2003). They invoke ideas of a historically new phenomenon in an old guise. In our understanding, relations of unfree labour are, rather, an ongoing class-based phenomenon linked to broader conditions of global inequality – in colonial times as well as today. The idea of modern slavery, especially with regard to sexual exploitation, is still less concerned with ideas of global inequality than with 'victims' of human trafficking (Andrijasevic 2007; Molland 2012).

As some case studies in this volume suggest, the term 'new coolies' might be more appropriate. Such labour relations are characterized by different degrees of bondedness, coercion, and voluntariness, with graded rights, as well as with incentives and constraints on entry and exit of contract – while lacking key aspects of formal slavery such as the idea of property. However, postulating 'new' coolies (as in the case of the 'new' slaves) assumes a false historical break

that would ignore the continuities of global relations of capitalist exploitation and ongoing global inequalities. In addition, the various coercive and precarious factors of past and present variants of bonded labour intersect, and blur rigid categories of slavery, coolie labour and 'free' wage work.

An alternative approach would be Michael Zeuske's idea of a historical continuity of slavery – what he frames as intersecting plateaus of slavery (Zeuske 2016b). From this perspective, abolition appears only as a minor hiatus in a long history of labour exploitation. Post-abolitionist regimes (and persistent local variants) of bonded labour are merely expressions of global inequalities and labour exploitation – or, rather, of capitalist relations in general. Consequently, also the ILO campaigns against indentured and forced labour were not able to address the underlying socioeconomic conditions of labour exploitation. As Lebaron and Ayers (2013) argue, neoliberal tendencies of global capitalism entailed more subtle forms of coerced labour.

Indeed, the boundaries between historical forms of bonded labour and the so-called free wage labour are difficult to uphold today – such labour regimes indeed overlapped in the past as well (see van Rossum, this volume; cf. Chalhoub 2011). Historical and present-day examples of 'coolie' contract labour epitomize disposable labour in a borderless capitalist world. This idea is today increasingly associated with neoliberal discourse (Ong 2006; Lebaron/Ayers 2013) and with notions of unbound mobility along global capitalist relations and value chains. Such labour relations imply an ambiguous interplay between opportunity and precariousness, freedom and forced immobilization, agency and vulnerability.

We are talking about the exploitation of labour under global capitalism, with some aspects of extremely unfree labour in fact anchored in arguably 'free' labour relations, intersecting and corresponding with outright unfree/forced labour. The historical example of the coolie as the colonial prototype of disposable labour still provides a useful model with which to understand variants of bonded labour in past and present configurations of (global) capitalist relations. It reveals the contingent nature of capital's emancipative claims and "it affords us a possibility to view the social relations of capital in a common frame unified across space, time, and social forms […]" (Balachandran 2011: 289-90).

Studying the everyday lifes of Thai migrants in Singapore, Pattana Kitiarsa (2014) reveals the Agambenian 'bare life' of contract labourers, their vulnerable and precarious situation. His observation of migrant workers "stripped bare" and "economically and socially naked" (Kitiarsa 2014: 4) is also true for colonial coolies suffering sociocultural uprootedness, arbitrary violence, and economic duress. The 'coolie' appears emblematic of present-day global labour relations

and unveils the ambiguities of present-day 'free' and 'flexible' labour arrangements (cf. Balachandran 2011).

Important aspects of contract labour are regional and global networks of labour recruitment (as in the case of the 'jobber' in the Indian construction industry, cf. Picherit 2009; and the global domestic labour economy with its peculiar mixture of state and non-state actors, cf. Killias 2010; Mills 1999; Nguyen 2015). Poverty, the desire for modernity, false promises, and indebtedness contribute to massive – allegedly 'voluntary' – labour mobilization. Yet today as in the past of the colonial coolie system, the aim of mobilizing the global poor results in re-immobilizing it "by tying it to the enclaves of capitalist production" (Breman/Daniel 1992: 271). In these very enclaves the workers often face racism, and have to endure sanctions from arbitrary violence to more subtle forms of legal coercion.

While it remains important to consider the precariousness/duress experienced by coolies, there is still need for more empirical research on the workers' agency and the sociocultural dynamics within coolie communities (cf. Roopnarine 2016 for an excellent case study of the West Indies). How did coolies cope with exploitation and uncertainty? How did gender relations shift and transform, and what new forms of social relations and self-empowerment emerged? How did the displaced workers express selfhood and belonging through artistic means? Khal Torabully's work inspires us to reflect on such aspects of the coolie experience.

To conclude, the treatment of colonial coolies reflected the "limits of liberalism" (Young 2015) under colonialism, while global market capitalism in the 21st century seems to bring forward new forms of unfree labour. 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 distress. The contributions in this volume provide a vantage point from which to gain a better understanding of the history of unfree labour relations and, hopefully, also offer an opportunity to let the coolies speak.

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