

Money, Indenture, and Neo-slavery in the Spanish Gulf of Guinea, 1820s to 1890s¹

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ABSTRACTS

Dieser Artikel sucht nach der ursprünglichen Konfiguration der Vertragsarbeit im Golf von Guinea in der Endphase des spanischen Imperiums, um aus dieser eigentümlichen historischen Entwicklung heraus dem Konzept der Transition oder vielmehr der Transformation von der Sklaverei zu post-Sklaverei-Formen unfreier Arbeit eine neue Wendung zu geben. Der erste Arbeitsvertrag auf der spanischen Kolonialinsel Fernando Pó (vor der Küste Nigerias und Kameruns) wurde in den 1860er Jahren aus Kuba mitgebracht und kombinierte sowohl Coolie-Verträge als auch *emancipado*-Vereinbarungen (Lehrverhältnisse für von Sklavenschiffen befreite Sklaven). Ich skizziere einige Auswirkungen dieses neuen kolonialen Vertrags, etwa das Auftreten einer neuen Generation von Arbeitswerbern, indem ich die Techniken untersuche, mit denen versucht wurde, westafrikanische Kru-Arbeiter auf die Insel zu holen und dort zu halten. Ich verbinde Fernando Pó eng mit dem Prozess der Abschaffung der Sklaverei auf Kuba und der Rekrutierung von Arbeitskräften an der westafrikanischen Küste und zeige, wie die Einrichtung und die Auswirkungen des Vertrags auf die partielle Fragmentierung und Mutation der Sklaverei zurückverfolgt werden können. Abschließend gebe ich einen konzeptionellen Abriss in

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Bezug auf eine kritische Diskussion der Metaphern der „Lohnsklaverei“ und der manchmal nur implizit anklingenden Prämissen des Konzepts der unvollständigen und gehemmten Übergänge, die immer noch einem Großteil der Literatur zur globalen Arbeitergeschichte und der New History of Capitalism zugrunde liegen.

This article looks for the initial configuration of indentured labour in the final stages of the Spanish Empire in the Gulf of Guinea to try to give, from this peculiar historical trajectory, a new spin on the concept of *transition*, or rather transformation, from slavery to post-slavery forms of unfree labour. The first labour contract in the Spanish colonial island of Fernando Pó, sitting off the coast of Nigeria and Cameroon, was brought over in the 1860s from Cuba, which combined both coolie indentures and *emancipado* (apprenticeships for slaves freed from slave ships) arrangements. I outline some of the emergent effects of this new colonial contract, such as the appearance of a new generation of labour recruiters by describing and examining the techniques used to try to attract and keep West African Kru workers on the island. By closely connecting Fernando Pó to the process of abolition of slavery in Cuba and to labour recruitment along the West African coast, I show how the founding and the effects of the contract can be tracked back to the partial fragmentation and *mutation* of slavery. I provide a conceptual outline in the conclusion in relation to a critical discussion of the metaphors of the “slavery of wage labour” and the sometimes just implicitly lingering premises of the concept of imperfect and inhibited transitions still underpinning much of the global labour history and the new histories of capitalism literature.

The literature on the Atlantic and African transitions away from slave labour has extensively studied the many variations of labour extraction and control devised by colonial powers to overcome abolition and their need for new labour – such as penal and tributary labour as well as debt bondage, indentured, apprenticeship, and obligatory contracts.² That post-abolition colonialism and global capitalism in general did not shift to free labour but instead produced a proliferation of varieties of unfree labour is the foundational idea of global labour history – as put forward by Marcel van der Linden and Shahid Amin in their special issue *Peripheral Labour: Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization* (1997) and as recently and powerfully restated in a special editorial note by Pepijn Brandon and Aditya Sarkar, the new editors of the *International Review of Social History*.³ The almost unanimous assessment of these trajectories by the labour history literature

2 H. S. Klein/S. L. Engerman, The Transition from Slave to Free Labor: Notes on a comparative economic model, in: M. M. Fraginals et al. (eds.), *Between Slavery and Free Labor: The Spanish-Speaking Caribbean in the Nineteenth Century*, Baltimore 1985, pp. 255–269; S. Miers/R. Roberts (eds.), *The End of Slavery in Africa*, Madison 1988. In relation to contract labour in West Africa, see especially M. Schuler, *The Recruitment of African Indentured Labourers for European Colonies in the Nineteenth Century*, in: P. Emmer, *Colonialism and Migration: Indentured Labour Before and After Slavery*, New York 1986, pp. 125–160; W. G. Clarence-Smith, *Emigration from Western Africa, 1807–1940*, in: *Itinerario* 14 (1990), pp. 45–60.

3 S. Amin/M. Van der Linden (eds.), *Peripheral Labour: Studies in the History of Partial Proletarianization*. Cambridge 1997; P. Brandon/A. Sarkar, *Labour History and the Case against Colonialism*, in: *International Review of Social History* 61 (2019), pp. 1–37; For new analytical syntheses see also C. De Vito/J. Schiel/M. van Rossum, *From Bondage to Precariousness? New Perspectives on Labor and Social History*, in: *Journal of Social History* 54 (2020)

of the past few decades, whatever the specific place or period, seems to have cemented Rosa Luxemburg's impressions at the beginning of the twentieth century: "Look at the different modes of 'moderate' slavery and forced labour European and North American capital employs to secure the necessary minimum of labour in the African colonies, in the West Indies, South America and the South Seas." Skipping the nuance, she simply calls it "a fantastic relapse into a sort of modernized slave economy."⁴ This "relapse" was quasi-permanent and not undone until the legal parameters of various imperial regulations were themselves abolished at various reformist points under colonial or even only post-colonial rule.⁵

It was Immanuel Wallerstein who started upending the liberal and orthodox Marxist presuppositions and concerns with the structural polarity of slavery and freedom, even though he speaks relatively little about the details of labour in his world-systems trilogy. In Sydney Mintz's seminal assessment in 1977 of Wallerstein and in his discussion of the *libreta* (workbook) regime of obligatory contracts in the context of harsh anti-vagrancy laws in the nineteenth-century colonial Spanish Caribbean, he sees world-systems theory as replacing the temporal notion of the transition from slavery with a spatial schema of types of labour spread out along different regions.⁶ In the most schematic of all possible terms, if Western Europe was becoming a land of "free labour" and if Southern Europe, as the semi-periphery, was still plagued by neo-feudal "intermediate" arrangements such as sharecropping, then the dominant mode of labour extraction in the periphery was and continued to be based on new combinations and generalizations of forced labour. Both the spatial and the temporal tripartite division of labour were implicitly rooted in the quasi-mythical stratifications of ancient and feudal societies into "free, unfree and slaves" groups or, where there were no slaves, "free, unfree, nobles". These subdivisions, set up already with Tacitus's differentiation of *servii* and *coloni* (slaves and tenant serfs), are conceptually rooted in kinship and displacement: while bonded serfs reproduced themselves and were subjected in their own domains, slaves needed to be purchased or captured from the "outside" and were severed from kin.⁷ This is precisely the overlap that crosses over into the study of indentured contract labour, with its quite characteristic element of long-distance movements without immediate family members to the same or similar worksites that had predominantly been worked on by slaves until the nineteenth century. I outline the precise contours that made up this overlapping transformation in Spain's last plantation colony – the island of Fernando Pó in the Gulf of Guinea – by following the founding of the contract and the concomitant labour recruiters who, after the aboli-

2, pp. 1–19; S. Damir-Geilsdorf et al., *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th–21st Century)*, Berlin 2016.

4 R. Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital*, New York 1972 (1913), pp. 71, 53.

5 In an African history context, see especially the spate of recent journal articles by Alexander Keese, as well as Z.K. Guthrie, *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940–1965*, Charlottesville 2018; O. Okia, *Labor in Colonial Kenya after the Forced Labor Convention, 1930–1963*, London 2019.

6 S.W. Mintz, *The So-Called World System: Local Initiative and Local Response*, in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 2 (1977) 1, pp. 253–270.

7 C. Meillassoux, *The Anthropology of Slavery*, Chicago 1991.

tion of the slave trade, made it possible to bring labourers into the emerging plantations exploiting indentured labour right off the West African coast. In the conclusion, I justify seeing this transformation as a *mutation* of slavery into contract labour in the Gulf of Guinea by drawing on Friedrich Engels's and, more recently, Yann Moulier-Boutang's critique of the concept of imperfect or inhibited transitions still underpinning much of the literature dealing with global labour history and new histories of capitalism, which today only linger in mostly implicit ways. Franz Steiner's discussion of the "peculiar dualism" or "nebulous dichotomy" of slavery and serfdom refers to the way historians describe the "gradual eclipse and survival" of slavery as part of the "history-lore of this civilization", because it assumes that slavery simply disappears in time or becomes suppressed rather than undergoes refinement and becomes the cumulative foundations of transformed legal and economic orders.⁸

1. Abolition and Labour in the Gulf of Guinea, 1820s to 1850s

Down the Strait of Gibraltar, past the Canary Islands and Western Sahara, hugging the coast and the "illusory coast" of inlets and deltas starting in Upper Guinea, the next two tall twin mountains imposing themselves as clear markers for navigators were at the centre of the Bight of Biafra, between the colossal Mount Cameroon on the mainland and the adjacent volcanic peak of the island of Fernando Pó. This other "[g]ate that stunts to a nothing the columns of Hercules" of the Strait of Gibraltar was a navigator's sign for having reached an "outer place", a "desolate" empty axis, at the extreme edge of the equatorial Atlantic doldrums, as Richard Burton, the British consul on this Spanish island, noted in 1862.⁹ Up until that point, slave traders had always avoided Fernando Pó because of the "baffling winds" and the "rather deceitful" eddies of "winds and calms" that disabled their sails.¹⁰ The island, located in a gap between the north-eastern and south-eastern trade winds at the margins of both West African and South Atlantic slaving and circulation systems, was spared involvement in the transatlantic slave trade due to unfavourable sailing conditions and various other reasons, including the resolute isolationism of its indigenous Bubi inhabitants. The Bubi had abandoned in the eighteenth century their fishing economy and settlements on the coast for the mountain valleys to

- 8 F. B. Steiner, *A Comparative Study in the Forms of Slavery*, in: J. D. Adler/R. Fardon (eds.), *Selected Writings: Orientpolitik, Value, and Civilisation* Vol. 2, New York 1999, at 157. Probably the most exemplary academic work that still fully retained this tradition is the collective volume of F. Cooper, T. C. Holt and R. J. Scott, *Beyond Slavery: Explorations of Race, Labor, and Citizenship in Postemancipation Societies*, Chapel Hill 2000, at 22–23, where they explicitly conceive of the contract workers brought in from new recruiting areas for the upkeep of the same or new plantations, leading "the poor of Asia or Africa into boats headed, like the slave ships, for the West Indies or the sugar islands of the Indian Ocean-or, later, the cocoa islands off Central Africa", as a "necessary anomaly", substituting or supplementing slavery, but automatically "beyond" or "after slavery", and simply arising from a kind of economics of inevitability where "labor was not readily available in the right place" or "at the right price".
- 9 R. F. Burton, *Wanderings in West Africa from Liverpool to Fernando Po*, London 1863, 2 vols, pp. 293–294.
- 10 A. G. Findlay, *A sailing directory for the Ethiopic or South Atlantic Ocean, including the coasts of South America and Africa*, London 1867, pp. 503, 451.

avoid passing slave traders both on European ships and on the large ocean-going canoes from Calabar and the Cross River delta.

In addition, from the late 1820s to the 1850s, various naval, merchant, and missionary British abolitionists, armed with steamships and a lease from the Spanish crown, used the island's shores as a staging ground for the commercial and religious colonization of the Bight of Biafra. For almost a decade after 1827, the port town of Clarence (which became Santa Isabel in 1843 and then Malabo in 1973) was a British naval base set up to track down and try the mostly Iberian staff of slave ships, to set fire to the coastal barracoons, and to sign abolition treaties with nearby monarchs and rulers.¹¹ For most of the 1840s and 1850s, the island was effectively stateless; its residents were neither British nor Spanish subjects, even though they were being nominally ruled by a British merchant, John Beecroft, who held the title of Spanish governor and British consul and headed the British West African Company, which developed a timber industry and a carbon fuel station around the port town.

In Clarence lived over a thousand former captives rescued from slave ships, who were initially employed around this British naval and judicial infrastructure and who mostly stayed on the island after the British evacuated its naval base in 1835. They were joined by slaves who deserted from Príncipe and littoral African slaving city-states such as Calabar and Bimbia and who rowed themselves to the island in canoes. In this period, there were also about another thousand Kru labourers and itinerant Portuguese traders from São Tomé and Príncipe. The *Kru* was a group label for those hailing from the areas around Cape Palmas on the Windward Coast (who were eventually encompassed by the Liberian and Sierra Leonean states), whom almost every colonial source of the mid- to late nineteenth century admired because of their then relatively unique disposition to emigrate as hired labourers.

The Kru were always the majority labour force on Fernando Pó in the nineteenth century, as well as in many other emerging colonial spaces along the West African coast, such as on the cargo ships carrying palm oil and navy frigates, with a large segment of them working in, for example, the mines on the Gold Coast or on the new imperial infrastructures of the Oil Rivers and Lagos protectorates. They were commonly referred to as the “the Coolies and Lascars of West Africa”.¹² European steamers and imperial bureaucracies were recruiting as many as 20,000 workers from the Kru coast each year in the 1860s and up to 50,000 workers per year in some years during subsequent decades.¹³

11 I. Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery: The Bight of Biafra and Fernando Po in the Era of Abolition, 1827–1930*, Wisconsin 1996, pp. 22, 31.

12 Burton, *Wanderings in West Africa*, p. 12; See also D. Frost, *Work and Community among West African Migrant Workers since the Nineteenth Century*, Liverpool 1999.

13 I. Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers: Brothers and Strangers: Black Zion, Black Slavery, 1914–1940*, Durham 2004, p. 65; J. Martin, *Krumen “Down the Coast”: Liberian Migrants on the West African Coast in the 19th and early 20th centuries*, in: *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 18 (1985) 3, pp. 401–423, at 409; C. Behrens, *Les Kroumen de la côte occidentale d’Afrique*, Talence 1974.

In the early 1860s, looking at Kru labourers on Fernando Pó, “employed all the day long”, Burton described the scene as “quite the counterpart of a landowner’s existence in the Southern States” before the American Civil War (1861–1865): “these fellows have no overseer, consequently there is no whip; punishment resolves itself into retrenching rum and tobacco; moreover, they come and go as they please.”¹⁴ Such labour relations were obviously overwhelmingly seen as, and were more or less quite, free in the sense that free migrants employed by British abolitionists technically were. As another British consul on the island reminds us, “The first and most important [thing] known to all who are acquainted with Africa, [is] that, of the two classes of slaves and freemen of which its population consists, the freemen *will not* emigrate, the *slaves cannot*.”¹⁵ Similarly, an illustrious Spanish priest on the island in the 1850s positively compared the “krumanes”, who made up the “majority of the population in the town” of Clarence (or Santa Isabel), to the “the Asturians and Galicians in Spain, in that they leave their home and family to lend their services in other provinces, undertaking the most painful [*penoso*] and difficult [*rudos*] work for a certain period of time”. As he was on board a steamship that stopped at all the port towns along the West African coast, a trajectory whose final or penultimate stop was usually Fernando Pó, he also took note that the Kru worked “not only on all the European ships, but also in all the British, French, Portuguese, Dutch, American, and Spanish colonies and commercial outposts in this part of the world”.¹⁶

It was not only Europeans who hired “Krumen”, as a British naval officer on Fernando Pó writing in 1850 observed with dismay: it was “cheaper to transport these men” from the Kru coast “nearly two thousand miles to perform this work, than it was to employ the liberated Africans residing on the Spot”. The “liberated captives” that the British had “hired” in Sierra Leone and brought to the island became known as the Fernandinos. This mostly Baptist and English-speaking creole group, or at least the several dozen commercially successful and important families that emerged, “had learned to read” and were themselves “hiring the Kroomen to work their farms for them” – employing some two to five Kru each.¹⁷

When Spanish Catholic missionaries started arriving on the island, there was wariness and alarm amongst a very heterogeneous free population, as Jamaican Baptist missionaries on the island had “spread the rumour that we [the Spanish] are coming with the sole objective of bringing slaves to kill and cannibalize, etc. What is hated the most in Fernando Po is precisely slavery”.¹⁸ Within a year of the first permanent Spanish govern-

14 R. F. Burton, *A Mission to Gelele, King of Dahome*, London 1864, p. 15.

15 T. J. Hutchinson, *Ten Years’ Wanderings Among the Ethiopians: With Sketches of the Manners and Customs of the Civilized and Uncivilized Tribes, from Senegal to Gaboon*, London 1861, p. 263.

16 M. Martínez y Sanz, *Breves apuntes sobre la Isla de Fernando Póo en el Golfo de Guinea*, Santa Isabel 1856, p. 25.

17 Cited in I. Sundiata, *The Fernandinos: Labor and Community in Santa Isabel de Fernando Poo, 1827–1931*, PhD thesis, Chicago 1972, p. 153.

18 Martínez, *Breves apuntes*, p. 58. Not without reason: on Beecroft’s death in 1854, the Spanish government appointed the Catalan slave trader Domènec Mustich to succeed him as governor, but the British protest led to his replacement by another English merchant (G. Nerín, *Traficants d’ànimes: Els negrers espanyols a l’Àfrica*, Barcelona, 2016, p. 195).

ment-sponsored expedition in May 1858, the first Spanish governor, Carlos Chacón, tried to reassure this population and declared slavery abolished, even though it was already practically non-existent: “all people of whatever class and provenance are necessarily considered to be free”. After the Portuguese governor in São Tomé and Príncipe asked his Spanish counterpart to return “some of their fugitive slaves” who had found “refuge” on the island, another royal order, from 18 August 1859, reiterated that “the existence of slavery is neither admitted nor recognized in any way” in Fernando Pó and its dependencies.¹⁹ These decrees came early, decades before the final abolition of slavery in Puerto Rico and Cuba (1873 and 1886, respectively) and half a century before colonial powers had fully colonized most neighbouring African territories and abolished the institutional form of slavery, in the primary sense of not being a “status” recognized in the courts (for example, in Southern Nigeria in 1901 or French West Africa in 1903).

2. Contracts from Cuba, 1860s

Fernando Pó was initially a colony’s colony, with its budget and most of its early officers coming directly from the Cuban treasury and bureaucracy. The power of the imperial state can be felt and approached in various ways, though the plantation economy it tried to create was supported and sustained through one thread: the contract. The contract was not a separate device operating to stabilize and arrange exchanges in the markets, including labour; rather, it was the core component of Spanish imperialism in the Gulf of Guinea, contiguous with the internal organization of sovereign power – a foundational asymmetry of state-supplied defaults.²⁰ An entry into its territory marked an automatic acceptance of the obligatory contracts with which all new workers were “saddled”. Without the specific shape of the contract, it was impossible to undertake new exercises in labour mobilization.

A case in point is Mr. Sparhawk, an American from Boston who had been notoriously involved in the slave trade in Havana and Rio de Janeiro and who was actually the first person in Spanish Fernando Pó to set up a plantation. By the late 1860s, the plantation was totally overgrown and in “ruins”, having planted 600 hectares of cotton and an “abundance of banana, coffee, and cocoa-trees, without a single hand to reap, or a single human being to enjoy”.²¹ Sparhawk’s plantation failed not only because the slave trade had been abolished but also because the form of the contract that would give rise to possibilities for recruiting workers for the eventually re-emerging plantations only became a default and was applied to all new African migrants from 1867 onwards. The working and housing conditions and all the other details stipulated in the contract were adopted

19 A. Miranda Junco, *Leyes coloniales: legislación de los territorios españoles del Golfo de Guinea*, Madrid 1945, p. 28.

20 C. Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, Stanford 1988, pp. 70–71; R. J. Steinfeld, *Coercion, Contract, and Free Labor in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge 2001, pp. 15–16.

21 H. Roe, *West African Scenes: Descriptions of Fernando Po*, London 1874, p. 95.

almost wholesale from the 1860 “regulation for the introduction of Chinese workers in the island of Cuba”.²²

The principal modification of the contract, however, was the engagement duration, as the Kru had bargained down the length of the contract with Spanish recruiters from an unacceptable eight years to between two and three years. A Spanish recruiter in 1864 set a precedent by “contracting 24 Kruman in Cape Palmas for a stay of only two years at 4 pesos a month”. The Spanish “colonial government had no choice but to assuage the conditions of contract”.²³ Two years was the customary upper limit on the Kru coast, of which workers would keep track by collecting and “hiding a stone in some secret place every time the moon was full, and then count the stones to know how many months, or moons, were passed”. A Methodist missionary on the island recounts in pidgin that a Kru worker halfway through his contract told him, “me finish dese moons, and when me done finish dese moons more, den me go to my country.”²⁴ These 24 moons were already formalized in the royal order of *Contratación krumanes* (1867), which was the base labour legislation for over three decades, and planters eventually started thinking of the two-year limit as a “tradition” that has “always been this way on the island”.²⁵

Fernando Pó was to Cuba as Freetown was to the British Caribbean or as Monrovia was to the United States, in that the contradictions of abolition in the Americas were made clear in the “emancipation” crucibles created by these empires on the West African coast. Fernando Pó started as a peripheral experiment, a minor sequence of abolition, where labour relations unfolded in the context of colonial military occupation where “freedom” was overruled and out of the question. In Fernando Pó, emancipation was not accompanied by a free labour teleology, which was being sustained in late colonial Cuba by waves of well-paid and politically organized former slaves and Spanish labour migrants.

Without a doubt, it was a small place: the profits gained from selling about a hundred people from a slave ship in Cuba was the same as the entire annual early colonial budget, about half a million reales. Much of this money was squandered on organizing various projects to transport groups of Spanish refugees from the Algerian province of Oran (who were promised “4 hectares and 2 black workers”), Aragonese, and Andalusian republicans and anarchist exiles and deported Cuban insurgents from the Ten Years’ War (1868–1878) – all ending in many deaths and repatriations. The “ten-year sentences of residence on Fernando Poo” that were being handed down to Spaniards and Spanish imperial subjects were “in lieu of a death sentences” – and were in effect a commuted death sentence, a prolonged death by other means.²⁶

22 Reglamento para la introducción de trabajadores chinos en la Isla de Cuba, in: *Gaceta de Madrid*, 12 July 1860.

23 D. García Cantús, *Fernando Poo: una aventura colonial española en el África occidental (1778–1900)*, PhD thesis, Valencia 2004, pp. 439, 442.

24 Roe, *West African Scenes*, p. 82.

25 Real Orden de 28 septiembre 1867, *Contratación krumanes*, in: Miranda Junco, *Leyes coloniales*, p. 140; Letter from Cámara Agrícola de Fernando Póo to Juan Fontán (Governor General), 13 April 1938, Archivo General de la Administración, Alcalá de Henares, Spain, IDD 15, Fondo África [hereafter AGA], Caja 81/08126.

26 P. Gabriel, *Más allá de los exilios políticos: Proscritos y deportados en el siglo XIX*, in: S. Castillo/P. Oliver (eds.), *Las figuras del desorden: heterodoxos, proscritos y marginados*, Madrid 2006, pp. 197–223, at 211. Up until 1895

In the mid-nineteenth century, the Spanish Empire was already experimenting with “gradual” notions of formal abolition, in contrast to what was called the “immediate extinction” of slavery by more revolutionary regimes, or, in the case of the British Caribbean and Sierra Leone, with the reformist and strictly four-year transitory period of ongoing “apprenticed” servitude for emancipated slaves and “liberated captives”. Fernando Pó’s labour question was founded on an island without a slave system in place through the combination of what Michael Zeuske characterizes as the two most significant “blurs” to the boundaries of slavery provided by Cuba in the early phase of abolition – *emancipados* (apprenticed recaptives from slave ships) and Chinese coolies – in a period when the illegal slave trade of the Iberian Atlantic was reaching its final peak.²⁷ It was these two forms that were quickly poured and cast in the last Spanish plantation colony in the 1860s, during the internal shock resulting from the coming collapse of the Cuban slaving system. Arrangements for the dispatch of *emancipados* had been repeatedly made, but only in 1862 did a group of 200 *emancipados* finally arrive from Cuba – recent captives who had been purchased at various barracoons on the Congo estuary by slave traders and who were freed and seized by the British navy and left in Cuba according to the terms the Spanish-British treaty to abolish the slave trade (1817). The Cuban *emancipado* policy usually involved directly consigning them to private plantation estates for the duration of a “contract”, but throughout the early 1860s, newly arriving *emancipados* in Havana were offered a chance to “spontaneously and voluntarily” offer themselves for emigration to Fernando Pó on government-sponsored ships.²⁸ The promise was of a full *carta de libertad* (freedom certificate) and the ability to benefit from “liberty, family and property” after a five-year contract. Their legal status was derived from Cuban *emancipado* regulations, which had to consider them initially and potentially free but put them under a provisional *tutela* (government guardianship), inaccurately analogous to what was used in Spanish family law to reassign the custody of orphans. Most of the *emancipados* who came to Fernando Pó were very young, with many being barely adolescents.²⁹ For the Spanish, the kinless belonged to the state, which could determine and allocate their availability for the labour market. Such an approach acted as a basis for all subsequent imperial labour laws in Fernando Pó.

Soon after their arrival in 1862, the *emancipados* lodged a collective complaint, bordering on a peaceful uprising emerging from their “strange surprise that they were being

almost two thousand political prisoners were sent to the island, from Spain, Cuba and the Philippines (C. De Vito, *The Spanish Empire, 1500–1898*, in: C. Anderson, *A Global History of Convicts and Penal Colonies*, London 2018, pp. 65–96, at 72).

27 M. Zeuske, *Handbuch Geschichte der Sklaverei: Eine Globalgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin 2013, pp. 24, 214–215.

28 B. Clavero, *Bioko 1837–1876: Constitucionalismo de Europa en África, derecho internacional consuetudinario del trabajo mediante*, in: *Quaderni Fiorentini per la Storia del Pensiero Giuridico Moderno* 35 (2006), pp. 429–546, at 458; I. Sundiata, *Cuba Africana: Cuba and Spain in the Bight of Biafra, 1839–1869*, in: *The Americas* 34 (1977) 1, pp. 90–101.

29 M. L. de Castro Antolín, *Fernando Poo y los emancipados de La Habana*, in: *Estudios Africanos* 8 (1994), pp. 7–19, at 13. See also AGA Caja 81/07209 and AGA Caja 81/06944.

forced to work” at almost non-existent wage rates as set by the contract. While the costs of food, housing, and transport were covered by the employer as per the terms of the contract, the wages being paid out were the in the lowest calculable and largely symbolic unit: 1 real a day. Officially, the wage was 50 reales a month (the governor’s salary was 8,000 reales a month), but almost half of it was paid out only at the completion of the contract, amounting to about 4 pounds per year in total. In contrast, even the Kru workers on the island received at least 1 pound per month in addition to rations, whereas *libertos* (free ex-slaves) in Havana could increase their wage rates and earn up to 400 reales a month.

After the complaint, the governor wondered, “where did they conceive of these dreamy [*songeras*] ideas in the course of the journey from Havana” and took to gathering all the emancipados in the “Congo-town” part of Santa Isabel “every Sunday” to give them a sermon “on the conditions of the contracts that they had entered into.” It should be noted that the governor, Pantaleón López Ayllón (in position from 1862 to 1865), was a colonel who had previously been expelled from Cuba after being accused on two occasions of complicity in the clandestine importation of new slaves. He “made them understand their obligations and the regime to which they will be subject” – not only because, in this case, the public works department also happened to be their employer but also because the administration was the counterparty of every labour contract, later formalized in a peculiar Spanish colonial figure of the *curador* (labour officer).³⁰ The *curaduría* (labour office) was the only institution permitted to represent contract workers; it even had its own special police force, which it primarily deployed to pursue deserters and ran its own *barracones* (jail dens) for workers that were separate from other colonial court and justice systems.

In Cuba, the faculty for assigning emancipados was abolished in 1865 because the slave trade had all but been suppressed; indeed, the final 105 slaves recaptured from the slave ship arriving in Cuba in 1865 were ordered to be sent to Fernando Pó but ended up being distributed to local planters. The Cuban colonial press was convinced that this revocation marked the “beginning of the end” of slavery³¹ – a institution permanently implanted on Fernando Pó, and so this beginning of the end was, in effect, perpetually restarted. The subsequent entire imperial century – 1860s to 1960s – is marked by the constant repetition of this contradictory new labour regime, contractual but obligatory

30 Letter from Pantolen de Ayllon (Governor General) to Ministro de Ultramar, Dando cuenta de las peticiones notadas en los emancipados venidos a esta isla de la de Cuba, 18 October 1862, AGA Caja 81/06941. While other ships with several hundred emancipados arrived from Havana in the early 1860s, many died before their contracts expired on the island. The 150 emancipados who survived by 1869 made up an important nucleus of the Fernandinos (García Cantús, Fernando Poo, pp. 437, 515; B. Sampedro, ¡Aquella mansión de desconsuelo y de horror!, in: J. Aranzadi/G. Álvarez Chillida (eds.), *Guinea Ecuatorial (des)conocida. Lo que sabemos, ignoramos, inventamos y deformamos acerca de su pasado y su presente*, Madrid 2020, vol. I, pp. 441–470, at 450–454; B. Sampedro, *Inscribing islands. From Cuba to Fernando Poo and back*, in: C. Enjueto-Rangel et al. (eds.), *Transatlantic Studies: Latin America, Iberia, and Africa*, Liverpool 2019, pp. 99–113.

31 I. Roldán de Montaud, *On the Blurred Boundaries of Freedom: Liberated Africans in Cuba, 1817–1870*, in: D. W. Tomich (ed.), *New Frontiers of Slavery*, Albany 2016, pp. 127–156, at 147.

and peculiar in wider African history in its early imperial unfolding and late colonial intactness.

3. Neo-slavery

The century of Spanish imperialism on Fernando Pó, and the accompanying build-up of a large-scale cacao plantation complex, was constantly characterized then – and now – as having a labour regime that “made the distinction between slave and contract worker at times no more than nominal”.³² I will need to briefly address this category collapse, or indistinction, as it consistently stretches from the first heterodox British missionaries to the Cuban liberals exiled on the island in the late nineteenth century to African worker representatives and anti-colonial intellectuals in the twentieth century. I should note that any attempt to undo the equivocations of such “analogic” thinking or insistence on clarifications or reclassifications is misguided. It would be a repetitive task because such stacked confluences are ever-present in the archival and historical sources; they even occur consistently in the most careful classic and recent comparative studies of unfree labour³³ and, of course, all over contemporary academic publications and the now orthodox and non-governmental discussions, whether dry analyses or polemics, around labour trafficking in an era of imperialism and neo-liberalism.³⁴

I start by briefly returning to Cuba again and the partial abolition decree known as the Law of Moret (1870), which granted “full” rights to both “emancipados under protection by the state” as well as “all slaves owned by the state”.³⁵ While some of the final 3,000 or so emancipados were to be immediately released, two-thirds were eventually forced to sign indentured contracts lasting for six years with the lowest possible salary, which the few Spanish abolitionists described as the infamous “*contratas de 1870*, which are plainly and flatly slavery; but a hypocritical and cowardly slavery” – ambivalent, vacillating, and irresolute.³⁶ The British, the Cuban governor feared, will “not believe” that emancipados or even the alternative labour relations established by “free people of colour” could alter the “nature of slavery” in Cuba either because free Afro-Cubans could be illegally but effectively re-enslaved or because contract labours working alongside slaves, such as Chinese coolies, would vividly experience and describe their descent into the bottom rung of the colonial economy as living, working, and being punished exactly as slaves.³⁷ It seems that an initial blanket state of emancipation would be needed to remove

32 Sundiata, *From Slaving to Neoslavery*, p. 8.

33 H. J. Nieboer, *Slavery as an Industrial System: Ethnological Researches*, New York 1971 (1900); A. Testart, The extent and significance of debt slavery, *Revue française de sociologie* 43 (2002), pp. 173–204.

34 There is a helpful overview of this split but lopsided field in the first two chapters of M. Rodríguez García/M. van der Linden (eds.), *On Coerced Labor: Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden 2016.

35 M. Lucena Salmoral, *Leyes para esclavos: El ordenamiento jurídico sobre la condición, tratamiento, defensa y represión de los esclavos en las colonias de la América española*, Madrid 2005, p. 453.

36 R. M. de Labra, *La abolición de la esclavitud en el orden económico*, Madrid 1874, p. 21.

37 M. Reid-Vazquez, *The Year of the Lash: Free People of Color in Cuba and the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*,

this catalyst of re-enslavement and to provide the affective sense of rupture, making a regression inconceivable or no longer definable as a continuity or derivation.

On Fernando Pó, this standard analogy was increasingly popular, starting from John Clarke, the first Baptist missionary on the island, who in 1841 wrote that Fernando Pó was a “land of slavery and oppression” in reference to the Kru workers who were “flogged and treated as if [they] were slaves [of] the lowest description”.³⁸ The Cuban deportee Emilio Valdés wrote in the 1890s that the back-breaking work associated with the carbon deposit for steamships in Santa Isabel that he was being subject to was indignant not only because he and fellow convicts were sometimes made to do this labour “in ball and chains” but also because they were working alongside and “being considered equivalent to Krumanes or blacks for work”.³⁹ The late colonial Nigerian intelligentsia continuously saw in Fernando Pó a situation where the “condition under which they toil are the equivalent of paid slavery” and where “workers are engaged under the terms of a charter which is a twentieth century devise for slave dealing”.⁴⁰ What was being elaborately indirectly communicated in practically all such earnest stray allusions and serious confusions that other labour relations are “like slavery” was primarily a display of the obverse – ideologies of liberty, especially liberal and radical ones. Before this paradox is worked through in more conceptual clarity in the conclusion, I would close this conclusion-like interlude by noting that, for the post-emancipation context of Fernando Pó, the terms slavery and freedom are too illusive, practically unusable for analytical purposes. These terms have an almost unsaturable valency and were – and are – applied as labels in an almost indefinite number of contexts across a century of documentary sources and academic literature.

4. Wages and Kinship, 1870s to 1890s

Fernandinos had been primarily active in a wide array of clerical, commercial, and religious middlemen activities (in particular, the trading of palm oil harvested by the indigenous Bubi of the island and the selling of it to British merchant firms). However, cacao production became the overwhelming cash crop and economic lifeline on the island, starting in the 1880s, when 80 per cent of all production (on some 630 hectares) was undertaken on Fernandino-owned farms.⁴¹

It is important to note that, except for the emancipados and the Spanish navy’s botched attempt to partake in the “disguised” slave trade by “redeeming” slaves in the slaving port of Ouidah in 1860, most new contract workers were not previously slaves and were not

Athens 2011, p. 163; L. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba*, Philadelphia 2008.

38 Cited in L. Martin, *Commerce, Christianity and the Origins of the “Creoles” of Fernando Po*, in: *The Journal of African History* 25 (1984) 3, pp. 257–278, at 263.

39 E. Valdés Infante, *Cubanos en Fernando Póo. Horrores de la dominación española*, Havana 1898, p. 37.

40 P. Pan, *The Brutal Island*, in: *Daily Times*, 27 January 1965.

41 W. G. Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate, 1765–1914*, London 2000, p. 104.

from slave-holding African societies. To be sure, there was a number of mostly adolescent “domestic slaves”, who were also transferred to the island to work as “domestic servants” for some of the more notable Fernandino planters from the former slave-trading aristocracies in the Vai areas of Sierra Leone, as well as from Lagos, Bonny, Calabar, and the Loango coast in the French Congo. They were simply being inscribed on five-year “apprenticeship” contracts that ensured “rations and rates of pay”.⁴² Quite a few of these former slaves in turn became Fernandino planters themselves. From Freetown, a letter to a newspaper recalls how the movement of “the aborigines from this country who went to that Island as farm labourers” involved people “who a few years ago [were] worth nothing, [and] are now being enriched: you will be astonished to know what insignificant Mendi, or Limbah or Timni who have now become planters make annually, hundreds of pounds”.⁴³

Most contract workers in the latter half of the nineteenth century were there as strictly temporary immigrants; they were considered *alienígenas* (statutory strangers), who were almost always intending to return and were uninterested in and also eventually categorically excluded from becoming resident or landowners on the island. The Kru notably considered themselves an anti-slave society: they “neither experienced enslavement nor ever kept slaves themselves”.⁴⁴ A Methodist missionary on the island in the 1870s noted that the Kru

*engage themselves to do all sorts of toil, such as rowing boats, paddling canoes, cutting forest wood, carrying water, clearing ground, cooking food, and, in fact, anything their masters dictate. They could never be forced into slavery, and say they would rather be killed, or kill themselves than be slaves; yet they will cheerfully do all manner of drudgery – even the most slavish work – so long as they are free, and fed and paid.*⁴⁵

The Kru valued the ability to be paid in gold pounds, which was the currency in use along the coastal merchant shops near their home areas, whereas the silver pesos and later pesetas they were paid if they worked for the Spanish crown would be immediately cashed in for goods at the factories on the island at a high markup, which was one of the main labour complaints by the Kru as it drastically reduced their earning power. In any case, most employers were forced to pay a part of the wage in pounds as demanded by workers, and this was formalized in the contract too in order to attract workers in the first place. The pound was used almost exclusively in daily commercial relations on the island, and the British monetary, commercial, religious, and linguistic influence was so

42 Sundiata, *From Slavery to Neoslavery*, pp. 54, 50. These regulations were the first to re-establish and bureaucratize the grounds for disciplinary relation between master and servant: disputes and punishments would be mediated by “the Governor and his advisors”, García Cantús, *Fernando Poo*, pp. 434–436.

43 H. H. Lardner, *Songo Town Its Capabilities and Prospects*, in: *Sierra Leone Weekly News*, 19 May 1900, <http://www.opensourceguinea.org/2014/06/hh-lardner-songo-town-its-capabilities.html>.

44 Sundiata, *Brothers and Strangers*, p. 65. Specific groups of coastal Kru had also been involved as worker-intermediaries of the slave trade, hired primarily as canoe “pilots” and “interpreters” by Spanish slave traders in Gallinas, Sierra Leone, until the 1840s.

45 Roe, *West African Scenes*, p. 44.

persistent that, in 1886, Oskar Baumann, the Austrian traveller and ethnologist, even described Fernando Pó as “entirely English, except for the government”.⁴⁶

The Kru considered themselves to be drawn into a labour market freely – in the sense of searching for wages, in the form of large advances and bulk payments sustained by long contracts, not to reproduce themselves, as rations and housing were part of the contract, but for their own collective reproduction in their societies. Recruiters could only operate in certain areas once colonial money and its equivalence in a variety of imported goods, such as alcohol, tobacco, and textiles, became indispensable components of key social obligations, such as ceremonial marriage payments. These are the arenas where recruiters appear, and in this way, they became the vectors for how the bulk of colonial money and imported commodities was being deposited and incorporated into “traditional” non-peasant and not fully colonized societies. Recruiters devised, negotiated, and provided the rate and proportion and type of goods needed to link up with the “internal” economies of societies with a high bridewealth. While I cannot go into ethnographic explanation here, it is worth noting that the Kru shared a similar characteristically high bridewealth – a common feature of egalitarian African social structures – with the primary workforce in the twentieth century, the Fang of central Africa and the Igbo of Nigeria. However, in the case of the Kru, their self-produced copper-bracelet currencies used for “social transactions” such as bridewealth had already been largely replaced by the use of colonial currencies in the nineteenth century.⁴⁷

Fernando Pó was a colonial outpost without the budget for an elaborate militarization of labour relations. Furthermore, the majority of employers were undercapitalized and had to borrow heavily from British merchant moneylenders on the island to pay the advances of labourers, on the expectation that they will be able to pay down their credit-fuelled plantations after various successful harvests. There were no proper land markets at this time; the government would grant concessions to any new Spanish planters or would give a deed to Fernandino planters if a parcel had had been cleared and tilled for a period of three years. At this point, there was also no extensive road network on the island; therefore, the plantations were dotted all along the coast, only reachable by boat. By the 1890s, several thousand *braceros* (contract workers) were employed by hundreds of smaller Fernandino cash crop farmers and several dozen large and flourishing Fernandino and Spanish planters. Increasingly, the haciendas were being started by a new generation of Basque and Catalan settlers and by large European firms managed by British and German agents.⁴⁸ Quite a few of the early Spanish planters were also former navy officials, such as Francisco Romera – who arrived on the island with experience gathered from plantations in Cuba and also who, in 1892, arranged a trip for 17 Chinese former coolies

46 O. Baumann, *Eine afrikanische Tropeninsel: Fernando Póo und die Bube*, Vienna 1888, p. 5.

47 Frost, *Work and Community*, pp. 10–12, 160–162; See also in relation to the Fang E. Martino, *Nsoa (“dote”), dinero, deuda y peonaje: cómo el parentesco fang tejió y destejió la economía colonial de la Guinea Española*, in: *Éndoxa* 37 (2016), pp. 337–361.

48 García Cantús, *Fernando Poo*, pp. 370, 567.

from Cuba on a navy gunner ship, promising them a “return passage to a destination of their choosing” if they would be indentured to him for a year on Fernando Pó.⁴⁹

Throughout this period, labour recruitment operated in a sea of instability and constant turnover: “half of the inhabitants are renewed every single year, because workers are all from the mainland, and they return after the expiry of their contract”.⁵⁰ Labour was structurally and continuously scarce and exogenous. Planters had to renew their workforce after the expiry of a round of contracts – between two and five years – after which *braceros* were released and either sought out other more desirable ways of earning colonial money at other emerging colonial towns or returned home and turned to lucrative small-scale cash crop farming. Indeed, it was also through the return of labour migrant from Fernando Pó’s early cacao plantations that the cash crop largely spread into Ghana and other parts of West Africa.⁵¹ Fernando Pó had a terrible reputation; it could not hope to operate by attracting successive waves of immigrant labour within a “positive” and self-organized feedback system linked by direct kinship networks and communities – a soon-to-be common form of intercolonial and especially urban migration in early colonial West Africa.

By the 1890s, labourers had come from almost every port town of the Gulf of Guinea; however, as a Spanish administrator noted, rapidly “unfavourable news is spreading about the treatment and suffering of immigrant Africans in our Spanish possessions” so that, “in reality, at whichever point [in the Gulf of Guinea] we try to recruit, as soon as they found out about the destination, they refrained from providing us [with] *braceros*, with a palpable sense of repulsion”.⁵² From the outset, Spanish and Fernandino recruiters who ventured not only to the Kru coastal areas but also along the Bight of Biafra were dismissed and even ignored. A Cuban prisoner who escaped to Calabar on a canoe from Fernando Pó with the hired help of a Kru worker reported that, there too, the locals “detest the Spaniards”.⁵³

In these circumstances, recruitment would only be possible by devising various techniques embedded in the contractual order, including the release of high advances guaranteed by long contracts and the fact that workers who were landed on the island by recruiters were prohibited from leaving without first being bound by a contract. The British foreign office in the early twentieth century still referred to these local regulations “governing all classes of indentured labour” as “a well-drafted and beneficent” as it “provides that all unemployed residents in Fernando Po who cannot show means of subsistence, or are not registered in the books of the District Council (town hall), must

49 Ministerio de Estado, Nota de la Legación del Imperio Chino, 9 July 1895, AGA Caja 81/07056. Six of them died on the island – some returned to Cuba to lodge a complaint at the Chinese legation there, whereas others, it seems, found their way back to China via Lagos.

50 J. Valero y Belenguer, *La Guinea Española: La Isla de Fernando Pó*, in: *Boletín de la Real Sociedad Geográfica* 32 (1892), pp. 144–365, at 218.

51 Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa and Chocolate*, p. 113.

52 Valero y Belenguer, *La Guinea Española*, p. 218.

53 *Escape of the Fernando Po Prisoners*, in: *New York Times*, 12 August 1869; F. J. Balmaseda, *Los confinados á Fernando Póo é impresiones de un viage á Guinea*, Havana 1869, p. 163.

perform such work as the *Curaduría* may assign to them, whether for the State or for private employers.”⁵⁴

Initially in the late 1860s, when labour relations started taking a turn for the worse, a dozen or more Kru would simply “disappear” through “desertion” with every passing British steamer stopping over in Fernando Pó.⁵⁵ The Kru, wrote an early Spanish governor, “made sure to flee from the island whenever opportunities arose”. If “we don’t find an energetic remedy” to the “flight of the Kruman”, he went on to claim, “it will be a stimulus to a series of successive desertions which will leave our Government and population without a single worker.”⁵⁶ That the primary worries of the Spanish authorities lay in desertion is clear from a labour treaty signed in 1862 with the Kingdom of Bimbia on the shores of Mount Cameroon, located within direct line of sight of the island. All five short articles were geared towards King William I of Bimbia, as he was called, and his “fulfilling and making his subjects fulfil the contracts with Spanish subjects” so as “to avoid the frequently arising problem of desertion”.⁵⁷

The planters and recruiters on the island had to come up with a counter stimulus, which, in the 1870s, even became the principal way the Spanish administration would hire workers to undertake public works: they incentivized the reverse movement and offered ever-larger advances to those who deserted “from the British vessels” to Fernando Pó. In this period, this method of siphoning off Kru mariners and workers being transported to and from home or a workplace proved much more effective than recruiting along the coast where the reputation of the Spanish island was continually hitting new lows.⁵⁸

On the Kru coast, workers tended to be hired in small groups, led by a headman who also mediated destinations, promises, conditions, expectations, and advances. In the peculiar conditions on Fernando Pó, the headman system had already started to dissolve. As outlined in unique detail in the diary of John Holt, who eventually became a shipping magnate but who started off as an agent for a British merchant firm on Fernando Pó in the 1860s, Kru workers tended to operate within a reputational mechanism to facilitate their rehiring by other employers.

At the completion of a contract, released workers would receive a letter of recommendation from their previous European employer that “vouched” for those particular workers or skills and their reliability. This letter was indispensable for getting hired into the better paying and prestigious jobs on offer on the coast. This makes it likely that the Kru on Fernando Pó were those who were not provided with these types of letters of recommendation or those who did not have experience or the skills to work on European-control-

54 Great Britain, Spanish Guinea, London 1920, p. 31.

55 I. Sundiata, *The Rise and Decline of Kru Power: Fernando Po in the 19th Century*, in: *Liberian Studies Journal* 6 (1975) 1, pp. 25–43, at 29; G. E. Brooks, *The Kru Mariner in the Nineteenth Century: An Historical Compendium*, Newark 1972, p. 25.

56 Cited in García Cantús, *Fernando Póo*, p. 416.

57 *Convenio con el Rey de Bimbia*, 1 February 1862, in *Miranda Junco, Leyes coloniales*, p. 140.

58 Cited in García Cantús, *Fernando Poo*, p. 515.

led ships and ports.⁵⁹ While it is commonly assumed that indentured wages were low and the contract long as well as necessarily irrevocable due to the high cost and amortization of long-distance displacement, this is not the case as many workers were hired on the spot in the Santa Isabel harbour, convinced to go to the island with large advances that would bind them for years. The preservation of the contract was not founded on logistical dimensions but on the solidification into a custom of a transplanting and borrowing of the coolie and emancipado contracts.

5. Comparative Method

For this article, I do not make a contrast with neighbouring or seemingly similar colonial territories, nor do I spotlight the cluster of institutions acting as a basis for plantation production, including disciplinary and vagrancy laws. In a sense, I reverse the order of comparison; I start only with *contrato* as it took shape in Fernando Pó. This entire method, and any analytical insight gained, depends on using the contract as the comparative unit and on relating any act of comparison directly through it.

Fernando Pó is often analytically placed side by side with São Tomé and the German plantations around Mount Cameroon, to which it tectonically belonged; however, the island's plantations emerged from their own peculiar vortex laterally connected to the Spanish Antilles.⁶⁰ Spain possessed no mainland hinterland (except effectively the enclave of Río Muni from the 1920s onwards) from where it could replenish itself with labourers. This was not the case for the very large and capital-heavy and state-supported German plantations in Cameroon, whose labour control and supply was upheld by the effective military conquest of much of the interior by the 1890s, or for the century-spanning Portuguese plantations in São Tomé and Príncipe, which, until 1910, continued to draw on the old slaving caravan routes in northern Angola with post-abolition eight-year *serviçais* (servant) contracts, out of which there was no escape.⁶¹

Indeed, what distinguishes Fernando Pó from São Tomé is that it had a commercially active class of Fernandino creoles, who made up the majority of recruiters in this period

59 John Holt, *The diary of John Holt with the voyage of the "Maria"*, Liverpool 1948, pp. 93–95, 216–226. See also C. M. Thiesen, *Mediators, Contract Men, and Colonial Capital*, Rochester 2018.

60 W.G. Clarence-Smith, *Cocoa Plantations and Coerced Labor in the Gulf of Guinea, 1870–1914*, in: M. A. Klein (ed.), *Breaking the Chains: Breaking the Chains: Slavery, Bondage and Emancipation in Africa and Asia*, Madison, 1993, pp. 150–170; A. Eckert, *Abolitionist Rhetorics, Colonial Conquest, and the Slow Death of Slavery in Germany's African Empire*, in: M. van der Linden (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and Changing Labor Relations: The Long-term Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, Leiden 2010, pp. 351–370.

61 A. M. Caldeira, *Learning the Ropes in the Tropics: Slavery and the Plantation System on the Island of São Tomé*, in: *African Economic History* 39 (2011), pp. 35–71; M. Cahen, "Indigenato" before Race? Some Proposals on Portuguese Forced Labour Law in Mozambique and the African Empire (1926–1962), in: F. Bethencourt/A. Pearce (eds.), *Racism and Ethnic Relations in the Portuguese-Speaking World*, Oxford 2012, pp. 149–171. Joseph Burt, the famous British Quaker and communist hired by Cadbury, grew concerned by that fact that *serviçais* were "perpetually indentured" and thus in a state that "was almost identical to slavery" (J. Burt, *Report on the Conditions of Colored Labour Employed on the Cocoa Plantations of Sao Tome and Principe and the Methods of Procuring It in Angola* [1907], in: W. Cadbury et al., *Labour in Portuguese West Africa*, London 1910).

and who had personal and other connections to all the main ports on Gulf of Guinea with similar creole communities. Additionally, Santa Isabel was a stop on most of the main West African steamer routes, and the island was also reachable by ocean-going canoes and small ships from the coast.⁶² Unlike the heavily state-subsidized indentures in the British or French empire, indentured recruitment was largely a private affair – an arrangement by private networks on private steamship companies and sailing and rowing vessels, not between administrative entities.⁶³ Instead, the contract allowed for the highly commercialized and individualized recruitment of labour through a few dozen transport merchants and brokers.

In the same way that John Clegg's remarkable recent article, "A Theory of Capitalist Slavery" (2020), makes the case for locating in the internal slave trade and the extensive credit markets the distinguishing capitalist character of slavery in nineteenth-century North America,⁶⁴ I take the founding of the colonial contract as the precise conduit that led to the new growth of plantations through recruitment. The two signature calendrical features that made up the consistent core of the indentured contract are the fixed length of at least a couple of years and its irrevocability. The way the wage was lumped, structured, and dispensed as a result of this contract directly led to the expansion of commodified labour and the unfolding of the real price of labour as an excess was generated from the contract to pay the commissions of the recruiters as well as the informal advances of workers. The contract created both the status of the worker and the dynamism that would make them appear via a new generation of recruiters. One can even speak of the contract mode of labour production or at least the recruiter-contract nexum, much like land was the underlying leverage in serfdom or property the ultimate tool in slavery.

Formally, the indentured contracts' primary economic purpose was to act as an obstacle to freely negotiated wages. However, it would be misleading to approach contracts in a straightforward way and ignore the escalating economies of recruiters and wage advances because this leads to economistic and legalistic rationalization that serve to maintain the ideological facade of equivalent exchange and voluntarisms and a relatively pedantic affirmation that such partial or halfway colonial contracts skipped a step or a precondition and were thus not complete or true. It is also misleading to see the contract in "diffusionist" terms, as a simple extension or application of other contracts or master-servant sociolegal codes, and assuming its distinctiveness from slavery and free labour.⁶⁵ Fernando

62 See E. Martino, Panya: Economies of Deception and the Discontinuities of Indentured Labour Recruitment and the Slave Trade, Nigeria and Fernando Pó, 1890s–1940s, in: *African Economic History* 44 (2016) 1, pp. 91–129.

63 A. M. McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders*, New York 2013, which I consider the most important and insightful book on indenture ever written. McKeown allowed me to see how this period recruitment for Fernando Pó is more akin to intercolonial contract migrations in Southern Africa, to "non-oceanic" Chinese migration in South-east Asia, or to contract-bound Haitian braceros in the early twentieth-century Caribbean, whom Fidel Castro described as having suffered in "new and even worse forms, the slavery that had just been abolished in 1886", cited in M. Casey, *From Haiti to Cuba and Back: Haitians' Experiences of Migration, Labor, and Return, 1900–1940*, PhD thesis, University of Pittsburgh, 2012, p. 15.

64 J. Clegg, *A Theory of Capitalist Slavery*, in: *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33 (2020) 1, pp. 74–98.

65 Cf. D. Hay/P. Craven, *Masters, Servants, and Magistrates in Britain and the Empire, 1562–1955*, Chapel Hill, 2004; A.

Pó is what abolition without a bourgeois compass looks like: a permanent and regressive (or pioneering if you prefer) transition and a new contractual order branching off from the dissolution and mutation of slavery and underpinning a new plantation frontier.

6. Conclusion: Atlantic Reminders

I started off this article by noting that the term *unfree* is a massive residual term to simply designate the “intermediary” category *not slaves*. The term *unfree* was directly borrowed by the English historiography from nineteenth-century German historians of mediaeval and ancient periods. The label of *unfreie* was then beginning to be applied to, as Max Weber says when discussing forms of debt peonage and debt slavery, the “social history of all parts of the world” – where “an endless variety of forms” of unfree labour were being embedded with “intermediate steps” and “gradual transitions”, making “sharp differentiation in concrete fact often impossible”.⁶⁶ Even in his classic chapter “Die Mark” on slave and feudal transitions pre-dating the supposedly definitive bourgeois breakaway, Engels only employs a range of adjectives and intensifiers when outlining the historical variations of *unfrei* relations in periods of “mitigated”, “alleviated”, “unlimited”, and “universal” “*corvée*”.⁶⁷

In an exchange of letters with Karl Marx in late 1882, when he just finished drafting “Die Mark”, Engels says of his thesis concerning the reappearance of serfdom in late mediaeval Germany that whereas in the high “Middle Ages there were innumerable degrees of bondage and serfdom, so that the *Sachsenspiegel* gives up the attempt to ‘make a tally’, this becomes remarkably easy after the Thirty Years’ War. Enfin.” Engels adds that he is “certain” that “bondage” was “not a peculiarly medieval-feudal form, we find [it] everywhere or nearly everywhere” in colonial and conquest contexts, and he is glad that, on this point, he and Marx “proceed in agreement’, as they say in business”. His insight into the oscillations, strange combinations, and reappearance of unfree labour relations during imperial expansion was gained by coming to the “opposite” conclusions reached by the German historians on whose books his essay was based. He neatly sums up his critiques of these historiographies in four “contradictions” – which I wish to point out in their entirety in relation to the current global labour history and global histories of capitalism literature, which have only partially succeeded in resolving them. The contradictions arise due

Stanziani, Local Bondage in Global Economies: Servants, wage earners, and indentured migrants in nineteenth-century France, Great Britain, and the Mascarene Islands, in: *Modern Asian Studies* 47 (2013) 4, pp. 1218–1251.

66 M. Weber, *Economy and Society*, New York 1968, pp. 214, 128. For the English adoption and discussion of types and degrees of unfree labour see W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England: In Its Origin and Development*, London 1877, p. 79–85.

67 F. Engels, *The Mark*, New York 1928 (1892). See also the fascinating chapter of A. Rio, “Half-Free” Categories in the Early Middle Ages: Fine Status Distinctions Before Professional Lawyers, in: J. Scheele/P. Dresch, *Legalism: Rules and Categories*, Oxford 2016, pp. 129–152.

1. to the habit of adducing, indiscriminately and side by side, documentary proof and examples from any and every period,
2. to a residue of legalistic prejudice which invariably trips him up when it comes to understanding a process of development,
3. to his gross underestimation of force and the role it plays,
4. to the enlightened presupposition that, since the dark Middle Ages, things must have changed steadily for the better; this prevents him from perceiving, not only the antagonistic nature of true progress, but likewise individual setbacks.⁶⁸

In my readings, one of the few works that has managed to make these “contradictions” clear is Yann Moulier-Boutang’s doctoral dissertation, “De l’esclavage au salariat: Économie historique du salariat bridé” (1998).⁶⁹ One of the only pieces of his extensive work available in English is a recent translation of a short composite extract published in Dale Tomich’s edited collection *New Frontiers of Slavery* (2016). There, Moulier-Boutang repeats his thesis that one of the primary features of the “long sunset” of the transition to a global labour market was the “mutation of slavery” into “labor under contract”.⁷⁰

This thesis is quite different than the more widespread metaphorical use of the “slavery of wage labour”, which is used to conceive the complete dependency on the labour market instead of on individual masters, to theorize proletarians as a class owned collectively by capitalists, and to give the structural compulsion of money the role of medium to substitute direct force. This common comparative analogy is found extensively throughout both Marx’s and Engel’s writings and was directly inspired by the theoretician Moses Heß and the radical artisan Wilhelm Weitling. Heß consistently speaks of wage labour as “temporary servitude”, which Engels adopts in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), whereas Weitling speaks more dramatically in terms of denouncing the new *Scheinfreiheiten* (the mere illusion of freedoms) and the continuities of “slavery concealing itself today in the shadows of contracts and laws”.⁷¹

In contrast, I apply the term *mutation* quite literally and technically onto the contract itself in the context of the dissolution of slavery in the Spanish Empire: duration of servitude was curtailed; possession and the administration of punishment was taken over by the state itself; and, most importantly, there was a structuring of the new wage form

68 F. Engels to K. Marx, 16 December 1882 in: E. J. Hobsbawm (ed.), *Pre-capitalist economic formations: Karl Marx*, London 1966, p. 145–146.

69 Y. Moulier-Boutang, *De l’esclavage au salariat: économie historique du salariat bridé*, Paris 1998. His work has mostly been ignored or unread in the regional and global historiographies, which is unfortunate because he analytically pulls together and helps connect many threads. For an exception, see M. van der Linden, *Labour History as the History of Multitudes*, in: *Labour / Le Travail* 52 (2003), pp. 235–243.

70 Y. Moulier-Boutang, *Agency and Transnational Perspectives on the Constitution of Waged, Unfree, and Free Labor: The Role of Mobility in the Nineteenth Century*, in: D. W. Tomich (ed.), *New Frontiers of Slavery*, Albany 2016, pp. 23–46, at 40. Another “composite” translation is available in the February 2018 issue of *Viewpoint Magazine*, “Forms of Unfree Labor: Primitive Accumulation, History or Prehistory of Capitalism?”, which gives a short but “full tableau of the global labor market.” For a critique from an African history perspective, see S. Bellucci, *Wage labour and capital in Africa: a historical perspective*, in: *Labour History* 2017, pp. 133–137.

71 P. Eiden-Offe, *Weisse Sklaven, oder: Wie frei ist die Lohnarbeit? Freie und unfreie Arbeit in den ökonomisch-literarischen Debatten des Vormärz*, in: J. Nickel (ed.), *Geld und Ökonomie im Vormärz*, Bielefeld 2014, pp. 183–214.

through advances or the promises of money offered by recruiters. Even if slavery directly transformed into wage labour through these operations, this conception still folds into the insights from the “anti-Wallerstein” Marxist analytics of, for example, the logician Gerald Cohen, noting that it was fundamentally money and the forms of its distribution that determine the social relations of freedom and unfreedom in capitalism.⁷² The contract, and the way it packaged wage money, represents a “break” – in the sense of Moulier-Boutang’s primary metaphor, *bridé*, translatable as *saddled* and literally the antonym of *unbridled*. The contract represented a deceleration or hesitation of complete exploitation but only as a quick adjustment to create the conditions for new labourers to appear from the “outside” and to prepare the grounds for a generalized and still present long nineteenth-century *Saddlezeit* of global labour history.

72 G. A. Cohen, *Capitalism, Freedom and the Proletariat*, in: A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom*, Oxford 1979, pp. 9–25; G. A. Cohen, *The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom*, in: *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (1983), pp. 3–33.