



Slavery in Latin America



When British clergyman Robert Walsh arrived in the Brazilian capital of Rio de Janeiro in 1828, he was struck both by the sheer size of the city's black population and by its startling diversity of

conditions. (Andrews, G.R. (2004). *Afro-Latin America, 1800-2000*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 11)

So begins the first chapter of George Reid Andrews' seminal book on the history of Africans in Latin America. But just as clergyman Walsh was surprised at the size and diversity of the African population of Latin America, so are modern Europeans likely to be astounded by the scale and extent of the transatlantic slave trade in Spain's and Portugal's Latin American colonies. The history of Africans in Latin America is multifaceted and complex. Not all Africans were slaves, and for those who were, conditions were diverse depending on a number of factors, such as economics, politics, ecology and demographics. Indeed, Europeans in Latin America used African labour in every conceivable form in every place they decided to settle during the colonial period and beyond. In the space allowed here, it would be impossible to give the whole picture of what happened in this vast continent over a period spanning several centuries. However, I will try to highlight this diversity by exploring slavery in three very different settings and themes within the South American mainland: slave policy in the Spanish colonies of Colombia; slaves in the mining industry in the Bolivian high Andes; and the role of descendants of slaves in the building of the Panama Canal.



Slave policy in Colombia

Colombia was a major destination for slave ships, with the town of Cartagena de Indias one of the most important ports through which enslaved Africans entered Nueva



Granada (present-day Colombia and Panama, as well as parts of Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Costa Rica, Venezuela and Nicaragua). Cartagena also served as a hub for intra-Latin American slave trade, where slaves were sold on to various destinations in the Andes and beyond.

Within Colombia, slaves carried out a wide range of tasks. They were squires, muleteers, cowboys, blacksmiths, domestic servants, gold miners, pearl divers, sugar cane cultivators etc. The nature



and extent of the tasks varied greatly from place to place, a variation influenced both by cultural attitudes as well as differing economic circumstances. Still, the relatively slow economic growth and development in Colombia may have contributed to overall less harsh and exploitative forms of slavery in many parts of



Colombia than in the French and English sugar islands. Added to these economic factors were medieval religious and legal attitudes and practices in which protection and

paternalism were emphasised alongside more repressive and punitive aspects. Most important in this respect is the medieval Castilian statutory code of Siete Partidas – promulgated in 1348 – which contained both repressive and protective elements in relation to slavery. While the Partidas did consider slavery a necessary evil, any slave (including Africans) were potential Christians and thereby servants of the king. The extent to which these principles translated into practice are debated, but it appears that the dehumanisation of African slaves was less pronounced in Spanish America than in French and British colonies. For example, masters who treated their slaves cruelly were liable for punishment. In Colombia, a slave was able and allowed to testify in court on matters of maltreatment and other legalities, and often did so. However, the relative mildness of Colombian slavery was probably guided as much by pragmatic factors as ideological ones. In many areas, slaves constituted a substantial part of the total population, even outnumbering their

masters, which prompted slave owners to treat slaves humanely to prevent revolt. Furthermore, the unpopulated hinterlands provided slaves with a fairly accessible escape route, which slave owners obviously wanted to prevent at all cost.

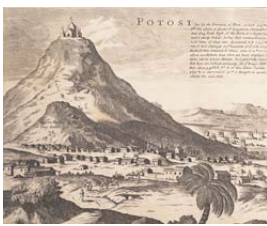
Some historians have argued that, because of this combination of economic, cultural and legal factors, Colombian authorities and slave owners were more ready to accept slaves as human beings with – albeit not equal – at least some basic rights. This is not to say that a slave's life in Colombia was a good one, but slaves appear to have enjoyed more freedom than their counterparts up north. Liberty, for example, was a legitimate goal for a slave who could gain his or her freedom through a variety of means. Furthermore,



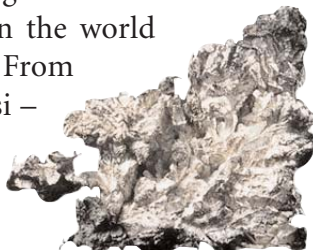
and to a great extent through the influence of the Catholic Church, family bonds amongst slaves were fostered and encouraged. Up to two-thirds of all adult slaves in Colombia lived in family units, and parents had rights over the fate of their children – when sale occurred, it was more often than not the sale of families.

Still, emancipation in Colombia was slow. Although the process started in 1821, it was only in 1852 – after three decades of social and political upheaval – that abolition was realised, intractable slave-owners being defeated by force.

Mining in Bolivia



As in other parts of South America, the indigenous population of the Bolivian Andes decreased dramatically as a result of the arrival of the Spaniards. The rich mining city of Potosí – which lies at 4000m above sea level – was no exception. Potosí was founded in 1546 at the foot of the legendary Cerro Rico ('Rich Mountain'), whose fabulous wealth quickly turned the small mining town into one of the richest and largest cities in the world with a population exceeding 200,000. From 1556 to 1783 – the golden era of Potosí – a total of 45,000 tons of pure silver was mined from Cerro Rico, 7,000 tons of which went to the Spanish monarchy. Initially, forced indigenous labour was used to mine and refine the silver, but exposure to European diseases, mercury and bru-



tility led the population to plummet by a catastrophic 90%.

To compensate for the loss of indigenous labour, African slaves were transported in great numbers to Potosí – an estimated 30,000 Africans were taken to Potosí throughout the colonial era. The indigenous population was still the mainstay of the mining labour force, but Africans were engaged in refining and minting tasks. This was hard and dangerous work. For example, African slaves were forced to push the mills in the royal mint (Casa de la Moneda) as 'human mules'. The lifespan of a mule pushing the mills was only two months, so slaves were deemed more cost effective.

Africans in the Bolivian Andes, as their counterparts elsewhere in Latin America, resisted and defied enslavement with great intensity. Hardly surprisingly, this created anxiety amongst slave owners as well as local authorities who were fearful of the 'free negros and mulatos, so many of them and their kind increasing by the day that soon



they will be roving bands, assaulting and robbing or they will join with the Indians and cause them to rise up'. These fears were not ungrounded; the Casa de la Moneda, for example, experienced numerous violent revolts among the slaves held captive there. The authorities responded by implementing a number of slave ordinances restricting the activities of slaves and free Africans alike.

In spite of the authorities' efforts, slaves continued to rise up, revolt and abscond throughout the colonial period and beyond. As in other regions of the Americas, African slavery in the Andes was synonymous with resistance and flight. Indeed, the Bolivian terrain made escape a viable option. The vast territories were impossible for slave owners and authorities to fully monitor. More importantly, perhaps, was the influence of the indigenous people's means of resistance. Migration was an established practice in the Andes, one that dated back thousands of years. As the impact of the European presence became clear, the indigenous population learned to use their migratory experience to reject and resist European control. African slaves tapped into this experience and learned to migrate in order to escape enslavement. In Bolivia, many Africans migrated to the semi-tropical Yungas,



situated between the Andean mountain ranges and the tropical jungles of the lowlands, where they intermingled with the indigenous population. In modern Bolivia, the Afro-Bolivian community comprises only 0.5% of the total population. Nonetheless, a traveller is likely to become aware of its presence in the Yungas, where the descendants of Africans have adopted dress and customs traditional to the indigenous people.

The role of descendants of slaves in the building of the Panama Canal

Slavery in the Americas has a complicated history, with a number of different threads interweaving through time and place. In this last example, we will briefly consider the contribution that descendants of slaves made to the construction of one of the world’s most astounding accomplishments in engineering: the Panama Canal.



The building of the Panama Canal was achieved in several stages. Although Charles V, king of Spain, floated the idea of a canal in Panama as early as 1534, the first serious attempt was carried out by

the French in 1880. The French had previously built a railroad through Panama, linking the Atlantic to the Pacific, an undertaking that relied heavily on slave labour. However, the French never finished the canal, and for a number of reasons, this enterprise was abandoned in 1893. The main factor was the extremely high death toll of workers. Exact numbers are unavailable since no detailed records of workers were kept, but it is estimated that a total of 22,000 people died, a large number of whom were descendants of Africans.



The Americans took over the construction in 1904 and completed it in 1914. Because of the disastrous consequences of the French canal-building attempt, local Panamanians were reluctant to work for the contractors. For this reason, the Americans were forced to recruit workers from the Caribbean. By 1907, more than 20,000 black workers populated the Canal Zone. This led to alarm amongst local Panamanians, who generally thought the newcomers were settling perma-

nently. Racism was part of the everyday existence of the Caribbean workforce. They faced hostility from locals, who continually reminded them of their unwelcome status, and discrimination on the part of the American contractors, who regarded them as nothing more than barbaric animals. Indeed, although slavery had been abolished throughout the Americas for decades, black people were still seen as inferior in the eyes of white Americans.



Due to advances in medicine, hygiene and health care, the death toll during the American construction was far lower than during the previous French attempt. Still, over 5,000 workers died. The working conditions were atrocious, with Caribbean workers housed in hastily-constructed barracks that offered no protection against malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Malaria was rife, the work was hard and dangerous and the black workforce was badly treated by American foremen.

The Caribbean workers, like their slave ancestors, were not willing to take this discrimination and abuse lying down. Strikes, disturbances and riots were common, and a number of workers fled into the surrounding jungles. Some workers would meet ships carrying newcomers and warn them about poor living conditions and ill treatment. The shadow of slavery still loomed; new arrivals were warned about the dangers of vaccination, which, they said, left 'an inextinguishable mark thereby forever preventing their leaving the Isthmus'. This was not far from the truth, as the vaccination process did leave a mark, used by American foremen or the authorities to identify runaway workers – much like the branding practices during slavery.

The contribution of the descendants of African slaves to the building of the Panama Canal – as well as the railroad before it – is undeniable; they performed more than 80% of the hard and dangerous work needed to complete it. This fact, though, remains one of the many untold stories of African contributions to historical events.



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Resources

The **Portcities Bristol** website has a section on South American and Slavery and looks at the Spanish and Portuguese Empires. There is also an examination of the impact of the Gold, Silver and Sugar trades on enslaved Africans in Latin America.

http://discoveringbristol.org.uk/showNarrative.php?sit_id=1&narId=786

The **Black Britain** site features an interview with cultural anthropologist, Dr Andoni Castillo, on the subject of Slave Colonies in Latin America.

<http://www.blackbritain.co.uk/feature/details.aspx?i=105&c=race>

Untold London has a feature on Joaquim Nabuco de Araujo, one of the men most deeply involved in the abolition of slavery in Brazil (the last country in Latin America to abolish slavery in 1888). He lived in London for many years and there is a plaque to him in London.

<http://www.untoldlondon.org.uk/news/ART39676.html>

There are a number of organisations campaigning against modern-day slavery around the world and including Latin America. On the **iabolish** site, people from as far apart as India and Benin, Brazil and Israel tell of their experience of slavery.

http://www.iabolish.org/slavery_today/slave_experience/index.html

The **Stop Slavery** site also has information on the history of slavery as well as modern-day slavery in Latin America.

<http://www.interserveonline.org.uk/stopslavery/worldwide.html>

Antislavery International's website has downloadable reports on contemporary forms of slavery in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

<http://www.antislavery.org/homepage/resources/PDF/PDFlatinamerica.htm>

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The Real Histories Directory

The **Real Histories Directory** (www.realhistories.org.uk) has been created as a resource tool for teachers, parents, pupils and the wider community to support them in their teaching and learning about cultural diversity in the UK. The website helps you to locate **resources** in your and other LEAs, such as storytellers, dual language books, culturally diverse toys and relevant **events** taking place in the UK. There are also items of **news** that may be of particular interest to schools and teachers.

You can also submit resources that you would like to include in the directory free of charge by visiting the site, clicking on 'Submit an entry' and following the on-screen instructions.

As well as the varied resources available, each month a new **Topic of the Month** is added with suggestions for using the Directory in the classroom and at home.

We are interested in hearing your views on our Topics and the Real Histories website. You can email comments and suggestions to: realhistories@runnymedetrust.org.