

Focus Lesson - The Encomienda System



EQ: How did the Encomienda System affect Spanish colonization of the New World?

The *encomienda* is a labor system that was employed mainly by the Spanish crown during the colonization of the Americas and the Philippines. In the *encomienda*, the crown granted a person a specified number of natives for whom they were to take responsibility. The receiver of the grant was to protect the natives from warring tribes and to instruct them in the Spanish language and in the Catholic faith. In return, they could exact tribute from the natives in the form of labor, gold or other products, such as in corn, wheat or chickens. In the former Inca empire, for example, the system continued the Inca (and even pre-Inca) traditions of exacting tribute under the form of labor.

History

The word *encomienda* means "to entrust." The *encomienda* was based on the familiar Spanish Reconquista institution in which *adelantados* (landowning nobles and knights) were given the right to extract tribute from Muslims or other peasants in areas that they had conquered and resettled. The colonial *encomienda* system differed from the peninsular institution in that *encomenderos* did not own the land on which the natives lived. Indian lands were to remain in their possession. This right was formally protected by the Crown of Castile because at the beginning of the Conquest, most of the rights of administration in the new lands went to the crown. The system was formally abolished in 1720, but had lost effectiveness much earlier. In many areas it had been abandoned for other forms of labor. In certain areas, this quasi-feudal system persisted. In Mexico, for instance, it was not until the constitutional reform after the Mexican Revolution that the *encomienda* system was abolished.

Encomenderos

Initially the *encomienda* system was devised to meet the needs of the early agricultural economies in the Caribbean. Later it was adopted to the mining economy of Peru and Upper Peru. The *encomienda* lasted from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the seventeenth century. The grantees of the *encomienda* were usually conquistadors and soldiers, but they

also included women and Native-American notables. For example, Doña Marina and the daughters of Montezuma were granted extensive *encomiendas* as dowries. Puppet Inca rulers established after the conquest also sought and were granted *encomiendas*.

The status of humans as "*wards of the crown*" under the *encomienda* system served to "*define the status of the Indian population*"; the natives were free men, not slaves or serfs. Conquistadors were granted trusteeship over the indigenous people they helped conquer. The *encomienda* was essential to the Spanish crown's sustaining its control over North, Central and South America in the first decades after the colonization, because it was the first major organizational law instituted on a continent where disease, war and turmoil reigned.

Establishment of the Encomienda

The phrase "*sin indias no hay indias*" (without Indians, there are no Indies - i.e. America), popular in America especially in the 16th century, emphasizes the economic importance and appeal of native labor, even above that of precious metals or other natural resources. Land awardees customarily complained about how "*worthless*" territory was, unless it also comprised a population of *encomendados*.

In 1503 the crown began to legally grant *encomiendas* to soldiers, conquistadors and officials. The system of *encomiendas* was aided by the Crown's organizing the Spanish population into small harbors known as *reducciones*. In response to the declining populations. Each *reduccion* had a Native chief responsible for keeping track of the laborers in his community. The *encomienda* system did not grant people land, but it indirectly aided in the settlers' acquisition of land. *Encomenderos* became familiar with Native lands; they were positioned to take control of land belonging to the Natives under their trusteeship through legal or illegal means, when the opportunity arose. As initially defined, the *encomendero* and his heir were only supposed to benefit from the grant for two generations, however, this was often not the case, especially if the heir rendered some service to the crown. The *encomienda* system did eventually come to a legal end in 1720, when the crown made a new attempt at eradicating the institution. The *encomienderos* were then required to pay remaining *encomienda* labourers for their work.

The *encomiendas* became very corrupt and harsh. In the neighbourhood of La Concepcion, north of Santo Domingo, the *adelantado* of Santiago heard rumors of a 15,000 man army planning to stage a rebellion. Upon hearing this, the *adelantado* captured the Caciques involved and had most of them hanged. Later on, a chieftain named Guaronex laid havoc to the countryside before an Indian-Spanish army of about 3,000 routed the Ciguana forces under his leadership.

Initially, the *encomendado* was supposed to be returned to the crown after two generations, however this was frequently overlooked. In 1574, the Viceroy of Peru Diego Lopez de Velasco investigated the *encomiendas* and concluded that there were 32,000 Spanish families in the New World, 4,000 of which had *encomiendas*. There were 1,500,000 natives paying tribute, and 5 million "civilized" natives.^[12]

Abolition of the Encomienda

The downfall of the *encomienda* system began as early as 1510, when Dominican missionaries began protesting the abuse of the native people by Spanish colonists. By 1538 Charles V

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What was it? -	
How did it work?	Why was it used?
Abuses	Decline

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realized the serious implications of a Taíno revolt and compelled policy changes over the labor of the Indians. The crown made two failed attempts to end the abuses of the encomienda system, through the Law of Burgos and the New Law of the Indies.

Bartolome de Las Casas a priest from Hispaniola and former *encomendero*, underwent a profound conversion after seeing the abuse of the native people. He dedicated his life to writing and lobbying to abolish the *encomienda* system which he thought systematically enslaved the native people of the New World. Las Casas participated in an important debate where he pushed for the enactment of the New Laws and an end to the *encomienda* system. The Laws of Burgos (1512-13) and the New Law of the Indies (1542) failed in the face of colonial opposition. When *Blasco Núñez Vela*, the first *viceroys* of Peru, tried to enforce the New Laws, which provided for the gradual abolition of the *encomienda*, many of the *encomenderos* were unwilling to comply with them and revolted against *Núñez Vela*.

Eventually the *encomienda* system was succeeded by the crown-managed *repartimiento* and the *hacienda*, or large landed estates, in which laborers were directly employed by the *hacienda* owners. As the number of natives declined and mining activities were replaced by agricultural activities in the seventeenth century, the *hacienda* arose because land ownership became more profitable than the acquisition of labor forces.

The *encomienda* was also strongly based on tribal identity. Mixed-race individuals, for example, could not by law be subjected to the *encomienda*. This moved many Amerindians to deliberately seek to dilute their tribal identity and that of their descendants as a way for them to escape the service, by seeking intermarriage with people from different ethnicities, especially Spaniards or Creoles. In this way the *encomienda* somewhat weakened Amerindians' tribal identification and ethnicity, which in turn diminished the pool of available *encomendados*.