

# Shadows of Slavery

Shadows of Slavery

*in West Africa and Beyond. A Historical Anthropology (ERC GRANT 313737)*

**SWAB-WPS**

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## **“Debtor forever”. Debt and bondage in Afghan and Pakistani brick kilns**

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### Abstract:

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Moving beyond the isolated-victim paradigm typical of most modern slavery discourses, this paper takes into account the “voice” of both the bonded workers and the kiln owners in order to understand the social nature of debt bondage. I revisit comments from interviews and conversations collected in Afghanistan and Pakistan in 2014 and 2015. Although the history of labour exploitation in these two countries deserves individual attention, my goal is to underline the transversal elements that are salient in both contexts. The crucial links and similarities between Afghan and Pakistani brick kilns are useful to pinpoint the bonding force of debt. Thus this paper focuses on how workers describe brick kiln labour and the role the dimension of “future” plays in their lives. Can work at the brick kiln be just a phase to attain a job, or does it stretch beyond a phase as the debtor/worker’s life is carried out?



*1. Brick kiln in Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

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### Introduction

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Debt bondage was first internationally recognised as a form of slavery in the 1956 *Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery*<sup>1</sup>. This was a United Nations treaty intended to “augment” (as expressed in the preamble) the 1926 *Slavery Convention*<sup>2</sup> and the 1930 *Convention Concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour*<sup>3</sup> of the International Labour Organization (ILO). According to the *Supplementary Convention*, it was stated that:

Each of the States Parties to this Convention shall take all practicable and necessary legislative and other measures to bring about progressively and as soon as possible the complete abolition or abandonment of the following institutions and practices, where they still exist and whether or not they are covered by the definition of slavery contained in article 1 of the Slavery Convention signed at Geneva on 25 September 1926: (a) Debt bondage, that is to say, the status or condition arising from a pledge by a debtor of his personal services or of those of a person under his control as security for a debt, if the value of those services as reasonably assessed is not applied towards the liquidation of the debt or the length and nature of those services are not respectively limited and defined (Art. 1a).

For Jean Allain, article 1 of the *Supplementary Convention* effectively supplemented the 1926 convention as it aimed to suppress four kinds of servile statuses – debt bondage, serfdom, forced marriage and child exploitation – in circumstances in which “the powers attached to the right of the ownership are not present” (Allain 2008: 18). This implied, if not attached to these powers – and thus not covered by the 1926 *Convention* – debt bondage would hold a servile status under the 1956 *Supplementary Convention*.

Accession to the *Supplementary Convention* by Afghanistan was dated 16 November 1966 and by Pakistan 20 March 1958, respectively. Conformity to the legal regulation of labour at the international level, however, does not necessarily imply that it was effective on the ground. Today, bondage and servile status remain an integral part of Central and South Asian capitalism (Breman 2008) and higher surpluses are achieved via intensive production by family labour (Ercelawn, Nauman 2004). Contemporary forms of bondage

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SupplementaryConventionAbolitionOfSlavery.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/SlaveryConvention.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C029](http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029)

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in Afghanistan and Pakistan are the result of a combination of elements that include intra- and inter-familial systems of dependence, extremely rigid social hierarchies, the overlapping of neoliberal monetary economics and the traditional moral economy. The nature and persistence of social asymmetries and unequal workforce structures have roots that connect the present with the history of labour exploitation in these regions.

In 2014, I began ethnographic research in the brick kilns around the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul. The objective was to analyse the aftermath of (post-)slavery and investigate contemporary forms of bondage and extreme dependence. In 2015, a group of brick kiln labourers' work trajectories brought me to Pakistan. For security reasons I could not follow them into where the kiln was located in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa area. However, through contacts provided by the workers' relatives and by relatives of some Pakistani families based in Italy, I had access to several brick kilns in the Gujrat district.

Indeed, beyond historical and geographical variables, ethnography conducted in different brick kilns in the two countries revealed a telling "nexus of methodological, epistemological, and ethical issues" (Marsden 2013: 229) useful in pinpointing the bonding forces of debt. For this reason, I will not analytically distinguish between narratives collected in Afghan and Pakistani brick kilns. Although the history of labour exploitation in the two countries would deserve specific attention, separately, I wish to emphasise here the transversal elements that are salient in both contexts. The following pages are a first assessment of the meetings and interviews carried out during these two preliminary periods of field research.

### Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Although the Emir Abdur Rahman banned slavery in Afghanistan in 1897, it was not until 1921 that a decree by *his* nephew Amanullah abolished it by law. Thereafter in 1923, in Afghanistan's first constitution, article 10 included the prohibition of forced labour. Despite these legal provisions, various forms of labour exploitation, along with human trafficking and sexual exploitation, continued throughout the twentieth century including

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(and to a certain extent particularly, as in the case of sexual exploitation) during the Communist, Mujaheddin and Taliban regimes (De Lauri 2012; Kakar 2006).

Various internal conflicts, tensions between different empires and colonies, invasions and war across the twentieth century have led to millions of Afghans displaced as refugees, relocated to neighbouring Pakistan, Iran and all over the world. With the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, not only was there a surge of Afghans returning but also internal migration to the capital for jobs and resources from humanitarian networks increased. Kabul's population went from less than a million to around four million, a demographic explosion almost unparalleled in the modern world<sup>4</sup>.

As observed by Alessandro Monsutti and Nick Miszak, "Kabul is another telling example of the general urbanization of capital; the development of the city illustrates the changes in the political economy towards a greater importance of investments in the 'built environment' for production and consumption including houses, roads, social services" (Monsutti, Miszak 2014: 185). Kabul's population boom has certainly worked as an "engine" for several economic sectors, especially the construction industry. This sector includes many different elements, from importing materials from abroad to producing bricks locally, from construction to the sale of buildings. Like all economic sectors in today's Afghanistan, the construction industry is strongly influenced by the flow of funds from humanitarian agencies, international investment and the military policies characterising the regimes of governance (particularly in Kabul) since the fall of the Taliban regime. Now that international funding is decreasing (interventions by aid agencies and international institutions follow the rhythm of geopolitics), the construction sector, like others, is vulnerable to a major economic downturn. Nevertheless, when walking around Kabul, one can still see many active construction sites. Some operate 24 hours a day, a novelty in Afghanistan, which has been undergoing a historical change from the "bazaar economy" to a neoliberal one. This transition is in part related to humanitarianism itself, which can be regarded as one of the main instruments used by

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<sup>4</sup> Kabul is ranked as 5th among the fastest growing cities and urban areas in the world, [http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/urban\\_growth1.html](http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/urban_growth1.html)

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donor institutions (mainly in Europe and the US) to export particular legal, political and economic models to the Global South<sup>5</sup>.

Although the morphology of construction sites is not uniform, it is possible to highlight common mechanisms such as the dynamics of labour recruitment. As in many other economic sectors in Afghanistan, recruiting procedures are to a large extent ethnically based and reflect social relations established on inter-familial connections and networks. On construction sites in Kabul, as in many other parts of the world, the main problems are workers' safety and the length of work shifts. However, it is at the edge of the city that situations of extreme dependence and the "cycles of debt" are found, specifically at the kilns that are producing bricks. Both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, brick kilns are nowadays seen as emblems of a so called "new slavery"<sup>6</sup> or as a form of servitude in which debt is hereditary and almost impossible to escape.

According to the 2014 Global Slavery Index, there are roughly 2,058,200 people being enslaved in Pakistan<sup>7</sup>. Debt bondage, in particular, is a practice that has long been documented in the history of South Asia and today it is the most common form of servitude globally (Knight 2012). In addition to it happening in brick kilns, this practice is reported in several other sectors of the Pakistan economy (Martin 2009; Upadhyayam 2004; for a different perspective see Khan 2010).

Article 11 of Chapter 1 (Fundamental Rights) in Pakistan's Constitution states:

(1) Slavery is non-existent and forbidden and no law shall permit or facilitate its introduction into Pakistan in any form; (2) All forms of forced labour and traffic in human beings are prohibited; (3) No child below the age of fourteen years shall be engaged in any factory or mine or any other hazardous employment; (4) Nothing in this Article shall be deemed to affect compulsory service: (a) by any person undergoing punishment for an offence against any law; or (b) required by any law for public purpose provided that no compulsory service shall be of a cruel nature or incompatible with human dignity.

Moreover, the Bonded Labour (Abolition) System Act (BLASA) was enacted in 1992 with its regulations formulated in 1995, and later the Prevention and Control of Human

<sup>5</sup> For related debates see for example Barnett 2011; Fassin, Pandolfi 2010; Mattei, Nader 2008.

<sup>6</sup> It is beyond the scope of this working paper to reflect on the limits and abuses of this category in the global context. See for example Bales 2012; Lebaron, Ayers 2013; O'Connell Davidson 2010; Quirk 2008.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/country/pakistan/>

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Trafficking Ordinance was enacted in 2002<sup>8</sup>. In spite of these regulations, Pakistan is considered to be a state where bondage and labour exploitation are deeply entrenched, affecting the lives of millions of people. The Institute of Social Justice in Islamabad reports that “unfortunately neither the BLASA nor the constitutional guarantees have brought any justice into the lives of millions of *haris* (share croppers), bonded labourers, forced labourers, child domestic labourers, slaves in mines and factories, women domestic servitudes, and victims of human trafficking and forced marriages”<sup>9</sup>. A 2011 report commissioned by the ILO maintains, in the same vein, that “Bonded labour, notably child bonded labour, is so pervasive in the brick kiln industry throughout South Asia that bricks for any project in Afghanistan, large or small, are *de facto* coming from kilns that utilise child bonded labour” (ILO 2011: 2). Therefore we can be sure that agencies and coalitions such as NATO and their projects in Afghanistan have used bricks made by children (Kamber 2011).



2. Brick kiln in Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri

<sup>8</sup> [www.fmu.gov.pk/docs/laws/Prevention\\_and\\_Control\\_of\\_Human\\_Trafficking\\_Ordinance\\_2002.pdf](http://www.fmu.gov.pk/docs/laws/Prevention_and_Control_of_Human_Trafficking_Ordinance_2002.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.isj.org.pk>

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According to Muhammad Javaid Iqbal, Joint Director of Labour Welfare in the Labour and Human Resource Department, Government of the Punjab (Pakistan), families in the brick kilns are “virtual prisoners” insofar as their debts affect their entire social life. Migrants and “low-caste” families, in particular, characterise labour in the kilns as they are more easily “subject to physical, economic and social exploitation” (Iqbal 2006: 100).



3. Man resting, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri

### Narratives of debt

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The actors most intimately involved in the bondage dynamics are the kiln owners, the brick-maker households and the *jamadar* (recruiter or mediator). During fieldwork research in autumn 2014, I met several workers employed in kilns around Kabul. One of them, Ali<sup>10</sup>, who is 18 years old, told me his story:

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<sup>10</sup> His name, like the others that follow, has been changed.

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My father died when I was very young. I don't remember him. My older sister remembers him but she never says anything about him. [...] I've been working at the kiln for six years. Maybe seven. [...] The brother of my mother decided to take me here. We didn't have anything to eat and he could not continue to support us. For the first four years the money I was earning had to go to Mr. Berhuz (the owner of the kiln) to pay off the debt. My mother always reminded me to keep working because her brother needed to give Mr. Berhuz the money he had used to pay off our debt with Mr. Enam [a carpet merchant, among other things]. [...]. Now I want to get married. Mr. Berhuz was gentle, although I never talked to him. But he has solved the problem with Mr. Enam who many say is a respectful person, but the truth is he's cruel. No heart indeed. Once he came to our own home insulting my uncle and demanding some money from my mother. Mr. Berhuz paid my uncle's debt to Mr. Enam [...]. Mr. Berhuz was correct. When I finally settled our debt my boss informed me that Mr. Berhuz would let me keep working for him. [...] The problem is that I have to work and work [...]. Sometimes I cannot sleep. When I'm too tired I cannot sleep<sup>11</sup>.

The cycle of debt Ali found himself in at a young age involved his maternal uncle, a carpet merchant (Enam), a “mediator” (Obaidullah, the recruiter, described by Ali as a respectful man) and the owner of the kiln (Berhuz). According to his story, his uncle borrowed a sum of money from the merchant in order to ensure support for the mother of Ali and her two other sons for a period of time after the loss of her husband. At one point, the uncle's relationship with the merchant had deteriorated and, through the recruiter, he contacted the owner of the kiln who paid the debt to the merchant. Then Ali ended up having to work for the kiln owner in order to pay back that debt. After four years the debt was paid off (making Ali's story a very rare one) and Ali continued to work for the kiln owner as a salaried worker.

In contexts where human labour is lacking value and is seen as surplus, dependence may not merely be opposed to freedom. As James Ferguson puts it,

dependence is not the worst of outcomes. To be dependent on someone is to be able to make at least some limited claims on him or her. The desirable alternative to such claim-making is normally not independence or autonomy (indeed, that would be possible only under truly exceptional conditions). Rather, the realistic alternative to dependence is more often an ability to become a dependant of (and thus to be able to make claims on) an actor with a greater capacity to provide and protect (whether this is an individual, a firm, an NGO, or indeed a political party or the state) (Ferguson 2013: 231).

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Ali, 7 November 2014, Kabul, Afghanistan.

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In line with these insights, Ali saw the creation of the debt with Berhuz (the owner of the kiln) through Obaidullah (the recruiter) as an improvement after the relationship with Enam (the merchant). From Ali's point of view this is not simply the expression of submission or lack of agency rather, it is the expression of a realistic appraisal of the social condition in which he found himself. This is emphasised as Ali says, "Without my uncle my mother would never be able to feed us. I owe a lot to my uncle. And indeed, I owe something to Obaidullah too. [...] This is the world I live in"<sup>12</sup>.

The history of debt is marked by a "profound moral confusion" (Graeber 2011) and indeed debt relationships are characterised by a certain level of moral ambivalence. In conditions of deprivation and anomy, systems of interpersonal dependence and debt are first and foremost the concrete manifestations of the possibility of creating meaningful social relations and economic ties. This social environment of diffused extreme dependency and debt-relationships, however, creates the very conditions under which dependence often escalates into exploitation.

In both Afghanistan and Pakistan, debt chains are essential drivers of the brick industry because they guarantee cheap (young) labour and a continuous supply of workers. Pakistani brick kilns – particularly in the Punjab and in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – are the chief primary source industry in which bonded labour constitutes a consolidated reality. Most of the workers are illiterate and landless people who are attracted by the possibility of advances/loans. Since there is a regular deduction from the wages to repay the advances, workers often ask for additional advances, which cannot then be repaid. Through this cycle, in a family loans can pass from one generation to another (Upadhyaya 2004: 131). It is not uncommon for a debt to be sold off several times, each time at a higher interest rate. The debt cannot usually be repaid completely, thus families and their members instead of their debt following them they are required to "follow" their debt from one kiln to another. In Gujrat I met several families who have worked in a number of kilns over the past thirty years as their debt was continuously re-sold. Sometimes a change of kilns is a worker's "choice", or sometimes it results from business negotiations between owners. During my

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Ali, 7 November 2014, Kabul, Afghanistan.

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fieldwork in Gujrat in June/July 2015 all the owners I met indicated that it is a worker's preference to ask for advances. Hafiz, the owner of a kiln in Gujrat told me that the system of advances "is related to the nature of this kind of work, but is something agreed upon through individual contracts. These people are not slaves. They earn good money and they mostly waste it. They want to live this way"<sup>13</sup>.



*4. Carbon, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

Aman, 19, and Zalmai, 17, are two Pashtun brothers who had been working at brick kilns for several years at the time of our meeting in autumn 2014. Having worked at three different brick kilns, they had to still repay their father's advances that he received years

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Hafiz, 23 June 2015, Gujrat, Pakistan.

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before. The following is one of our conversations after their work day at a kiln outside Kabul.

Zalmai: Aman is a hard worker. He's never tired [Aman laughs]. Really, I never saw him tired. I would like to be strong like him.

Aman: He can't be strong like me [both brothers laugh].

Antonio: Indeed working here is a tiring job.

Zalmai: Yes it is.

Aman: Yes, it is tiring. Now it's easier, but when you are a kid it is difficult. Look at them [two young boys resting in the dirt not far from us]. They are good boys. They are here with their entire families like the others, but they work much more than their fathers, who are lazy men.

Antonio: When did you start doing this job?

Aman: We started living in the kiln with our family when we were very young. I started helping to make bricks when I was 10. Zalmai was 9. The place where we started was bad.

Zalmai: I didn't like that place either.

Aman: Once a boy fainted. He hadn't had a drink all day. There were problems between the families who worked there [...].

Antonio: How did it happen that your family moved there?

Aman: When our father had asked for a loan from the owner of the kiln we all moved there. [...] He was sick and he passed away soon after. When he died the boss told us we had to work harder in order to honour our respected father. I worked there for three years.

Antonio: What happened then?

Zalmai: We moved to another kiln.

Aman: Once the boss told us it was our last day there. The next day we met Shafiqullah [the recruiter of the second kiln] and he explained our duties to us.

Zalmai: It was better than the first kiln.

Aman: Here is fine too. You know, nobody would say this is a good job. But still, it's better than nothing.

Antonio: Are you finished with your debt now?

Aman: No.

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Antonio: How long do you still have to work to repay this debt?

Aman: We can't repay the advances. If we want to change kilns we have to ask a new owner to cover our advances here. We need money so we may ask for advances from another kiln owner in the future<sup>14</sup>.

Although generally absent in the academic literature, the perspective of employers is important in order to better understand the moralities within the environment of the kiln. The following day I spoke with the owner where the brothers worked, Rasul.

Antonio: Are you aware of the fact that most reports state that brick kilns in Afghanistan exploit workers through mechanisms of debt?

Rasul: It is not correct to say "exploit workers". At least not in my kiln. In Afghanistan if you have a problem, if you need money you can't simply go to the bank and ask for a loan. None of the men working here would get a loan from a bank. Workers prefer to have advances. It's their choice. Most of them would never agree to work without advances.

Antonio: What are the interest rates?

Rasul: Most of the time there are no interest rates. When workers want to move to another kiln the owner of that kiln repays my advances and gives new advances to workers. [...] You know, we cannot say we accept the rule of the market for certain things and not for others. It is a reality of every society that loans and debts are the basis of the economic system. It is a worker's preference to ask for advances.

Antonio: What about children who work at kilns?

Rasul: What I do is agree to a contract [contracts are non-written and are generally coordinated by the recruiter] with the head of the household. It is their choice to keep their children with them and to organize their work. What I expect from anybody is to respect his word. It is a moral duty to respect a contract. The recruiter also needs to be very careful. When he acts as a guarantor, he is the one responsible for the loan. Sometimes I don't know workers personally. But again, it is not my choice to have children working in my kiln. The heads of households bring them here in order to make more money<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Aman and Zalmi, 8 November 2014, Kabul, Afghanistan.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Rasul, 9 November 2014, Kabul, Afghanistan.

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*5. Kid at work, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

In conditions of poverty and uncertainty, “as long as the utility of work is higher than that of non-work, parents will send their children to the labour market” (Bhukuth 2005: 290). The report commissioned by the ILO (2011) suggests that parents in brick kilns should not be considered unscrupulous or less caring than other parents. The interviews collected for the report show that parents prefer to keep children working with them in the kiln instead of sending them off to the dangers of street work alone. Moreover, the report reiterates, parents are aware of the effects that working at kilns have on their children.

Massoud is a Pashtun man who lives with his family in a kiln nearby Kabul. At the time of our meeting he had been working for 17 years at brick kilns. During our conversation he explained why his 11 year-old son works with him while his daughters, 15 and 8, do the household’s domestic work:

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Massoud: Everybody needs to contribute for the good of the family. Look at my hands: these are the scars of labour. My son will have the same hands. [...] It is important that Abdul [his son] works here with me. I didn't want him to work somewhere else. Here he works close to me and he can learn better from my experience.

Antonio: You also have two daughters, right?

Massoud: My daughters take care of home duties. I don't want them to spend all day among other men<sup>16</sup>.



*6. Bricks production, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

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<sup>16</sup> Conversation with Massoud, 7 November 2014, Kabul, Afghanistan.

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*7. Domestic work in the kiln, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

Although there are both children and adult female workers at kilns (generally, girls are allowed to work at kilns only until they become adolescent, at which point they get married), in Afghanistan the majority of kiln workers are boys and men. In fact, the gender composition of workers is an important distinction between the organisational structures of Afghan kilns and those in countries such as India, Nepal and, to some extent, Pakistan. In Afghanistan women and girls are normally in charge of family work (e.g. cooking, siblings caring). In comparison, in Pakistan women are found to be working as *pathera* (a person who prepares unbaked bricks, including preparation of clay) family labour (PILER 2004), even though a consistent number of households do not report to involve women in work activities that imply “public exposure”. It is worth emphasising that family work done

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by girls is unpaid and mostly undercounted in child labour statistics. While it is generally regarded as “light work”, the age of the child, the numbers of hours and interference with school education “can easily push family work into the child labour category” (ILO 2011: 43).



*8. Siblings caring, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

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9. Siblings caring, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri

Afghanistan represents, as mentioned, a case-study with specific features in terms of gender composition of kilns' workforce – something which is related to a combination of customary values (e.g. *Pashtunwali*, the code of behavior of the Pashtuns), a particular interpretation of Islamic religion and family structure. In South Asia, it seems that a large number of women (especially married women) are engaged in brick kiln activities (Das 2013: 100).

Only on a few occasions did I have the chance to talk with women to explore these dynamics. Syeda, an 18 year-old girl I met in Gujrat, told that she must be fully involved in the brick production together with her husband because “in Pakistan, once you ask for a

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loan you become debtor forever”<sup>17</sup>. Her fatalistic thought sparks the following: What role do ideas of “future” play in the lives of the bonded workers and can work at the brick kiln be simply a phase in the working life, or does it comprise of the debtor/worker’s whole life?



*10. Workers houses, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

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<sup>17</sup> Conversation with Syeda, 29 June 2015, Gujrat, Pakistan.

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*11. Workers houses, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

### **Bonded future**

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While discussing kiln work in Badhaber (Peshawar, Pakistan), Niaz Muhammad et al. (2010) emphasizes the constant health risk that the bonded debtors are subjected to and the absence of ambition for their own future. The concept of a “tomorrow” for kiln workers can be understood as a “bonded future” because, in their social environment, debt is a chain that is almost impossible to break. Yet, the interviews in Gujrat complicate this picture, as most of the kiln workers confirmed that they prefer to ask for advances and would never accept a job in a kiln without the option for advances. There is an ambiguous relationship between the system of advances and the workers’ attempts “to expand their

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narrow room for manoeuvre” (Breman 2010: 19) in trying to optimise their living conditions.



*12. Workers houses, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

In a context of structural inequality and social asymmetries, the idea of “free choice” cannot be used as a paradigmatic tool to obtain a deep understanding of the dynamic of bondage. While showing me his house (see photo below), Hassan spoke about his life in a number of different kilns:

Hassan: I like to enjoy life. I have a TV, a motorbike [he laughs].

Antonio: How many kids do you have?

Hassan: Four.

Antonio: Do they go to school?

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Hassan: No school. They are illiterate. They are here with me.

Antonio: Why do you prefer to have advances instead of a regular salary?

Hassan: We always need money. Outside of the kiln we have nothing. All we have is what you see here<sup>18</sup>.



*13. Hassan's house, Gujrat, Pakistan. Photo by A. De Lauri*

The rhetoric of “voluntary choice” (Genicot 2002) systematically narrated by owners is an expression of the monetary-individualistic morality that dominates the contemporary kiln industry. The same is for workers’ consumerism. Both help to understand how modern day bondage is a phenomenon deeply rooted in local social webs yet with global connections and implications. Before concluding our conversation, Hassan shared, “As long as I can buy things to enjoy life, it’s fine”.

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<sup>18</sup> Conversation with Hassan, 29 June 2015, Gujrat, Pakistan.

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In his *Life within Limits*, Michael Jackson suggests:

Though it is rare to meet people who are completely and permanently satisfied with their lot, it is rarer to meet people who expect nothing of life, abjectly accepting the status quo, never imagining that their situations could or should be socially, spiritually, or materially improved. This sense that well-being remains elusive, transitory, and unevenly distributed is felt by the rich as well as the poor, and in all societies (Jackson 2011: IX).

However, it becomes crucial to understand the extent to which the imagination of the future is affected by severe inter-generational social exclusion and structural inequality. In a kiln in Gujrat, an illiterate 14-year-old girl told me “I don’t know what I like. I never thought about what I could do. I’m just here”<sup>19</sup>.

It is important to focus, alongside the difficulty to imagine the future, on the atomization process at work at the kilns. Although labour and the cycles of debt are embodied in complex social networks made of continuous exchanges and interactions at familial and inter-familial level, this social density falls apart as soon as workers reflect on their future and their working conditions. This translates into the absence of collective action, a phenomenon that seems to be very common within the brick industry. For instance, in their study of the Chennai brick kilns in India, Isabelle Guérin et. al. (2007: 602) reports that they “have encountered no case of a union or any other form of collective action with the aim of defending the rights of workers”. In the Gujrat district of Pakistan there are a few workers’ unions but they so far have had no impact on the brick sector, apart from a few individual legal cases. As for Afghanistan, Michael Kamber (2011) quotes Mir Ali, the former director of the All Afghanistan labour union who works in the kilns with his children: “We are slaves here because when you owe someone money, then of course you’re a slave. If we try to raise our voice, then the owner of the brick kilns will tell us to empty their house and go from here”. This is certainly an important element, yet the owners’ power of repression would not be effective without the sense of atomization and uncertainty that overwhelms workers at the brick kilns. Waheed, a Punjabi man who has

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<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Amina, 24 June 2015, Gujrat, Pakistan.

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been working at kilns for 21 years, confirmed this during one of our conversations in Gujrat:

Everybody looks after his own interests. No matter that we are all in the same condition. If I need something I have to do it by myself. [...] Of course I care about my family, but that's it. [...]. There are 12 households living in this kiln, but none of us knows where we will be tomorrow. If someone needs money he will try to look for another owner who can pay the loan here and give him new advances<sup>20</sup>.

In Kabul, Aman underlined the same point: “I grew up as a debtor. I inherited my father's debt and I'm totally alone in my struggle”<sup>21</sup>. On one hand, bondage is made possible by a dense and articulated social web, which in any case does offer a benefit of saving individuals and families from starvation, as outlined by some workers during our conversations. On the other hand, the possibility of escape from bondage rests mainly on external factors (for example interventions by NGOs and Unions), and is perceived by workers as an individual achievement. This state of atomization seems to be a point of convergence in two ways: between systems of dependence and the radical acceptance of the rule of the monetary economy and between social hierarchy and moral economy. The mutual relationship between atomization and a bonded future is the cornerstone of both the self-perception and the life trajectories of the workers.

## Conclusion

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The narratives of workers and owners reported in this paper illustrate the diverse moralities and labour dynamics that articulate brick kilns in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The bonding forces of debt in conditions of poverty and its inter-generational impact create the condition for forms of exploitation, which are interlinked with monetary morality and consumerism and connect the local with the global. The once “free person” that creates the debt through the system of loans/advances enters into a level of social relationships structured by different degrees of dependence, thus engages in the prerequisites of bondage. This equation interrogates a series of assumptions that are

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<sup>20</sup> Conversation with Waheed, 23 June 2015, Gujrat, Pakistan.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Aman, 8 November 2014, Kabul, Afghanistan.

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generally overlooked by modern slavery experts, namely the idea of freedom that lies behind it (Prakash 1990), the links between the history of debt and the history of slavery (Clarence-Smith 2013), and the historical transformations of bondage. According to Sudipto Mundle (1979), debt bondage in India gradually substituted traditional relationships of forced labour and emerged as a way to gain control of labour and keep labour costs low in a new agricultural (and then industrial) situation. For Afghanistan, the genealogies of debt bondage are yet to be explored. Today, consolidated social hierarchies – linked to the system of caste (in Pakistan), gender inequality and the uncertainty produced by mass-mobility – merge with a form of neoliberalism that is globally characterised by a scarcity of access to credit. This exposes the economic systems of the two countries to ever more unequal re-distribution and forces people to create debts that cannot be repaid. To some extent it is possible to argue that the bonded labourer has more access to work than the non-bonded labourer. Thus, this suggests the bonded relationship and dependence can provide a measure of security in a situation of grinding poverty and uncertainty, one in which the worker gets some protection in exchange for accepting his or her role. Fluctuating from interpersonal dependence to severe exploitation, it is on the axes of these degrees of dependence and their co-existential nature with atomization that bondage and slavery research should continue to focus. Therefore, by doing so, enabling an investigation of “free choice” and the extent to which it can lead to unfree lives while simultaneously exploring evolutions in the connection between local bondage and global neoliberalism.

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