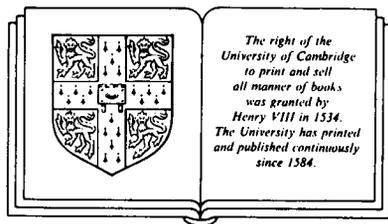


BONDED HISTORIES:
GENEALOGIES OF LABOR
SERVITUDE IN
COLONIAL INDIA

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Introduction: the discourse of freedom

It is impossible that any man can possess any property by a more intimate and perfect right than that by which every man possesses the property in his own person; and the property in the profits of his lawful labour follows as a necessary consequence; all acts of capture and violence, buying and selling, being vitiated and rendered null and void by previously existing, permanent and inalienable right of the man to himself, a right which, like many other rights, may be in abeyance, but which can never be lost, and may always be resumed when the fear of violence or the pressure of actual force is removed.

W. Adam, *The Law and Custom of Slavery in British India*, 1840

In the nineteenth century when colonial officials encountered slavery and bondage all over India, they came across a class of agricultural laborers called *kamiās* in the eastern province of Bihar. Living primarily in the southern part of the province, these laborers were distinguished by long-term ties to landlords known as *mālīks*. A *kamia* worked all his life for the same landlord, earning wages for the days that he worked and expecting assistance when needed. For his son's marriage, he received some grain, money, and a small plot of land from the landlord. After the conclusion of this transaction, called *kamiauti*, the son, too, became the same *malik's* *kamia*. Women also became attached to the same master through the labor relationship of their *kamia* husbands. Thus, women too, along with their *kamia* husbands, worked in the paddy fields of the *malīks*, and both were subjected to a system of restrictions: restrictions on their movements, their labor, and their persons. Classified as slavery and serfdom initially, after the abolition of slavery in 1843 this *kamia-malik* relationship was increasingly reported, studied, legislated, and represented as debt-bondage. The *kamiās* and *malīks* also executed written deeds that treated the money advanced as loans and stipulated labor servitude so long as the loans remained outstanding. Although the colonial government regarded this servitude in exchange for loans as an advance over slavery, it was perturbed by the

continued existence of unfreedom. With history seen as a steady march towards progress, this suspension of natural rights to freedom appeared as an anachronism. Thus, it hoped that as economic progress occurred and modern education spread, the laborers would realize the value of freedom. Power would be rendered incapable of suppressing man's free self and bondage would take its place in the museum of past horrors. But as British rule in India neared its end, the earlier hopes appeared to have been sanguine. The 1930s witnessed the British make one last attempt to end bondage, even as they despaired that unfreedom was too deeply entrenched for any quick and easy uprooting.

Representing history as a progression from unfreedom to freedom, as a process of restoring the loss of natural rights to liberty, colonial records voice a powerful discourse. Not only is the notion of freedom deeply entrenched in our consciousness, the fact that its negation occurred in a region such as Bihar makes the discourse particularly compelling. Agriculturally relatively backward and stagnant, socially mired in caste oppressions and class exploitation, its political structure eroded by corruption and wracked by landlord and state terror, Bihar today often evokes revulsion in other parts of India. It is looked upon as a region where feudal domination continues unabated, in violent conflict with agents of modernity and progress. Even in the colonial period, Bihar was looked upon as a relative backwater. Hundreds of miles west of Delhi, it was too far from the old imperial center. And flanked in the east by the colonial center in Calcutta, it was dwarfed by the importance lent to Bengal, with its coastal access and British headquarters. Far from the center of the medieval empire, and overshadowed by the energy of colonial commerce in Calcutta, Bihar's marginality as a hinterland is at least several centuries old. Because of this history of marginality, the region appears to be a place overlooked by the forces of modernity and change, lending credibility to the discourse of freedom's suggestion that the kamias' bondage is also a backward legacy of Bihar's pre-modern past.

Historians venturing to write the history of the kamias in this region are confronted by a history already written in colonial records. Documenting freedom's unsuccessful struggle against bondage, these records establish the free-unfree opposition as the privileged instrument for writing the history of social relations. Thus, the kamias appear already documented as unfree persons in these records. In recording the kamias as laborers whose rights were suspended because of their indebtedness, however, the colonial

documents disguise two historical formulations as ontological facts. The first formulation, owed to post-Enlightenment Europe, consists of the claim that freedom constitutes humanity's natural being. The second proposition, characteristic of the bourgeois political economy, contains the representation that money forms the basis for social relations. Referring to this attribution of power to money, Karl Marx remarked:¹

people place in a thing (money) the faith which they do not place in each other. But why do they have faith in the thing? Obviously because that thing is an *objectified relation* between persons. . . . it [money] can have a social property only because individuals have alienated their own social relationship from themselves so that it takes the form of a thing.

In this passage, Marx was referring to the phenomenon in capitalist societies that he later called commodity fetishism. But since this fetishism referred to the representation in which social relations appear grounded in the market exchange of commodities, it may seem to have very little relevance for debt-bondage. After all, whereas commodity fetishism was founded on the free exchange of labor power as a commodity, debt-bondage prevented free exchange. It is important to note, however, that debt-bondage not only implied that social relations were based on money but also that its identity was derived from the opposition it posed to free labor. In this sense, debt-bondage animates an inanimate object like money with a power to bind people, and it naturalizes free labor by positing bondage as the suspension of "natural" rights to freedom.

With the power of money and the right to freedom appearing as ontological facts, debt-bondage also conceals its historicity. Instead of revealing itself as a product of discourses that naturalized money and freedom, it comes disguised as an obvious effect of money loaned to hitherto free persons. As such an obvious condition, it seems as applicable to ancient as to modern societies. In support of its claim to universal applicability, the antiquity of severe punishment for the non-payment of debts can be invoked. In ancient Greek law, for example, outstanding debts were treated as thefts and debtors were punished as robbers.² But debt-bondage in ancient Greece, according to Moses Finley, was not imposed as a punishment for default in repaying the loan. Instead, its purpose was to create relations of

¹ *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (New York, 1973), 160.

² Moses Finley, *Economy and Society in Ancient Greece*, eds. Brent D. Shaw and Richard P. Saller (London, 1981), 152.

dependence between unequals. As Finley notes, “it was only between classes, between rich and poor, to put it in loose and simple terms, that debt led to bondage in practice.”³ If servitude was not a punishment for default but a condition that followed a loan transaction between classes, then it was not the power of money that bonded people but the fact that persons advancing and receiving money were of unequal ranks. And so long as people were legally recognized as unequal to begin with, insofar as unequal ranks were considered “natural,” bondage could only be a particular condition that applied to certain juridically ranked groups: it could not result in unfreedom since people were differentiated by inequality rather than brought together as free. If ancient Greece shows that debt-bondage’s claim to universality is untenable, the same is also true for ancient India. Take, for example, the term *kamia*. It appears closely related to the Sanskrit *karmakāra* and the Pali *kammakāra* which, according to D. R. Chanana, are defined in the ancient texts as one who earns his living for a *bhattā-vetana*, that is, for cooked rice and wages for fixed periods.⁴ While some *kammakaras*’ position was marked by a debt-relationship, the term as such denoted work for wages, and the texts often speak of these laborers as servants working for wages and distinguish them from *dāsas* (slaves).⁵ There is no notion of bondage associated with these *kammakaras*, nor is there a term for free laborers to which unfree laborers could be opposed. In fact, the irrelevance of the free–unfree opposition becomes clear when one text uses the term *kammakara* to refer to a monk named Nanda. The text calls Nanda, who was Buddha’s brother, a *kammakara* by accusing him of having become a monk in order to get, as a sort of wage, fairies in heaven!⁶ Even the term *dasa*, usually glossed as slave, was used to refer to those who were subordinated as “non-Aryan” outsiders. From these textual references, it becomes clear that the *karmakaras* and *kammakaras* were marked by status and rank, and that, even when they were involved in debt-relationships, the notion of laborers rendered unfree by loans was irrelevant to these groups. It is not surprising that there is no term for bondage in Sanskrit. Similarly, it should cause no surprise to learn

³ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁴ Dev Raj Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India* (New Delhi, 1960), 129.

⁵ Chanana notes that a *kammakara* could either be a *bhātaka* (working for a wage) or an *ahātaka* (a person mortgaged). But unlike the modern *kamia*, the *ahātaka*’s wages served to redeem the sum advanced against his person (p. 131). For a discussion of the difference between *kammakaras* and *dasas*, see p. 147.

⁶ Chanana, *Slavery in Ancient India*, 170.

that the ancient Greeks also had no name for what we call debt-bondage.⁷

Bondage as a general category, whether caused by money or any other object, is the product of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment discourses that discovered humanity and revealed liberty as the essence of humanity. To be sure, the notion of liberty is of considerable antiquity, as is the slave-free opposition. But in classical societies, slave and free represented legal statuses connected with the classification of people as barbarians and citizens: free status was associated with citizenship, wealth, and membership in the community, just as enslavement was imposed on the poor and foreigners, who were called barbarians.⁸ Furthermore, the institution of slavery was taken for granted, and Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, defended it as a "natural" institution.⁹ Even the Sophists' argument that free and slave statuses were social conventions and hence contrary to natural justice did not amount to equating liberty with a natural human condition.¹⁰ The conception of freedom as a natural right owes itself to the eighteenth-century doctrines of natural rights and laws, even though, as David Brion Davis shows, the record of the Enlightenment *philosophes* is mixed; while speaking of natural rights, many of them used the notion of public good to justify slavery.¹¹ It is also a fact that while Europe celebrated the emergence of Man, it enslaved Africans and transported them to the plantations in the Americas. But whatever its record in extending or curbing slavery, the discourse of freedom's premise that denial of freedom constituted the negation of man's natural being formed the context for both pro-slavery and anti-slavery positions. Rousseau's forthright anti-slavery stance carried this notion, as did Montesquieu's tortuous defense on the grounds that Africans were not quite human and that people from tropical lands needed coercion because the climate made them slothful.

⁷ Finley, *Economy and Society*, 150–1.

⁸ Thomas Weidemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (Baltimore and London, 1981), 15–35 *passim*. In Rome, according to Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), the legal notion of absolute ownership—rendering the slave into a "thing" and making him appropriate for dominium—had the same effect that the distinction between citizens and barbarians had in Greece: both marked the slaves with "social death" (pp. 28–32). In both cases, then, slaves could not be "free" persons rendered unfree by slavery; dishonor and natal alienation defined their status from the very beginning.

⁹ Robert Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle," in *Slavery in Classical Antiquity: Views and Controversies*, ed. M.I. Finley (New York, 1960).

¹⁰ Joseph Vogt, *Ancient Slavery and the Ideal of Man* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 14.

¹¹ *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), 391–421 *passim*.

Articulated in a variety of ways by the *philosophes*, the deep-rooted existence of freedom as a natural right is also owed to the establishment of bourgeois social relations in the modern epoch. By making labor power into an exchangeable commodity, capitalism represented slavery as the opposite of that free exchange. As Eugene Genovese remarks, “The power of slavery as a cultural myth in modern societies derives from its antithetical relationship to the hegemonic ideology of bourgeois social relations of production.”¹² Opposed to free labor and free individuality, slavery became tantamount to the suppression of innate rights, giving rise to what Michel Foucault called the “repressive hypothesis” in his study of sexuality. By this hypothesis, according to Foucault, power presents itself only as a restraining force, as a thing “that only has the negative on its side, a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable only of posting limits . . .”¹³ Consequently, when servitude appeared as the negation of freedom, as the subjection of an anterior human essence, as a system of *restrictions* on freedom, it looked as if, banished from the realm of free labor, power found refuge only in slavery. So, the discourse of freedom’s formulation of slavery as the suppression of natural existence is no simple matter of definition, innocent of power relations. On the contrary, this conception makes power visible only in its juridical form, that is, as a system of restraints and restrictions, and renders its role in producing and constituting free individuals invisible. The naturalization of free labor that consequently occurs through the recognition of its Other—unfreedom—makes the description of bondage a purely analytic exercise. Neither rooted in history nor complicit in power, the analysis of bondage, servitude, and slavery as different degrees of unfreedom presents itself as self-evident distinctions while privileging free labor as outside the reach of power relations.

This empowered and empowering classification of social relations in terms of the free—unfree opposition occupies an enchanting presence in our midst. What makes this presence persuasive is the persistence of certain institutional features of slavery from ancient to modern times. David Brion Davis convincingly argues for this continuity from ancient to modern times, pointing to enduring institutional practices, such as the treatment of the slave as a thing, legal codes and regulations, and the moral-ideological problems it

¹² *From Rebellion to Revolution* (Baton Rouge and London, 1979), xiii.

¹³ *The History of Sexuality, I: An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980), 85.

posed throughout its existence.¹⁴ Orlando Patterson's sociological analysis of slavery across time and space as a form of power relations involving the "social death" of the slaves also contains a persuasive argument in favor of continuity. But continuity of slavery as a system of domination does not necessarily imply persistence of unfreedom, or at least not in an unchanged form, across time and space. As David Brion Davis writes, "Today, however, we automatically contrast slavery with free labor or with various modern ideals of individual autonomy. Through most of history such antonyms would have appeared absurd or contradictory."¹⁵ And yet, this is what Orlando Patterson implies when he concludes that the struggle against social death gave birth to the notion of freedom.¹⁶ But if David Brion Davis's view is correct, and if Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff's wider claims flowing from their analysis of African slavery in terms of the slave-kin continuum hold,¹⁷ then the free-unfree opposition has not existed through all of our history, and the struggle against slavery could not have always implied a desire for freedom at all times. If in "premodern societies the salient characteristic of slavery was its antithetical relation to the normal network of kinship ties of dependency, protection, obligation, and privilege,"¹⁸ then slavery could not have always meant unfreedom, and the struggle against the disabilities that the slaves were subjected to was unlikely to invoke freedom in the same sense at all times and places. From the present standpoint, however, modern struggles against slavery and the emergence of free labor appear to have their origins in antiquity. Consequently, a continuum extending from slavery to freedom becomes available for arranging a variety of different statuses—slavery, serfdom, debt-bondage, free labor. Although it is true that these statuses represent historically given categories, their arrangement as a spectrum of conditions makes sense only in that it suggests a progressive restoration of a lost essence—freedom.

¹⁴ *The Problem of Slavery*, 30–31.

¹⁵ *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), 15.

¹⁶ "And so it was that freedom came into the world. Before slavery people simply could not have conceived of the thing we call freedom." Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 340.

¹⁷ "Here [in African societies], the antithesis of 'slavery' is not 'freedom' qua autonomy but rather 'belonging.'" "African 'Slavery' as an Institution of Marginality," in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (Madison, 1977), 17. Interestingly, Patterson concurs with this view when he states that in most non-Western societies, where a "personalistic idiom of power" prevailed, the opposite of slavery was not freedom. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 27–28.

¹⁸ Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 15–16.

This mistaken reading of the continuity in the institution of slavery as a continuous history of the free–unfree opposition, leading to its resolution in free labor, characterizes colonial records. This should not cause any surprise, for the era of colonial domination, particularly in the nineteenth century, coincided, on the one hand, with the hegemonic rise of the western conception of history as progress and, on the other hand, with the triumph of capitalism on a world scale. In a colonial context, however, the belief in progress had a specific mode of articulation owing to the fact that, as conquered and dominated subjects, Indians represented the Other. As this Other, Indians lived in a time very different from that of the British. Their world belonged to a remote past, separated from the modern world of their masters. So virtually since the beginning of colonial rule, for British administrators and Orientalists, contemporary India existed as the vestige of a classical India that was made increasingly visible through religious texts. However valued and admired this classical India may have been by Orientalists, its basis in the denial of coevalness—a denial that, according to Johannes Fabian, characterizes anthropology even today¹⁹—meant that it could become easily devalued when the admiration for Indian “traditions” gave way to demands for reforms and progress. This began to happen in the early nineteenth century. In the changed context, the reduction of contemporary India as a mere signifier of classical India saw contemporaneous social conditions criticized as outmoded and uncivilized. And for the comparative understanding of such uncivilized and “inhuman” conditions such as *kamia*–*malik* relations, ancient slavery and medieval serfdom, rather than modern “wage slavery,” provided the appropriate framework. Representing the past, and embodying the reign of unfreedom in the past, the *kamias*’ placement in the continuum extending from slavery to freedom became the mode in which the doctrine of progress was pronounced. In this pronouncement, because the time of the British was separated from the time of the *kamias*—the observer was divorced from the observed—the slavery, serfdom, debt-bondage, and free labor continuum emerged as the natural course of history, thus disguising the role of colonial discourse in the production of this knowledge. Of course, what lent strength to this discourse was the emerging dominance of bourgeois relations. Historians and economists of India are divided over when and to what extent, if at all, capitalism was established in colonial India. Without entering this debate, it is

¹⁹ *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York, 1983).

abundantly clear from the existing literature that objectification of social relations was well in place by the late nineteenth century.²⁰ This means that not only the world-wide triumph of capitalism but also the form that its presence took in India lent power to the doctrine of progress articulated in the colonial discourse. As a result, the history of slavery, serfdom, and debt-bondage emerged as progressive steps in the direction towards free labor.

Colonial records embody the presentist history that the slavery to freedom continuum fabricates. This fabrication can only be exposed if it is interrogated, challenged, and historicized. The existing historiography of slavery and bondage in India, although impressive,²¹ has failed to interrogate the discourse of freedom. Consequently, it often ends up arranging a variety of social relations in terms of a continuum, thereby making power relations appear primarily as a system of restrictions and suppressions.²² Of course, not all historians have accepted the discourse of freedom without resistance. The most notable example of this resistance is Jan Breman's seminal work on bonded labor in south Gujarat which escapes the free-unfree conception by situating the laborers and their domination by the landlords in patron-client ties animated by the Hindu caste system.²³ But his work does not address the question as

²⁰ The following constitutes a small sample of the vast and growing literature dealing with the late nineteenth-century social changes objectifying agrarian relations in land and money. Jairus Banaji, "Small Peasantry and Capitalist Domination: Deccan Districts in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 12 (Special Number, August 1977); Christopher John Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy 1880-1955: The Tamilnad Countryside* (Delhi, 1984); Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure, and Politics 1919-1947* (Cambridge, 1986); B. B. Chaudhuri, "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal-1859-1885," *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), 7, 1-2 (1970), and "The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947," *Indian Historical Review* (hereafter *IHR*), 2, 1 (July 1975); Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978), ch. 12; and D. A. Washbrook, "Economic Development and Social Stratification in Rural Madras: The 'Dry Region,' 1878-1929," in *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of Africa and India*, eds. Clive Dewey and A. G. Hopkins (London, 1978).

²¹ For examples, see Benedicte Hjejle, "Slavery and Agricultural Bondage in South India in the Nineteenth Century," *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 15, 1-2 (1967); Sudipto Mundle, *Backwardness and Bondage: Agrarian Relations in a South Bihar District* (New Delhi, 1979); and *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India*, eds. Utsa Patnaik and Manjari Dingwaney (Madras, 1985).

²² For recent examples, see the essays by Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar in Patnaik and Dingwaney, *Chains of Servitude*.

²³ *Patronage and Exploitation: Emerging Agrarian Relations in South Gujarat, India* (Berkeley, 1974). In my view, Dharma Kumar's objection, stated more than two decades ago, that the terms used by the British to characterize bondage in South

to how these laborers were constituted as unfree persons in the colonial period.

One alternative available, when faced with the fact that the kamias were recognized, administered, and judged as debt-serfs by colonial rule, is to demonstrate that western categories are inapplicable to India, as Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff have done in the African context. Such a perspective was deemed sufficient not too long ago when, in an overreaction to the earlier sweeping generalizations about the colonial impact, the recognition that the British often imposed their rigid categories on complex and flexible Indian conditions led scholars to pose a radical disjunction between official discourses and actual conditions. More than any other issue, the question of agrarian relations witnessed this phenomenon as historians turned away from the study of policies to an examination of the realities "on the ground."²⁴ While these studies exploded many long-held myths, and revealed the complexity of the agrarian structure, the official discourses tended either to appear as theory subordinated to practice or disappear as the ephemeral musings of the British mind. Recent scholarship shows signs of recovering from this overreaction. Colonial laws and policies are now beginning to be treated as practices constituting part of the total context.²⁵

This treatment of colonial texts reflects the growing emphasis that literary theorists and historians place on historicizing texts, that is, on disclosing how the context forms the text's *pre-text* and revealing how the text also constitutes its context. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, analysing the formation of empowering and empowered knowledge, represents perhaps the best moment in this interpretive move.²⁶ His insights into the production of knowledge enabled by and enabling western domination have found support in studies of colonial texts of India.²⁷ From these studies of British writings on religion, gender,

India did not fit the description of conditions, was an early challenge to the free-unfree opposition. See her *Land and Caste in South India* (Cambridge, 1965), 35.

²⁴ The literature on this shift and its implications are discussed in Neeladri Bhattacharya, "Colonial State and Agrarian Society," in *Situating Indian History*, eds. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya and Romila Thapar (Delhi, 1986).

²⁵ D. A. Washbrook, "Law, State and Society in Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3 (1981); Nicholas B. Dirks, "From Little King to Landlord: Property, Law, and Gift under the Madras Permanent Settlement," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (hereafter *CSSH*), 28, 2 (1986), and *The Hollow Crown: Ethnohistory of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987).

²⁶ *Orientalism* (New York, 1979).

²⁷ Most notable in this context are Bernard S. Cohn's writings on colonial sociology. See the essays in his *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1987).

society, and history, we now know that the production of knowledge was intimately connected with the practices of colonial rule. We also know from these works that the projects of reform – initiated and directed by British officials and Indian elites, and however mistaken in their descriptions of “traditions” – ended up installing the objects of their attack as real entities. The colonial texts’ deployment of the free–unfree opposition represents a similar case. Of course, the constitution of the kamias as debt-serfs was not only a textual matter. If textual description affected and constituted the very object of description, colonial texts were also traces left by historical practices – in Michel Foucault’s terms, “archaeological” monuments erected by history.²⁸ In these monuments, the kamias were inscribed as bonded laborers. But because historical practices made this inscription, these monuments stand as archaeological remains of the process by which a bourgeois political economy was installed as the hegemonic discourse.

The aim of my study is to trace the monumentalization of this bourgeois discourse. It is to make visible the process by which freedom and commodity fetishism came to don the garb of naturalness in Indian history. Because this requires asking how the kamias became bonded laborers, the search for better definitions for slavery and bondage is not my major concern. For my purpose, it is not adequate that we simply expose the colonial records’ representation of the kamias as debt-serfs as a case of western misunderstanding, but corroborate how historical practices gave a real existence to this misrecognition. I begin with a snapshot composed from the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth-century records in which agro-economic tropes for depicting the south Bihar region were well in place; freedom was firmly grounded as a natural right; and the power of money to bind people was beyond scrutiny. This objectification of social relations in the colonial period is then subjected to a series of scrutinies, starting with a glance at the pre-colonial history of the region – as represented in written records and oral traditions. I use these two sources in combination in Chapter 2, identifying the mythic and realist narratives they tell, and locating pre-modern historical contexts in the mode of the oral traditions’ and written records’ narrativity. I use the representations contained in these sources to establish differences between the kamias’ pre-modern subordination and their modern bondage, and to set the stage for reconstructing, in Chapters 3 and 4, juridical and socio-economic processes animating

²⁸ *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, tr. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York, 1972), 7.

the transformation of the kamias. Spanning the period from the 1700s to the 1930s, these chapters sketch the rise of exclusive landed property, the objectification of agrarian social relations, and the construction of debt-bondage. In drawing this sketch, I immerse texts in their contexts as I combine the analysis of how colonial records articulated the discourse of freedom with the investigation of how records documented practices objectifying social relations in things – land and money. This is followed by a chapter describing the forms of domination anchored in the juridical constitution of the kamias as bonded laborers, and reconstructing struggles mounted against the techniques of subjection that the kamias experienced. The book ends by highlighting the kamias' history as a process that placed the discourse of freedom in its present hegemonic position. It thus brings us back to the point of our departure – the discourse of freedom. If the book starts and ends with the present, it is because the history of the kamias' past constitution as bonded laborers is also a history of the present hegemonic position of the discourse of freedom. The writing of the history of the present, therefore, is immanent in writing the history of the kamias.