



**Indians, Merchants, and Markets: A
Reinterpretation of the *Repartimiento* and Spanish-
Indian Economic Relations in Colonial Oaxaca,
1750-1821 (Social Science History)**

Jeremy Baskes

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Traditional historiography describes the *repartimiento de mercancías* as a forced system of production and consumption in which officials of the Spanish crown compelled Mexican Indians to produce goods marketable in the Spanish economy and to purchase expensive and undesired Spanish products. The author challenges this conventional portrayal of Indian-Spanish economic relations by arguing that Indian market behavior was economically rational and voluntary. He further argues that the *repartimiento* was an institution designed to overcome market imperfections inherent in Mexico's colonial economy and to facilitate the extension of credit in a cross-cultural environment. Examining *repartimiento* production of cochineal, a dyestuff produced exclusively by Oaxacan Indians and representing Mexico's most valued export after silver, this study shows that Indians produced cochineal for the market voluntarily because it provided them with needed income. The primary role of the *repartimiento* was to provide Mexico's indigenous peasantry with credit, without which they could not have participated in the market as extensively as they did. Owing to the difficulty of collecting debts, credit provision was monopolized by agents of the Crown, the *alcaldes mayores*, who alone possessed the legal leverage needed to enforce the payment of debts. Though Spanish officials profited from the *repartimiento*, their economic gains were not so great as traditionally believed. Overall, the book demonstrates that Mexican Indians were much more actively engaged in the market than customarily imagined, and were adept at promoting their interests despite the discriminating policies of colonialism. The book rounds out its account of the *repartimiento* by examining the transatlantic trade in cochineal, especially in its late colonial decline.

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