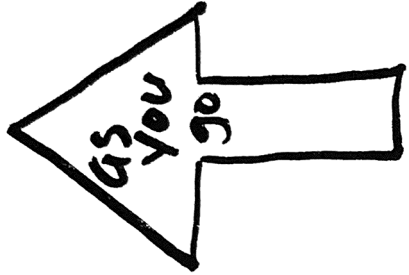
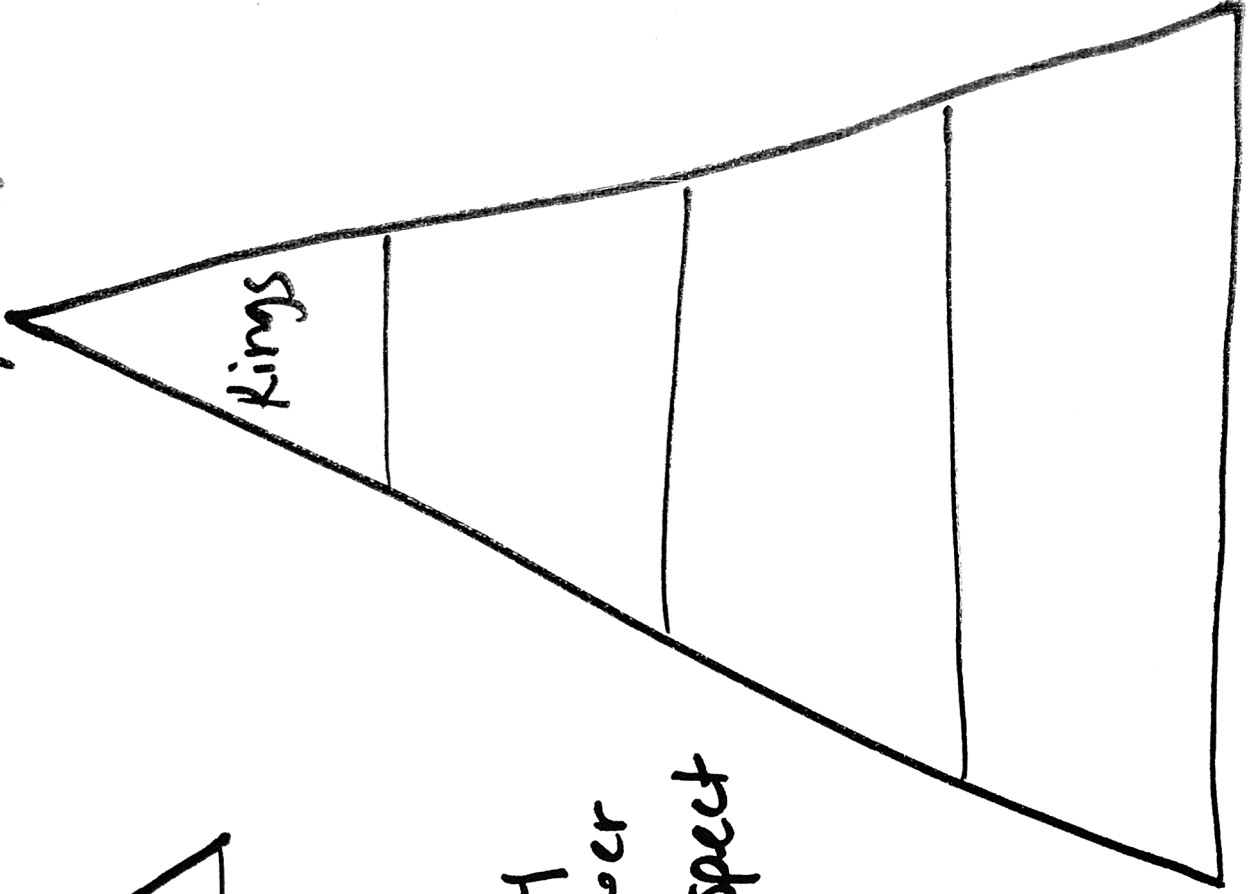
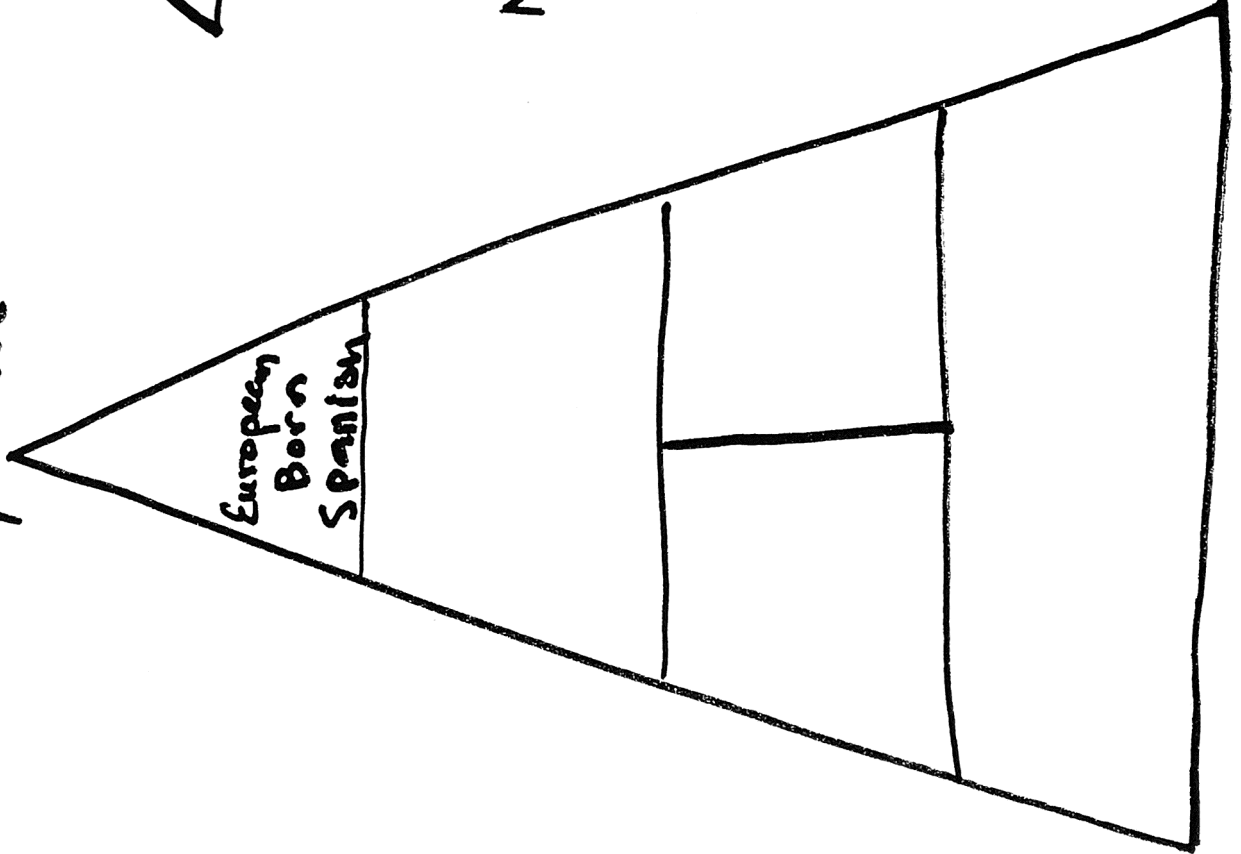


European
Feudal
System

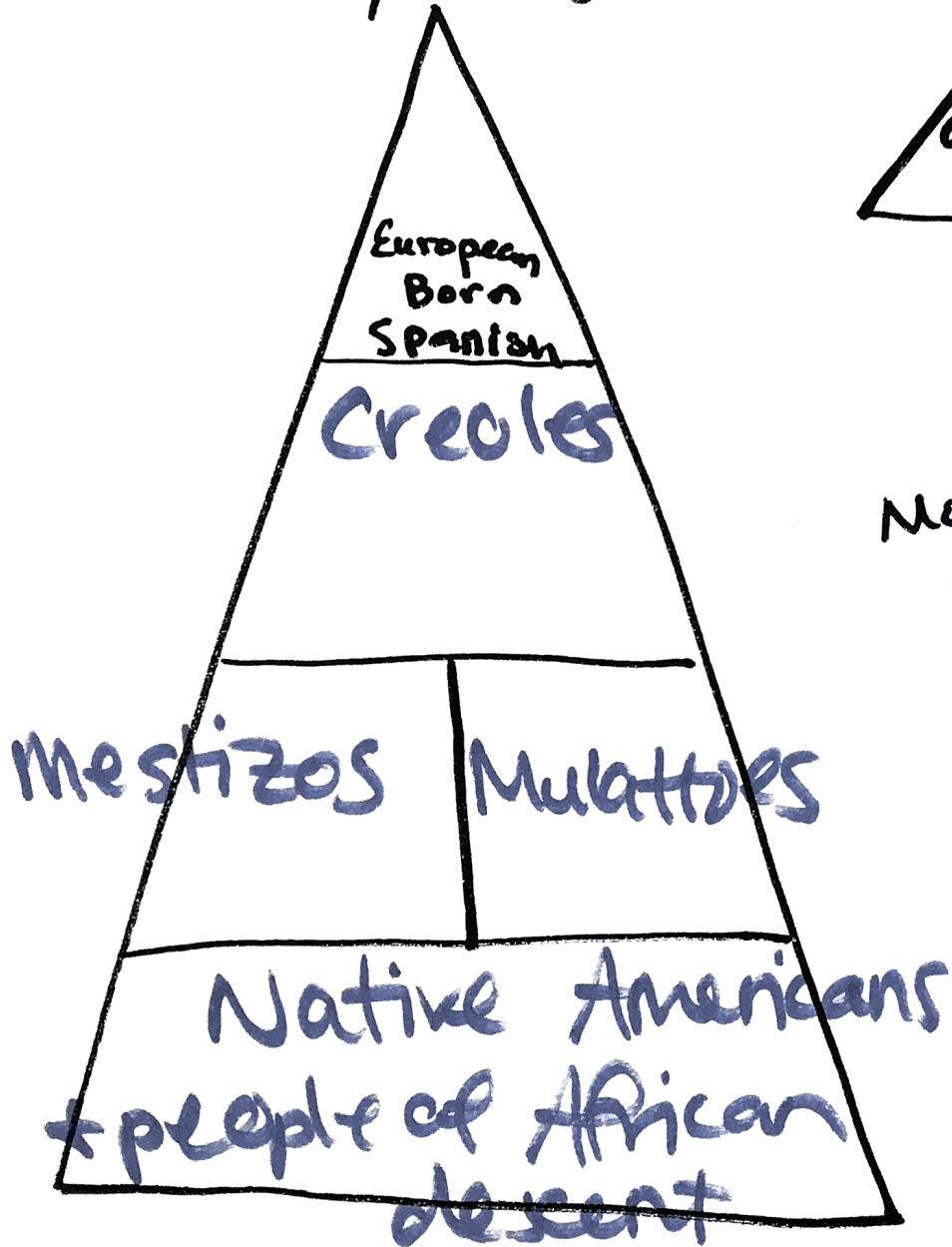


Money
Power
Respect

Encomienda
System

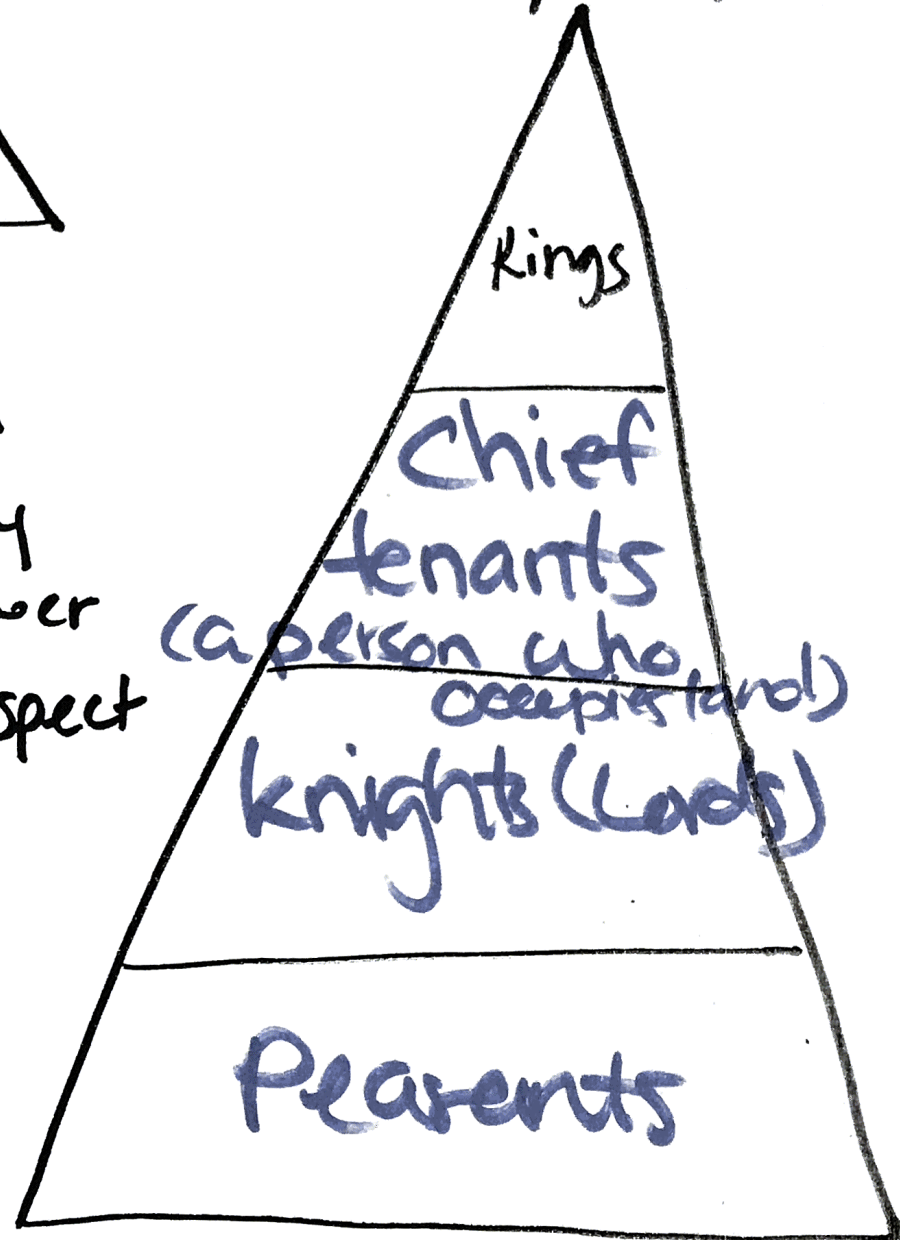


Encomienda System



Money
Power
Respect

European Feudal System



Spain's American Colonies and the Encomienda System

BACKGROUND:

In the 1500's, Spain conquered parts of North, Central and South America as well as the Caribbean. With native governments such as the efficient Inca Empire in ruins, the Spanish conquistadors needed to find a way to rule their new subjects. The encomienda system was put in place in several areas, most importantly in Peru. Under the encomienda system, prominent Spaniards were entrusted with native communities. In exchange for native labor and payment, the Spanish lord would provide protection and education. *In reality, however, the encomienda system was thinly-masked slavery and led to some of the worst horrors of the colonial era.*

THE ENCOMIENDA SYSTEM:

The word encomienda comes from the Spanish word encomendar, "to entrust." The encomienda system had been used in feudal Spain during the reconquest and had survived in some form ever since. In the Americas, the first encomiendas were handed out by Christopher Columbus in the Caribbean. Spanish conquistadors, settlers, priests or colonial officials were given a repartimiento, or grant of land. These lands were often quite vast. The land included any native cities, towns, communities or families that lived there. The natives were supposed to provide tribute, in the form of gold or silver, crops, and foodstuffs, animals such as pigs or llamas or anything else the land produced. The natives could also be made to work for a certain amount of time, say on a sugarcane plantation or in a mine. In return, the owner, or encomendero, was responsible for the well-being of his subjects and was to see to it that they were converted and educated about Christianity.

A TROUBLESOME SYSTEM:

The Spanish crown reluctantly approved the granting of encomiendas because it needed to reward the conquistadors and establish a system of governance in the newly-conquered territories. The system essentially made landed nobility out of men whose only skills were murder, mayhem, and torture: the kings hesitated to set up a New World oligarchy which could later prove troublesome. It also swiftly led to abuses: encomenderos made unreasonable demands of the natives who lived on their lands, working them excessively or demanding tribute of crops that could not be grown on the land.

ENCOMIENDAS IN PERU:

In Peru, where encomiendas were granted on the ruins of the rich and mighty Inca Empire, the abuses soon reached epic proportions. The encomenderos there showed an inhuman indifference to the suffering of the families on their encomiendas. They did not

change the quotas even when crops failed or disasters struck: many natives were forced to choose between fulfilling quotas and starving to death or failing to meet quotas and facing the often-lethal punishment of the overseers. Men and women were forced to work in mines for weeks at a time, often by candlelight in deep shafts. The mercury mines were particularly lethal. During the first years of the colonial era, Peruvian natives died by the hundreds of thousands.

ADMINISTRATION OF THE ENCOMIENDAS:

The owners of the encomiendas were not supposed to ever visit the encomienda lands: this was supposed to cut down on abuses. The natives instead brought the tribute to wherever the owner happened to be, generally in the larger cities. The natives were often forced to walk for days with heavy loads to be delivered to their encomendero. The lands were run by cruel overseers and native chieftains who often demanded extra tribute themselves, making the lives of the natives even more miserable. Priests were supposed to live on the encomienda lands, instructing the natives in Catholicism, and often these men became defenders of the people they taught, but just as often they committed abuses of their own.

While the conquistadors were wringing every last speck of gold from their miserable subjects, the ghastly reports of abuses piled up in Spain. The Spanish crown was in a tough spot: the "royal fifth," or 20% tax on conquests and mining in the New World, was fueling the expansion of the Spanish Empire. On the other hand, the crown had made it quite clear that the Indians were not slaves but Spanish subjects with certain rights, which were being flagrant, systematically and horrifically violated.

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SUMMARY:

The encomienda system was one of the many horrors inflicted on the native people of the New World during the conquest and colonial eras. It was essentially slavery, given but a thin (and illusory) veneer of respectability for the Catholic education that it implied. It legally allowed the Spaniards to work the natives literally to death in the fields and mines. *It seems counter-productive to kill off your own workers, but the Spanish conquistadors in question were only interested in getting as rich as they could as quickly as they could: this greed led directly to hundreds of thousands of deaths in the native population.* To the conquistadors and settlers, the encomiendas were nothing less than their fair and just reward for the risks they had taken during the conquest.