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In 1980, anthropologist Frank Salomon published a book ("Los señoríos étnicos de Quito en la época de los Incas"), which gave a tremendous boost to the emerging Ecuadorian ethnohistory. Basically, the book deals with the study of chiefdoms (llactakuna) in the region of Quito (the famous "township of the five leagues of Quito", which corresponds roughly to the present-day province of Pichincha). Key to understanding the functioning of these political entities was the control, the lords had over the circulation of goods produced within the chiefdom and those obtained from other ecological zones, through regional exchange.

In this regard, Salomon (1980:157 ff) has postulated for the northern highlands (Sierra) the existence of the *tianguéz* or market, probably mobile in pre-Columbian times, but in the case of colonial Quito, established in the present-day plaza of San Francisco. Everything was sold there: sumptuary commodities (gold, silver, precious stones), exotic strategic resources (salt, coca, chili pepper, and cotton), standard mountain products (corn, tuber crops, quinoa, etc.) and, of course, prepared food and drinks. Over this general productive activity, there was also a specialized trade, carried out by an elite group of merchants called *mindaláes*

, whose taxation, incidentally, was not equal to that of other indians, as they always paid in gold, blankets or bone beads (Salomon 1980:164 ff.) There is documentation from 1559 that in the case of Quito, the mindaláes lived in the city, traded in the tianguéz and had no chief (cacique) as boss but a colleague from the group. The same happened with the merchants of Otavalo. However, other documents from the northern highlands (late XVI century) show the mindaláes subject to the principal chiefs of their llactas, although with relative freedom of movement and residence. This means that the commerce of these merchants was far too important to be left alone at the mercy of the mindalá.

Indeed, it is known that these merchants were specialized in the trading of exotic goods from the lowlands toward the highlands: gold, silver, coca, salt, chonta, cotton, spicy pepper, feathers, hallucinogens, birds, plush, exotic animals, cinnamon, achiote, etc. Moreover, research by Salomon shows that the mindalá institution was of pre-Columbian origin, allowed and adopted first by the Incas and then by the Spanish. In fact, there are some pre-Columbian figurines showing a man laden with a big basket, which could well represent these merchants. In any case, the mindalá was the great traveler of the intricacies of the Andes, the news messenger from remote villages, the merchant that sustained, with its traffic, the power of the lords, and the consumption of a few crumbs for lower social ranks, both pre-Columbian and colonial. Salomon sees the system functioning with some restrictions in the second half of the sixteenth century, and sees it disappear sometime in the seventeenth century.

Was "mindalá" an appellative of a man, a woman or both? This is an important topic for issues concerning division of labor. I completely exempt Frank Salomon from blame, since he clearly states that, by the end of the sixteenth century, women could "finally" designate themselves as mindalá (Salomon 1980:169), but reading his work has left on my own thoughts, the idea that mindaláes were always men. Thoughts, of course, fed poorly by a few pre-Columbian figurines, and a few late images of mindalá yumbos loaded with baskets. The trace of the word, through historical documents and works of the intricate Aquiles Perez have given, in the northern highlands, several current uses of mindalá, and a few toponyms and patronymics, but with the variation *mindala* (emphasis on *da*), and it is with this term that I will take the reader to the southern highlands of Ecuador.

As a child, I went thousands of times to shop in the market of Cuenca, but not without receiving the customary recommendation of my mother to keep quiet, if the saleswoman would have a fit. Invariably, at some point, in some close vending spot, voices would rise and a fight between the indigenous saleswoman and the mestiza buyer would break out, in a verbal battle in which the first simply overwhelmed the second. Suddenly, the buyer grabbed her basket and pulled away to be well heard shouting: "Come, daughter, I cannot lower myself to fight with a mindala." And this aggression is that, which accompanies the definition of the word in some vernacular dictionaries.

"Mindala: name given to Indian women or of the low masses, which retail groceries, spices, vegetables, etc; at a designated site every day or wander from town to town." "Mindala (having a mouth of), to be like the quarreling mindala; of plentiful and profane vocabulary." "Mindalo: indian male that, as the mindala, deals on groceries; man of disgusting and well-stocked vocabulary." "Mindalapachi: special way of supporting a load on the mules, similar to that used by the mindalas. Sacks placed in the beast bundled in an easy and safe manner; to stay on the rig as if it were a saddlebag (Cordero Palacios 1985:207)." "Mintala: woman who goes by the fields buying and selling. It's "Azuayismo" (Tobar Donoso 1961:191)". "Mindalas: women that sell vegetables in the marketplace or public square by shouting; the women of the "cutus" were formerly known as mindalas (Carvalho Neto, 1961:296, citing the Costales couple, who claim that the voice is Kichua)." In his study of the Cañaris, Pérez (1978) does not record any instance of the term mindalá, but records, between 1759 and 1780, show four instances of the patronymic Minchala, which may well be a variation of original mindala. The term would come from the Colorado, with a meaning of min(ú), path, and chala, basket. If the etymological attribution is correct, arguably, Minchala, refers to someone who walks with a basket, perhaps a mindalá or a mindala? Incidentally, Minchala is a common last name in Azuay.

The ethnohistorian, J. Poloni-Simard, recently published (2006) an extensive work on the

relationship of indians, mestizos and Spanish in the township of Cuenca, in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The framework of commerce, which concerns us here, is described in terms quite different from that described by Salomon. This is understandable, considering that the trade dealt with, by Salomon, is that of the small chiefdoms in Quito, while Poloni-Simard deals with the institutionalized trade of Cuenca. In this study, he indicates that the participation of male indians in long distance trade was in a position of mule drivers, which was much tougher job than what the term means. Indeed, besides the care of animals and loads, their job included ensuring the smooth operation of the network of *tambos*, its stocking and attention to travelers; the construction of bridges and maintenance of the rugged road to Puerto de Bola (Poloni-Simard 2006:128-129).

When supplying the city, they did it in very precarious levels and with insignificant products such as *chicha*, grass and wood, usually at a small space in the public square, and in constant friction with the *pulperos*, who owned the stores. Cattle were mobilized by land to Lima, following the route Loja-Ayabaca-Piura, the same that in pre-Columbian times served for the traffic of *mullo* (Hocquenghem 1993:714). The sale of groceries, in Cuenca, was made by indigenous women in the plaza and main streets (the city lacked an exclusive place as a market). In documents they appear with different names, saleswomen of salt, *chicha*, fruit, eggs, dry goods, etc. or the more generic "*gateras*" (Poloni-Simard 2006:513). In Quito, the saleswomen of the market received the same name (Minchom 1985:175); "*gatera*" would be derived from "*gato*", Spanish variation of the Kichua *katu* or market. Poloni-Simard never mentions the term *mindala*, which appears perhaps sometime in the nineteenth century.

Carlos Aguilar Vazquez has in his work *Xima* (1944) a vivid passage of the *mindala* in the late nineteenth century: "The *mindala* was once and still is a serious character. The transhumant trade is still hers. She owns the byways and shortcuts. Her exclusive properties are villages without roads and hamlets hidden in the brushes of the mountains. Ageless woman, connoisseur of the world, the devil and the flesh, owner of a sturdy sling and a few reales invested in salt, particularly salt, in black sugar, in *achiote*, in rennet yellow of dust and dirt, in chili pepper and in a few cheap pots. She also sells combs made of horns, round mirrors, ribbons, sewing needles and thread. All of her scarce possessions on the back of the patient animal, she rides the steep summits of the grasslands; in gullies she sleeps, protected from the weather, by a tree or a rock. She does not flinch for the rain, nor the night stops her walk. Her days are Thursday in the city of Cuenca and Sunday in the villages. Wandering from fair to fair, she is the native soul of the fair and the uniqueness of the market, for the rawness of her vocabulary, unwrapped manners, and her avenging arm in the face of slander; always ready for a spectacular attack. In the fair of Cuenca, stocks her bags and sacks of hemp, and... to the fields, wherever there is land, whether the day is cloudy or sunny, whether rivers are tame or grown. Her pictorial odyssey never stops: she wanders from hut to hut, collecting eggs, cheese, spicy pepper, and fruit, only to show up on Sundays in the parish or any other known village surrounding the province (Aguilar Vasquez 1974:173)."

The mindalas generally came from the Cuenca area. They had a well known stand in the San Francisco market, where during fairs, they set up a little tent with a mat on the floor and ran the outdoor trade, charging for their products in cash, or simply making tradeoffs, particularly with farmers who came to the city. Those who went from town to town had more agitated lives, as they were sometimes expelled from places due to trivial reasons such as: suspicion of witchcraft or the "evil eye" of a child, acquired after a previous visit of the mindala. Aguilar Vasquez (1974:174) reports a similar case in Xima, when villagers prevented the entrance to the mindalas. The authorities calmed things down, highlighting the work of these merchants, who, by bringing products to the people themselves, saved those people long trips to Sigis or Cuenca.

Summed up, the mindala represents, three centuries apart, the pattern of the mindaláes of the north, but reduced to its simplest expression: long-distance attention. She still barter, if necessary, but the nature of her goods (ex. food and a few artifacts of common use) does not give her prestige or wealth. And if the mindaláes rubbed shoulders with leading chiefs, the mindala barely brushed the authority for cases of minor justice. In the twentieth century, the construction of roads and markets and the widespread adoption of the monetary economy would end this character and its trade facilitator system, leaving only the name for the occupants of the markets, name that it's irretrievably being lost. Today, the darker side of the mindala are the mafias of "arranchadoras" (snatchers) that have formed in main markets of major cities around the country, which threaten the unsuspecting farmer and subtract by force his products for which they pay the price they want (Pedro Reino, personal information).

At some point, it is unknown whether simultaneously with the mindala, appeared a male character, a long distance merchant: the so-called, sometimes disparagingly, as "cachicaldo." In the central highlands (Cotopaxi, Tungurahua), he has been seen equipped with a large basket, which actually consisted of two similar baskets: one served as a container and the other as a lid to protect the goods. They walked through the villages of both mountain ranges, carrying mirrors, needles, clothing, blankets, or mats (much needed in fruit seasons) (Pedro Reino, personal information). In the south, they moved with a huge bundle tied to the thorax. In the decade of 1970, I was able to interview them in the jungles of Chiguaza, Morona Santiago; they came from Ambato and moved to the cooperatives (colonies of highland mestizos) and jibarías. In Pioneros de la Selva (Salazar 1989:209), I have recorded the following: "The cachicaldos travel by foot through the rural areas of the country, laden with huge bundles in which there can be found the most varied items: medicines, blankets, petticoats, underwear, pants, socks, blouses, shirts, pieces of cloth, aluminum pots, plastic tableware, etc. ... They visit the small towns of El Oro, Manabi, Esmeraldas, Azuay, and the provinces of the Oriente, carrying different goods, because they know the items that are preferred by people in each village." They have not completely disappeared, but now they are seen more prosperous, trading as usual, but in a truck.

And so, life goes on ... because as long there are people or towns in mountain cliffs or in inaccessible jungles, a merchant will come to them with their knickknacks and brightly colored dresses, to recreate for the umpteenth time the old game of long distance trade.

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