



Regatones, Mercachifles, or Informal Street Vendors in Colonial Lima

Regatones, mercachifles o ambulantes informales de Lima colonial

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Abstract

This article deals with the emergence of informal street vendors in colonial Lima, and the efforts from authorities to eradicate them. In the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, *the regatonería* was persecuted and denounced by the authorities for the informal retail sale of basic necessities, bought wholesale. Informality was a constant in the streets of Lima, and the authorities tried to formalize *regatonería* with unsuccessful attempts, even using the same sales methods, wandering around looking for clients, offering locals good from formal merchants who sold them in portable wooden “cajones” near the city’s main square, so that they could make a profit and meet their tax obligations.

Keywords: regatones, Lima, Viceroyalty of Peru, informal commerce, cabildo.

Resumen

Este artículo trata del surgimiento de los ambulantes informales en Lima colonial y la gestión de las autoridades para erradicarlos. En la capital del virreinato del Perú, la *regatonería* fue bastante perseguida y denunciada por las autoridades por la venta informal al menudeo de productos de primera necesidad, comprados al por mayor. La informalidad fue la constante en las calles limeñas y las autoridades trataron de formalizar la *regatonería* con intentos fallidos, incluso utilizando sus mismos métodos de venta, deambular para buscar al cliente, al ofrecerlo a los comerciantes formales que vendían en los “cajones” portátiles de madera, apostados cerca a la Plaza Mayor de la ciudad, para que pudiesen obtener ganancias y poder cumplir con sus obligaciones tributarias.

Palabras clave: regatones, Lima, virreinato del Perú, comercio informal, cabildo.

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Introduction

Throughout the colonial period, numerous royal decrees prohibited the circulation of regatones in the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru and urged the population not to buy the goods they offered in and around the city of Lima. The term *regatón* refers to an individual who buys small quantities of products and resells them outside official market hours, inserting himself between producer or importer and the consumer in order to sell in small lots (Galán, 1997, p. 1319). It was an occupation frequently pursued by municipal authorities (Lorenzo, 1996, p. 204).

The *gateras* were the (female) vendors, and according to the RAE, the verb *regatear* means “to resell or sell at retail foodstuffs that have been bought wholesale.” In this way, *regatones* profited from resale. In the colonial period, *regatonería* was treated as a crime, associated with hoarding a product and then selling it at a higher price (Zamora, 2014, pp. 190–191). *Regatones* sold all kinds of goods: new and used clothing, bread, fruit, vegetables, candles, as well as coal, lime, and barley (Moncada, 2009, p. 482). There were even *regatones* who dealt in empty wine jars (*botijas*), which was denounced before the *cabildo* on November 22, 1599 (Rivasplata, 2018, pp. 178–179).

However, this system—in which various sectors of colonial society participated (*encomenderos*, officials, *pulperos* [small shopkeepers], and others)—was more complex than it appeared. The *regatones* were only the visible tip. It formed part of an illegal, informal, and criminal economy whose existence was well known to high metropolitan authorities. Hence its presence in the *Recopilación de leyes de Indias*, published in 1681 (Book 4, Title 10, Law 12), which established the incompatibility of serving as *regidor* (alderman) while also being a shopkeeper, given the high likelihood of resorting to *regatones*.

This study draws on primary documentation from the Historical Archive of Metropolitan Lima (*Archivo Histórico de Lima Metropolitana*, AHLM). The core sources are the *Cabildo* (municipal council) minute books for the period 1535–1821. It also uses the copy books of royal decrees and provisions, which include several Castilian and colonial municipal ordinances relating to *regatonería*. Some of the *actas capitulares* transcribed and published by Bertham Lee and Juan Bromley were likewise consulted. In addition, material from the National General Archive of Peru (*Archivo General de la Nación del Perú*, AGN) informs this analysis.

Regatones and Mercachifles in Sixteenth-Century Lima

From the conquest to the establishment of the Viceroyalty of Peru, that is, from 1535 to 1542, city authorities largely overlooked the presence of *regatones*, *mercachifles*, and other itinerant vendors. This tolerance reflected the context of the time: demand in the city was higher than the available supply, and political instability had allowed these traders to flourish. The situation changed on 21 January 1549, when the *Cabildo* ordered that no one was to buy food, drink, or other provisions for resale. On 28 March 1549 it explicitly prohibited the presence of *regatones* (Lee, 1935, p. 52). The measure was reiterated in 1551: the *Cabildo* ordered that all buying and selling of merchandise take place in the Plaza Mayor and forbade the sale of foodstuffs through *regatones* and *mercachifles* in shops, houses, or any other locations. The main public square was to be the place where bacon, pork offal, bread, and vegetables—displayed cleanly in baskets—would be sold, following the custom of the kingdoms of Spain, and only by licensed vendors (Lee, 1935, p. 74).

The market in the Plaza Mayor allowed authorities to supervise what was bought and sold and to prevent fraud in weights and measures. Transactions took place in public view, and the constabulary could intervene quickly to calm disputes and restore order. In this way, the *Cabildo* attempted to control the *regatones*, who were known to push prices up, and to oblige them to sell formally in the central market rather than on the outskirts, in alleys, or while circulating through the streets. Colonial authorities consistently condemned *regatonería*, yet in practice it played an important role in guaranteeing basic supplies (Olvera, 2007, p. 61). The activity was common among popular sectors, who faced a scarcity of waged work. It offered a way to survive by trading without paying taxes on the goods they sold—often with uncertain quality or origin, dubious freshness, and the possibility that items were second-hand or stolen. This underground economy, at times openly criminal, did not involve *regatones* alone. Other social groups in colonial Lima also participated, in ways that could harm third parties and even public health, since these circuits operated beyond the reach of the *Cabildo* and the *protomedicato* (medical inspectorate).

In the first set of ordinances “for the good government of the City of the Kings” (*Ciudad de los Reyes*, Lima), issued by Emperor Charles V in 1551 and ratified by Philip II in 1567, Indigenous people were allowed to bring in food for daily consumption and to sell fruit, fish, and prepared food in baskets. At the same time, the ordinances prohibited the commercial practices of informal vendors (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* III, 1534–1633; *Ordenanzas hechas para el*

buen Gobierno de la Ciudad de los Reyes por el emperador Carlos V en 1551, Madrid, 19 November 1551). Under these initial city ordinances, licensed sellers had to post prices or tariffs at the entrance to their shops. These prices had to match those set by the authorities. They were also forbidden to sell products such as wine, vinegar, honey, and oil “by eye”; they had to sell them by weight. The courts pursued *regatones*, *mercachifles*, and other informal vendors because authorities believed that their reselling practices raised prices.

By the mid-sixteenth century, anyone who wanted to sell in the Plaza Mayor needed a permit. Town criers had obtained such licenses, which allowed them to sell used clothing on tables in exchange for cleaning the city. *Mercachifles* also sold used clothing, but they did so illegally, setting up near the arcades where the criers traded and displaying their goods in chests or bundles.

According to the authorities, residents of the city often purchased from *regatones* everything they needed to eat and drink, as well as soap to wash clothes and candles or wax to light their homes—and they paid excessive prices. In response, the *Cabildo* ordered that any person who bought goods for resale within the city and its jurisdiction had to declare to the authorities, within three days, the prices they had paid. On 2 August 1553 the *Cabildo* repeated the measure and again urged that anyone selling wine, vinegar, honey, oil, or similar products must sell them by standardized measure and weight, not by eye. Disorder in the city led the Royal Audiencia of Lima, in 1557, to prohibit itinerant selling by *regatones*, on the grounds that it drove prices up (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes III*, 1534–1633; *Provisión y autos para que en esta ciudad no haya reventa ni regatería de mercaderías ni mantenimientos*, January 1557). Lima had *regatones* who sold fresh meat, pork, salted and marinated meats, brains, loins, blood sausage, sausages, ribs, and bacon, either in the street or from their homes.

On 21 May 1557 the *Cabildo* even denounced *regatones* and some *pulperos* (small shopkeepers) for selling hens at four *tomines* each, which significantly raised prices. Deputies and officials responsible for weights and measures—chosen from among the *regidores* (aldermen) of the *Cabildo*—patrolled the city to supervise meat sales in slaughterhouses and butcher shops. Even so, the authorities in Lima were largely unable to control street-level meat sales (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes III*, 1534–1633, 2 June 1569).

By the mid-sixteenth century, *regatones* and *mercachifles* in Lima had also developed the practice of going from house to house offering goods directly to potential

buyers (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* II, *Cédula de su majestad para que el virrey y audiencia provean en razón de que no anden vendiendo mercancías por las casas* (1580), f. 20v). As this practice became increasingly common, a royal decree was issued in 1580, under Viceroy Martín Enríquez de Almansa, prohibiting this form of itinerant selling (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* VI, *Cédula de su majestad remitiéndole al virrey lo pedido por parte de la ciudad cerca de que se observen las prohibiciones que hay para que no se vendan mercaderías por las calles*, 11 November 1580, f. 145r).

Later, the ordinances issued by Viceroy García Hurtado de Mendoza, Marquis of Cañete, on 24 January 1594, penalized not only *regatones* but also their customers; authorities confiscated the goods that had been bought. The ordinances forbade the purchase of foodstuffs for resale within ten leagues of Lima. Suppliers, innkeepers, and *pulperos* had to sell their wares without forcing customers to purchase additional items. Fruit and vegetables were to be sold in the Plaza Mayor, and people were prohibited from buying or selling them along the roads. Animals could not be bought more than fifteen leagues away without written proof of the seller's name, location, and price. Only legumes and vegetables already harvested could be sold. Subsequent viceroys issued similar provisions and orders. These measures forced *mercachifles* to petition the *Cabildo* for designated locations where they could sell their merchandise—that is, they sought to formalize their trade. In 1600, however, the *Cabildo* prohibited *mercachifles* from selling in the same places as the town criers.

By the end of the sixteenth century, informal commerce was firmly in place, with features that would persist for centuries. It proliferated and endured despite repeated prohibitions. Authorities struggled to control it because it responded to real demand and met buyers' basic needs. The convenience of acquiring essential goods close to home, and with little investment of time or effort, made these vendors attractive to the wider community, even as officials insisted that they contributed to overall price increases. The origins of the goods sold by informal traders were often uncertain—frequently tied to theft, reuse, or low-quality stock that could threaten public health, as in the case of fish already in the process of decomposition. The concentration of vendors near the Plaza Mayor also disrupted commercial balance across the viceroyalties of the Spanish monarchy. Ordinances against *regatones* appear repeatedly in municipal records throughout Spanish America, including New Spain, and became stricter following metropolitan regulations aimed at curbing informal trade from the late seventeenth century onward (Galán, 1997, p. 1319). Persecution of *regatonería* began in Spain and spread across

Hispanic America. The chronicler Francisco de Ariño, in *Sucesos de Sevilla de 1592 a 1604*, relates how authorities in Seville strictly enforced laws against *regatonería* in that period (Ariño, 1873, pp. 37–38; Lozón, 2004, p. 78; Rivasplata, 2014, p. 30).

The First Attempts to Formalize Regatones and Mercachifles in the Seventeenth Century

In the seventeenth century, population growth in Lima intensified commercial activity and, with it, informal trade. Dirt, disorder, and lack of control also increased. The *Cabildo*'s coffers were chronically depleted, so city officials pressed the central government for additional funds to meet urban needs. One of their ideas was to rent out portable wooden stalls to informal traders, both to ease pressure on the streets and to generate revenue. During the government of Viceroy Luis de Velasco y Castilla, in 1603, *regidor* and attorney general Simón Luis de Lucio reported that Licentiate Juan de Villeca and other commissioners had inspected the site the city had designated for these stalls, awnings, or stands. There, *mercachifles* could rent space to sell, along with other vendors of fruit, vegetables, meat, and similar goods. The *Cabildo* asked the viceroy for permission (*merced*) to rent out wooden stalls in the Plaza Mayor, with the income destined for the city's own funds (*propios*). The viceroy granted the request as a royal favor on 4 March 1603, in view of the new need to lease sites to vendors. The decision, recorded in the *Cabildo* books on 10 May of that year, granted the city legal title over the stalls:

...I grant you proper and sufficient legal title, as required in such a case, so that you may hold them as your own property and lease them to the said *mercachifles*, fruit sellers, and any other persons the city deems appropriate, as goods rightfully acquired and purchased with its own funds, which I assign to you for the city's own property and revenues... Done in Los Reyes on the fourth day of March 1603. Don Luis de Velasco, by order of the Viceroy. (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes II*, 10 May 1603).

The chosen site ran:

From the corner of Mercaderes to the corner of the main church or cathedral, leaving a street between the said awnings and stalls and the portals of the silk and hat makers, with the same width that existed between the post used for punishing Black people, placed in the Plaza Mayor, and the portals—sixty *varas* wide—which left sufficient space for people and commerce to circulate. (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes II*, 10 May 1603).

At the time, the *Cabildo* believed, following the commissioners' opinion, that no one would be harmed by this arrangement. That expectation proved false. Shopkeepers soon complained that the stalls left too little space for customers to move and for goods to be displayed. The measure also failed in its main objective: *regatones* continued to sell in the streets out of habit or necessity, so this early attempt by the *Cabildo* to reduce informality collapsed. Even so, the *Cabildo* and other authorities did grant individual permissions to some informal vendors to continue selling in their own way.

By 1617, itinerant sellers roamed Lima's streets offering their goods to passersby, both day and night. In response to this routine practice, Viceroy the Prince of Esquilache ordered that licensed *mercachifles* stop selling at night and show their licenses whenever authorities requested them. He also ordered street vendors, whether licensed or not, to register with the *Cabildo* so that officials could know their number and identity:

...So that vendors do not sell at night... because of the serious problems that result from this... the situation is growing worse because of the many who go about selling... therefore I order that all those who sell in the streets, with or without licenses, present themselves before the *Cabildo* of this city so that it may be known how many they are and who they are. (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes V*, 1613–1621, *Auto del señor Príncipe para que los mercachifles no vendan de noche y manifiesten sus licencias*, 17 March 1617, ff. 70r, 76r).

That same year, the viceroy issued another decree against *mercachifles*, yet street vending continued to grow, as shown by new decrees in 1620 and 1622 (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes V*, *Auto de S.E. contra los mercachifles*, 1617, f. 159r; III, *Auto para que los mercachifles no vendan por las calles*, 1620, f. 97r; *Auto del marqués de Guadalcázar para que no anden mercachifles por las calles*, 1622, f. 91r).

The spread of *regatonería* forced authorities to reiterate penalties on a regular basis, alternating between fines and corporal punishment. These deterrent measures targeted people of all "races," reflecting the complexity of a trading system that could involve almost anyone, even if *regatones* were the most visible actors. On 12 September 1622, the new viceroy, Diego Fernández de Córdoba, Marquis of Guadalcázar, prohibited any person—whether Spanish, mestizo, mulatto, *cambayo*, or Black—from selling merchandise or other goods in the streets or entering houses to do so. Existing licenses were suspended and declared null.

Spaniards who violated the ban faced a fine of 600 pesos (divided in thirds among the royal treasury, the judge, and the informant) and four years of banishment from the city and ten leagues around it for a first offense; a second offense brought the same fine, public shaming, and ten years of banishment. Mestizos, mulattoes, *cambayos*, and Black people received one hundred lashes through the streets, a fine of one hundred pesos, and four years of banishment to ten leagues outside the city. The decree and its penalties were publicly proclaimed (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* VI, *Cédula de su majestad remitiéndole al virrey lo pedido por parte de la ciudad cerca de que se observen las prohibiciones que hay para que no se vendan mercaderías por las calles*, 12 September 1622, f. 145r).

Despite these sanctions, *regatones* continued to wander through Lima's streets and tried to approach the central plaza, where they could find more buyers—much as in other colonial cities (Salinas, 2018, p. 28). During the government of Viceroy Luis Jerónimo Fernández de Cabrera y Bobadilla, Count of Chinchón (1629–1639), officials informed him that *mercachifles* were forbidden by “good government” decrees from selling goods in the streets out of the boxes (*petacas*) they carried as they walked through the city. Their numbers had grown so much that they were harming stallholders who rented portable wooden booths, as well as shopkeepers who paid *alcabalas* (sales taxes) and rent to the *Cabildo* for their locations. Because they sold less, these formal vendors struggled even to cover their rent. Merchants petitioned the viceroy, explaining that the “abundance of *mercachifles* who are in full view of everyone... selling publicly in the streets and squares...” made it impossible for them to compete, and they urged enforcement of the 12 September 1622 decrees (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* IX, 1638, n.f.).

The failure of attempts to formalize *regatones* and *mercachifles* in the Plaza Mayor became clear under Viceroy Luis Enríquez de Guzmán (1655–1661). In 1657 complaints mounted about the high prices of fish, vegetables, and other provisions sold in the main market. One cause was the refusal of *regatones* to pay tariffs or taxes, and the growing reluctance of formal vendors to pay them, as they saw that *regatonería* remained largely unchecked. The *fieles ejecutores* (market inspectors) and their constable were ordered to monitor the many *regatonas* and *regatones* in the city, patrol the plazas, ensure that price schedules were respected, and arrest *regatonas* wherever they were found—whether in private houses, warehouses, streets, or the porters' lodges of convents (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 26, 1655–1659, 1 August 1657, f. 125v). The emphasis on pursuing women vendors rather than men is striking. It is unclear whether this reflected their numerical dominance among street

sellers or the workings of patriarchal control over women's economic activities. The *procurador general* again raised the issue in 1658 (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 26, 1655–1659, 8 August 1658, f. 166r).

Complaints continued under Viceroy Diego de Benavides y de la Cueva (1661–1666). Officials lamented the large number of *mercachifles* selling in the streets from their boxes, which reduced demand for the rental booths in the Plaza Mayor. This decline affected the city's own funds, since the rents collected were used to maintain the stalls and the stone bridge. Through its *procurador general*, the *Cabildo* petitioned the viceroy to address this problem, describing it as a “disorder so great and harmful to the public cause (...) that, because there are so many *mercachifles*, the booths are being closed because they do not sell” (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 27, 1660–1664, 9 November 1663, f. 281v).

The Success of *Regatería* and the Authorities' Attempt to Use It to Boost Sales in the Plaza Mayor

In the 1630s, the way *regatones* sold their goods had become extremely popular, and the authorities could not control it. Formal merchants and guilds began to imitate them. Silversmiths, for instance, had their silver and gold wares sold “à la *mercachifle*,” carried through the streets and offered directly to passersby. This practice made it easy to sell stolen goods and to pass off counterfeit silver or low-grade gold. Municipal ordinances for the silversmiths eventually banned this form of selling (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* VII, 1631–1634, 6 November 1633, f. 116r).

The Royal Council of the Indies in Madrid knew about the large number of *mercachifles* swarming Lima's streets and decided that the *Cabildo* needed to find ways to raise funds to meet its debts and obligations. By the mid-seventeenth century, the success of the *mercachifles*' selling practices was undeniable, and the authorities themselves temporarily adopted this model—under tight control—to generate revenue. The *procurador general* noted what was set out in the royal decree of 24 September 1668, issued by the queen regent Mariana of Austria. The decree described the difficulties involved in curbing *mercachifles* and street hawkers, and linked these to a steep drop in rents from the *cajones* in the Plaza Mayor, which had been the most reliable source of cash for the *Cabildo*'s funds. Those rents had been seized to service the city's debt to the general censos fund, collected by its administrator, Andrés Camacho, until the account was settled. The *procurador* suggested that collection should instead be placed in the hands of the city's steward, who

could handle it at lower cost and then remit the proceeds to the *censos* fund. That court, in turn, financed expenses such as the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which absorbed a large sum each year.

As a way to keep money flowing, the authorities ordered each of the forty-two *cajoneros* in the Plaza Mayor to appoint one *mercachifle* they trusted to sell their merchandise in the streets. In this way, the *cajoneros* could raise enough money to meet their commitments to the Royal Treasury (rents and *alcabalas*), having previously agreed with the *Cabildo* and its commissioners on the rent for each *cajón*. The *Cabildo* drew up a list of authorized *mercachifles*, each of whom received an identification document. The idea was that rents collected from the *cajones* would cover the interest owed to the *censos* fund, which amounted to 4,400 pesos (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 26, 1655–1659, 28 November 1670, *Memorial sobre que se quiten los mercachifles y otras cosas*, ff. 48v–49r–v) (Appendix 1).

In practice, however, the scheme quickly produced serious problems. Once the royal decree authorizing forty men to sell Castilian clothing in the streets took effect, many others began to operate “in their shadow,” protected by judicial officials. Licenses also cost thirty pesos each, whereas earlier many had sold without paying anything. According to the *procurador general* of the City of Los Reyes, Juan de Toledo, the use of licensed street sellers to increase *cajón* income simply led to more *mercachifles*, more harm to residents, and lower revenues. Rents from *cajones* continued to fall. Because sales were so low, many *cajoneros* gave up their stalls, returned the keys to the *Cabildo*, and forfeited the *traspasos*—transfer fees of around one thousand pesos per stall. Unfair competition from the crowd of *mercachifles* and peddlers roaming the streets left stores, *cajones*, and other stands with too few sales to pay either *alcabala* or rent. This, in turn, damaged the Royal Treasury through lower *alcabala* revenues and made it impossible to meet existing debts.

Faced with this situation, the *Cabildo* asked the viceroy to forbid *mercachifles* from selling in Lima’s streets (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 29, 1670–1675, 6 May 1670, f. 28v). In September 1670, at the *Cabildo*’s request, metropolitan authorities also sought a total ban on these licenses. The Royal Council of the Indies reviewed the matter, and the fiscal insisted on enforcing the royal decree and assessing the advantages and disadvantages of the practice (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* III, 7 September 1670, n.f.).

“...nor enter the houses of the residents on the pretext of selling their merchandise, causing very irregular and scandalous situations by doing so, notwithstanding wha-

tever licenses they may have, which are declared null so that they may not use them in any way”, a provision enforced by the *cabildo*, the Royal Audiencia, and the other courts of the city

(AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 29 (1670–1675), 23 September 1670, f. 38v).

That same year, Viceroy Pedro Antonio Fernández de Castro Andrade y Portugal, Count of Lemos, issued a proclamation banning hucksters from the streets, except for those with an individual license to do so (they sold clothing and goods from Castile). These licensed vendors had to be appointed by the *cajoneros* of the Ribera in the Main Square and around the palace, whose number reached fifty-nine, plus the eight *cajoneros* under the arches of the bridge (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 29 (1670–1675), 27 November 1670, *Memorial sobre los mercachifles y otras cosas*, f. 48v–49r–v). As a result, the Lima *cabildo* issued an order instructing its *procurador general* that, within three days, all hucksters circulating in the streets had to appear with whatever licenses they held so they could be inspected. The sixty-seven *cajoneros* could each appoint only one itinerant vendor to sell, in the streets, the Castilian textiles entrusted to him and nothing else. The peddler’s name was to be entered in a book by the *cabildo* scribe, who would issue an identification slip countersigned by one of the ordinary *alcaldes* and attested by the scribe, to be shown to the authorities whenever requested. Spaniards who violated this decree could be banished, while *mestizos*, *mulatos*, and Black people would receive one hundred lashes. The purpose of this proclamation was to address the drop in rental income from the stalls in the Main Square caused by the large number of hucksters and street sellers in Lima. That revenue was a major source of funds for the city and, at the time, was being used to pay debts owed to the census fund.

In this way, feeling unable to resolve the consequences of proliferating informal trade—especially unfair competition against the wooden stalls rented annually near the Plaza Mayor—the authorities ended up resorting to the very same strategies that *regatones* had developed.

Soon afterward, a royal decree of 3 September 1671 stiffened the policy. It categorically forbade *mercachifles* of any “race” from selling in the city’s streets, overturning the previous proclamation (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 29, 1670–1675, 2 May 1671; 22 September 1671, f. 70v). This new resolution followed a complaint from Lima’s *procurador mayor*, Juan de Toledo, who warned that the earlier measure would generate even more street sellers—this time legal ones—and that “in their

shadow” a further group of illegal vendors would emerge (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XIII, 1667–1676, 10 September 1671, ff. 162v–163v).

Three years later, in 1673, the *Cabildo* again responded to the *procurador general*’s request by issuing an ordinance that ordered all *mercachifles* to refrain entirely from selling in the streets. The *mercachifles* offered a share of their takings to the Royal Audiencia in exchange for permission to continue trading, but the *Cabildo* instructed the *procurador* to remind the royal government of earlier petitions, which had already outlined the problems created by street *mercachifles*. The authorities ultimately concluded that *mercachifles* should not be allowed to trade in the streets and appointed commissioners to enforce the royal decree (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 29, 1670–1675, 21 January 1673). By 1677 the situation had not improved, and the main victims remained the *cajoneros* of the Plaza Mayor who paid rent. Through the *procurador general*, they asked for a reduction in their payments (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 30, 1676–1683, 19 February 1677).

In the late seventeenth century, in 1678, trade was so depressed that the *Ribera cajones* stood empty: the shopkeepers who had rented them withdrew, and the city lost the thousand pesos that each had paid in *alcabala* and rent (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XIII, 1667–1676, 27 November 1670–13 January 1671, ff. 157v–160r; VI, 24 September 1678, ff. 145r–146r). That year, the authorities therefore decreed a blanket ban “that no person sell in the streets (or plazas) merchandise from the boxes commonly called *mercachifles*,” because these vendors had multiplied to such an extent “that nothing is sold any longer in our *cajones* or in the shops with which to pay the city’s rents” (Lee, 1944, p. 27; AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* V, 1617, ff. 159v–160r, *Auto contra los mercachifles*; VI, 4 September 1678, ff. 145r–146r).

Additionally, the stores denounced the hucksters because their tables and benches prevented shoppers from entering them (Lee, 1944, pp. 516–517). To solve this problem, the *Cabildo* asked the viceroy to allow it to make wooden benches in the plaza in order to rent them. However, after eight years, the hucksters’ decree of 1679 again allowed for one peddler for each previously registered drawer (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XV, 1679–1689, August 14, 1679, f. 23v–f. 24r).

A Bad Habit: Robbery or Forced Purchases on the Roads from the Indians Who Supplied Lima

The sale of agricultural products was permitted to the Indians charged with supplying the city, since the trade in foodstuffs was reserved for them. Unscrupulous people, however, took advantage of this by intercepting them on the roads, buying or stealing their goods. This happened in different parts of Spanish America, such as in the viceroyalty of New Spain (Olvera, 2007).

In Lima's case, this indigenous supply was shrinking as the Indigenous population declined, and nearby haciendas partially made up the difference. Even so, neither source was enough to provision a growing city in the seventeenth century, so authorities increasingly depended on more distant sources (Vergara, 1999, pp. 42–43).

In 1630, the authorities therefore ordered that no one—least of all *pulperos*—was to go out on the roads to buy chickens from Indians, or fish from the fishermen bringing it to the fish market, or from the Indians coming down to Callao. Nor could they send their children, servants, or slaves on horseback with saddlebags to those roads and places under the pretext that they were buying on behalf of others. The decree also stipulated that no *regatón* could buy empty *botijas* from *pulperos* or anyone else in order to resell them. No carter could buy from *regatones* or haul those goods to Callao or back to Lima on his own account, nor could he sell any *botija*, because any *botija* sold in this way would be considered acquired through *regatonería* and would be confiscated. No *pulpero*, pastry cook, or anyone else acting as a *regatón* could sell fried fish of any kind—anchoveta included—or cured fish in any form, whether raw or breaded (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* VI, 1630, n.f.). Fish was almost always sold *regatonamente* in alleyways, dark corners, along the bluff, behind the convent of San Francisco, and along the road to the port of Callao (Rivasplata, 2018, p. 491).

The administrators of several Lima hospitals complained that rising prices for basic goods in the city were due to *regatones* who went out along the roads to seize provisions from the Indians bringing them in. They took their goods by force or trickery and paid whatever they pleased. This practice—buying or, in the worst cases, snatching products from the people who brought them, generally Indians—was denounced in other parts of the Hispanic monarchy in America as well, including New Spain (Galán, 1997, p. 1326) and Santiago de Chile (Salinas, 2018, p. 24).

This attitude not only harmed the Indians, but also all the neighbors, because they resold it much more expensively, making the products more expensive and causing a shortage of hens and eggs for the sick in the hospitals, like those of San Andrés and This behavior harmed not only indigenous producers, but all residents, because *regatones* resold the goods at much higher prices, driving up costs and creating shortages of chickens and eggs needed for patients in hospitals such as San Andrés and Santa Ana. In 1630, the administrators of these hospitals asked the viceroy, the Count of Chinchón, to intervene. They requested tighter control of the roads so that Indians could enter Lima with their products all the way to the *Plaza Mayor*, as they customarily had, where everyone could buy at fair prices and Indians could sell freely along the roads for six leagues around, without allowing *regatones* to stockpile.

Anyone who did so would have their goods seized and turned over to the city's hospitals on the first offense, pay a fine of one hundred pesos on the second, and serve unpaid time in the Callao garrison on the third, if they were Spaniards. Blacks and mulatto men or women would receive one hundred lashes in the streets and two years of banishment from the city. Similar penalties applied to anyone who went out to buy from *regatones*. On 4 February 1630, the king's notary and the court for "naturals" had the mulatto town crier Juan Simón proclaim these severe measures in the *Plaza Mayor*, at the corner of the four merchants' streets. The edict was also read in the plaza and at the Indian hospital of Santa Ana, at the main gate of the nearby Indian town, in the little square of Santa Clara, and on Malambo Street.

Against certain persons who buy different fruits of the land and provisions from Indians who bring them to sell in this city and resell them to the great detriment of the *república*, and whereas this matter pertains to the ordinary justice and to the *fieles ejecutores* of this city in cases of *regatonería* of provisions, according to the ordinances and royal decrees of His Majesty. (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes VIII*, *Auto sobre que no salgan a los caminos a comprar las gallinas a los indios*, 15 January 1630, f. 58v).

Abuses by resellers against Indians continued throughout the Peruvian viceroyalty. During the government of Melchor Portocarrero Lasso de la Vega, third Count of Monclova (1689–1705), those who brought food and supplies into the city still suffered the same grievances. Some *regatones* went out to the roads and other places to buy their goods by fair means or foul, often at much lower prices than the owners usually received. Complaints about the lack of freedom to dispose of their own goods and set their own prices pointed to the harm done to the public

interest in securing an adequate food supply. *Regatones* then sold these goods at highly inflated prices, driving up household expenses. To curb these abuses, earlier viceroys had already issued multiple decrees, though many offenders claimed ignorance of the law.

Other Problems Caused by *Regatonería*

Regatonería on the outskirts of the city. Wholesale and retail sales were supposed to take place in designated public spaces—*plazas mayores* and *tambos*—and not “anywhere at all,” so that authorities could verify provenance and ensure fair and transparent transactions. In practice, however, informal trade and the criminal acts associated with it—especially robbery and violence—prevailed in this sector. To avoid feeding this criminal system, authorities also blamed and punished buyers. Thus, on 15 September 1689, the Viceroy Count of Monclova ordered that no person, of any race or status, was to buy any kind of provisions on the roads or anywhere outside the city of Lima. Carters could not haul such loads under the pretext that their owners had sold them and that they were merely delivering them to the doorsteps of buyers or *pulperías*. Authorities ordered that all goods for sale be taken to public squares or to the *tambos* or stalls where their owners customarily sold them, exercising the freedom they had over their own property.

Those who forced others to act otherwise faced eight years of service at the presidio of Valdivia, and the owner would pay an additional fine for violating the ban. Black, mulatto, or Indian offenders and others would receive two hundred lashes and four years of service in the Callao garrison; owners of slaves would pay 200 pesos, and enslaved women and Indian women would receive one hundred lashes each time they were caught carrying goods along the usual streets. Spaniards or mestizos would face four years of banishment and a fifty-peso fine. The decree was published in the city, in the surrounding towns, and in the port of Callao (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 17, 1688–1692, 15 September 1689, *Bando para que los regatones no salgan a los caminos a comprar*, f. 139r).

Regatonería and public health. Ensuring the quality of meat was a priority for the *cabildo*, both to prevent disease and to reduce mortality. The meat supply was a sensitive matter, and only animals slaughtered publicly at the city slaughterhouses—whose provenance was known—were supposed to be sold. Yet the population boom in the late seventeenth century forced authorities to expand the meat supply and tighten quality controls. On 15 September 1689, a decree prohibited anyone from selling meat, in small or large quantities, outside the public slaughterhouses

of the city and of Callao, even if the meat had been purchased from those officially charged with providing it. Any meat seized in violation of the ban would be confiscated, as such practices harmed the king, the Royal Treasury, and the public good. Confiscated meat was redirected to the poor in the hospitals. The decree was proclaimed in the usual places so that residents of nearby valleys, surrounding towns, and the port of Callao would be informed.

In Lima, the right to sell meat (*la sisa*) was farmed out to the highest bidder, which drove prices up, while *regatones* of meat paid no taxes at all. This illicit pattern in the city and its port had dragged on for many years, and successive viceroys—including the Count of Lemos—had issued bans with harsh penalties for violators (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 17, 1688–1692, 15 September 1689, *Bando del conde de Monclova sobre las regatonas de la carne*, f. 140v; 19, 1705–1716, *Bando para que no haya regatones de carne en la plaza*, 1706, f. 41r). Despite prohibitions and fines, clandestine *regatones* continued to sell cut-up meat in Lima.

Shortages and rising prices of basic goods. In the eyes of the authorities, informal trade was to blame. Under Viceroy Mancera, the prices of wheat, sugar, soap, tallow, and other goods brought from the port rose, a rise attributed to the middlemen who transported them into the city. The same happened with the muleteers who carried Guayaquil timber from the port to Lima, driving up its price to the detriment of carpenters, most of whom depended on their craft for a living and now had to buy wood at exorbitant rates (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* VIII, *Auto del virrey marqués de Mancera contra los que atraviesan la madera en el puerto del Callao*, 14 March 1647, f. 22r). This problem persisted throughout the viceroy's government, to the point that on 18 May 1647 he issued a decree on the distribution of tallow that had been seized in the port of Callao, ordering that *regatones* be prosecuted with full rigor for raising the price of that product (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 24, 1644–1649, 18 March 1647, *Decreto contra los regatones y personas que hacían subir el precio del sebo*, f. 162v).

In sum, *regatería* was a recurring problem throughout Spanish America in the seventeenth century. It showed the same profile everywhere: hoarding, price inflation, goods of dubious origin—often stolen—and evasion of official controls on weight, price, and quality. It involved not only *regatones* but also other merchants and *pulperos* who traded with them, closing a vicious circle and turning this into a complex, often criminal and abusive activity that harmed farmers, fishers, formal merchants, and consumers' health. This infringing pattern appears elsewhere as well, for instance in the piracy of raft-borne cargoes coming downriver to the city

of Guayaquil, whose products were stolen or bought under coercion at rock-bottom prices (Chaves, 2002, pp. 72–73). *Regatones* built alliances among economic sectors, *pulperías*, and segments of political power, which helps explain their diffusion and deep entrenchment in colonial society.

Regatones and Mercachifles in Eighteenth-Century Lima

The problem of *regatonería* continued into the eighteenth century. The Cabildo had to prevent the monopoly of foodstuffs, by controlling that *regatones* or *pulperos* did not go out onto the roads around the city to buy from Indigenous people and commit abuses and outrages that harmed the whole community (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXIII, 11 September 1765, ff. 212r–213r). In 1681, the *Recopilación de leyes de Indias*, book six, title 1, law 25, ordered the authorities to allow Indigenous people to sell their goods and fruits freely and without impediment; and in 1765, this freedom was reiterated locally in order to counteract the monopoly of basic products, but the Cabildo had to ensure that these were not sold to *regatones* and *pulperos*, who would raise their prices (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXVII, 24 December 1804–2 January 1805, f. 132r–v). Despite all the prohibitions, there were many *regatones* in the streets, due to the lack of officials to enforce the ordinances and the lack of cooperation from supply distributors, who sold their products for resale through *regatonería*, as well as the people, who instead of denouncing them to the authorities bought their products (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXVI, 27 February 1789, ff. 62v–63v, *Oficio contra los excesos de los regatones*). The abuses committed against Indigenous vendors came not only from *regatones*, but also from the authorities themselves, such as the Cabildo, which allowed the *almotacén* and the lessee of awnings to force them to pay for cleaning the areas where they sold and for the rental of sunshades. During the government of José Antonio de Mendoza Caamaño y Sotomayor, third Marquis of Villagarcía de Arosa, in 1736, the aldermen of the Cabildo debated a memorial submitted to the viceroy by the attorney of the Royal Audiencia, Juan Manuel de Orozco, requesting that the Indigenous women vendors in the Main Square, who were legally authorized, not be forced by the lessees of awnings to rent them (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 35, 1730–1756, 17 April 1736, n.f.). That is, some authorities advocated for Indigenous women who sold products at retail and at low prices and who were established in the Main Square. Everyday petty trade, involving surplus agricultural production, was largely in women's hands, but they did not participate in large-scale commerce (Bravo, 1996, pp. 143–160).

The authorities tried to curb informal trade through successive edicts and prohibitions during the governments from Manuel de Amat y Junyent to Teodoro Francisco de Croix-Heuchin, between 1761 and 1789 (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXIII, 1763–1777, *Bando para que no permitan regatones de mantenimientos*, 1770, f. 212r). In 1784, faced with the great disorder that was being experienced in the sale of provisions and other basic necessities, the authorities determined that it stemmed not only from the shortages caused by lack of rainfall, but also, and above all, from second-hand *regatones*, whose eradication had not been achieved. To the problem of *regatonería* was added the hoarding carried out by *encomenderos*, who accumulated products and then sold them at retail. From its origins, the problem of informality had reached the very structure of the state, and only at the end of the eighteenth century did the Cabildo denounce it so that measures would be taken.

Enlightened despotism reached the Viceroyalty of Peru, and specifically Lima, in the second half of the eighteenth century with the superintendency sent from the metropolis to implement the new measures. The government of Viceroy Prince de la Croix coincided with the arrival in the Viceroyalty of Peru of Jorge Escobedo y Alarcón, Visitor and Superintendent of the Royal Treasury, who was also intendant of the Province of Lima, and between 1782 and 1788 he assumed responsibilities that had been carried out by the Cabildo (Navarro, 1995, pp. 96, 101, 106). Despite the drastic measures taken, they did not succeed in eliminating *regatonería* from the streets of Lima. In 1789, Prince de la Croix blamed the failure to eradicate *regatonería* on the shortage of law enforcers able to correct transgressors by confiscating their goods and punishing them with full rigor, according to their status and condition and in accordance with the kingdom's laws and ordinances. The laws against *regatones* extended to the owners and drivers of foodstuffs and to the *pulperos* who used them to buy from Indigenous people along the roads or in the outskirts. All were obliged to report immediately to the ordinary mayors and the judge on duty to inform them of their movements regarding the purchase of supplies, and to report offenses to the aldermen, the lieutenant of police, and the appointed assistant. An official letter would be sent to the general administrator of the Royal Customs so that the gate and road guards would submit the appropriate reports, preventing the entry of informal products and arresting those who attempted to bring them in. This resolution was communicated to the subdelegates of Cañete, Huarochirí, Canta, Chancay, and El Cercado, with the specific charge that they, for their part, should contribute to the free supply and introduction into the city of Indigenous people, owners and carriers of provisions, punishing tho-

se who, in their districts, bought goods along the road with the aim of reselling them through *regatonerías* (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXV, 1785–1788, *Oficio contra los excesos de los regatones*, 1789, f. 62v).

In this way, at the end of the eighteenth century there existed in Lima:

a kind of monopoly carried out by the *encomenderos* and owners of *tambos*, making purchases in large quantities in order to break them down into small sales, setting prices at their own discretion and taking advantage of the urgencies and needs of the public, which is the party that suffers the extortion and the well-known hardships, about which it repeatedly directs its complaints to this cabildo, whose duties now compel it to adopt extraordinary measures with which to remedy the damage as far as possible and to consult the benefit of the public without losing sight of that of the suppliers, who are also worthy of attention and must be left some profit. (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 37, 1782–1784, 28 February 1784, n.f.).

The mayors and aldermen, as well as all other authorities, were to watch over and safeguard the city's food supply. They were to visit the plazas, the *casas de encomienda*, warehouses, and *pulperías* where the goods to be sold would be stored, with prior registration, and report back to the Cabildo. Under no pretext were the authorities to allow these products to be resold by *regatones*, who were to be pursued and have their goods confiscated. The decree of 13 February 1789 ordered the Cabildo to enforce the confiscation of foodstuffs that *regatones* brought into the city (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXIX, 1785–1802, 25 February 1789, *Caballero de la Croix al cabildo*, f. 124r). This measure coincided with certain petitions to open *chicherías* in private houses, which were usually submitted to the attorney general, such as that of 17 November 1797 by Julián Cuevas (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 39, 1793–1801, 17 November 1797, n.f.). In these areas on the periphery of Lima, such as Bellavista, products obtained from *regatones* could be sold (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 39, 1793–1801, 6 March 1798, n.f.).

By the end of the eighteenth century, *regatonería* was understood as equivalent to monopoly, which made products more expensive—in this case, hawthorn and willow wood for the manufacture and repair of carriages. The *regatonería* of wood still continued at the end of that century, as revealed by a complaint submitted by the guild of coachbuilders of the city of Lima to the Royal Audiencia. The *alcalde veedor* of that guild denounced the monopoly that the *tamberos* of Malambo, in the suburb of San Lázaro, held over the resale of wood transported from Ica, Pisco, and Huarmey and deposited in those establishments, where they bought it. This

practice was considered a monopoly or *regatonería* by the coachbuilders because it increased the price. The guild demanded the removal of the unnecessary intermediary and that the wood be sold to the main interested parties, and therefore requested that the wood be delivered to the *alcalde veedor* so that he could distribute it among all of them:

at a fair price to be set according to its quality, its tariff and wages, and the interest corresponding to the carrier, so that in this way the masters may obtain the material at a reasonable price and the public may feel less acutely the cost of repairing their carriages (...) To separate the *tamberos* from the monopoly they exercised over such wood, which they bought from the carriers at a lower price and resold to the artisans at an inflated one (...). (AGN, cabildo, box 1, file 89, exp. 1301, 84 fols., 1 October 1776, *Monopolio que los tamberos poseían para la reventa de esta madera*).

In the early nineteenth century, the government of Gabriel Miguel de Avilés y del Fierro also decreed the prohibition of regatones and established penalties against them (AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXX, 15 March 1800, *Oficio para que el ayuntamiento persiga a los regatones de comestibles porque persistían en el oficio*, f. 430r; XXVII, 1798–1820, *Decreto que prohíbe regatones y establece penas contra ellos*, 1804, f. 132r). In 1805, the aforementioned viceroy ordered that order be imposed on the supply of fuel that Indigenous people brought to the capital, as well as on the *regatones* who went out onto the roads, to whom the corresponding penalties were to be applied under the supervision of the Cabildo and its aldermen (AHLM, *Libro de Cabildo de Lima* 40, 1801–1805, 2 January 1805, *Abastecer a Lima de comestibles, los indios y recatones*; AHLM, *Libro de cédulas y provisiones de la Ciudad de los Reyes* XXVII, 24 December 1804–2 January 1805, ff. 132r–v, *Decreto que prohíbe regatones y establece penas contra ellos*).

Final Considerations

Regatonería was an endemic problem that took root in the very fabric of colonial Lima. It was not, however, unique to the capital of the Viceroyalty of Peru, but was practiced throughout Spanish America. Demand for basic goods outstripped supply, and the formal market was insufficient to meet it. Regatones were able to manipulate the market by seizing control of products that they later sold at higher prices, creating monopolies. The law sought to contain and even eradicate the practice, and authorities devised ways to formalize regatonería, but without success. At the same time, hucksters bought licenses from other viceregal authorities and from the Audiencia to continue selling in their own way, which generated chaos in the city by the mid-seventeenth century. The Cabildo itself joined this

practice when it proposed that each Ribera stallholder should have a regatón to sell his products, in order to compete with the informal system and meet the payments required for the right to use the Main Square as a marketplace.

Over time, regatería evolved from a small-scale informal activity into a set of monopolistic practices involving goods on a larger scale. The need for those resources forced buyers to purchase them despite their repeated appeals to the authorities to eliminate the intermediaries who drove prices up. In other words, rather than diminish, the problem grew, became entrenched, and grew more complex within society, so that Lima—like other Latin American cities—acquired the distinctive stamp of informality that, to some extent, continues to be fostered by legality itself.

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Annex

Decree on the drawers of the plaza and peddlers. It is granted to the town council while it is not disposed another thing by this government the privilege that it tries of which they cannot walk in it merchants and peddlers selling clothes nor other genres of Castile, and that only those that the drawers of the Ribera who must have a license to be able to choose each one a merchant and not more than by their account can do it, this will be taken by the notary to ensure that this is affirmed and that no frauds are committed. The cabildo will appoint a merchant that each one chooses and will give him a ballot so that the justices allow him to sell freely without carrying for this more rights than four reals, and to avoid the confusion of those who appoint and are choosing, a book will be kept in the cabildo where the persons who appoint and those appointed will be recorded with warning that if they make new election of others they will be seated in the same form and the ballots given to the antecedents will be collected, which will be initialed by one of the ordinary mayors, and with the faith of the cabildo scribe referring to the cashier who makes the appointment and the person appointed, with which the leases of the drawers of the city will grow and the cabildo will have with which to go to what is of its obligation, and so that this may have a more prompt execution, I order that the seizure that is made in the drawers by the census box be reached with the quality and condition that the chapter must first give a plain lay guarantor and paid to the satisfaction of the scribe of the census box that in each year it will pay four thousand and forty pesos for the two thousand and eighty-eight and one thousand two hundred on account of what the city owes in arrears until the census fund is entirely satisfied. And so that the Royal Treasury can enjoy the same benefit in the seventeen drawers that are at the turn of the palace towards the bridge, I give this same order to the loyal officers on whose account their leasing runs with that the merchants named will be in all fifty new that is enough number for whose effect provision is dispatched in form which will be put in the books of the town council. Lima, November 27, 1670. And at the foot of this writing there is a rubric that seems to be of the most excellent Count of Lemos (AHLM. Libro de Cabildo de Lima 29, 1670-1675, November 27, 1670, Memorial sobre los mercachifles y otras cosas, f. 48v-49r-v).