

“Blowing” Family Savings Zapotec Style: A Theoretical Dilemma

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The Zapotec Indians, with whom we did our research, live in southern Mexico chiefly in the state of Oaxaca. They are identified by their speaking any one of several Zapotecan dialects as a primary language and by living a traditional way of life that finds its roots in a pre-Columbian past. Although essentially a rural people at present, they are the descendants of peoples who evolved one of the earliest and most notable of meso-american civilizations comprised of city-states about 400 B.C. and terminating in an empire around 700 A.D. (5) (7).

While basically subsistence farmers many Zapotecs produce goods exceeding family needs. Such surpluses and goods resulting from specialized crafts and husbandry have been exchanged in regional markets since at least early colonial times (2). Monetary resources from such exchanges have not been used for capital investment, and only sparingly for family needs and personal wants. Rather large amounts of accumulated monetary resources traditionally have been consumed through ritual expenditures perceived as contributing to community benefit. The principal vehicle for directing funds to community benefit has been the custom of participation in the *mayordomia*.

Briefly, the *mayordomia* is a widespread custom in mesoamerican peasantry systems which calls for the individual sponsorship of religious feasts. A man may volunteer for or be named to the position of sponsor. In either case the sponsor, called a *mayordomo*, takes on the burden of financing a religious feast for the benefit of his community. The economic burden is called a *cargo* in Spanish, and for this reason anthropologists often refer to the whole as the *cargo* system (6).

The cultural roots of the *cargo* system antedate the conquest of the New World by the Spanish, reflecting indigenous customs of ritual sponsorship economically costly to individual sponsors. Utilizing the customs they already found in operation, the Spanish conquerors added the dimension of prestige to expenditures made in the service of the saints. As one writer puts it, the *cargo* “. . . system takes from those who have, in order to make all men have nots. By liquidating the surpluses, it makes all men rich in sacred experience but poor in earthly goods.”(8)

Another writer, who sees the *cargo* system as just one type of customary behavior reducing inequalities in wealth between people in various primitive and peasant societies, refers to these systems as “leveling mechanism” (3). Analytically the leveling mechanism emphasizes the importance of individual contribution to community welfare and service while it deemphasizes the importance of individual economic success. Individual economic sacrifices are compensated for by community conferred prestige.

For hundreds of years and indeed up to the present Zapotec farmers and their families have been willing “to blow” family savings by participating in the *mayordomia*. Heads of families have been willing to take on the *cargos* seen as so important by themselves, their neighbors and fellow townsmen, and in return to receive honor and prestige for the financial sacrifices so made. The system

has been notably resistant to change and because it contributes to the maintenance of equilibrium in the total society its persistence contributes to stability in Zapotec society generally.

The ethnographic evidence is that the *cargo* system may finally be beginning to give way to a system favoring economic competition, the accumulation of wealth, personal discretion in the use of monetary resources, and the purchase of goods for personal and family pleasure and profit. There is a real question however about how long it might take a capital forming economic system to overtake and supplant the *cargo* system. The cultural roots of the *cargo* system run deep into the soil of a social order brought about by the fusion of indigenous Indian systems and a Spanish economic system which had not yet emerged into the industrial age.

It cannot simply be assumed that the *cargo* system will give way to some more modern system of a use of accumulated savings at the family level. For the most part the shift from spending household savings from community service to family use is an effect and not a cause of the breakdown of the *cargo* system. In places where the *cargo* system no longer remains a vital element in one's participation in community affairs we often are able to observe that it has been displaced functionally by other elements which serve to maintain a balance of equilibrium in community social dynamics. It is tempting to think of the *cargo* system only as a siphoning agent for individual and family resources. The chief quality of the *cargo* system lies in the fact that it serves as an important factor in the maintenance of social equilibrium at the community level.

One of the more fruitful formulations explaining the eventual demise of the *cargo* system comes from Frank Cancian (1). Cancian develops his hypothesis about the passing of the *cargo* system from his excellent functional analysis of the *mayordomia* in the elaborate *cargo* system in the Mayan community of Zinacantan.

Briefly, Cancian maintains that currently increasing population and wealth in Zinacantan stand as threats to the functionality of the *cargo* system in the maintenance of equilibrium and stability in the community. The equilibrating system which previously functioned in precisely that way is now overburdened by a steadily increasing population of adult males who have the economic resources and the desire to take on *cargos* but who cannot be accommodated by positions traditionally open to them. Increasingly resources which would be consumed in *cargo* expenditures are being diverted to the purchase of goods becoming attractive to would be participants and their families. Cancian refers to many of these goods as "*ladino* symbols" because they are taking on values beyond their utilitarian ends and because ownership of such goods often has prestige value among non-Indians or *ladinos*. *Ladino* symbols include things which reflect wealth and social status for non-Indians—special housing, cars, radios, bicycles, westernized clothing, and increasingly more important, education beyond the primary level. Bit by bit prestige of a type is beginning to accrue to the ownership and use of *ladino* symbols by Indians, although this prestige is not comparable at present to that gained through participation in the traditional *cargo* system.

Says Cancian, "The integration of Zinacantan society which has been a consequence of the *cargo* system will inevitably break down". (1) His analysis disposes him to predict that as *cargos* become less of an economic burden (through greater potential for wealth for individuals), while other economic outlets become more accessible and important to people, the more the *cargo* system will be threatened. In consequence, the prestige which comes from filling *cargos* will decline while prestige accruing to the ownership of *ladino* symbols will increase, gradually to replace that which derives from participation in the *cargo* system. The end result

will be complete erosion of the *cargo* system which will no longer serve economic leveling and social prestige functions.

Fortunately in our field work we have been able to observe the results of the demise of the *cargo* system in a Zapotec community, called Escalerita. Our observations span a period of about fifteen years but our informant data allows us to reconstruct conditions when the *cargo* system was intact, and to analyze those conditions which led to the collapse of the system.

In many respects Escalerita is similar to Zinacantan. Both are "cultural communities" in the sense that residents have a decided community orientation to the world, perceiving themselves in community-centric terms relative to people in neighboring communities. People in both communities have traditional approaches to life and regard their own way of life as having as much validity as that of the non-Indian. Two important variables distinguish the communities. Zinacantan is large and for several decades has been relatively prosperous. Escalerita is small and for much of this century has been relatively impoverished.

Prior to 1950, when the *cargo* system was officially dissolved in Escalerita, there were four levels of *cargos*. The system could accommodate from 8 to 15 yearly *mayordomias* although it seems quite certain that not all positions were filled every year. Men were involved in *cargos* from ages 15 through 55 years. Positions in the *mayordomia* were matched with positions in the civil political hierarchy so that assuming a *cargo* in the religious structure permitted a man the possibility of assuming a *cargo* of commensurate rank in the political structure. A man's prestige in the system was reflected not only in the kinds and levels of *cargos* he could assume in the religious structure but also in the ranking of the positions open to him in the political structure. All men entered the system at the lower levels, hoping through participation to achieve positions at the higher levels. No man, for example, was considered fit for the position of town president unless he had served in five *cargos* in the *mayordomia* and had occupied certain lesser political offices. A man could not occupy the most prestigious position of *alcalde* (mayor) unless he had served as town president and in the two major *mayordomias* in the highest grade of the *cargo* system.

Any man could volunteer for a *mayordomia* at a level appropriate to his age and prior service. But a committee also existed to name men to serve if no one volunteered for the essential positions. Official lists were kept recording *cargo* services.

Evidence is that the system functioned well in the early decades of this century. Probably because of the Revolution (1910-1917) conditions changed which affected the *cargo* system in Escalerita. Political *cargos* declined in importance, some becoming non-existent. This loosened the all important connections between religious and political positions which apparently undermined the prestige of the *mayordomia*. Economic decline accompanied political decline and *cargos* became unbearable economic burdens for many people.

Fewer and fewer people controlled the resources necessary for participating in the *mayordomia*. With fewer volunteers the council acted more frequently in naming men to unfilled important, and of course more expensive, *cargos*. Enforced participation and outright refusals became the rule rather than the exception. Prestige through service under these circumstances became questionable, particularly when service in the *mayordomia* was not matched by opportunities to serve in the political structure which traditionally validated prestige gained in the *mayordomia*. The small size of the community exacerbated the generally unfavorable conditions.

The president of Escalerita in 1950 with considerable, but by no means

unanimous, support dissolved the *mayordomia*. His act erased the obligatory aspect of the system and gave official recognition to the fact that large numbers of people were simply no longer able to participate in the system (4). Enough resistance to the act resulted so that for at least a few years it appeared that the *mayordomia* might be reinstated as a compulsory system of *cargos*. And the custom of the *mayordomia* did not disappear immediately. Even into the early 1970's some men still periodically volunteered to support one or the other of the major feasts. Although they thought of themselves as *mayordomos* taking on *cargos*, they rarely assumed full expenses for the feasts as was customary in the past. Initially most townspeople saw the expenses as "unnecessary." Now there is an almost unanimous tendency to see such expenditures as "foolish" or "wasteful" on the part of the individuals who might undertake them.

Economic recovery occurred after the dissolution of the *mayordomia*. But it is interesting, and important, to note that no major effort has been made to reinstitute the *cargo* system as a result of recovery. With economic recovery a number of community-wide enterprises have been undertaken which would not have been successful had it not been for assessments leveled on heads of households by the town authorities. Some of these assessments were made proportional to the estimated wealth of the individuals assessed conforming to the spirit of the *cargo* system. As a result the community now enjoys a complete six year primary school, an all weather road, a deep well with a pump to supply clean drinking water, and electricity for both public and private use. Such assessments of funds for the public good do not normally exhaust family savings however.

What is apparent in the thirty year period since the *mayordomia* was abolished is the observable fact that people are not "blowing" family savings in the support of *cargos* but in the purchase and use of what Cancian calls "*ladino* symbols." For example, in 1950 there were no radios in the community; in 1965 there were 5 or 6; in 1971 there were about 20. By 1981 there were at least twice as many and one person had already purchased a television set. Prior to 1968 no one owned a vehicle of any sort in Escalerita. In that year the first bicycle and the first truck were purchased. By 1981, many bicycles, several trucks and one farm tractor had been purchased. The quantity of items purchased is not as important to note as is the qualitative shift from ritual expenditures to personal expenditures, reflecting it would seem the complete and final disappearance of the *cargo* system in this Zapotec town.

Chiefly of interest to us is how we might best explain the cultural factors involved in the complicated processes we have observed. Over the years we have witnessed the demise of the *cargo* system in Escalerita, but under conditions which appear to be opposite those posited by Cancian for Zinacantan. Because our observations appear to be at variance with those of Cancian in many respects it might seem that his formulation has little utility for us in understanding the case familiar to us. A problem arises from trying to explain contradictory cases with a theoretical formulation that analytically applies well only to one. We in fact however believe that Cancian's formulation offers potential for the generation of some more general theoretical construct to help us . . . and others . . . understand (and perhaps predict) the collapse of the *cargo* system wherever found, facilitating its replacement by other economic mechanisms. Currently we are working with some more broadly based theoretical constructs to see which of them can best accommodate an understanding of these contradictory cases thereby helping us to address the dilemma we have but briefly outlined in this paper.

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