

TWO GENDERS, TWO VARIETIES OF PRESTIGE. FULFILLING *CARGO* AS A WAY OF GAINING ESTEEM

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Abstract

Mexican *cargo* systems are a very popular topic of anthropological reflection. This article belongs to that current; however, its author attempts to show the *cargos* not as the axis of the social structure (as it is done in classical ethnographic studies), but as an individual career path available to both men and women. On the basis of material from the village of Tócuaro in the Michoacán province of Mexico, she demonstrates how one of the most difficult *cargos*, organising the feast of the Virgin Mary of the Candlemas, facilitates the process of gaining prestige. Interestingly, this prestige is different in the case of men and women. Despite that difference – which to some would certainly corroborate how unequal are the social opportunities for men and women – this prestige constitutes huge motivation to undertake the equally huge task of organising a feast for the entire community.

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Meksykańskie systemy *cargos* są bardzo popularnym tematem dociekań antropologicznych, w ich nurt wpisuje się także ten artykuł. Jego autorka stara się jednak pokazać *cargo* nie jako oś struktury społecznej, jak w klasycznych pracach etnograficznych, lecz jako drogę do indywidualnej kariery dostępnej tak mężczyznom, jak i kobietom. Na przykładzie materiałów z wioski Tócuaro w stanie Michoacán w Meksyku pokazuje jak jedno z najtrudniejszych *cargos* – organizacja święta Matki Boskiej Gromnicznej – umożliwia zdobycie prestiżu. Co ciekawe, uznanie to inne jest dla mężczyzn, inne dla kobiet. I mimo tej różnicy, dla niektórych będącej z pewnością świadectwem nierównych możliwości społecznych dla kobiet i mężczyzn, stanowi wystarczającą motywację, by podjąć się ogromu pracy, jakim jest organizacja święta dla całej społeczności.

Key words: *cargo* system, *carguero*, prestige, Mexico

The concept of prestige does not find broad application as a category in ethnological research. Ethnographic encyclopaedias and dictionaries often overlook it completely, even though the term does appear in the research of many scholars. Prestige is treated mostly as a derivative of the so-called symbolic exchange systems, such as *potlatch*, *kula*, or funeral feasts (see Mauss 2001, Malinowski 1981, Firth 1971). It is not, however,

viewed as an explanatory category. Studies on the Mexican *cargo* systems¹ and the inclusion of women into that originally “male” system are, however, an example of a different approach to the category of prestige. Contemporary analyses of that phenomenon inevitably lead towards gender studies and towards considerations upon the presence of women in the public sphere (see Mathews 1985). Focus on the category of prestige permits the scholar to demonstrate that assuming *cargos* by women brings consequences different than in the case of men. It is true that the system of *cargos* guarantees prestige and appreciation to both men and women; yet it does that in two different ways.

Scholars often perceive Mexican *cargo* systems as a principle that imposes order on social life.² Some see them as no less than the axis around which the entire social structure is constructed (Loewe 2003, p. 463); others only stress the close and indissoluble connection between the hierarchy of offices and social structure (Carrasco 1961, p. 483). This is because in many cases the *cargo* system is the most easily observable, and thus the most expressive element of social life. It permeates both the secular and the religious sphere, and penetrates into private life and family life. Specific offices within the hierarchy of *cargos* are extremely varied; also, in many localities, local administration and religious life are founded upon the system of those offices. From this, many anthropologists seem to get the impression that the system of *cargos* constitutes the main mechanism of ordering social life, and that only passing the entire ladder of *cargo* offices gives the opportunity to fulfil the highest and the most prestigious *cargo*. The extent to which the perception of the *cargo* system as a regulator of social life is correct may, however, be an issue of debate, since as a rule the concern to fulfil successive duties pertains exclusively to men.³ Women are included into the system of *cargos* only informally, through help they render to men in fulfilling their duties. The hierarchy itself does not include women – so the system of *cargos* cannot be identified with the entirety of social structure. Nevertheless, the fact of submitting to the system reflects, to a large extent, upon the life of the entire family, and this means women as well. The place in the hierarchy of offices held by a given man has an effect on the position of his relatives.⁴

¹ The *cargo* system is a hierarchical structure of secular and religious offices within a local community, usually held for the period of one year. Fulfilling the lower *cargos* of the hierarchy permits a person to assume the successive, higher offices (Carrasco 1961, p. 483).

² The majority of descriptions of the *cargo* systems pertains to Indian communities (Carrasco (1961 p. 485–491) emphasises the Indian character of the *cargo* system the most strongly of all, assuming that it derives from the pre-Columbian Aztec social structure), but the phenomenon pertains also to non-Indian communities.

³ In classical anthropological studies the fulfilling of *cargos* was presented as an exclusively male domain (see Beals 1946, Foster 1948, Carrasco 1961, Van Zantvijk 1967), but contemporary works speak of both men and women as *cargueros* (cf. Mathews 1985, p. 290, Monaghan 1996, p. 502).

⁴ By this I understand the *carguero*’s wife and children, possibly also his unmarried sister, rather than his parents and older relatives, because those usually fulfilled their own *cargos* earlier.

The highest offices in the entire social structure, in turn, i.e. the seats in the “council of elders”⁵ are often outside the system of *cargos*. Yet although they function outside the system, they are largely dependent on it, because they can be held only by men who have reached the very top of the *cargo* ladder and have fulfilled the last and the most important *cargo*: they have organised a *fiesta* of the community’s patron. At this point, a man receives the title of a *pasado*, one who has passed the entire hierarchy (Van Zantvijk 1967, p. 115). In some cases, the highest offices in the local administration are included in the *cargo* system, but constitute its apex and are considered equal to organising the feast of the patron (Carrasco 1961, p. 483).

Despite the relatives’ huge involvement in helping the man to climb the successive rungs of his career as a *carguero*, the whole honour for fulfilling the specific *cargos* is accorded to him only. The aim of passing through the ladder of offices is to reach that very particular position within the community: the seat in the “council of elders”. Usually only fulfilling the final *cargo* allows the man to participate in the council that directs the community⁶ and thus to win general esteem and to be regarded with deference. It is success in fulfilling the successive offices that gives him the right to actively participate in the local political life.⁷ Thus, participation in the governance is a special type of reward for climbing up the *cargo* ladder systematically and effectively. Precisely for this reason, the most highly valued quality imparted by fulfilling all the *cargos* is prestige that allows the man to assume the highest offices (Carrasco 1961, p. 484).

It is a remarkable kind of prestige,⁸ which is due only to a concrete group, and gains importance exclusively while fulfilling concrete functions. The man who passed all the system of *cargos* gets included into a group of those who had done the same, and he becomes a respected and esteemed person. Yet this appreciation and positive opinion is due to him not because of his individual qualities, but chiefly because of the position he now assumes in the community. Prestige enjoyed by a man who has fulfilled the highest *cargo* in the hierarchy is a feature of the group to which he has been included, and so a feature not only of himself, but of all his fellow holders of identical social status. His character and all personal qualities which have allowed him to fulfil the consecutive duties are of secondary importance in the face of social esteem that he has gained.

⁵ In Mexico, beside the state administration, function also the local administrative structures, to whom belong the decisions on e.g. road renovation, redecoration of the local church, organisation of feasts, or disputes regarding village land leases.

⁶ The situation I describe is a specific, ideal model of the *cargo* system, underscoring its most essential and most widespread functions. It must be remembered that a local type of the hierarchy of *cargo* offices can be found in every community. However, the dependence of the opportunity to participate in the community’s governing structures on the fulfillment of the highest *cargo* is stressed by all the authors describing the operation of *cargos*.

⁷ An example of the *cargo* career path is described by Van Zantvijk (1967, pp. 111–113).

⁸ I understand prestige as the distinction and respect accorded to an individual in exchange for his/her actions and attitudes.

Prestige is attached to the particular group and can be enjoyed by all its members; but it does not gain full value if it is not used in a proper manner. Status gained by a man after fulfilling all the *cargo* has no particular meaning at all, unless he avails himself of the opportunities offered to him by his new position. A man who would elect to stay in the shadow and would not participate in the social life would still, formally, retain the esteem that is his due, but he would not find himself in situations in which that esteem might meet with a reaction from the other members of the community. From this, it is evident that prestige gained by passing thorough a ladder of offices constitutes a potential of a kind, to be applied in a very specific field; a potential which gives men the opportunity to participate in the local politics. Only involvement in governing the community makes the prestige accorded to a concrete person shape his relations with others, and thus becomes a real value (Gregory 1975, p. 78). Prestige is indeed a reward for fulfilling the successive *cargos*; but it is a reward that loses a part of its value if the subsequent duty, i.e. the council membership, is not accepted. This is because participation in the local authority "is characterized by the acceptance of commissions (*cargos*), by prestige and the enjoyment of its benefits rather than by responsibility, power and the exercise of it" (Van Zantvijk 1967, p. III). The possibility to influence the fate of the community is not based on the man's having power itself, but on his having prestige. It is not the actual power held by the members of the council, but their social esteem that makes the decisions of the council accepted by the community.

It appears, therefore, that the individual qualities of council members are unimportant; what counts is their inclusion into the group of men who are held in particularly high respect. A man who sits on the council will be esteemed irrespective of his character. The qualities which allowed him to fulfil subsequent offices seem to go unheeded. This is because of the general assumption that a person who has decided to fulfil a *cargo* must be predisposed to do so. He should be patient, honest, persistent in attaining his goals, he must be able to win the acceptance of his family and, above all, the family's help. There exists, therefore, a canon of features which the man aspiring to the entire *cargo* career ought to possess; not having them, he will not be able to reach his ambition (Van Zantvijk 1967, p. 129). Yet in this case, the individual features of a *carguero* are understood exclusively as a means of attaining the goal, not as a capital that allows him to win individual esteem; they are perceived only with an eye to the *cargos* he has fulfilled. A man who undertakes to fulfil a certain *cargo* is not admired for particular cleverness, organisational talents or persistence; he is esteemed as a *carguero*, a man who holds a concrete place in the hierarchy of offices.

In my opinion, this is because personal prestige is gained for special features; for applying one's abilities in unusual circumstances, for achieving something out of ordinary – something that cannot be held as conventional. In order to fulfil the subsequent duties, it is necessary to adhere to a definite "pattern" known in the community; to adjust to social demands and accomplish the given *cargos* in accordance with them.

In this way, it is possible to attain a socially acceptable success; yet this success does not translate fully to individual esteem. When the proceedings become inflexible, to a certain extent ritualised, this leaves no space for individual display, and thus no opportunity for gaining personal prestige. Adherence to certain regulations assures only positional prestige,⁹ one attached to the fulfilment of given social expectations. This is the male prestige gained through fulfilling a *cargo*.

Fulfilling the *cargos* must be performed in accordance with social demands. It is for fulfilling those demands that the man gains prestige – the potential to use in the field of social activity. Neither do the women helping their men to realise their *cargo* win individual appreciation for their willingness to make sacrifices; their support is inscribed into the ritualised circle of exchanging gifts and services that functions within the community (see Monaghan 1990). A single person is unable to manage all the tasks relative to the fulfilment of a *cargo*, especially of the highest one: organising the *fiesta*. Hence every household is involved in a more or less complicated system of mutual help. The *carguero* who is preparing the feast for the patron avails himself of the support of several families. Afterwards, when one of those families is preparing “its” *fiesta*, his household repays the support it has been given. Yet, despite many women’s involvement in the preparations, despite their huge effort and time investment, their culinary and organisational abilities, none of those women gains personal prestige¹⁰ for services she renders to others. She does not gain it, because in this case, too, personal features are no more than a means to upholding the exchange of services. This exchange is strongly conventionalised, and the social expectations involved in it are clear: the entire system of exchange is to continue through diligent fulfilment of the obligation to help. Also, fulfilling the community’s expectations is of crucial importance. Attempts to display individual abilities are viewed as totally superfluous, and often quite unseemly. Personal prestige, in turn, is gained by fulfilling atypical duties, which are less ritualised. Actually, gaining personal prestige is often connected with the necessity to break or exceed a convention. This is the task faced by women who on their own undertake to fulfil the highest *cargo*: to organize the *fiesta*.

My research focusing on the profits gained by women, in contrast to men, through fulfilling a *cargo* was conducted in Tócuaro, a village in the Michoacán province in central-western Mexico.¹¹ I was interested in the reason why women decide to

⁹ Positional prestige is gained just by occupying a given position in the society (Domański 1999, p. 36), but in the case of the *cargo* system it is rather the potential of occupying a position, since the prestige is gained for fulfilling a *cargo*, i.e. after its completion; by then the *carguero* already has a different place in the hierarchy.

¹⁰ Personal prestige is gained for personal qualities (Domański 1999, p. 36), but it seems to me that in the case under discussion, what is important is the extraordinary and unconventional application of individual qualities.

¹¹ My research was conducted in the years 2002–2004. Their main topic was the annual *fiesta* of the Virgin Mary of the Candlemas, which is prepared by four *cargueros*.

fulfil a *cargo*, even though through this, they do not achieve gains as evident as those achieved by men. In Tócuaro, the system of *cargos* is considerably reduced: it is limited to only four equally important offices. The persons who occupy them are responsible for the preparation of the feast of the Virgin Mary of the Candlemas in the given year. Men who fulfil this duty and prepare the *fiesta* become “fully fledged” members of the community: if they are married, they gain the right to put forward their own proposals at the meetings of the village council; their opinion gains weight in the community and cannot be disregarded. Thus, in Tócuaro, too, fulfilling the *cargo* gives a man access to activity in local politics. Undertaking to organise the Candlemas feast is voluntary; men nevertheless see it as their duty to fulfil this *cargo* at least once in their life, as this is the only way they can be certain of gaining respect in the community. Very often, if the family is affluent enough, a father would fulfil this *cargo* in the name of his son, in order to ensure for him a proper position in the village and through this, the earliest-possible access to the local council.

Yet the privilege of council membership is not available to women. They do not have the right to participate in its meetings, to put forward their own postulates, or even to vote in elections of the village authorities. They are formally banned from local political structures – and so the fulfilment of the *cargo* cannot bring them the same benefits as men. A woman shall not gain prestige which might enable her to govern the community. Despite this, a woman may also decide to undertake to organise the feast; she is then called a *carguera*, she fulfils exactly the same duties a man would, and similarly to a man, she invests a huge effort into completing the task. What she gains in exchange for this effort is, above all, personal prestige. Esteem is accorded to her for exceptional qualities that allowed her to fulfil this extraordinary task – extraordinary to a woman, that is, because it is a man who ought to organise the *fiesta*. He owes this to the community, which reciprocates by offering him the opportunity to make decisions concerning its future. Undertaking to organise the Candlemas feast, a woman does not have such an obvious, clear-cut social interest.

Fulfilling this *cargo* is not an easy task. Besides the obvious organisational skills, preparing a feast for the whole community, which numbers a few hundred people, requires a large investment of time, work and money. Often the fulfilment of this *cargo* devours the savings of the whole life. Each of the four *cargueros* spends about five thousand dollars on the *fiesta*, and although of course he receives the help from others, the expenditure is largely his own. The decision to become a *carguero* is never taken on the spur of a moment; most often, a person keeps considering it for years. A woman is admired for this great feat; of a man, it is said that he must manage somehow.

Cargueras fulfil their *cargos* with the same zeal men do, even though the effect of their work will not open to them the path of village career. But this is not what women desire when they decide to undertake the *cargo* of organising the feast. They want to gain appreciation by showing what they are able to do, and thus to gain esteem in

the village – not as members of a group of women who have managed to fulfil the *cargo*, but as outstanding individuals who possess exceptional qualities. For this reason, women make the preparations that accompany fulfilling their *cargo* more individual than men. It is true that they follow the generally accepted pattern of the feast, because, like every *carguero*, they are trying to satisfy the expectations of the Tócuarians. Yet “their” *fiesta* must stand out, must have some unusual detail: they may cook a different dish than the traditional meal or enhance the festivities with a fireworks display. Women want their effort to be remembered; they wish the participants of the *fiesta* to appreciate their creativity. In other words, they want that individual prestige to be fully earned. In the case of women, the fulfilment of the *cargo* is a personal success in itself, differently than in the case of men, to whom it only opens the path to success.

However, among the anthropologists there appear opinions that prestige gained for fulfilling a *cargo* pertains not only to the male *carguero*, but encompasses also his wife; that both of them are equally esteemed and respected for fulfilling the given duty (Mathews 1985, p. 290). This is supposed to result from the conviction that a *cargo* is fulfilled by the entire household, and that it is a family as a whole, not an individual, that undertakes to fulfil it (Monaghan 1990, p. 758); for this reason both the husband and the wife are known as the *cargueros*, and both are obliged to prepare the feast. Yet in my opinion, they do not enjoy equal appreciation for fulfilling the *cargo*: the prestige accorded to a “co-participant” differs from that accorded to the main “executor”. I do agree that the respect accorded to a *carguero* may extend to his family, and in Tócuaro respect is due to all its members as those who have prepared the feast of the Virgin Mary of the Candlemas.¹² Nevertheless I think that the prestige they gain is not of the same quality. This is because the prestige due for fulfilling the *cargo* constitutes a potential to be used on the arena of the local politics – an arena which is closed to women. Thus, only a man is able to avail himself of the privileges granted by the preparation of the feast; a woman is left with personal satisfaction, with a reason for boasting that she, too, has been a *carguera*, but she does not have any space to exploit this fact in society. Mathews reaches similar conclusions; although she maintains that prestige for fulfilling a *cargo* is gained by both a man and a woman, she nevertheless points out that a woman, despite having gained esteem, has little chance to become a player in the local politics (1985, p. 296).

Women, however, at least in Tócuaro, do not undertake to organise the *fiesta* with the intention of competing for positions occupied by men. To them, fulfilling a *cargo* is not a path towards “gender equality”, but towards distinction, albeit an informal

¹² In my opinion, respect due to the *fiesta* organisers springs chiefly from its religious character and the fact that the whole event is perceived as an act of special thanksgiving to the Virgin Mary. For this reason special veneration is accorded to anyone who takes part in preparing it; this, however, is not identical with the positional prestige gained for fulfilling a *cargo*.

one, in the community. What women want is to be talked about, to have their effort acknowledged and commented upon favourably; all in all, they want to become “someone” in their own village. It is for this reason they come forward with the offer to prepare the feast. Of course, they do not fulfil their *cargo* entirely on their own: the family helps them, and the whole household is involved in the preparations; yet it is the woman herself who bears the responsibility for satisfying the expectations of the participants. Mathews does give an example of a situation when the appreciation for fulfilling a *cargo* was accorded to the husband of the woman who did it, instead of herself (1985, p. 287); in Tócuaro, however, the state of affairs is different.

The woman is appreciated, individually, for accepting such a bold challenge and for rising to it. Considering the fact that the majority of women in Tócuaro do not work professionally or have their own income, those who have managed to obtain an education and a paid job and who, in addition, undertake to organise the feast for an entire community, are much admired. They are, however, admired only for their individual qualities; although this esteem does affect the woman’s private relations with others, it does not alter her position in the sphere of the local politics. Nevertheless, respect due to a *carguera* for preparing the feast is demonstrated chiefly to her, not to her husband, who of course helps in the preparations, but all the time remains slightly in the shadow. The *carguera*’s husband seems to be perceived with a touch of facetiousness: that he allows his wife to realise her whim, that he is helping her, means that he loves her – but he does not gain any particular esteem for his participation. Men who aid their wives in fulfilling their *cargo* have already fulfilled their own *cargo* earlier, so the fact that a wife is organising the *fiesta* does not open her husband to scorn. Still, the evaluation of the entire situation is ambiguous. On the one hand, the whole household is responsible for fulfilling the *cargo*, so the husband has a duty to help; on the other hand, it is not always understood why it is the woman and not her husband who undertakes to prepare the *fiesta*. Fulfilling a *cargo* by a woman is still treated as an exception to the rule and a surprising, out-of-ordinary incident. This, on the one hand, makes it easier for the *carguera* to win personal prestige; on the other, it is not always positively judged, since a *cargo* is a man’s duty.¹³

A man, in turn, usually gains personal prestige only due to the efficacious application of the potential accorded to him by positional prestige – when he turns out to be a good councillor or wins the villagers’ gratitude, for instance by seeing to renovating the school or mending the road. Then he gains enormous respect; but this respect is not attached directly to fulfilling the *cargo*, but rather to the manner in which the potential granted by organising the *fiesta* was exploited. What is more, positional prestige, as opposed to personal prestige, is valid also outside Tócuaro. Fulfilling the

¹³ In Tócuaro, fulfilling the *cargo* by women is also, to some extent, a necessity, because often not enough men are willing to organise the feast; thus, it is the women who ensure the continuity of the event.

cargo is a generally accepted quality. It is evident how much work must be invested in preparing the *fiesta* and what a huge effort it is; but it is also evident by what reward it is accompanied. Hence, men who have availed themselves of the opportunity given them by fulfilling the *cargo* and joined in the local politics enjoy general respect – not only on the local level. It may be thus perceived as global prestige of a kind (see Domański 1999, p. 36), recognised also by members of other communities. Personal prestige, on the other hand, has (regardless of gender) only a local dimension. This is the nature of prestige gained by women: it influences mainly the perception of the *carguera* in her village, and her relations with other Tócuaran. A Tócuaran *carguera* will not gain personal prestige in the eyes of the residents of other villages, because her actions were meaningful in the local context; and it is in that context that the importance of those actions is recognised.

Nevertheless, both in the case of men and of women it is prestige that constitutes a reward for fulfilling the *cargo*. Although respect and esteem are, in either case, of a different quality and offer different opportunities, they largely explain the motivation that lies at the basis of the undertaking to fulfil a *cargo*. Apart from the religious motivation, it is the chance to gain prestige, be it positional or personal, that makes individuals accept the *cargo*. To men, organising the feast means a specific kind of social advancement; to women, it brings renown within the community. Both these qualities are valuable enough for some to decide to return temporarily to Tócuaro from emigration in the United States: they travel several thousand kilometres just in order to organise the *fiesta* in honour of the Virgin Mary of the Candlemas. Others willingly spend the savings of their whole lives on the *fiesta*. Thus, both men and women pay for prestige very dearly.

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