"we are mayordomo": a reinterpretation of women's roles in the Mexican cargo system

HOLLY F. MATHEWS—*East Carolina University*

Nearly two decades have passed since the feminist movement inspired a resurgence of interest in the study of gender roles. Much of the initial research during this period was directed towards overcoming a generation of male bias in anthropological studies by filling in the missing portion of the ethnographic record on women. To analyze this new information on gender, feminist anthropologists formulated a theory of social roles which emphasized a split between the public sphere of male activity and the domestic sphere of female activity. The domestic/public theory as first articulated by Chodorow (1974), Lamphere (1974), Rosaldo (1974), and others holds that (1) familial and extrafamilial realms constitute separate domains cross-culturally; (2) women are universally associated with the family or domestic sphere while men universally control the public or political sphere; (3) and, as a result, women's roles and activities are always subordinate to, or are accorded less value than, the roles and activities of men.

A number of anthropologists (for example, Pearlman 1980; Rosaldo 1980; Sacks 1979) have pointed out the ethnocentric assumptions that underlie the domestic/public model and acknowledged the limitations involved in applying it cross-culturally. As Sacks writes, the domestic/public model projects:

> what is a fairly recent bifurcation of family and society into a universal and natural human condition. In this anthropology has ethnocentrically adopted a basic premise of industrial capitalism [1979:61].

Anthropologists who start with such an ethnocentric premise tend to emphasize the separation between male and female roles and seldom investigate the ways in which such roles interrelate and function within specific sociocultural contexts. Consequently, many anthropological studies fail to capture a sense of the complexity and diversity characteristic of gender roles cross-culturally. Yet without a basic understanding of role diversity, anthropologists cannot begin to assess the differential implications of socioeconomic change for men and women

This paper explores the empirical consequences of moving beyond the use of the domestic/public framework in analyzing gender roles in the cargo system of the Mexican community of San Miguel. Data demonstrating that religious cargos are held by household units on the basis of wealth are presented. Male and female sponsors are given joint title to office and have parallel roles and duties. In the newly emerging civil sphere, however, officials are elected on the basis of specific individual skills which women often lack. Consequently, as the civil sphere assumes increasing importance over the religious in regulating community affairs, women are being deprived of opportunities to hold community posts. [gender roles, cargo system, Mexico, social structure, community change]

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in particular societies. Although some anthropologists (e.g., Collier and Rosaldo 1981; Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Sanday 1981; Sacks 1979) are currently using new models to study gender roles, the empirical consequences of *not* using the domestic/public theory have yet to be explored. Data on the religious ceremonial system known as the *cargo* in the Mexican community of San Miguel are used to illustrate some of these consequences.

Specifically I argue that the use of a domestic/public model led many anthropologists to view cargo service as an exclusively public and hence male domain of activity. A detailed examination of the way in which male and female cargo roles interrelate reveals, however, that cargo service is undertaken not by individual men but by household units on the basis of wealth. Male and female household heads assume parallel roles and responsibilities for ritual, and the participation of each sex is crucial for successful service.

In the newly emerging sphere of civil service, however, male and female roles articulate in a fundamentally different way. Modern civil offices, instituted by the Mexican national government, are held increasingly by individuals elected on the basis of personal skills such as literacy in the Spanish language and experience in interacting with Ladino elites. Women, for reasons outlined in the following sections, usually lack such skills and hence civil offices are dominated by men.

This analysis of role relationships in the religious and civil spheres provides a basis for predicting the likely outcome of socioeconomic changes occurring in San Miguel. To the degree that the ritual cargo system is breaking down, and separate civil offices assuming importance in the administration of community affairs, women are being deprived of opportunities to hold community posts.

the traditional cargo system

Mexico contains hundreds of autonomous Indian communities largely responsible for regulating their own internal affairs. In the past the civil-religious hierarchy or cargo system, instituted in Mexico by Spanish colonial authorities, was the characteristic administrative organization found in these communities. Cancian describes the cargo as "a system in which adult males serve in a series of hierarchically arranged offices devoted to both political and ceremonial aspects of community life" (1967:283).

These offices are ranked in terms of levels of service and authority. An individual begins service in a low-level office before being eligible to serve in a higher ranked one. In the past individuals alternated between civil and religious offices in the course of lifetime service. Since there are more offices at the bottom than at the top, those individuals who complete service at all levels are called elders or *principales,* and community members accord them great respect and prestige (Carrasco 1961:484).

Tenure in cargo offices rotates annually and individuals serve without payment. Elders generally appoint people to cargos, and service involves the officeholders in considerable expense since they must sponsor festivals and banqueting in conjunction with the saints' days and religious holidays celebrated by the Catholic Church. In return for service individuals earn prestige and respect, which sometimes translate into political influence as well.

anthropological interpretations of male and female cargo roles

The anthropological literature on the cargo system in Mexico is extensive. Descriptions of the system are varied and often reflect intercommunity variation in cargo organization. In addition, ethnographic reports span a 50-year period during which the cargo system in many

communities was undergoing rapid change in response to outside pressures. Consequently, it is often difficult to distinguish differences in cargo interpretation arising from the use of particular theoretical models from those arising out of intercommunity variation and historical change. Nonetheless, certain general trends in the description and analysis of male and female roles can be traced through the various stages of cargo research.

The earliest Mesoamerican ethnographies to include descriptions of the cargo system were produced by a generation of anthropologists (both male and female) who were trained to assume that a description of the male world was an adequate description of the society at large (see Rogers 1978:131). Regarded as the main political and religious actors, men were widely reported to be the only significant participants in cargo service, and cargos were said to rank individual men in terms of relative prestige (Beals 1945; De La Fuente 1949; Foster 1967; Hinton 1964; Lewis 1960; Parsons 1936; Vogt 1969). Few anthropologists of this generation mentioned women's involvement in cargo service, and when they did, women were described as peripheral participants involved primarily in the preparation of food for ritual (Cancian 1965).

These ethnographers did note, however, that a man's chance for a successful cargo career often depended on his ability to raise resources from his kin network. Presumably women, as members of these networks, were important in supporting male cargo careers. This point, however, is often overlooked in many early studies. Cancian (1965), for example, analyzed the importance of labor for cargo service in Zinacantan, Mexico but assumed that only the aid given by brothers and sons was useful to the cargoholder. Consequently, he asked informants to list the reasons why brothers and sons were helpful in cargo service but neglected to ask the corresponding question about sisters and daughters. Cancian's statistical analysis is designed to test if men with more brothers and sons participate to a greater degree in the system than those with fewer. Although his prediction that they would was only weakly confirmed, Cancian made no corresponding attempt to test the effects of greater and lesser numbers of female kin on such participation (1965:103–106).

In summary, although these early ethnographers sometimes acknowledged the ritual roles played by the wives of cargoholders, for the most part they did not see female participation as significant in terms of the larger system.[1] A subsequent generation of anthropologists influenced by the feminist movement began to rectify this situation by focusing more attention on women's cargo roles. Iwanska (1966), for example, found that Mazahua Indians in Mexico did not see men as dominant in the religious system. Rather, the Mazahua referred to husband and wife as joint officeholders saying, "we are *mayordomo,*" or "they are *mayordomo*" (1966:78). Such parallel titles to office were extended to men in situations where the women held formal title. As Iwanska writes:

> I was told on one occasion, for instance, that such and such a man was elected to the office of *La Señora* [the lady]—which simply meant in the language of the Mazahua from El Nopal that his wife was elected to a political-religious group called *Las Señoras* [1966:178–179].

Similarly, Chinas (1973) documents the active role of women in the religious activities of the Isthmus Zapotecs of Oaxaca, Mexico. Chinas found that households were involved in religious participation, and that husbands and wives held joint title to cargo offices. If a single head of household was appointed to a religious office, he or she had to choose a partner of the opposite sex to assist in preparations. Even when the original *mayordoma* was a woman, the prestige accrued for service went to her household and not to the man chosen to assist her (1973:71).

While these feminist-oriented anthropologists succeeded in documenting women's cargo activities, they still tended to conclude that men's cargo roles were more public, formal, and important than women's. Chinas, for example, wrote in her analysis that "where formalized roles occur in complementary pairs by sex, the male role of the pair is normally accorded higher status than the female role" (1973:96).

She later adds: "An examination of the formalized roles in the Isthmus Zapotec public domain makes it clear that men and male roles carry higher status than women and female roles" (1973:99).

Yet apart from the presumed segregation of male and female roles into public and private spheres, Chinas gives no evidence to support this status differential. Her analysis illustrates one of the problems inherent in the use of a domestic/public framework—the framework itself predisposes researchers to view male and female roles as separate and somehow different in kind. The usual interpretation arising from such a view is that female activities, being by definition private and informal, must somehow be less important and prestigious than male activities which are, by definition, public and formal. In reading such accounts, however, it is difficult to determine if community members themselves agree with such an interpretation, or if the interpretation is, instead, an artifact of the theoretical model.

In an update (1983) to her research, Chinas acknowledges this very problem and writes:

> Today I would qualify my former statement regarding the higher status of men's formalized public roles. Although fewer women hold formalized public roles than men, when they do so their status and the respect accorded them seems to be equal to men's [1983:116].

This quotation, however, highlights a second and enduring difficulty that stems from the use of the domestic/public framework. The model assumes that male and female roles can be divided into discrete categories which can then be opposed and compared across all domains of social life. This line of reasoning fails to recognize the variation likely to occur in role relationships across domains of activity.

In this paper I argue that a major consequence of *not* using the domestic/public model is the opportunity to move beyond static, oppositional analyses to look, instead, at the ways in which male and female roles interrelate and function in specific contexts. Such an analysis paves the way for a more sophisticated understanding of the social and cultural factors affecting gender role organization and enables us to assess the potential impact of socioeconomic change on male and female roles in different contexts.

In the following sections of this paper I explore the consequences of moving beyond a domestic/public model in analyzing gender roles in the Mexican community of San Miguel. I use statistical data to demonstrate that religious cargos in San Miguel are held not by individual men but by those household units that possess sufficient economic and labor resources to meet the obligations of service. Qualitative data show that male and female household heads are considered to hold joint title to cargo offices and have parallel roles and duties. The prestige earned in service, moreover, accrues not to individual officeholders but to the household.

I also present statistical data that demonstrate a shift away from household-based service in the newly evolving civil sphere. Political offices were once dominated by individuals from households that had successfully completed service in the religious cargo system. Today, however, this pattern is changing, and individuals are now being elected on the basis of specific skills such as fluency in the Spanish language and experience interacting with outsiders regardless of household wealth. Because women in San Miguel often have difficulty acquiring these specific skills, they are seldom elected to office. Consequently, as the civil sphere assumes increasing importance over the religious in regulating community affairs, women are being deprived of opportunities to hold community posts.

the research community

San Miguel is a community of 2000 people located in the central valley of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico.[2] Inhabitants of the community are of mixed Zapotec and Mixtec descent who now label themselves ethnically as mestizos. The community economy is based on mixed cash

and subsistence farming primarily of maize, beans, vegetables, and tobacco. Men and women also engage in a variety of other activities designed to provide supplemental cash income for the household (see Mathews 1982).

The basic social unit in San Miguel is the domestic group or household which consists of co-resident individuals, usually kin, who cooperate in the production and consumption of resources. There are 354 households in San Miguel of which 322, or 91 percent, are headed by men and 32, or 9 percent, are headed by women. Kinship is traced bilaterally and the preferred postmarital residence pattern is patrilocal. In theory the eldest son assumes the headship of the household upon the death of his father. Daughters marry out and go to live in the compounds of their husbands. In practice, however, actual household composition varies as the units move through a developmental cycle and respond to changing economic and social conditions.

When the eldest son marries and brings his wife home the extended network begins as father and son cooperate in farming lands held by individual household members. Over time other sons may marry and bring wives into the compound. After the parents die, the residential groups usually consist of either a single man, his wife and children or a group of brothers, their wives and children. As the children marry, the cycle begins again. If a family has no sons, daughters may bring in husbands to live and work on family lands. Unmarried and widowed daughters are also assured residence in the natal compound and may add to the size of the household unit.

In recent years the increasing birth rate, combined with the limited supply of arable land in San Miguel, has acted to alter slightly the typical pattern of household composition. Many young men have migrated out of the community leading to an increase in the number of unmarried young women remaining at home along with a decrease in the numbers of households consisting of co-resident brothers. Generally it is the eldest son who remains in the community residing with his parents in the household compound.

In San Miguel the majority of households (62 percent) consist of some variant of the extended family described above. Yet a large number of co-resident kin does not necessarily guarantee a household economic success. Household wealth is limited by the amount and quality of land available to household members; access to supplies of irrigation water; ownership of, or access to, plow oxen and agricultural equipment; and the amount of supplemental cash income brought in by household residents.

the religious cargo system The religious cargo system in San Miguel consists of two distinct sets of religious offices known as *cofradías* (sodalities) and *hermandades* (brotherhoods) dedicated to the care of different saints in the Catholic hierarchy.[3] Cofradía and hermandad officeholders, known as *mayordomos,* are chosen each year and must organize and carry out all the rituals and festivities associated with the particular saints in their charge. Cargo service is costly and it often takes household members 10 to 15 years to pay off the debts incurred during their tenure in office. Although the mayordomo's household bears the brunt of the expense associated with cargo service, much assistance is rendered through the institution of *guelaguetza,* which is a system of reciprocal economic exchange involving both resources and labor.

Because of the time and expense involved, community members once regarded cargo service as a burden, and in the past they often had to be coerced to serve. The town judge or *alcalde* appointed officeholders, and those who refused to serve could be jailed. On a more indirect level community members would use gossip, ridicule, and even ostracism against the members of households that consistently refused to participate in the system.

Over the past 20 years, however, major demographic and economic changes within San Miguel have acted to alter this pattern of participation. An overall increase in population com-

bined with the introduction of cash cropping has created a situation where the demand for service exceeds the number of offices available in the religious sphere. Community members have adopted a "waiting-list" solution similar to the one described by Cancian (1965:174–194) for Zinacantan. Community members now volunteer for religious service, and many offices have long waiting lists. The waiting time currently varies between three and ten years with those offices perceived as more prestigious having longer waiting lists (Mathews 1982:56).

When the civil-religous hierarchy was first instituted in Mexico, Spanish colonial authorities tended to recognize men as official heads of household and often decreed that only men could hold formal title to official civil and religious posts (Nash 1980; Silverblatt 1980). Perhaps, as a consequence, male household heads in San Miguel have been listed traditionally on official cargo rolls as festival sponsors or mayordomos. Community members, however, persist in recognizing male/female couples as joint titleholders to religious office. If the official household head is a man, then he must select a woman (usually but not necessarily his wife) to serve with him as the co-officeholder or *mayordoma*. She not only assumes the companion title but is also charged with the responsibility for administering women's activities during the cargo festival. In the absence of a male household head, the senior woman from a household eligible for service will be officially listed as the officeholder. She, in turn, must select a man, usually a relative, to fulfill the companion obligations of service. In San Miguel no religious office is held by any individual of either sex who cannot provide an appropriate partner of the opposite sex. Thus while community cargo rolls usually list men as "official" mayordomos, service is viewed by community members as a household responsibility, and parallel titles are conferred on male and female representatives of the household.

As a pair, the mayordomos plan the festivities and make decisions about the personnel to be invited to perform important ritual duties. During the festival, the male mayordomo organizes and coordinates the activities of men which may include the preparation and decoration of altars, the arrangement of materials to be used in the rituals, the making of candles and fireworks displays, the roundup and slaughter of animals for feasts, and the performance of music and recitations during ritual. The female mayordoma organizes and coordinates the activities of women, which may include the preparation and cleaning of costumes and adornments for ritual, the making of decorative displays for altars, the preparation of food for feasts, and the performance of songs and recitations during ritual.

Both mayordomos greet guests, record contributions, and receive civil officials, and both are publically acknowledged as the sponsors of the festival. Upon completion of the religious festivities, the mayordomos share in the prestige accrued for service. Praise for success as well as blame for failure is attributed to the couple, and those men and women who have completed a number of religious cargos are treated with respect by the community as a whole. They are invited as guests, not laborers, to other religious functions and upon arrival are seated first; served ritual drinks and food ahead of others; and are often asked to advise the current mayordomos on ritual procedures.

As one informant who had himself been listed "officially" as the sponsor of five cargos explained it:

> To complete service you need a lot of assistance. The mayordomo has to recruit male helpers and organize their work for the festival. His partner [*compañera*] must recruit female helpers and organize their work for the festival. Without both—a mayordomo and a mayordoma—you could not have a festival. They work together and without one or the other it would be too much; it would be impossible to complete the obligation. So if there is no man in the home, a woman must look for a kinsman to help her—maybe her brother or her brother-in-law. They work together because they are a pair.

In general, the expense of sponsoring a cargo, both in terms of resources and labor, is so great that only one couple in a household will be active in the religious system. Consequently, in extended family households in San Miguel, the elder generation must make a decision to

"retire" or end a career of religious service before a younger couple is free to begin festival sponsorship.

During my three-year study in San Miguel I made a count of all religious posts available and kept records of the individuals officially listed as officeholders on cargo rolls. There are a total of 61 religious offices that must be filled on an annual basis. Of these 61 posts, 25 are filled by people sponsoring religious festivals. Another 36 positions involve people serving as the officers of the religious brotherhoods. In theory tenure in all of these positions rotates annually. In actuality, however, some individuals continued to occupy the same offices throughout the three-year study period. Consequently, over the study period a total of 138 offices were filled by appointment of which 129 were listed on official records as held by men and 9 by women.[4]

the civil administration The civil administration in San Miguel is concerned with public works, the administration of justice, and the maintenance of relations with the outside world. Officers are elected by community members and serve three-year terms. The *presidente municipal* or mayor is the principal authority in the community, and his major responsibility is to handle dealings with the larger governmental system outside the community. The *sindico* or vice-mayor assists the mayor and also handles public works and issues related to social welfare including the recording of births and deaths in the community. There are seven councilmen or *regidores* who are responsible for opening and maintaining the municipal building during the week and who act as heads of municipal committees.

In addition to these elected officials, the presidente also appoints a secretary, a treasurer, and four police chiefs, one for each administrative section of the community. Finally, there is an alcalde or judge and his substitute who are appointed by the presidente to one-year terms of service. The alcalde acts as a justice of the peace and listens to disputes brought before the municipal authorities. The alcalde is empowered to render decisions, assess fines of compensation, and jail those guilty of major offenses.

There are also several permanent commmittees in San Miguel whose members are appointed by the presidente. These include the committee of the dominant political party in Mexico—the PRI *(Partido Revolucionario Institucional),* the Committee of the Parents of Schoolchildren, the Health Committee, and the Committee for the Celebration of Mexican Independence day. Other temporary committees are formed as needed.

A number of scholars hypothesize that in the cargo system, as first instituted in Mexico, civil officeholding remained dependent upon the successful completion of prior service in the religious sphere. Religious service, in turn, entailed the support and cooperation of household members. This intertwined system of civil and religious service began to change in 1917, however, when the Mexican Constitution decreed that local communities had to elect councils of civil officials who would report directly to state officials (Perez 1968:21). Only men could serve on these councils, since women in Mexico could not legally vote or hold elective office until 1953 (Elmendorf 1977:158).

The duties of civil officials also changed dramatically as the new system became established. Where officials once had relative autonomy in regulating internal community affairs, they subsequently had to report directly to Ladino elites serving as political officials at the district and state levels (Greenberg 1978; Perez 1968). It became important, therefore, for local officials to be well versed in the dominant Spanish language and have experience in interacting with outsiders. Officials lacking in such skills often had difficulty transacting community business with Ladinos and securing the goods and services needed by their communities. Consequently, over time, good literacy and interactional skills became valued attributes in civil servants, and men possessing these skills began to be elected to office without regard to household wealth or past participation in the religious sphere. The town mayor or presidente summarized it this way:

> The way of doing things has changed since we were young. Before, my father was only a hired worker. He did not have the standing to ask for a mayordomia and his family was too poor to endure the expense. Now, I am still poor, but people respect me. I worked hard. I went to school here and after here I went to the city to learn more. Then I went as a *bracero* to the United States and there I learned what the world is like and how to act. When I came back, people had respect for me, and they asked my advice. I began to work for the town, and the people saw that I worked well with the district officials. And so they elected me presidente.

Just as civil officeholding in San Miguel is no longer dependent on prior religious service, so too the assistance of wives and the availability of household labor is not a prerequisite for service. Men, on the average, spend between eight and ten hours a week in executing the duties of office, and the majority reported no difficulty in reconciling such efforts with the demands of agricultural work. In no instance did any civil official surveyed report the need to call upon the assistance of friends or relatives in discharging the obligations of office.

During my three-year study in San Miguel, I made a count of civil posts in the community and kept lists of the individuals occupying each. There are a total of 31 political offices in San Miguel. Of these, 14 include civil officials elected every three years while the remaining 17 posts are held by individuals appointed on an annual basis by the presidente. Over the study period a total of 61 offices were held by 58 men and 2 women.[5]

determinants of religious and political participation

In contrast to previous studies emphasizing the role of individual men in the cargo, I argue that religious service in San Miguel involves competition between household units. Those households with sufficient resources (here defined to include both wealth and labor) compete for prestige and recognition by volunteering for cargo service. Those households with surplus resources who evince a lack of interest in religious service are often pressured to volunteer by community members in general and family members and friends in particular (see also Walter 1981). In the civil sphere, on the other hand, household wealth is no longer an absolute prerequisite for service. Rather, the basis for service is shifting to emphasize, instead, the possession of certain individual skills, and wealthy, high-status households no longer dominate in the political sphere as they do in the religious.

To measure the extent and nature of household participation in civil and religious offices, I employed two rating scales adapted from the stratification studies of Warner et al. (1960). The Evaluated Participation Scale is used to uncover empirically emic social categories. Informants divided the households of San Miguel into three major social strata and two substrata. I then used an Index of Status Characteristics to obtain a more objective measure of socioeconomic status which I correlated with the assignment of households to strata by informants. The result was an overall socioeconomic ranking for the 354 households in San Miguel. For ease of presentation, I have collapsed the two substrata into the three larger categories and compared rates of political and civil participation for households in each of these categories (see Table 1).[6]

religious service In the religious sphere cargo rolls listed 129 men and 9 women from 138 different households as the official holders of the religious posts filled during the three-year study period. The data presented in Table 1 show the distribution of participating households by category of socioeconomic status. Of the 92 households in the highest stratum, 68, or 74 percent, are active participants in the religious sphere. Similarly, of the 84 households in the middle stratum, 60, or 71 percent, are active participants. Since membership in these two strata is dependent upon the possession of economic resources, these households would be expected to participate to a significantly greater degree than those in the lowest stratum. This is, in fact, the case since only 10, or 6 percent, of the 178 low-stratum households are active in the religious domain.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of active and inactive households in the religious cargo system according to socioeconomic status.

Stratum	Total		Active		Inactive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
High	92	26	68	74	24	26
Medium	84	24	60	71	24	29
Low	178	50	10	6	168	94
Total	354	100				

$X^2 = 165$
$p < .001$

If religious service is dependent on socioeconomic status, then a higher percentage of low-status households can be expected not to undertake religious service. The data in Table 1 show that of the 178 households in the lowest stratum, 168, or 94 percent, were inactive in the religious sphere. Conversely, of the 92 households in the highest stratum, 24, or 26 percent, were inactive, and of the 84 households in the middle stratum, 24, or 29 percent, were inactive. The numbers of inactive households in the two top strata are surprisingly close and seem somewhat higher than might be expected if religious service was completely dependent upon the possession of financial resources.

A closer examination of the circumstances of the 48 inactive households in the upper and middle strata show that in 14 cases households had held religious posts during the ten-year period immediately preceding this study. Since households must "rest" after completing religious service in order to pay off debts and accumulate the resources necessary for future participation, these 14 households can be considered "involved" in religious service although none was currently holding a religious office. An additional 13 of the 48 inactive households were registered on official waiting lists for future religious posts and consequently could also be considered "involved" although not currently active in the religious sphere.

Individuals in an additional 9 of the 48 inactive households were holding civil posts during the study period. When interviewed, those individuals unanimously agreed that the requirements of civil service did not allow them to take on additional obligations in the religious domain. Thus, although they may have had the resources necessary for religious service, these individuals were reluctant to assume dual commitments.

This leaves 12 of the 48 inactive, high-status households to be considered. When interviewed, members in 3 of these 12 households indicated some interest in future religious service. The remaining nine, however, did not participate and indicated no desire to do so. One reason for the inactivity of these households, lack of available labor, will be discussed below.

The data presented thus far suggest that religious service is dominated by households of higher socioeconomic standing in the community. A Chi Square test, moreover, indicates that the level of participation of high-status households is statistically significant (see Table 1). Community members, however, suggest another factor that may be crucial for the successful completion of religious service—the ability to mobilize adult laborers of both sexes. As one informant states:

> To have the cofradía is much work—it is work for a year before with all the visits and planning; then it is work during the year having all the *fiestas* and making sure everything is right. I could not do it without Micaila [mother-in-law] to help cook the meals and watch the children while I am gone. I could also not have done it without my father-in-law because he has helped a lot with the farm work and seeing that the sharecroppers did not cheat us this year.

That the labor of both sexes is vital is further explained by this informant because:

> The cofradias are divided—there is the work of women and the work of men. You cannot have a festival without rituals. The men, they do the heavy work of building the altar and collecting the plants. They

decorate the Church and the house and prepare for ritual. The women get the food ready. They dress the animals, toast the chilies, and cook the meals. They also get the clothes ready for the Saints and repair the costumes and decorations. Then they make sure everything runs smoothly on the day of the festival when the men are drinking. Everybody has their job to do. Women are not good at men's jobs and men do not know anything about food. But all must eat and all must have an altar to pray under. So I direct the men in their activities, and my wife, she has charge of the women.

I investigated the importance of labor resources in religious participation by comparing the numbers of adults (both male and female) present in the households of San Miguel with rates of religious participation. The number of adults in active households averaged 2.9 while the number of adults in inactive households averaged 2.0. A finer breakdown of activity rates relative to the number of adults present in the household is presented in Table 2. The data demonstrate that rates of religious participation increase in accordance with the number of adults present in the household. A statistical test indicates, moreover, that the association between activity level and number of adults is such that those households with three or more adult laborers are significantly more likely to be active in the system than those with two or fewer.

A subsequent comparison of religious activity according to the sex composition of households in San Miguel is recorded in Table 3. The households of San Miguel are grouped into five categories. "Equal" households are those having equal numbers of male and female adult members. This category is subdivided in the table according to whether the members number one male and one female or more than one male and more than one female. The "male predominant" households are those with more male than female adult members. Conversely, the "female predominant" households have more female than male adult members. Finally, the "single-sex" households have only a single male or a single female adult member.

The data show significant differences in activity levels by sex composition of the household. Those "equal" households with two or more male and female members and the "female predominant" households participate more than would be expected if sex composition made no difference in religious service. It appears that an adequate number of adult members of both sexes are necessary for festival sponsorship, and that those households with two or more adult members of both sexes are significantly more likely to participate than those with fewer. Hence, those households having only one adult member of each sex, and those households with only one adult member of either sex, are significantly less likely to participate in religious service than would be expected if the sex and number of adult members present made no difference in religious participation.

The extent to which labor availability acts as a mitigating factor affecting the participation of wealthy households can be explored by returning to a consideration of the 12 higher status households whose lack of religious activity remained unexplained in the preceding section. Of these 12 households, 8 have only 2 adult members available while the remaining 3 households have only 3 adult members. This finding corresponds to the median number of 2.5 adults found in inactive households in San Miguel and contrasts with the median number of 4 adults found

Table 2. A comparison of religious activity in terms of numbers of adult members present in the household.

Number of adult members	Number of active households	Number of inactive households
0–2	7	97
3–5	115	116
6–8	16	3
Total	138	216

$X^2 = 75$
$p < .001$

Table 3. Frequency distribution of rates of religious activity according to sex composition of households.

	Equal					
	1 male 1 female	> 1 male > 1 female	Female predominant	Male predominant	Single sex	Total
Active	5	61	25	44	3	138
Inactive	81	30	59	27	19	216
						354

$X^2 = 88.77$
$p < .001$

in active ones. These findings suggest that the availability of adult labor is an important factor in cargo service that may militate against participation in households that have sufficient wealth but lack personnel.

civil service I suggest that the pattern of high-status household participation characteristic of religious service is beginning to shift, in the civil sphere, to one based on the possession of individual skills. If this hypothesis is valid, then rates of civil participation should be distributed more evenly across households in all three social strata. The figures in Table 4 show that of the 92 households in the highest stratum, only 17, or 18 percent, are active in the civil sphere. Similarly, 23, or 27 percent, of the 84 middle-stratum households are active, and 21, or 12 percent, of the 178 low-status households are active.

A comparison of the rates of religious and civil participation for households in each stratum (see Tables 1 and 4) shows some clear differences. While 74 percent of the high-stratum households and 71 percent of the middle-stratum households are religious participants, only 17 and 27 percent of the households in these strata are active in the civil sphere. Conversely, 6 percent of the low-stratum households are religious participants while double that percentage are active in the civil sphere. Rates of civil participation by strata are still not what would be expected if wealth had no influence on officeholding. I suggest, however, that these figures point toward a trend for the increasing participation of low-status households in civil service and indicate that wealth is no longer an absolute prerequisite for civil officeholding.

changing patterns of women's religious and political participation

The data presented thus far indicate that socioeconomic status is the single overwhelming determinant of religious participation in San Miguel. Consequently, it is not surprising to find

Table 4. Frequency distribution of active and inactive households in the civil system according to socioeconomic status.

Stratum	Total		Active		Inactive	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
High	92	26	17	18	75	82
Medium	84	24	23	27	61	73
Low	178	50	21	12	157	88
Total	354	100				

$X^2 = 8.74$
$p < .05$

that households with surplus resources participate in religious activity regardless of the sex of the head of household. The use of a domestic/public model emphasizing the separation between public and private spheres tends to obscure the fact that in religious cargo service, the domestic unit is the unit involved in public service. The two spheres are, in this case, one and the same. Households, not individual men, compete for prestige through service involving the expenditure of surplus resources. The labor of both male and female household members is vital in accomplishing this goal, and the prestige earned through service is shared equally by the members of the household unit.

Women, as integral members of such units, served and continue to serve in all aspects of the religious system. They contribute labor needed in accumulating surplus resources and in discharging the obligations of office. Consequently, when male heads of household hold official title to office, they must appoint a female partner as co-sponsor of the cargo and vice versa. The two mayordomos share responsibilities for discharging the ritual obligations of office with each having parallel duties to perform. In the religious sphere both female and male members of wealthy, high-status households are able to participate on a parallel basis in cargo service.

Women, however, do not have similar opportunities for participation in the civil sphere in San Miguel. During the study period, women held only 2 of the 61 civil posts available and both were appointive, as no woman in San Miguel has ever been elected to civil office. I suggest that women's exclusion from civil office is tied directly to the changing bases for service in San Miguel. Election to office is no longer absolutely dependent on past success in the religious system. Rather, individual skills including literacy in the Spanish language and the ability to interact with outsiders have become valued attributes in civil officeholders. Men in San Miguel possess these kinds of skills to a greater degree than do women because traditionally they traveled more widely and made more contacts with outside officials. In addition, men in San Miguel had, and continue to have, greater access to formal schooling than women and hence have been better able to improve their Spanish literacy skills.

Bossen (1975) and Boserup (1970) suggest that the greater development of interactional and literacy skills on the part of men is an established pattern in modernizing nations. Men are often recruited by the state to serve in the armed forces or provide labor in areas far distant from their homes. As men travel, they are exposed to outside people and customs leading to the development of these skills. In Guatemala, for example, Bossen (1975) found that Indian men were frequently recruited to labor on lowland coffee plantations and conscripted to serve in the national armed forces. These Indian men traveled more extensively than women who had to remain behind to care for households in the highlands. As a result of their experiences, these Indian men learned the dominant Spanish language, often acquired formal schooling, and gained valuable experience interacting with Ladinos.

The situation described by Bossen for Guatemala parallels that occurring in San Miguel today. As official heads of households, men in San Miguel have always been responsible for regulating interaction between the household and outside authorities. In recent years, moreover, large numbers of men have left the community to work stints as agricultural laborers in the U.S. and to serve in the Mexican military to earn additional cash. In the process, men's literacy skills in Spanish improved as did their ability to interact with outsiders. Today, as parents in San Miguel perceive the importance of education for improving the quality of life, young men are often sent to secondary school in Oaxaca City where these skills are further developed.

Even though women now have the legal right to hold civil posts in San Miguel, they seldom achieve them because they often lack the particular skills valued in officeholders. The only two women to hold civil posts in San Miguel are ones who, through a combination of unusual circumstances, did have the opportunity to acquire some of these valued skills. The circumstances of their cases illustrate the processes now at work in the assumption of civil offices.

One woman, Hermelinda, was appointed as a member of the local committee of the domi-

nant political party in Mexico (PRI). Another woman, Elena, is currently serving in the civil system as a member of the Committee of the Parents of Schoolchildren. Both women are single heads of household in the upper socioeconomic stratum designated in Table 1. Interviews with Hermelinda and Elena reveal that in each instance the appointment to political office was predicated on somewhat unusual circumstances.

Hermelinda, for example, first got involved with civil officials after her husband murdered a fellow townsman in a drunken brawl. She hid her husband at a neighbor's house and later smuggled him out to Mexico City. He has not returned to San Miguel since, although it is rumored that he sometimes visits Hermelinda in secrecy. After her husband fled, Hermelinda was questioned at great length by civil authorities who pressed her to reveal his whereabouts. She refused to answer their questions and began, instead, to ask town officials about what would happen to her husband and about why he was being held responsible for a crime of passion committed in a drunken state. The local officials became annoyed and refused to answer her questions. Consequently, Hermelinda pursued these issues with civil officials in the district capital. These officials promised to look into her husband's case and even hinted to Hermelinda that her husband might be the innocent victim of persecution by an unscrupulous official in San Miguel. Hermelinda was grateful for the assistance of the district officials and invited them to stop for beer at her store any time they visited San Miguel. Thus even though the district officials never helped solve her husband's case, Hermelinda did make and maintain valuable political contacts.

About five years ago, according to Hermelinda, the state branch of the PRI party issued a directive encouraging districts to appoint women to local PRI committees. One of the district officials, who had met Hermelinda, convinced her to serve on the committee by suggesting that in so doing she might meet people who could assist in solving her husband's case.

The other woman to hold office in San Miguel, Elena, is one of three members of the Committee of the Parents of Schoolchildren. Committee members are responsible for handling the money raised by the school cooperative and negotiate requests for repairs and services made by the teachers. Twice a year the committee meets with all the parents to announce projects for the school and discuss problems arising between parents and teachers.

The presidente municipal appoints the members of the committee who have, in the past, been men. Women are active, however, in auxiliary roles relating to fundraising, planning school festivals, and maintaining school facilities. In addition, as parents of schoolchildren, women have always attended the twice annual meetings held by the committee. Elena's appointment to office stemmed from her public protest at one of these meetings. The protest occurred because the teachers had convinced committee members that mothers should work two days a year at the school cleaning the bathrooms and sweeping the floors. Mothers who refused to work, they argued, should be fined. The plan was protested vociferously, and Elena took the floor to argue this point with the president of the committee. She said:

> If we have the money, then why do you not use it to pay a girl to come to the school in the mornings to clean up? There are many young girls who need the money. Why do you expect the mothers to spend their time cleaning up like servants? We have to care for our own homes and children first.

Other women shouted their agreement, and the president said he would consider the idea. In the meantime, Elena canvassed the community and urged mothers not to go to the school when it was their turn to clean. Many of the women Elena visited in turn convinced their husbands that the work being asked of them was demeaning. As a result both men and women started to oppose the plan. The president of the committee had to call another meeting and at that time suggested that Elena join the committee to devise a plan for cleaning the school. The parents agreed, and Elena set up a plan whereby all the parents came to the school collectively twice a year in alternating groups to do a general cleaning of the facility. For the remainder of the

year Elena hired two local girls to clean on a daily basis. The plan satisfied everyone, and Elena continues to serve on the committee.

These two cases represent very different but equally unusual paths to civil service. Even though women can legally hold civil posts in San Miguel they find it difficult to do so since they often lack the skills valued in civil servants. The only two women to hold civil office in San Miguel are women who, through a combination of unusual circumstances, did acquire some of these valued skills.

Yet, because women are active participants in the religious system we cannot assume that their exclusion from civil service represents a lack of interest or ability, nor can we assume it results from confinement to a domestic sphere. Rather, women's exclusion from civil service is the complex outcome of a number of specific political and historical developments both within and outside the community. Spanish colonial authorities and later the Mexican national government created an administrative domain where men were favored for service. Additional socioeconomic changes led to conditions favoring men's travel outside the community and promoted their greater access to formal educational systems. As these skills obtained by men became increasingly important for election to civil office, they began to dominate in these posts. From a community-wide perspective, the implication for women is apparent. To the extent that the civil sphere is assuming increasing importance over the religious in regulating community affairs, women are being deprived of opportunities to hold community posts.

conclusion

The data presented in this paper indicate that what appears on the surface to be a division in San Miguel between the domestic roles of women and the public roles of men is, instead, a manifestation of a more complex division emerging between the community-oriented religious sphere and the extracommunity-oriented political sphere. Because men dominate in the extracommunity sphere, it often seems that they control all the public roles of importance in San Miguel. Yet obviously they do not. I would argue that many ethnographic descriptions of a domestic/public division in postcontact societies may actually depict this more complex split in orientation between community and extracommunity institutions brought about by the penetration of state-level systems into formerly autonomous or semi-autonomous areas.

The penetration of the state, as anthropologists like Reiter (1975) and Sacks (1974, 1976, 1979) document, is accompanied by major political and economic transformations within local communities. State officials usually recruit men for public works projects and military service because of their greater mobility and physical strength, and because they are more easily exploited than women who must care for children. In the absence of men, the duties of domestic work and local subsistence fall to women. This division between women's production for family use, and men's corresponding involvement in social production, provides the basis for a sexual divide-and-rule policy in state-level systems (Sacks 1974:221). The effect of this policy, according to Sacks, has been to convert the productive role differences between men and women into a system of differential worth such that men become social adults while women are seen as domestic wards (Sacks 1974:221). As domestic wards, women's dealings with the public sphere are necessarily restricted, and they must depend on men to mediate for them with the larger extradomestic system of authority. Thus, although women in many state-level systems may exercise considerable amounts of power within the community, states are still prone to deny women's authority by excluding them from formal positions of importance in dealing with extracommunity officials. While the policies of the state have acted in general

to promote the ties between men and state officials, this pattern of participation is by no means universal. Klein's (1980) work with the Tlingit of Alaska shows how specific historical conditions act, in some situations, to provide women with the opportunities to accrue the skills and positions necessary for extracommunity service.

The tendency of many anthropologists to assume that differential patterns of male and female participation necessarily reflect a domestic/public division is misplaced. Such reasoning fails to recognize the amount of variation that exists in the roles associated with both local and extracommunity institutions. Only by moving beyond the domestic/public model can researchers begin to focus on role relationships in order to specify both the determinants behind, and consequences of, particular patterns of sexual participation.

notes

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[1]See the work of Reina (1966) on the religious system in a Guatemalan community for an exception to this general trend.

[2]The research community is located in the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico. In accordance with anthropological precedent, the name of the community has been changed to protect informant confidentiality. Similarly, informant names have been changed in order to guarantee their anonymity.

[3]The religious cargo system in San Miguel today conforms in structure to what De Walt (1975) labels the "faded" type and what Smith (1977) labels the "truncated" type. A more detailed description of cargo organization can be found in Mathews (1982).

[4]Theoretically, all these 61 religious posts are filled annually, which would lead to a total of 183 offices over the three-year study period. In actuality, however, 38 were filled annually while another 24 were only filled once over the course of the study. Consequently, there were 138 religious posts filled over the three-year period.

[5]In the civil sphere, 14 offices were filled only once, by election, during the three-year study period. Another 15 were filled three separate times by annual appointment. In two additional cases, the offices were not appointed annually, but rather the same two individuals held these posts throughout the three-year study period. Thus the total number of posts to be filled over three years was 61.

[6]I used two rating scales, the Evaluated Participation Scale (EP) and the Index of Status Characteristics (ISC), to assess the socioeconomic status of households in San Miguel. The methodology is adapted from Warner et al. (1960). The goal of the EP technique is the empirical discovery of what people mean by the descriptive terms they use when talking about different social strata (Warner et al. 1960:35). I used open-ended interviews with 20 informants to elicit relevant terms and phrases for social class. Community members talked about three major strata and two substrata based on household standing in the community or *categoria*. In the interview context, informants often cited households as exemples for each of the social categories. After constructing a model of the social system, I asked a panel of five informants to sort index cards with the names of all community households into the relevant categories. I tested this model with data from an identical task done by a separate panel of five informants.

After completing this work, I next constructed an Index of Status Characteristics designed to yield an objective assessment of socioeconomic status that enables the analyst to determine what is meant in socioeconomic terms by community-derived categories of status. I used four status characteristics including occupation of household head, household landholdings, house type, and location of household. I had a panel of informants rate each household in the community on each characteristic, using a scale from an excellent rating of 1 to a poor rating of 7. Each score was then weighted to reflect the relative importance of each characteristic in the determination of status by community members. The composite rating score was then matched to the previous placements of households into emically derived status categories by informants to produce an overall picture of socioeconomic status in the community (see Mathews 1982 for a more detailed account of methodology).

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