

Chapter 11

Altruism in Human Ritual

Garry Chick

11.1 Introduction

These good acts give pleasure, but how it happens that they give us pleasure? Because nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct, in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses.

Thomas Jefferson, letter to Thomas Law Poplar Forest, June 13, 1814

Altruism is generally defined as the selfless concern for the well-being of others. In the case of nonhuman animals, that translates to behavior that appears to be detrimental to the survival of a given individual but which may contribute to the survival of the others. Calls by prey species that warn others of the approach of predators, for example, are often regarded as altruistic in that they may help the majority of animals survive while simultaneously drawing the attention of the predator to the individual giving the warning. While engaging in rituals rarely puts humans at risk from predators, aspects of many rituals appear to be largely selfless and may have negative repercussions for those who sponsor, manage, or support the events. Examples include many rites of passage, that is, ceremonies that celebrate the transition of an individual, or sometimes a group of individuals, from one life stage to another (Chick, 2004; van Gennep, 1960). Such rites are observed at events such as births, deaths, transitions from childhood to adulthood, marriages, religious affirmations and confirmations, retirements, graduations, initiation into secret societies (such as the Freemasons), and many others cross-culturally. These often involve gifting, feasting, and great ceremony, such as in elaborate weddings, debutante balls, or college graduations, often at great cost to parents, relatives, and others. Most of these appear to have altruistic aspects in that they involve not only substantial sacrifice by some but benefits to others.

G. Chick (✉)

Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management,
The Pennsylvania State University, 801 Ford Building,
University Park, PA 16002, USA
e-mail: gchick@psu.edu

One example is the system of festivals in Latin America organized to venerate saints in the Catholic pantheon. In many traditional communities, festivals honoring locally important saints are sponsored, organized, and funded by community members. The classic system entails a series of hierarchically arranged sponsorship positions that involve both political and religious aspects of community life. Participation in the higher levels of the system can entail considerable cost in terms of both time and money for community members. But why do individuals participate in the *cargo* system? Various explanations have been offered, including that it acts as an economic leveling system (e.g., Nash, 1958). It may also function as a means by which villagers can acquire prestige (e.g., Cancian, 1965). Indeed, those who hold the highest *cargos* in their villages typically are accorded elder status with substantial decision-making power. But why would individuals voluntarily, and often eagerly, participate in a system designed to redistribute their wealth? And, of the many who participate in the system, only a few ever make it to the top, so prestige remains unevenly distributed. An alternative explanation is that *cargo* holding is an example of altruistic service to one's community, a contribution to the well-being of the group while having potential or real harmful effects for individual *cargo* holders. The purpose of this chapter is to examine evidence for the expression of altruism in the *cargo* system and to suggest that rituals, more generally, can involve altruistic behavior toward others.

11.2 Ritual, Expressive Culture, and the *Cargo* System

Human culture, defined as socially transmitted and shared information generally in the forms of beliefs and values, can be roughly divided into utilitarian and expressive components. The former deals primarily with how people go about making a living and raising a family, while the latter gives meaning to much of the former as well as to life in general. Anthropologists have devoted far more research attention to utilitarian than to expressive culture although particular activities, such as games, sports, art, music, and narratives such as legends, folktales, and other oral or written literature, have received considerable notice. Ritual is an anthropological favorite, and if defined as an organized and generally repetitive set of symbolic acts designed to communicate meaning, rituals are important and very common forms of expressive culture cross-culturally. Rituals can be both sacred and secular and used to remove sin, bring rain, grow crops, heal the sick, get politicians elected, make graduations memorable, unite couples in marriage, and get sports events underway, among others.

11.2.1 *The Cargo System*

Rituals, as part of the *cargo* (meaning “load” or “burden”) or *fiesta* (meaning “festival”) system, have occupied a place in Latin American expressive culture

since the sixteenth century. The *cargo* system is an important religious (and now often secular) system that consists of a set of more or less hierarchically organized positions, generally held for the duration of 1 year, wherein community members sponsor and administer events based on the local religious calendar (Carrasco, 1961; Cancian, 1965; Chick, 1981, 1989, 2002; Dewalt, 1975). In some cases, individuals alternate between holding religious and secular political offices, while, in others, the religious and political systems are distinct. In San Rafael Tepatlaxco, a community of approximately 1,050 people in the state of Tlaxcala, Mexico, where I did field research from 1977 to 1980, the religious and the political systems were separate. I will describe the system, as it existed during my field research there.

The rule of thumb in San Rafael Tepatlaxco was that if there was an image of a saint in the community church, then a festival must be sponsored in the honor of that saint during the year. However, not all festivals were created equal. Some, such as the festival in honor of Saint Rafael, the patron of the village, were very elaborate (and expensive). The festival of Saint Rafael lasted for 2 weeks in October. The festival in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patron saint of Mexico, was also very elaborate and lasted for a week in December (the national celebration falls on December 12). These two festivals were each sponsored and organized by three men. The *mayordomo* was always an older, experienced hand at festival sponsorship and he had the assistance of two others, the *devoto* and the *topile*. Collectively, the group was referred to as *mayordomos* and the sponsorship itself, the *cargo*, was termed a *mayordomía*. Twelve other saints were honored with festivals but all of these were considerably less elaborate than those of Saint Rafael and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Two individuals, the *mayordomo* and the *devoto*, constituted the *mayordomos* for these smaller festivals, which ranged from a 3-day celebration for *la Virgen Purísima* to nothing more than a dinner with a few guests for *San Gabriel*.

While, historically, and in many Mesoamerican and other Latin American communities, the *mayordomos* themselves supported the festival with their own money, in Tepatlaxco, most expenses were defrayed through donations collected from community members (and the visiting anthropology graduate student). So, while the *cargo* system has been described in the anthropological literature as a “leveling system” whereby resources are redistributed among community members from wealthier *cargo* sponsors (e.g., Nash, 1958; see Chap. 4 of this volume by Gibbons (2013), for a similar claim regarding Mayan communities), this was not an accurate description of Tepatlaxco because of the high level of support provided by villagers. The *mayordomos* did spend considerable time and effort on organizing the festivals, however. Cancian (1965) claimed that the *cargo* system acts as a stratifying mechanism that separates the community into multiple levels of social status through the award of prestige to *cargo* holders. He claimed, as well, that *cargo* holding legitimized differences in wealth that already existed, leading to community homeostasis and internal accord. This explanation is dubious for Tepatlaxco for, while wealth and status distinctions were evident, there was no obvious correlation between wealth and status in the community or between wealth and *cargo* service (Chick, 1980).

Why did villagers spend so much time and effort on the *cargo* system? It may have been an economic leveling system in some places in Latin America but not in

Tepatlxco. The sponsorship of festivals in honor of saints certainly also had religious aspects. While community members in Tepatlxco were nearly all Roman Catholics (there were two families of Protestants in the village, as well), in their version of Catholicism, the saints were intermediaries to God. Hence, propitiation of the saints was important. But village men fell into three groups, two of which participated in the system and one that did not, apparently due to different motives (Chick, 1989). The latter group consisted largely of men who were involved in daily, weekly, or longer period migrant labor. Individuals might commute (by bus) daily to nearby villages or towns or to the large city of Puebla, some 20 km distant. Others would commute to Mexico City or more distant cities on a weekly basis, while still others participated in transmigration to places such as Veracruz for agricultural work. Many of the older men of the village had participated in the *bracero* program in the 1950s and early 1960s and had been to places like Texas, Arizona, and Kansas but also to Illinois and Michigan (where they picked sugar beets). These men sometimes told me that they would like to participate in the *cargo* system but could not because of their work situation. Others, older individuals or those who were still participating, sometimes claimed that those who used their work as an excuse to avoid *cargo* service were simply lazy or not community minded.

Two groups of individuals did participate and the men in each of these could be distinguished by their patterns of *cargo* sponsorships. One group sponsored *cargos* in a pattern generally concordant with the hierarchical organization of the offices. That is, they began their *cargo* careers with relatively low-ranking, cheaper, and less onerous sponsorships and successively held higher-ranked positions until they completed the highest *cargo* in the village. They then became elders and wielded substantial decision-making authority, especially with respect to the *cargo* system itself. Individuals in the second group often sponsored as many *cargos* as those who went on to become elders but, instead of holding successively higher positions, they muddled around in the lower and middle levels of the system, sometimes holding higher offices, sometimes lower, and sometimes on the same level as their previous office. It could be argued that the nonparticipants and the elder status seekers were acting selfishly, but it would be very difficult to do that with respect to the muddlers.

Moreover, members of the two Protestant families in the village commonly participated in the *cargo* system despite the fact that the *mayordomías* were held to honor Catholic saints. Their participation had nothing to do with religious devotion; their participation was not going to save their souls, at least in their minds. A couple of the Protestant men told me that they participated because Tepatlxco was their village, their home, and the others who lived there were members of their community and their friends. So their service in Catholic festivals (as well as in construction projects on the [Catholic] church in the village) made complete sense to them as a contribution to their community. In turn, the Protestant families were treated well, if occasionally with a bit of suspicion, and were regarded as integral members of the community.

Kurzban and Houser (2005) suggest that humans come in three types with respect to cooperation. First, there are cooperators, “who contribute to generating group benefits at a cost to self.” Second, there are “free-riders, who do not incur these

costs.” Finally, there are “reciprocators, who respond to others’ behavior by using a conditional strategy” (p. 1803). They experimented with multiple players, in groups, in a computer simulation wherein players allocated tokens to individual and group exchanges in order to gain points. Kurzban and Houser termed those who contributed little to the pooled exchanges “free-riders.” Those who contributed a great deal most of the time were “cooperators,” and those who contributed an amount that was about equal to that of others were “reciprocators” or “conditional cooperators” (Kurzban & Houser, p. 1803). The authors based their inferences about their informants’ types from a plot of each player’s contributions compared with the average contribution observed before making his or her contribution. Cooperator’s contributions were well above the 45° line on the plot while free-rider’s contributions were well below the line. Reciprocators’ contributions clustered near the 45° line. Kurzban and Houser found 17 of their 84 informants (20 %) to be free-riders, 11 (13 %) to be cooperators, 53 (63 %) to be reciprocators, and three to be unclassifiable according to their criteria.

Kurzban and Houser (2005) feel that their findings support the idea of multiple and stable behavioral types that vary in terms of willingness to cooperate in group contexts. Their results corroborate others where researchers classified people as competitors (motivated to get better payoffs than others), cooperators (motivated to contribute to group welfare), and individualists (motivated to serve their own interests) (e.g., Komorita & Parkes, 1995) and experimental economics where people were found to be “spiteful” (competitors), “altruistic” (cooperators), and “payoff-maximizing” (individualists) (e.g., Cason, Saijo, Yamato, & Yokotani, 2004).

I suggest that these characterizations fit the three types of interactions with the *cargo* system that I observed in Tepatlaxco from 1977 to 1980. Those who completely avoided participation in the system might be termed “free-riders” as they often enjoyed the fruits of the system (i.e., the festivals and associated activities) but contributed little or nothing to it. Those whose “*cargo* careers” closely paralleled the hierarchical organization of the system and passed the highest office, thus becoming village elders, were individualists who maximized their payoffs. Those who I termed “muddlers” above participated intermittently and seemed to do so in order to contribute to the community. As such, they were cooperators or *altruists*.

11.2.2 A Cargo Festival

In 1978, the festival in honor of the patron saint of San Rafael Tepatlaxco, Saint Rafael, was held between October 19 and October 31. During this period, 15 Masses were celebrated, there was a *Mañanita* performance (the singing of traditional songs by young girls and boys), and residents carried images of the saints in two processions through the village. They were joined in this by people from several neighboring villages. Community members put up banners and streamers to decorate the community and bouquets of flowers were placed throughout the village.

Many of the activities that took place were religious in nature although it can be argued that religion, as an expressive system, has innate recreational qualities. Villagers, in addition to the *mayordomos*, served festival meals, almost always involving *mole*, a sauce with chocolate as a main ingredient usually used over meat. Many former villagers returned for the festival, which featured carnival-like games, baseball, soccer, and horse racing. There were several fireworks displays and vendors, set up around the church, sold ice cream, candy, and trinkets. Two dances were held in the elementary school courtyard. Alcoholic beverages were consumed in vast quantities (generally in the forms of beer, brandy, and *pulque*, the local beverage fermented from the sap of the *maguety* or agave cactus). The church itself was decorated with banners and, on the floor inside, with elaborate *alfrombras* (depictions of religious scenes on the church floor made from flower petals).

Other festivals ranged from an evening to a week in duration. Most villages in the area had between 15 and 30 festivals per year. The festivals associated with the patron saint of the community and the Holy Week were the most elaborate. The activities associated with the *cargo* festivals are the only form of community-wide recreation and are the only form of recreation to which all members of communities, whether young or old, male or female, are welcome. All other forms of recreation involve either individuals or small groups, including families. And, again, all of this is organized and, to a significant extent, financed by community members on a volunteer basis (see Chap. 6 of this volume by Grönlund (2013), on volunteering).

11.2.3 Research on Cargo Careers

I collected the *cargo* careers of 60 individuals from the local church records. The names of *cargo* holders were recorded each year, beginning in 1920 when Tepatlaxco achieved *Pueblo* status and then, in following years, held *mayordomías* separately from Santa Ana Chiautempan, the local municipal seat. The data were relatively complete through 1980 although the books for 3 years (1947, 1949, and 1951) were missing. I was able to partially complete the lists of officeholders for these years from the records of other years. Additionally, data for several of the lowest-ranking *cargos*, the *Mayordomía del Santo Entierro*, the *Mayordomía del Divino Rostro*, and the individual days of the Holy Week were often not recorded. Hence, I excluded these from the analyses described below.

Twenty-seven of the 60 individuals had achieved the status of elder in Tepatlaxco; that is, they had passed the highest office in the community, that of *fiscal* (the *fiscal* is the chief officer of the *fiscalía*, the lay governing body of all religious activities in the village). Based on the data available, these men had held between 5 and 11 (mean=6.95, SD=1.68) recorded offices. It is likely that each had held several more *cargos* that were unreported in the records. Of the remaining 33 individuals, two had reached the second highest level of the nine-level hierarchy (the *Mayordomo de San Rafael*), eight had reached the third highest level (*Mayordomo de la Virgen*

de Guadalupe), thirteen had reached the fourth highest, and ten the fifth highest. It should be pointed out that several individuals who had not reached the highest office still had the opportunity to do so. I did not gather information on anyone who had not held any offices.

So, 45 % of the 60 individuals had *cargo* careers that could be regarded as competitive; that is, they were motivated to surpass the efforts of others in the system, while 55 % were cooperators in that they seemed to participate in order to advance the welfare of the community. Since I was unable to determine the number of non-participants, the percent of “free-riders” cannot be calculated. While the 45–55 % ratio of competitors and cooperators seems to differ from 63 % to 13 % of reciprocators and cooperators that Kurzban and Houser (2005) found in their sample, the contexts these data represent were very different. Since I chose to ignore *cargo* careers of individuals who had held fewer than five offices, and since none of the competitors had held fewer than six offices, it is certain that more than 55 % of the individuals who participated at all in the system were cooperators, or *altruists*.

It is also possible that the competitors knew the system better than the cooperators did and were therefore better able to move through it systematically. Fortunately, this is a testable proposition. I asked a sample of 31 men, all who had had sponsored at least three *cargos* to rank order 20 of the primary sponsorships in terms of the local *escalafon*, or graded list of *cargos*. I then calculated the mean rank of these sponsorships in order to provide an informant-provided overview of the hierarchical organization of the *cargos*. I recalculated this after removing each individual’s ranking from the total and then correlated his ranking with the composite ranking. This provided a quantitative indicator on how well each individual’s *cargo*-holding pattern agreed with the composite ranking of the *cargos* by the other 20 informants (Chick, 1981). Later, Romney, Weller, and Batchelder (1986) proposed cultural consensus analysis, along with a theory of culture as consensus, that provided exactly the same information I had determined, although in a more sophisticated way. Like my 1981 analyses, cultural consensus analysis provides, first, the “culturally correct” answers to a series of questions. In the case of the *cargo* system, these would be questions about the *escalafon* rank of each of the *cargos*. Second, it provides the degree to which each informant agrees with the culturally correct responses, just as I had done for the *cargo* system in Tepatlaxco. Finally, it provides an overall measure of how well informants agree with the culturally correct answers. I had calculated this, as well, in my 1981 article.

Cultural consensus analysis consists of factor analysis wherein the informants are treated as variables while the variables (the 20 *cargos*, in this instance) are treated as cases. If the factor analysis returns a one-factor solution where the ratio of the first to the second eigenvalue is equal to or greater than three to one and where all of the factor loadings are positive, cultural consensus is said to exist (Romney et al., 1986). Given that this method is superior to my own, in a confirmatory analysis, I used it to determine the “cultural competence” of the 31 informants, that is, the degree to which each agreed with the overall ranking of the 20 *cargos*. Individual cultural competence scores ranged from 0.480 to 0.928 with a mean of 0.805 (SD=0.098). I then correlated the individual competence score for each individual

with the number of sponsorships he had held. As I suspected, cultural competence is unrelated to the number of sponsorships held (Pearson's $r=0.003$, $p=0.99$, $N=31$). This indicates that knowledge of the system is not what differentiates competitors from muddlers.

The above analyses do not demonstrate that participation in the cargo system is, even for some, due to altruism. It is impossible to determine whether the *cargo* system engenders altruism or merely allows it to be exhibited by those who are already altruistic. A safe bet would be the latter. However, I was surprised to find instances where individuals who had already attained elder status in Tepatlaxco (an elder is known by the Nahuatl term *tiaxca*) held additional *cargos*, often at relatively low levels in the system. When I asked about this behavior, several of the elders explained to me that no one was now willing to take on those *cargos* but someone had to do so to keep the system working properly. So, even those who I classified as competitors became cooperators when the system that afforded their status was endangered. Perhaps most important, many of my informants told me that they, and others, participated in the *cargo* system because it provided them with the opportunity to serve their community, despite the often considerable financial cost.

11.2.4 Altruism in the Cargo System

Although there was a priest's house in Tepatlaxco and it was, by a considerable margin, the nicest house in the village (I rented it for the summer of 1977), there was no resident priest in the community. The same situation prevailed in nearly all of the villages of similar and smaller size in the area. So, instead of a resident priest, religious functions that required the services of a priest, primarily saying Mass, relied on visiting priests. Visiting priests would travel to villages by car and say Mass or administer other rituals for a fee. For the most part, the villagers despised them because they felt their fees were exorbitant and, moreover, the visiting priests had no real connection to the communities they served. Because of their dislike of the visiting priests, villagers summoned them as infrequently as possible. This meant that as many religious functions as possible fell to the village elders, the members of the *fiscalía*, the lay religious governance body in the community, and the *mayordomos* (Chick, 1981). Together, the *fiscales* and the *mayordomos* composed the *cofradía*, a religious governance institution imported from Spain soon after the conquest.

In addition to its religious components, the *cargo* system provided the range of recreational activities during the festivals, described above. This made the *mayordomos* the primary providers of community-wide recreation in the village (Chick, 1991). Few of these activities had anything to do with religious devotion but they clearly involved community involvement and service. One service was to lure others from nearby communities into the village to spend money or to attract former residents who had migrated, mostly to large cities such as Mexico City, Puebla, or Veracruz, home to visit friends and relatives.

Of the participants in the *cargo* system I studied in Tepatlaxco in 1977–1980, slightly more than half did so for what appeared to be entirely selfless reasons. That is, they got nothing obvious in return for their considerable expenditures in time and, to a lesser extent, money. Before Tepatlaxco had easy access to the outside (prior to 1954, it was connected to Santa Ana Chiautempan only by footpath while, by 1980, several busses per day traveled the 14 miles up and down the mountain between Chiautempan and Tepatlaxco), community members were surely much more interdependent and cooperative behavior was more important than in more recent years. Many of my older informants criticized the lack of community spirit, exemplified by *cargo* sponsorship, exhibited by younger villagers. By 1980, factors such as readily available transportation and work opportunities outside the village appeared to have eroded the system substantially (Chick, 1981, 1989; Dewalt, 1975). Similar systems in larger communities in the region, even by then, had either disappeared completely or been secularized and taken over by local politicians. These degraded systems had religious functions in name only and their real purpose is not community altruism but to bolster local economies, largely through tourism. Few pristine systems remain intact today.

11.3 Conclusion

Thomas Jefferson, in his letter to Thomas Forest in 1814, claimed that nature has implanted in us a love of, and sense of duty to, others. Jefferson seemed to be claiming natural, perhaps even biological, roots for altruism, thus presaging the growing body of research on the place of certain neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, and neuropeptides, including oxytocin and vasopressin, on social behavior. My research in Tepatlaxco did not include research on how neurotransmitters or neuropeptides may have influenced *cargo* festivals in the community. However, these events involved numerous forms of prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, generosity, and positive emotions including anticipation, joy, and excitement. In addition, *cargo* festivals were the most important shared expressive activities in the village and were also the only events that provided community-wide recreation, other than graduation day from the local elementary school (Chick, 1991).

One question, however, is whether the activities of *cargo* holders and other lay religious officers in Tepatlaxco should be considered as altruistic rather than the result of a sense of duty, obligation to their community, or religiously motivated sacrifice or obligation. Clearly, the duties that were part of *cargo* system participation cost sponsors dearly in terms of time and, to a lesser but still important extent, money. Moreover, while some individuals, who I identified above as competitors—those who advanced through the system toward elder status—might have anticipated a reward in terms of status enhancement, the cooperators, who I referred to above as muddlers, had no such anticipation of benefits or gain, at least in this world. Hence, at least for the muddlers, sponsoring *cargos* appears to meet the qualifications for altruism that include being voluntary and intentional and involving

concern for the other, empathy, benefits to the receiver, ease of escape, and cost to the initiator, as proposed by Smith, Lapinski, Bresnahan, and Smith (2013) in Chap. 2 of this volume.

It is also possible to think of the *cargo* system in terms of kin selection (e.g., Hamilton, 1964). Members of four village families dominated *cargo* holding and the lay religious system generally in Tepatlaxco although they did not represent a proportionally outsized number of residents. Since present *cargo* system officeholders were responsible for assuring that others would assume their positions for the next cycle, a family in-group bias may have existed, however. There was also a system of fictive kinship, the *compadrazgo* system, at play in Tepatlaxco, as in much of Mesoamerica (e.g., Nutini & White, 1977; Nutini, 1984), that may also have influenced candidacy and recruitment for *cargo* sponsorships (see Chap. 3 of this volume by Coe and Palmer (2013), regarding the place of kinship in traditional societies).

Rituals such as found in the Mesoamerican *cargo* system in Tepatlaxco appear to provide an opportunity for altruistic behavior, particularly in terms of providing recreation to members of one's community. Only when easy transportation and other amenities permitted individual members of communities such as Tepatlaxco to become less dependent on each other did the altruistic aspects of the *cargo* system begin to wane. Other rituals and ceremonies, including various rites of passage where individuals or groups make sacrifices in terms of time, money, or other resources with no anticipation of return, appear to be expressions of altruism, as well.

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