

International Migration and the Use of Remittances in the Local Sociocultural Structure in Oaxaca, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of remittances in the cargo system in rural Mexico. Instead of focusing only on the economic function of remittances based on a dualistic approach (positive-negative or productive-unproductive), the author illustrates why sociocultural, political, and economic effects should be carefully examined. Remittances used to perform local communal duties in the cargo system can revitalize the traditional culture and political structure in the community by reinforcing local identity. Using the remittances for cargo duties strengthens the sense of belonging among villagers. International migrants who use remittances to complete their cargo obligation in the community are able to acquire prestige when they return or visit home, because they have not neglected their communal duties while working in the U.S. Therefore, the author argues that the use of remittances in a seemingly unproductive or negative way may in fact facilitate the maintenance of the community, local cultural customs and the civil-religious hierarchy.

Key Words: international labor migration, migrants, remittances, cargo system, Oaxaca, Mexico

INTRODUCTION

This article explores the role of remittances, money sent home by international labor migrants from Mexico to the U.S., in the cargo system in rural Mexico. Many Mexican migrants have been crossing the

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U.S.-Mexican border with hopes to find better economic opportunities in the U.S. even though the U.S. government has repeatedly established repressive immigration laws since the 20th century. To fight against the illegal migration from Mexico, U.S. Congress passed the Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1965, which was amended in 1976, 1978 and 1980 continuously. The Immigration Reform and Control Act practiced in 1986 aimed at reducing the flow of illegal Mexican migration while intensifying border patrol and punishing employers in the U.S. for hiring unauthorized migrant workers. Responding to the incessant surge of migration from Mexico in spite of a series of measures, U.S. government promulgated the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which was characterized by increasing penalties on unauthorized laborer. In 2002, U.S. and Mexican governments signed the United States-Mexico Border Partnership Agreement as an effort to curb the border-crossing of illegal migrants from Mexico. Recently, U.S. Senate and Congress are considering very controversial legislation that will fortify border security because of decreasing U.S. demand for labor caused by economic stagnation.

International labor migration has been and will be one of the most important social issues in Mexico. The majority of Mexican international labor migrants have been heading toward the U.S. and the number of Mexicans staying in the U.S. has been increasing incessantly. In 2004, there are about 26.6 million Mexicans or Mexican-Americans in the U.S. and among them about 10 million people are migrant workers born in Mexico (Delgado Wise 2006, 36). Especially, the number of migrant workers has been rapidly rising since 1990s and every year about 400,000 migrants are crossing the border to find jobs in the U.S. (Delgado Wise 2006, 36; Escobar et al. 2003, 126). Mexico leads other countries in the number of emigrantsto other countries including the U.S. (The World Bank 2008, 3). However, recent studies by Pew Research Center shows that immigration from Mexico to the U.S., especially unauthorized immigration, began to drop off in mid-2006 in response to heightened border enforcement and the weakened U.S. economy (Passel and Cohn 2009, 3).

International labor migration to the U.S. is of great consequence in socioeconomic terms in the Mexican society and economic impact of migration to the U.S. stands out in remittances. The amount of remittances, as they are called *migradólares* in Mexico, has been augmenting each year, and Mexico, the third-largest recipient of remittances in the world after India and China, receives US\$10.5 billion in 2002, US\$16.6 billion in 2004, US\$21.8 billion in 2005, and US\$25.0 billion in 2007 respectively

(Acosta et al. 2008, 27; Ruiz 2006, 47; VanWey et al. 2005, 84). Recent economic downturn in the U.S. may influence in the amount of money sent by Mexican migrants in the U.S. In Mexico as well as other developing countries, remittances have played a significant role in the local and national development (Eversole 2005, 295). In the poor societies suffering from unequal socioeconomic stratification, remittances have become a relatively stable source of income. In general, the amount of remittances tends to increase when economic hardships are intensified due to financial crisis, natural disaster, and political conflicts because migrants are asked to send more remittances to help their needy families or relatives. The role of remittances is much more significant in Mexico where economic crises have been recurred periodically.

Remittances sent by migrant workers in the U.S. can help the local communities in various ways in economic and non-economic terms. It is quite obvious that many poor rural households in Mexico suffering from the lack of employment in the agricultural sector can survive thanks to regular or irregular remittances arrived from the U.S. In addition to their economic function, remittances can help rural households and communities maintain local customs and political practices. Even though many people living in the countryside decide to migrate from Mexico to find jobs in the U.S. for economic reasons, their remittances produce tremendous effects on local sociocultural and political structure. In this case, the cargo system in southern Mexico, the system of periodical unpaid civil and religious obligations for the community among men, is a good example to understand the role of remittances from a different perspective other than economic aspect. The cargo system, continuously weakened by deteriorating rural economy in Mexico because of high costs to participate in, can be continued without interruption thanks to income from international labor migration. Especially expensive and prestigious cargo services can be taken by migrants or their family members utilizing their remittances, which can be beneficial for the preservation of traditional customs and politics. In this sense, we should not ignore the use of remittances in local cultural customs and practices to grasp their meaningful role in contemporary rural Mexico.

INTERNATIONAL LABOR MIGRATION AND REMITTANCES

In recent years, many scholars show keen interest in the relationship

between international labor migration and economic development. Above all, the role of remittances derived from international labor migration and their contribution to Mexican rural economic development is a major focal point. The effects of remittances on local economic development are analyzed from two distinct analytical frameworks. First, from a negative point of view, it is described that with the inflow of remittances people tend to spend more money to purchase consumer goods and that local economy has to respond quickly to the fluctuating external economic situations. What makes matters worse, the rapid dissemination of inequality may incur augmented social conflicts, enlarged economic differentiation, surge of prices in the local markets, the disintegration of families and communities, and the weakening of traditional political structure (Burrell 2005, 20; Conway and Cohen 1998; Dinerman 1978; Gammage 2006, 93; Kearney 1986; Mines and DeJanvry 1982; Reichert 1981; Rubenstein 1992; Wiest 1984). However, scholars emphasizing a positive role of remittances insist that the influx of remittances in rural Mexico experiencing serious economic adversity will vitalize local economy and stimulate economic development by increased wealth and agricultural capital to purchase land and farming tools. Remittances may facilitate the economic activities of the poor and decrease the risks of household economy while reducing poverty in the community (Adams and Page 2005a; 2005b; Durand 1994; Durand, Parrado and Massey 1996; Fajinzylber 2008, 2; García Zamora 2000; Jones 1995; Malkin 2004, 81; Massey and Parrado 1994; Padilla 2000; Parrado 2004, 79; Pérez 2005, 68; Taylor 1999; Taylor et al. 1996; Wong et al. 2007, 138-139).

Some scholars try to evaluate the productiveness of remittances for the better and wider understanding of their role in socioeconomic terms. In general, scholars pointing out the negative function of remittances focus their research on their unproductive nature (Butterworth and Chance 1981, 84; Durand and Massey 1992, 25; Gledhill 1991, 237; Grindle 1998, 79; Jokisch 2002, 547; Kearney 1986, 346; Massey et al. 1987, 216; Russel 1986, 688). It is reported that remittances used in purchasing consumer goods may disrupt the economic behaviors of the poor thoroughly. In addition, many people prefer to buy new imported products that were not easily available for them with limited income in the past, which will inevitably contract the local economy. Though remittances can be invested in purchasing agricultural land, people just try to demonstrate their wealth or accumulate their money temporarily rather than to encourage agricultural production. Rubenstein (1992, 132) even mentioned that rural economic conditions can be deteriorated because of the unproductive use of

remittances.

But, scholars recognizing the productive effects of remittances argue that they can be invested in land, livestock, other capital goods, or small-scale businesses to create employment. The influx of remittances is said to bring many valuable indirect, multiplier, or second-round effects (Delgado Wise 2006, 39-40; Eversole 2005, 302; VanWey 2005, 167-168). For example, increase in income may enhance the level of consumption, which will eventually promote productive economic activities in local communities because villagers with more remittances may be willing to spend more money to improve the quality of their lives. In other words, the use of remittances in the unproductive sector for the present does not always mean that they will bring negative impact on the local economy eventually. For example, remittances helping the subsistence of poor households can contribute to the maintenance of the rural community in various ways. In reality, the lack of infrastructure, low skill level, scarce resources, and limited markets prevent rural villagers from investing their remittances in their society directly (Durand and Massey 1992, 27). However, when income from agricultural production is sufficient, remittances may be invested in diverse productive areas. Accordingly, considering the difficult Mexican rural economic situations, in spite of low rate of investment of remittances, a significant portion of them can be applied in the rural industrial sector (Massey et al. 1987, 232; Hulshof 1991, 70-71). Therefore, the capitalist development of rural industry can be expedited if the inflow of remittances into the rural industrial sector continues (Cook and Binford 1990; Stephen 1991).

In reality, both aspects of remittances can be discovered in the countryside. On the one hand, income from migration may partially alleviate dire economic poverty and introduce new types of rural industry in a limited sense. On the other hand, wage differentials between U.S. and Mexico obviously manifested in remittances will discourage many valuable productive activities in the local economy. Accordingly, it is not easy to design any models applicable to all societies in regard to the effects of remittances.

So far, researches on remittances tend to be heavily focused on their role for the local communities and households in economic terms. Especially, dualistic approach (positive vs. negative, productive vs. unproductive) has been preferred to examine the usage of remittances to highlight their economic contribution. Nevertheless, patterns in the use of remittances in economic activities are not always crystal clear. Sometimes it is very difficult to say that remittances are used either positively or negatively

(either productively or unproductively) because seemingly negative or unproductive use of remittances can be proved to be positive or productive later. Therefore it is not easy to evaluate their role and importance properly in rural Mexico. On the contrary, remittances spent to hold obligatory communal sociocultural or political activities can play a much significant and culturally meaningful role for the whole community. Particularly, part of the remittances appropriated to perform cargo services in southern Mexico may be very critical for the maintenance of the whole community even though only a small amount of money is allocated to pursue cultural and political duties. Remittances paid to complete communal duties can provide different types of cultural meanings for the migrants and people living in the community because they can share local identity transcending geographical distance. Accordingly, instead of recognizing migration only as a kind of economic strategies, more attention has to be given on symbolic and cultural frames including values, customs, and communal cultural tradition within which migration takes place. Although economic necessity obliges migrants to leave their own communities to earn wages, the role and function of remittances can vary with the nature of communities. In this context, for the better understanding of the non-economic role of remittances in the community where traditional customs and practices have existed, we need to reveal the processes of the use of remittances in sociocultural and political activities in a specific community from a broad perspective.

Also, many researches on remittances try to investigate their usage in the households sending migrants. Of course, only rural households receiving remittances from the migrants can be directly and most significantly affected by international migration. But we should not underestimate the influence of remittances for the whole community. Remittances involved in communal cultural and political activities can introduce many new changes in the society in the future. For instance, the migrants participating in the cargo system are eager to develop close ties with their communities of origin.

FIELDWORK AND THE RESEARCH SITE

Fieldwork to collect data was carried out for 2 months in 2006, 1 month in 2007, and 3 months in 2010 in the municipio of San Juan del Estado, located in the northwestern part of the valley of Oaxaca, 30km away from the city of Oaxaca. San Juan del Estado is a Spanish-speaking

Mestizo community with a population of about 2,500. The village is connected with the city of Oaxaca with paved Pan American Highway and many buses and taxis are available along this highway. Many villagers frequently travel to the Oaxaca city to work everyday and some of them sell agricultural or other products grown and manufactured at home in the Oaxaca markets. Because of its location in the valley of Oaxaca, a political and economic center in the state, the villagers in San Juan del Estado actively participate in diverse sociocultural exchanges with other communities.

International labor migration from the village began in the mid-1950s. Until the 1980s, less than 100 young people crossed the border to look for employment. As the number of villagers who were working or have worked in the U.S. has augmented sharply since then, international labor migration became a general cultural phenomenon in the village. Slowly, instead of migrating individually, many family members and relatives outmigrated together to the U.S. About 2/3 of the migrants from the village working in the U.S. have lived collectively in Southern California near San Marcos, Vista or Ensenada, which facilitated the exchange of information concerning migration among the migrants and the villagers. Now even the poor class can join the process of migration as costs and risks for migration have diminished significantly. Currently, approximately half of households in the village have their family members working in the U.S. and, in several cases whole household members completely have left the village. Some migrants return to the village after working in the U.S. for several years. But most of them cross the U.S.-Mexican border again eventually. Remittances sent by migrants in the U.S. have increased consistently (Joo 2009, 106) and they have an important function in maintaining the community and households. At present, except for one-fifth of villagers who are too destitute to migrate to the U.S., most villagers have been migrating or plan to migrate to the U.S. soon. Because of the existence of migrants visiting the village frequently and those who never return to home without any news after leaving the village, counting exact number of migrants is a challenging task. Villagers have estimated that there are roughly between 800 and 1,000 migrants in the U.S. in the late 2000s. My own survey in the village showed that among the 163 sample households surveyed, there were 194 migrants in 76 households in 2006. Since the total number of households was 549 in 2006, villagers' calculation of migrants was not completely wrong.

To collect essential and necessary data concerning dynamic functions

and patterns of international labor migration in a community of origin, fieldwork and participant observation in the community have been periodically conducted since 1994. Detailed data about the use of remittances for 163 households were collected in 2006 and 2007. In 2010, remittances for the cargo system were investigated in the village. By applying both quantitative and qualitative research methods in the fieldwork, I have gathered first-hand data about people's opinions on migration, their behaviors for the preparation of migration, the use of remittances, and sociocultural relations. Specifically, along with intensive formal and informal interviews, I have directly observed the behaviors and discourses of people in the community about migration and remittances to disclose its patterns, meanings and results. Questionnaires on the use of remittances were used in 2006 and 2007 to supplement the interviews and participant observation and to compare people's opinions with communal socioeconomic conditions and institutional and cultural principles.

USE OF REMITTANCES IN THE COMMUNITY

The role of remittances should be understood from the viewpoint of the rural households sending migrants because remittances can function differently depending on the economic situations of the households receiving them. Small amount of remittances may play an essential role for the survival of the poor without any other sources of income. It seems that the role of remittances may be negligible when we consider the total amount of remittances, but among the poor households they may function very positively and diversely. Specifically, poor people without sufficient and stable income can rely on remittances to emerge from extreme poverty and to participate in productive economic activities.

In San Juan del Estado, most households use their remittances to purchase daily necessities and only a small part of them are invested or saved (Joo 2009, 107-113). Cohen and Rodriguez (2005, 54) find that a small percentage of remittances (8 percent) went to start or expand businesses, the purchase of land, or towards equipment for commercial ventures in Oaxacan villages and that rest of the households use remittances to buy consumer goods. Fluctuation of the amount of remittances prevents them from participating in agricultural or industrial production continuously. In case of investment, even villagers receiving sufficient remittances hesitate to be involved in productive economic activities because of inadequate remuneration from their businesses. Also the deficiency of infrastructure

is another obstacle for the investment of money from remittances. Anyway, poor households with lower level of consumption may be interested in somewhat productive economic activities when the amount of remittances is greater than they expect for the maintenance of their households. After all, the influx of remittances can be very valuable for the welfare of the poor and for the maintenance of the rural community because they can be utilized to stabilize and invigorate local economy. Acknowledging international labor migration and remittances as a strategy of diversifying household income-generating activities will allow us to perceive the dynamic aspect of remittances. In fact, the role of remittances in a given society may differ relying on the socioeconomic conditions of each household and community. Obviously, remittances can play an important role in a poor village, like San Juan del Estado.

In short, remittances may benefit extremely poor rural households without stable sources of income because they can be utilized to buy essential goods to subsist. In a sense, the livelihood of poor villagers can be temporarily or partially relieved while receiving remittances from the U.S. continuously. Nevertheless, the existence of remittances in the community cannot guarantee the eradication of poverty in the end due to the small amount of remittances. Household with international labor migrants complain that the insufficient small amount and irregularity of remittances make their lives harder from time to time. Frequently the migrants stop sending remittances when they experience unexpected economic difficulties. The irregularity of remittances prevents the villagers from carrying out their long-term economic plans systematically.

Among 163 households interviewed in 2006 in San Juan del Estado, 194 international migrants were reported in 76 households and among them 69 migrants were women. Twenty-five households answered that they had only one migrant while 22 households had two migrants. More than three migrants were found among the remaining 29 households. Each household with migrants had 2.14 people working in the U.S. on an average. Villagers with migrants mentioned that each migrant sent between US\$100 and US\$150 to them monthly. In this situation, only households sending more than three migrants at the same time could get sufficient financial support from the migrants.

Other than consumption and investment, a fair portion of remittances has been reserved to pay for cargo service in the community.¹ Since

1 The cargo system (or the civil-religious hierarchy) is composed of civil and religious positions held by men in rural indigenous communities throughout central and southern Mexico and Central America (Chance and Taylor 1985; Dewalt 1975). The cargos become

all adult men aged over twenty-one (or eighteen if married) in the community has to serve cargo for a year every three years until they reach sixty, male migrants who want to serve for the community have to save about one third of their total remittances to undertake communal obligations accounting that every civil or religious cargo costs ranging between US\$500 and US\$2,000. Even part of remittances from female migrants who are not bound to be involved in the cargo services is used to pay for the services of their father or brothers. Of course, cargos are not required to serve every year and only male members of the community can participate in the system. But villagers mention that they always have to prepare for the next cargos because there are several male members in their household. By contributing money and other necessary goods and services in the community through the cargo system, male or female migrants are able to intensify networks between the villagers and themselves. In other words, the migrants can maintain sense of belonging through the cargo system even though they live far away from home. The migrants agree that they are much more concerned about the community when they think that their remittances are used to take care of the communal duties.

In fact, remittances may be used to alleviate extreme poverty depending on the socioeconomic conditions of the households involved. But remittances devoted to the cargos leave much more essential cultural meanings and political effects for the villagers and the migrants. In addition, remittances spent to sponsor the religious cargos can encourage many side or multiplier effects for local economic activities as foods, alcoholic beverages, and decorations have to be purchased and musical bands have to be invited to celebrate local saints. Therefore, it can be said that remittances allocated for the cargos may play a more important role for the community because the migrants paying for the cargos can be acknowledged as true members of the community. In this context, Remittances used in the cargo system have broader socioeconomic, political and cultural effects as a whole than those used in consumption or investment.

the unpaid responsibility of men living in the community. They usually hold a given post for one year, and alternate between civil and religious obligations from year to year. Office holders execute most of the tasks of local governments and churches. Individuals who hold a cargo are generally obligated to incur the costs of feasting during the fiestas that honor particular saints. Office holders assume greater responsibilities as they grow in the community. Such progression requires substantial financial resources, but eventually an individual who holds a requisite number of posts in service to his community retires and joins a group of elders instrumental in community decision-making, including appointing people to cargos.

REMITTANCES IN THE LOCAL SOCIOCULTURAL STRUCTURE

The Practice of the Cargo System in San Juan del Estado

In rural Mexico, the traditional custom of cargo system, otherwise called civil-religious hierarchy, is one of the most important sociocultural phenomena even though many people are not eager to participate in the system because the cargo service requires money and time. In the cargo system, every adult man in San Juan del Estado obliges to serve for one year without compensation for the community. People who do not live continuously in the community are not required to do cargos. Unlike some other communities in Oaxaca, there is no clear separation between the civil and religious cargos in the community. Community members in San Juan del Estado can fulfill their duties of cargos either by serving as elected officials or public servants in civil offices or by sponsoring *mayordomías*, the celebration of Catholic saints in religious offices.

The assignment of cargo service to each community member is a very delicate process. Economically rich and politically powerful agriculturalists and largeholders want to become elected municipal officials with decision-making power over the agricultural system. People with outside jobs or local businesses who do not wish to waste their time in cargo service see the municipal authority before the December assembly meeting and ask to be *mayordomos* taking care of *mayordomías*. The five types of cargos (*ministros*, *mesoneros*, *secretarios*, *sacristanes*, *topiles*) assigned by the community members in the municipal assembly were very hard and time-consuming jobs (Joo 1998, 52). Since nobody wants to take the difficult cargos with less prestige voluntarily, they decide to appoint cargo holders in public. In the assembly meeting, the audience recommends potential incumbents from the list provided by the municipal authority for the specific cargos.

People who have to serve civil cargos but cannot fulfill their obligations because of their own businesses or outside employment look for substitutes. They have to pay US\$800 for the service to the substitutes. For difficult and time-consuming cargos like *ministros* or municipal policemen, more than US\$1,000 is the going rate. People with non-agricultural employment consider the cargo service as a kind of local tax. They note that in the city they have to pay more expensive taxes instead of doing cargos. Some landless community members who are not employed make money by

taking over other people's cargos. This can be one of many income-generating alternatives for the poor even though it does not happen frequently. Some people take two cargos of other villagers at the same time to earn more money. This is possible because some cargos like municipal policemen need to be served only for two weeks a month. However, substitution is not allowed for the committee members who are directly appointed by the municipal authority.

Anybody who is supposed to take cargo but does not want to spend his time in the municipal offices has to be in charge of religious offices. The religious cargoholders have to sponsor one of the several *mayordomías*. Economically affluent villagers are willing to be *mayordomos* instead of taking civil cargos because assuming a *mayordomía* automatically precludes holding a cargo. San Juan del Estado has a relatively large number of *mayordomías* compared to other neighborhoods in Oaxaca. The villagers insist that they have many *mayordomías* because they keep stronger Catholic faith than other neighboring communities. However, they agree that the number of *mayordomías* is too high for poor villagers. To solve this problem, a municipal president tried to reduce the number of *mayordomías* in 1974 at the general municipal meetings. He wanted to leave only four or five of them. But faced with strong resistance in the meetings, he had to return to the same old custom. There are 20 *mayordomías* in the community in which 32 persons celebrate Catholic saints or other holidays as *mayordomos*. Four important *mayordomías* are served by more than 2 *mayordomos*. One person who pays the electricity bill of the church is also regarded as a *mayordomo*. Nevertheless, demand for the religious cargos has been continuously high because sponsoring a *mayordomía* is a good way of fulfilling obligatory communal service. In other words, the cargoholders who are able to spend a considerable sum of money can take the religious cargos without consuming their labor power and time for a whole year.

One carpenter reminds me that he prefers to sponsor *mayordomía* rituals because he may not be able to save money if he has to serve a civil cargo. Local business owners generally agree on the fact that they can make more money by working for themselves instead of killing time in and around the municipal office. In general, the rich serve their community as elected officials or by sponsoring *mayordomías* while the poor are pressed to take less prestigious and demanding civil cargos such as policemen, *ministros* and *topiles*. Most people agree on this point. If one has sufficient money at hand, he can decide the way of serving cargo either through *mayordomía* or civil service in San Juan del Estado. On the contrary, poor men's destinies are totally controlled by the local authority or by the

municipal decision-making process. One old man who passed many unpopular and laborious civil cargos is extremely dissatisfied:

A man who is married and has a family has to abandon his family and lose time in his demanding civil cargos. One suffers a lot. But *mayordomía* is much easier. Everybody who has sufficient funds can organize a *mayordomía*. Only poor people are in charge of dirty and difficult cargos. If you do not have money, you have to endure a cold night in front of municipal building as local policeman to protect the village everyday (Gustavo, age 87).

The amount of money spent for a *mayordomía* depends on its importance and popularity. The *mayordomías* for *San Juan Bautista* or for the third Friday of Lent can cost up to US\$2,000 while smaller ones can be accomplished with the expenditure of as low as US\$500. Normally, less expensive ones are reserved for the villagers who are poor and physically unable to do manual labor. *Mayordomos* have to buy food, drink, flowers, and other decorating materials for the altar. The local priest also gets paid for the mass. If the *mayordomos* decide to invite a band, they need more money. The villagers assert that expenses for the *mayordomía* rituals have increased steadily as the level of consumption in the community goes up thanks to the influx of remittances. Until the 1990s, even the most important *mayordomía* could cost less than US\$1,500.

As more people tend to be employed outside, they have less time and energy to participate in communal activities and events. Sociocultural and political practices are directly influenced by the increasing involvement in outside wage work by the villagers. More and more the villagers show their interests in the remunerative outside employment opportunities. Many young men who have to serve time-consuming civil cargos have to change their occupations every three years in order to accomplish their duties because they cannot go to work everyday while they are on duty for the community. In this sense, the civil offices requiring manual labor and time repeatedly and consistently become significant constraints to obtaining outside jobs. As a result of economic changes such as decline of agriculture and increase in non-agricultural occupations, villagers prefer religious offices to time-consuming civil cargos. Even though *mayordomía* rituals require more expenses, people who have commitment to outside wage work or local businesses do not want to waste their time in local communal matters. Recently, international labor migration to the U.S. is another issue that has to be arranged within the system of the civil-religious hierarchy.

Cargo Service for the Migrants

As younger villagers have preferred to work in the U.S. rather than cultivating crops in the community or finding jobs in the city of Oaxaca, the massive and rapid outmigration from the Mexican rural communities to the U.S. eventually has resulted in the shortage of young men who need to take part in the civil-religious hierarchy (Cohen 2004, 44). In this circumstance, when many young men massively leave their community to look for employment in the U.S. temporarily or permanently, the community may suffer from the shortage of manpower to sustain their traditional system in some measure. Especially in Oaxaca where international labor migration has become an affair of everyday occurrence, the maintenance of the cargo system is a very difficult task to manage. Furthermore, the lack of young villagers due to outmigration has brought serious problems for the rural communities with a population of less than 1,000 people because small villages also need a certain number of cargoholders to manage local municipal offices and to celebrate Catholic Saints. Faced with many social tensions and troubles, Oaxacan communities have developed their own methods of handling the decline of the number of young men who have to fulfill their cargo services. Some communities ask the migrants or their family members to find a replacement or pay a certain amount of money to someone who can take care of their duties. Other communities do not require cargo service for the migrants temporarily while working in the U.S. and allow them to resume their service when they return (VanWey et al. 2005, 88). Small communities faced with the problem of the disintegration of the cargo system may coerce the migrants to return home to finish their obligations or oblige their family members to complete the cargos instead of the migrants remaining in the U.S. In an indigenous Oaxacan village called Santa Cruz located in the Sierra Norte the community may expel individuals who fail to satisfy communal obligations (Mutersbaugh 2002, 490). However, relatively large communities like San Juan del Estado with a sufficient pool of cargoholders so far do not require cargo service for the migrants and let them participate in the cargo system voluntarily.

The migrants who stay in the U.S. for at least more than a year do not need to carry out their duties in San Juan del Estado at all. Even though cargo service is not imposed on the migrants, many of them are voluntarily involved in the cargo system in various ways in order not to lose sociocultural benefits and economic and political rights. In sociocultural terms, many migrants want to finish their local duties to

continue their ties to the community and not to abandon cultural identity while working in the United States because they can keep their communal membership for the future. If they continue to serve their cargos, they can belong to the elders who make important decisions for the village in the future. Many migrants visit the community for the baptism of their children or their own marriage ceremony though they have met a spouse in the United States. People argue that they wish to have their wedding ceremony in the community because traditional Mexican rituals for marriage are so significant and emotional.

Politically and economically, neglecting cargos can lead to the restriction of numerous essential rights to live in the community. Villagers insist that if one does not participate in the civil-religious hierarchy for several years, the communal authority applies sanctions against the migrants' families including the suspension of water and power supply. In case of communal lands (*terrenos comunales*), one may lose his right to cultivate it if the land is abandoned for three or more years. The local authority hands over the usufruct of communal lands to other person who needs land to cultivate if the land is not utilized. In other words, accomplishing the communal duties can guarantee the citizenship in the community, which includes the rights to cultivate communal lands. Except for the small scale *pequeña propiedad*, the majority of land in the community belongs to communal lands. After all, these traditional practices can be used to strengthen collective values, to reduce social conflicts, and to maintain traditional social orders by limiting membership in the community. Besides, when they return home after a long absence, the migrants still can play an influential role for community matters as members of the elders group if they have continuously contributed to the maintenance of the cargo system in one way or another. Villagers agree that until the late 1990s when there existed only a small number of migrants, most migrants did not care much about their duties in the civil-religious hierarchy. But since then, a growing number of migrants want to take their cargos to prepare their future lives in the community because no one knows exactly what will happen in the future in the U.S. due to the U.S. border enforcement and unstable U.S. economy.

In some households with migrants working in the U.S., a large sum of remittances (about US\$1,500 for each migrant) is used to take care of or replace cargos or *mayordomías*. Most migrants prefer *mayordomía* to cargo because they do not have to be present for the day of celebration as long as they pay for the *mayordomía*. Interest in the *mayordomías* among international migrants can be also found in other neighboring communities

in Oaxaca (Cohen 2001, 962). Another merit of *mayordomía* is that it is more prestigious than *cargo*. Villagers mention that sponsoring a *mayordomía* to celebrate Catholic saints can make *mayordomo* to be proud of oneself in their belief system. Even though the migrant may not be show up personally to prepare the fiesta, *mayordomía* can be done with the help of other family members. Female family members or other relatives share tasks to arrange the celebration. Obviously more women are now involved in activities related with *mayordomías*. Therefore, the increase of international labor migrants makes *mayordomías* very popular to sponsor among villagers. Following this trend, villagers complain that sponsoring *mayordomías* costs more than before because more people are eager to observe them. Naturally villagers have to pay more to take the same religious cargos than before. Most *mayordomías* except for smaller ones like the Day of *San Isidro* reserved for extremely poor households with physical disability are now taken by the migrants and their family members. Villagers do not care much about it since the migrants have made significant financial contribution for communal projects or local festivals for the patron saint in June.

The Role of Remittances in the Local Cargo System

The cost to hold a *mayordomía* ranges between US\$500 and US\$2,000, which is usually spent to buy food, drinks, and alcohols and to invite a musical band. The most prestigious and costly *mayordomías* are held on Christmas, *tercer viernes de Cuaresma*, and the 24th of June to celebrate their patron saint San Juan. Family members and their relatives have to share necessary work to prepare for the rituals. Usually relatives get paid US\$15 a day for their work by the *mayordomos*. Frequently, migrants visit home for the celebration to appreciate the religious meanings of the ritual for one or two months. Even though, there is no fixed regulation concerning the exact amount of money to be expended, in conformity with old tradition, villagers generally have an idea about how much money one has to spend for each specific *mayordomía*. If a *mayordomo* spares expenses for an important and prestigious religious cargo and fails to meet the villagers' expectations, he may be condemned immediately and can get himself talked about. He can become a victim of gossips in the community and the local authority will hesitate to grant him another *mayordomía* for the next cargo. Since *mayordomía* is so popular among the migrants and their families nowadays, it is impossible to secure a proper one for them every now and then. If that happens, each migrant have to pay US\$800 to the authority for their own cargo in 2010.

As migrants and their family members try to hold *mayordomías* as a way of fulfilling communal duties, it is quite natural that remittances are used to observe many important civil and religious cargos. Since San Juan del Estado has been a relatively poor community, only a handful of rich villagers could celebrate the big *mayordomías* in the past. As a matter of course, many migrant families cannot take charge of *mayordomías* without utilizing remittances. About three quarters of migrant families observing *mayordomías* have to rely on remittances from their family members. In this sense, remittances can play a significant cultural and political role for the community even if it seems to be spent without immediate positive economic returns.

Needless to say, some affluent villagers who want to take religious offices instead of time-consuming civil ones may dislike the participation of migrants and their family members in *mayordomía*. Also poor villagers who have tried to hold a religious cargo at least once to express their faith to God in their life may be dissatisfied because they may not compete with people with income from remittances. However, the interest of migrants in the communal public affairs can strengthen the connections between the migrants working in the U.S. and the local community. In reality, since the late 1990s many voluntary hometown associations in southern California organized by the migrants from San Juan del Estado, which have been used to share information about jobs and housings in the U.S. by the migrants, have become very active owing to the concerns over their cargos. Of course, more than three fourths of the migrants do their best to avoid the burden of cargos while staying in the U.S. But for the migrants, sending remittances to home town to hold civil or religious offices in the community can create momentum to improve the relationship between them and the community. In fact, due to the economic hardship caused by the periodic economic crises and unfavorable agricultural government policy, less people have shown interests in offering big fiestas in the community until the early 1990s when there were a small number of migrants. As some migrants and their family members hold big *mayordomía* rituals inviting more neighbors and relatives than before and offering sufficient food and drinks in order to demonstrate their economic success in the U.S., more villagers are willing to enjoy fiestas during the *mayordomía* rituals. People agree that cultural events surrounding *mayordomía*, which include dancing, singing, and parading, have become very diverse so that villagers can enjoy the festive atmosphere.

At first, villagers have shared pretty negative opinions towards international migrants because shortage of young men caused by outmigration can

weaken the cargo system in the long run. For that reason, remaining villagers who need to make up the burden of cargo may feel discontented. Moreover, they have left very bad cultural impacts for the community when they return home or when they visit the community cyclically. For example the migrants have tried to use English in their everyday activities and to disregard valuable and meaningful customs and rituals (Joo 2007, 101-112). They criticize the low educational level of the local authority and consider the celebration of Catholic saints idolatry. Some migrants even look down on communal practices and traditions and want to make a display of American life style in public in the community after accepting new culture and ideology while working in the U.S. Especially senior villagers do not like the attitudes of young migrants who attempt to ignore local cultural and political authorities. Some young migrants criticize that the majority of powerful senior villagers in the community lacking education and experience has been chosen simply because of their commitment in time and money for the cargo system and Catholic Church.

The migrants and their families voluntarily or involuntarily join the cargo system for their own interests taking advantage of their sufficient remittances after working several years in the U.S. Now they can afford to enjoy much more affluent *mayordomía* rituals, which will reinforce the relationship between the villagers and the migrants and among the villagers. In short, remittances sent by migrant workers abroad can play a role of restoring local tradition in a limited sense. This phenomenon can be found in other countries such as Guatemala and Portugal (Brettell 2003, 54; Burrell 2005, 12). Also by transmitting cultural tangible and intangible heritages to the next generation, the migrants can refresh their ideas on the local identity once again and have a great conceit regarding their own cultural backgrounds even though they cannot stay in the community for a long time. As a matter of course, migrants working in the U.S. frequently share their information among themselves about current news and their community of origin to prepare for their next cargos. In this way they can develop stronger local identity and sense of belonging centering on their unique and precious cargo system.

CONCLUSION

International migration taken place to supplement insufficient economic resources in the countryside may bring tremendous and unexpected changes in the rural Mexican household economy. Consequently, remittances,

depending on amount, frequency and number of migrants, can alleviate severe rural poverty in many ways for the rural poor. In this context, remittances from migrant workers abroad can partially and temporarily relieve extreme poverty in rural Mexico while contributing to support the subsistence of many other villagers. Also a part of remittances invested in rural industry or agriculture may stimulate the local economy and bring many additional effects. Nevertheless, small scale and irregularity of remittances prevent the local economy from prospering fundamentally and perpetually. That is why it is not easy to discuss the role of remittances in pure economic terms.

Meanwhile, remittances used to perform local communal duties can revitalize the traditional culture and political structure in the community by reinforcing local identity and the sense of belonging among villagers. Particularly, in Oaxaca, Mexico, where traditional custom of civil-religious hierarchy still persists, income from remittances has been often reserved to perform local cultural and political duties such as civil cargos and *mayordomías*. Sometimes remittances exert a favorable influence on sociocultural customs and political practices in the community. Other than simple economic function, remittances may be used to develop more favorable conditions for the maintenance of the local community in the sociocultural and political sector. Even though, remittances utilized to observe communal duties may be small compared to the total amount of money received from the migrants working in the U.S., they can encourage the relationship between the villagers and the migrants. In addition, the migrants staying in the U.S. show more interest in communal matters since they know that they are still involved in the local cultural and political structure while they are away from home.

International migrants who complete their cargo obligation in the community are able to acquire prestige when they return home because they have not neglected their communal duties when working in the U.S. Therefore, the use of remittances in a seemingly unproductive or negative way in a sense may facilitate the maintenance of the community, local cultural customs and civil-religious hierarchy.

In many cases, the purposes of remittances expected by migrants may not be realized in their actual usage in the local community. For example, migrants sending remittances usually ask their family members to save them for the future. But most villagers use the remittances for the maintenance of their households and sometimes they are used to perform civil or religious cargo services requiring substantial sum of money in a short time. Frequently *mayordomías* for the migrants are practiced even

though the migrants in the U.S. are not eager to participate in the cargo system. In other words, remittances can be used in an unexpected way from the perspective of migrants who have left the village for economic reason. The use of remittances is closely related to the sociocultural organizations of the specific rural community because communities that are more strongly organized are able to encourage or coerce migrants into providing remittances for community projects or cargo services (VanWey et al. 2005, 85). Likely enough, more accurate understanding of the role of remittances requires an analysis about the dynamic sociocultural relationship beyond the level of individuals and households. In Mexico, where migrants frequently visit their home communities once or twice a year for holidays, and participate in local festivals and other religious rituals while working in the U.S. with occasional financial support (Cohen 2004, 145), we should not overlook the communal cultural customs and tradition influencing as well as being influenced by international labor migration and the use of remittances. The meaningful uses of remittances in local cultural and political customs confirm the fact that they should be analyzed within the broader cultural and political contexts.

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