

The Role of the Musician in Zinacantan

**** I. Problems of Conscience about the scope and validity of the study of "musician's role"

1. /hteklum/ vs /parahel/: The ceremonial center (/hteklum/-- 'my real land) in Zinacantan is the scene, not only of fiestas and exercises of civil government, but of nearly all the important cargo ritual. Cargo holders, persons who have special religious duties, move into the center for their year in office. Hence, the center is also the scene of the musical activity associated with cargo ritual, and the most accomplished and active musicians appear in /hteklum/. Music in the outlying hamlets (/ta parahel/ - in the parajes) is most often associated with special events, including weddings, funerals, new house dedications etc., or with events of community importance, such as new year ceremonies et. al. We will devote our main attention to the more accomplished musicians who play in the Center; later we will comment on paraje musicians.

2. kinds of 'music': The Spanish word for 'musician', musico, has a Tzotzil cognate /h-musikero/. This word, to a Zinacanteco, denotes the class of people who play, e.g., maripás, band instruments, or conventional guitars or violins. There are (at least) two other Tzotzil words denoting classes of people we might call musicians: /h-amarero/ (flute player) and /h-vabahom/ (lit: person who plays /vob/). /vob/ is music ~~afixatex~~ played with either violin, harp, and guitar, or just violin, and guitar (Indian manufactured instruments) and includes a finite list of pieces; /vob/ and flute and drum music are what we may consider to be indigenous music of Zinacantan (whatever ~~itxxxxxxx~~ the historical roots of the music may be.) We will confine our attention to /hvabahometik/, the string players, whose 'roles' are distinct from those of the other types of musician. A note about flute and drum players will follow.

3. "role": Philosophy does not corner the definitional problem. Anthropologists (and others) are apt to set out to define "the role of x in y" with little more than a vague idea what ~~the~~ sort of ~~phenomenon~~ phenomena are relevant to the problem. This difficulty is related to the questions about elicitation below. Here let me enumerate some of the aspects of making 'musician's role' explicit for Zinacantan.

'Role' ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx(i)xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ must be defined with relation to an individual (in this case) and some specified group of individuals, where the group performs some activity and the individual in question has specific tasks. 'Role' may be (i) the task of the individual seen as part of the total activity; or (ii) the function, effect, results of the individual's actions seen as ~~part~~ part of the total function, effect or results of the activity of the group. Furthermore, one might ideally distinguish two distinct descriptions of 'role' in each of these two senses --- an internal characterization, based on the culture's opinion about what an individual does, or what the effect of his action is; and some sort of external description of what, in fact (and this presumes something 'etic grid' which gets to the facts), our native actor does or what results he produces. We may add to this compounded list of 'role descriptions' the internal normative 'role' which expresses

the culture's opinions about what an individual should be doing in a certain group activity in which he takes part.

I~~W~~ will say something about ~~xxx~~ the 'role' of the musician in Zinacantan in each of these senses, though my remarks will be far from exhaustive and not organized along these lines. (X Work is required far better than that which I have done.)

With special reference to Zinacantan and /h-vabahometik/ we will want to distinguish the musician's role (a) in a musical group (of two or three musicians) (b) in a particular ceremony with music, where there are typically cargo holders and various ritual helpers in addition to musicians, and (c) in the community, where musicians function as part of the total social organization. (That these are the relevant groups in which to consider the role of an individual musician is a fact dependent on the culture and needs separate argument --- which, unfortunately, I cannot provide.)

4. elicitation procedures: I offer no new methodological mechanisms here. First, I suggest that even with some explicit definition of what a sufficient description of 'role' ~~xxx~~ would be, the status of our term can hardly be called scientific until we have some idea about what sort of information would count as supporting or defeating a proposed description and, collaterally, without some idea of how to arrive at and verify a description of 'role'.

In my work I had no such requirements on my own eliciting techniques. Here I enumerate some investigations which contributed to the suggestions I make below about musicians in Zinacantan.

- a/ observation of ceremonies and participation as musician
- b/ investigation by interview of economic and 'political' or prestige status of musicians and others
- c/ interviews about choice of musicians by cargo holders
- d/ study of musical norms and standards, in instruments, and performance
- e/ observation of expressions of musician ranking (within one ensemble)
- f/ investigation of learning music, with emphasis on the sorts of enticements offered a boy to learn.

To make convincing conclusions about the role of musicians some program of eliciting more formally arranged to suit the definitions of the problem would be desirable.

5. theoretical interests: It is worth pointing out that a complete study of musicians in Zinacantan can contribute to several questions of more general theoretical interest:

- a/ the general nature of ritual helper groups in Mayan communities
- b/ proposed cross-cultural elements in the status of musicians.
It has been suggested (Merriam, The Anthropology of Music) that musicians often combine low status with high license.
- c/ development of theories about the function and use of music in general

Zinacantan presents an example of X interest at least to those of us in Western culture in which music is essentially a non-art, non-expressive activity, relegated to the class of 'ritual paraphernalia.'

***** II. ~~Musicians~~ Musicians in Cargo Ritual

1. The ceremonies: there is a wide variety of cargo ceremonies in Zinacantan, taking place in the various churches or in the homes of individual cargoholders. Typically a ceremony involves the decoration of an altar housing a Saint or some replenishing of a Saint's clothes or decorations. Ordinarily, the cargoholders perform the decoration or whatever in defined phases, after which they dance for a period --- either moderately or immoderately long. The ceremony is often punctuated by pauses of one sort or another during which the participants joke or talk or eat or drink or smoke or all. The important points are that ceremonies are grueling and long, & that they involve definite phases and ordered activities for the cargoholders.

2. Musician as director: The ceremony is punctuated by pauses which are signalled ordinarily by a round of cane liquor. The musicians, in particular the violinist, is responsible for calling for each round of liquor by singing a special verse. The violinist thus acts as a sort of director, signalling to the helpers when a given phase of the ritual shall stop or start.

The musicians, in their song, also keep up a running commentary describing --- perhaps to Our Lord /kahvaltik/ --- what takes place at the ceremony. (Example: "Now we are lighting candles" is a sample lyric.)

Often the most senior man at a ceremony is the musician. He may be called upon by younger cargoholders to advise about correct procedure for ritual. Similarly, he is often asked to make decisions ~~about~~ when problems or unexpected circumstances occur. He thus, as an especially knowledgeable participant, can serve as an important ritual advisor.

Note, here, that musicians are integral parts of ceremonies ~~even~~ in that they pray at the altar, light candles, and are part of the ritual greetings which take place from time to time.

3. Musician as entertainer: During the pauses of a long ceremony there is considerable joking, to ease the rather wearisome business. Musicians, as a large part of their responsibility, keep up lively conversation with other participants. This is especially noticeable towards the end of ceremonies, when hours of dancing have tired the cargoholders themselves.

Furthermore, there is the general opinion that musicians keep everyone happy just by playing and, especially, singing. Without music, Zinacantecos say, ceremonies and fiestas are sad. (The way this is conceived will be examined somewhat more below.)

***** III. Musicians in the Community

1. Economic disadvantages of musicianship: Zinacantecos earn their livings by cornfarming --- a profession which requires considerable expenditure of time in planting, tending, harvesting and generally preparing the milpas. Cargoholders give up this activity to a large extent during their cargo years; moreover, they expend considerable money on supplies. Musicians spend a good deal of time at cargo ritual which disables them for labor in the milpas. (Though there is no precise study) musicians may be expected to suffer certain economic disadvantage each time they accept an engagement.

It is worth comment that cargo holders gain prestige according to their outlays as cargo holders (Cancian).

2. Choice, availability and pay of musicians: Despite the possible economic liability of playing at a given time, musicians among the 'professionals' who are known to be active musicians are, in effect, constantly available. That is, barring some serious disability, when a cargo holder comes to request a musician's services, though he may put up a formalized argument, he cannot refuse in the end. He is considered to have a religious responsibility to play whenever asked.

Musicians say they are not paid, except incidentally --- that is, they are presented with several bottles of cane liquor when they agree to come to play, and typically they are fed (well) while they are at a cargo holder's house.

There are evidently several factors at work in the choice of a musician by a cargo holder. He normally must recruit a set of musicians who will play for him through his entire cargo year. In addition he chooses special musicians for special events which occur from time to time. The cargo holder recruits the violinist, who is the leader of the group; the violinist then suggests a harpist and guitarist to the cargo holder. Some factors which seem to be involved in choice of violinist are:

- a/ Kinship or substitute-kinship relationships (e.g., a cargo holder is apt to choose a compadre as musician)
- b/ Experience or 'elder-ness' (That is, a new cargo holder may choose as violinist a man who has been in service a long time and, hopefully, who has ~~played~~ passed cargos himself; and a man who has already passed several cargos himself will often choose as violinist a man who is at least as high on the hierarchies of age and service as he. The violinist is quite often the most senior man present at a cargo ritual.)
- c/ Personality - there is explicit acknowledgement of the fact that musicians develop reputations as being 'friends to all the people', 'able to talk (joke)', 'good-hearted' or the opposite --- and these positive features make a musician desirable.

3. Musicians as a Permanent Ritual Helper Class: These considerations, along with ~~facts~~ the fact that almost all the popular musicians (ones who play often) live in the ceremonial center, suggest that musicians be viewed as a special class of helpers, who have specialized abilities and knowledge which is necessary to the proper functioning of the ritual world. They may be likened to sacristanes who tend the church on the one hand, and to the rather more diffuse class of ritual-advisors --- elders who have past cargo experience and who know procedures well enough to advise.

This claim may be justified insofar as musicians seem to serve from a sense of duty (religious duty in support of the community) --- without pay --- and insofar as the class of musicians is, at any one time, relatively stable and well-defined.

(An historical study towards which these considerations might bear would consider the existence in classic Maya of comparable ritual helper classes, especially musicians such as they might have been. Nearby communities like Chamula seem to accord special status to musicians, who are there called /mastroetik/)

***** IV. Reservations and Internal Norms

1. Conceptual role of musician at ceremonies: It is certainly true in a sense that musicians are entertainers at ceremonies --- they do joke. But is the music entertaining? The musicians themselves almost fall asleep while they are playing. The other (human) participants generally ignore the music and song, as they have their own business. The expressed opinion of Zinacantecos is that the music must be present at ceremonies ~~for~~ to rest the heart of /kahvaltik/ --- Our Lord, typically the particular Saint for whom a ceremony is carried out.

Musicians are, then, celestial entertainers.

2. Problems about 'musician class': We have spoken of the class of musicians as forming a special helper class. There are certain problems about exhibiting the reality of this class, however.

- a/ Musicians are not organized in the same way as, say, sacristanes or curers are, in Zinacantan. They do not act as a body. There is no formal entry into the group. (Though, musicians do, ideally if not in fact, dream that they are chosen.)
- b/ Musicians are not formally ranked as musicians. I have made primitive attempts in this direction by correlating such features as cornfarming success, number of cargos, friendliness, musical expertise, amount of musical activity etc. with respect to a large group of frequently mentioned musicians. (Musicians are ranked within an ensemble of three: V-H-G, and this ranking does not correspond strictly to age or experience as musician.)
- c/ The class of musicians (viewed only as an extensional class) is a bit fuzzy at the 'new musicians' end: that is, when and how young learning musicians begin to play 'professionally' --- for cargo ritual--- is not at all well-defined. There is some fuzz at the top end, as well, for elder musicians, especially ones who have had considerable contact with the ritual hierarchy, there is NO obligation to play. Such men can refuse and send themselves into voluntary retirement.
- d/ A question which I have incompletely explored is a description of the internal structure that does exist within the class of musicians. That is, there may be considerable ties of compadrazco between musicians. Similarly, because the violinist in effect chooses the other two musicians in his group there may be recurrent groups often seen.

3. Status and learning: There is a double status implied for musicians. It is certainly true that musicians earn a special place (somewhat high?) in the community by virtue of their close connection to the ritual hierarchy. But a man may be criticised for playing too much; so much, that is, that he uses his playing as an excuse not to do any honest work: cornfarming.

There is little pressure on youth to become musicians. One might explore why or under what conditions a boy would learn to play. Generally it is suggested that a boy learns because ~~his heart~~ his heart wants to play music --- he is presumably attracted by

music that he hears and acquires an urge to learn. There is also the suggestion that boys learn because they are attracted by the life of a musician: contact with the ritual world, lots of good food and /pox/.

4. Specialized knowledge: There are problems with defining the musician's role in terms of the various kinds of specialized knowledge he must have. There are ritual-advisors who have the information about proper order and procedure. There are many non-professional musicians who can play all the pieces and may do so for their own relaxation; (the prejudice that these non-pros do not play so well seems largely unjustified). And such things as special musician's prayers and procedures seem to be common knowledge --- any informant with a moderate exposure to ritual can produce an acceptable version of the musician's part in formalized dialogues. More work is necessary to discover what it is that defines the class of musicians who do play for ritual. Why do they do it?

***** V. Asides

1. Use and function: We may distinguish internal statements of the use of music from external ideas about musical function: Examples:

- a/ Internal opinion that music functions to keep everyone at a ceremony (human and super-human) happy.
- b/ external view that the presence of music at ceremonies is necessary to validate the event.
- c/ external view that music --- a common body of tunes, songs, musical techniques --- integrates the community, giving people from faraway parajes a common link with center

2. FD music: It is worth pointing out that the other 'indigenous' music, flute and drum, seems to have a radically different role in the community. It too is said to serve to make fiestas good. But the virtue of a good flute or drum is that it be ~~hearing~~ audible from afar. Similarly, the FD musicians accompany the canons and rockets which signal the movements of processions. FD music, then, seems to have a signalling function.

3. Paraje musicians: in outlying hamlets musicians seem to come much lower in the hierarchy of an individual ceremony. They rarely joke, except with one another. They are often younger than other participants, and hence are not consulted on matters of ritual. They seem to be mere providers of background noise.