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Gossip as Competition in Zinacantan

by John Beard Haviland

Mexican village culture has turned hostility inward and has generated a morbid sense of privacy coupled with insatiable curiosity about others' private affairs.

Like most of us, villagers *in* the hamlets of Zinacantan, in the Mexican state of Chiapas, spend much of their time gossiping about friends and neighbors. They even gossip about gossip.

"Didn't I hear that old Jose was up to some mischief?"

"Perhaps, but that never became public knowledge. It was a secret affair."

"The magistrate settled the whole business in private."

"Yes, when a dispute is settled at the townhall, then a newspaper report goes out to every part of town. . . . Ha ha ha."

"Yes, then we all hear about it on the radio. . . . Ha ha ha."

"But when the thing is hushed up, then there's nothing on the radio. There are no newspapers. Then we don't hear about it. Ha ha ha."[1]

In the village where my family and I have set up household from time to time over the past ten years, about two thousand people cluster into a single large valley, with house compounds scattered among cornfields and fruit trees, and centered roughly around a *parque* with church and townhall. People live close to one another, and despite fences erected between households, they are

[1] All conversations reported here are loosely translated fragments of actual Zinacanteco gossip, transcribed from tape recordings or fieldnotes in Tzotzil.

John Beard Haviland is Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology, Institute of Advanced Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra. His work in Zinacantan began in 1966 under the auspices of the Harvard Chiapas Project, and his book, *Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan*, is soon to be published by the University of Chicago Press. The author appreciates the comments on this article by Leslie K. Haviland and Roger M. Keesing.

A group of Zinacanteco men (including some civil officials) discusses a public event

constantly scrutinizing one another's dealings—in the next field, up the mountainside, just within earshot at the standpipe or the mill, or staring unabashedly in front of the townhall. Yet in spite of this proximity, physical and social, Zinacantecos have a morbid sense of privacy. While being fascinated with events across the fence, they strive to keep other prying eyes and ears away from their own affairs.

Zinacantecos live in households that seem to perceive themselves as competing, not in solidarity with other Indians and peasants against an economic and political system controlled by non-Indians, but against one another—for access to land, to labor, to social ascendancy. In the midst of a village where everyone lives on top of everyone else, there is great maneuvering for self-protection and isolation. The corollary is intense curiosity about other people.

Gossip is a powerful and dangerous weapon within the larger set of behaviors that limit intimacy and promote evasion. Bad words are like physical blows: they violate personal space, and their heated exchange leads to colder but harder legal and social repercussions—tearing apart kin, friends, and neighbors. Zinacantecos enjoy gossiping about disclosures and slips in other people's lives, but they guard themselves carefully both against gossip turned against them, and against the charge of spreading gossip.

The bounds of confidentiality generally coincide with household boundaries. Neighbors, even brothers, with contiguous houses and local cornfields, may farm together, rent lowland cornfields or hire trucks in common, but will not

ordinarily share confidences across the fence. A son who takes his bride with him from his father's house will begin to maintain a separate corn supply and to keep his business to himself. A new bride, introduced into her husband's household, represents a serious potential breach of confidentiality; her in-laws begrudge her even occasional visits to her own mother, where she can leak out family secrets and gossip about her new household to an outsider.

Gossip trades, then, on a separation between public and private information; it celebrates leakage from one domain into the other, brought about at the townhall, by child spies, or by empassioned but incautious disclosures.

"Is it true that old Maria divorced Manuel?"

"Yes. She complained that she awoke every morning with a wet skirt. Old Manuel used to piss himself every night, just like a child."

"When he was drunk, you mean?"

"No, even when he was sober. 'How it stinks!' she said."

"Ha ha ha. She spoke right out at the townhall."

Zinacantecos know that there are natural obstacles to the transmission of information. Even within the small village where we lived, scandals on one side of the village often failed to penetrate to our hearth or yard. Bits of overheard conversations, names dropped, events perceived only indistinctly or from afar, all fuel incipient gossip. And speculation is only encouraged by the knowledge that people hide whatever they can about what they are doing. In fact, a morbid desire for privacy, the tendency to evade prying questions and inquiring looks, brings with it a concomitant conviction that one's neighbors are always getting away with things, hiding damaging secrets, or planning mischief or worse.

"Today he is a ritual advisor."

"He is a Holy Elder now, but he gave injections to women in his time. Ha ha ha. . . ."

"He made a 'holy' child under the pine trees. Ha ha ha."

"But that is the only story we have heard about him."

"Yes, but he has doubtless behaved foolishly on other occasions. Maybe he has gotten other women pregnant, without the affairs coming to light."

"After all, he doesn't go around publicly talking about such things."

"No, it's just that in this case we all heard about it. If there were other times, they remained secret."

Propriety demands that one cover one's tracks. My wife and I were criticized by others in our compound for having a small window—little more than a peephole—on the side of our house facing the path. People would, we were told, peek inside to examine our possessions, to watch us. According to Zinacantecos, only *ladinos*—Spanish-speaking non-Indians—enjoy sitting down to eat their meals in front of a window where everyone can watch. (And in fact never did a day pass without some inquisitive set of eyes plastering itself against the tiny window pane in question.)

There are elaborate conversational devices by which people protect themselves against being dragged to court for slander. For example, the Tzotzil

language employs a quotative particle, *la*, which flags a sentence as hearsay: *I'ipaj la* ["he got sick, or so I hear"]. But caution is often not enough. I was present at a court case involving alleged slander by a man against his son-in-law. The son-in-law had been accused of having prompted civil authorities to build a road across his father-in-law's property. The son-in-law thought his father-in-law had started the story—which he maintained was a fabrication—and sought an apology and a reconciliation. The father-in-law tried various defenses: "No, I didn't accuse my son-in-law. Well, perhaps I repeated the charge, but someone else told me. Well, maybe no one else told me, but everyone agreed when I suggested it" and so on. What should have been a dispute about the responsibility for damage to this man's property was thus transformed into a dispute about who spread false or unsubstantiated rumors about that responsibility. The father-in-law ultimately had to pay a fine for his unrestrained tongue; and he was too ashamed to press the case for recovering damages for his lost property.

Zinacantecos have a deep ambivalence about gossip: their exaggerated sense of privacy carries with it a fascination with and a curiosity about others' private affairs.

Gossip is part of a syndrome of behaviors that at once isolate Zinacanteco households from one another and—in seeming contradiction—encourage mutual spying between households. Common verbal etiquette in Zinacantan is evasive and banal: "Where are you going?" "For a walk." But deliberately uninformative replies do not necessarily stop the flow of more and more pointed questions. "For a walk, eh? Whom are you planning to visit?"

More than this, where words fail, spies are often employed to ferret out other peoples' doings. Sitting in our house compound yard, we were constantly aware of the comings and goings of our neighbors, of commotion in the center, of trucks on the road. Members of the household listened and watched, identifying people and speculating about their precise errands. Any untoward disturbance was excuse enough to dispatch a young boy—a social non-person—to get a first-hand view of fresh scandal.

On the other hand, elaborate precautions were taken to plug information leaks from within the compound. Members of the family took care to avoid encounters which would lead to drinking or unguarded conversation. My wife and I, as particularly clumsy members of the household, were often coached explicitly about what to say and what not to say with outsiders. A drunken son would be carefully escorted home lest his conduct provoke unfavorable comment. Conversation ceased entirely in painfully public situations: at the corn mill, at the weekly market, before visitors, or on the buses.

Within this pattern of espionage and counterespionage gossip cuts both ways. Gossip is a potent tool of the spy but a fearful threat to the counterspy. Truth may hurt, but Zinacanteco talk suggests that gossip, true or not, can hurt more. So dangerous do Zinacantecos reckon unfavorable gossip that they will on

occasion break normal rules of confidentiality to head off some particularly damaging tidbit. (Here is the ploy, familiar to all of us, of admitting freely to a transgression, lest the offended party hear about it indirectly.) One particularly rocky courtship in our village was characterized by well-timed disclosures, on the part of the groom-to-be, about his past affairs.

> "When they were fighting about his misbehavior, he said at the townhall: 'Well, I told them openly that I had talked to this other woman Maria; I told them that I had given injections.' Ha ha ha."
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> "He spoke right out? He confessed?"
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> "Yes. The father-in-law couldn't complain. 'Yes, I have heard about that. I don't claim I haven't heard about it. I am not angry about that,' said the father-in-law. He had been told plainly about this affair with Maria."
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> "It was fortunate that he had told them openly from the first. If only afterwards they had heard about the affair, then they would have been angry and upset. Someone else might have told them. That is why he told them directly—so his parents-in-law could not criticize him or become angry with him."

Blunted truth may be rendered innocuous, but the best strategy in Zinacantan seems to be to erect a wall around oneself, to keep one's business totally private. A common theme in gossip about shady dealings and intrigue in the woods is the (obviously futile) attempt by protagonists to protect themselves from the gossip's tongue. In one account, a man arranges to take over another man's obligations to perform ritual service. He takes pains to insure that the matter is kept quiet.

> "This is what I told him: Allright, I'll see how deeply I must go into debt to take this office. But I don't want you to start complaining about it later. If I hear that you have been ridiculing me, saying things like: 'Boy, he is just pretending to be a man; he is just pretending to have the money to do ritual service. He stole my office, he took it from me. . .'
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> "If you say such things, please excuse me, but I'll drag you to jail. I'll come looking for you myself. I don't want you to tell stories about me, because you have freely given me your ritual office. If there is no dispute, then I too will behave the same way. I won't gossip about you. I won't ridicule you. I won't say, for example, 'Hah, I am replacing him; he has no shame, acting like a man, asking for religious office when he has no money.' I won't talk like that. 'He wanted to serve Our Lord, but he ran away. I had to take over for him.' I won't say things like that, if we agree to keep silent about it. . . ."

Zinacantecos have a clear theory of gossip. The theory involves the separation between information in the public domain and private information, and the ability of gossip to pull bits from the private into the public realm. And the theory reflects a deep ambivalence about the ethics of telling tales.

The reasons for Zinacantecos' deep sense of privacy go deeply into the social and political constraints on village life, and the resulting cultural traditions. Among Zinacantecos, as with many other peasants, history has taken the hostility and mistrust that might legitimately be directed against controlling and exploitative outsiders, and has turned it inwards: setting villager against villager, despite their underlying commonality of interests. In Zinacantan gossip is not merely "social control"—enforcing certain behavior or insuring that people observe social or cultural norms. In Zinacantan, as elsewhere, gossip is one sort of behavior by which people manage their social faces: keeping an eye out while limiting other people's view of oneself.

Gossip, like espionage, is assymetric: gathering in more than it bestows. Moreover, gossips are not locked in a social system whose rules they can only, pettily, enforce. Instead they create social rules by invoking them—in outraged tones, to be sure—in gossip. And if privacy feeds on competition between social units, gossip that invades that privacy may be expected to be a weapon of competition. Household gossips against household for advantage; brother slanders brother for land; and so on. But since few people manage all the information they want to manage, since gossip often backfires or goes too far, Zinacantecos, like many of us, enjoy but worry about gossip.

Zinacanteco women sort beans in their house yard