

The Ethnographic Context

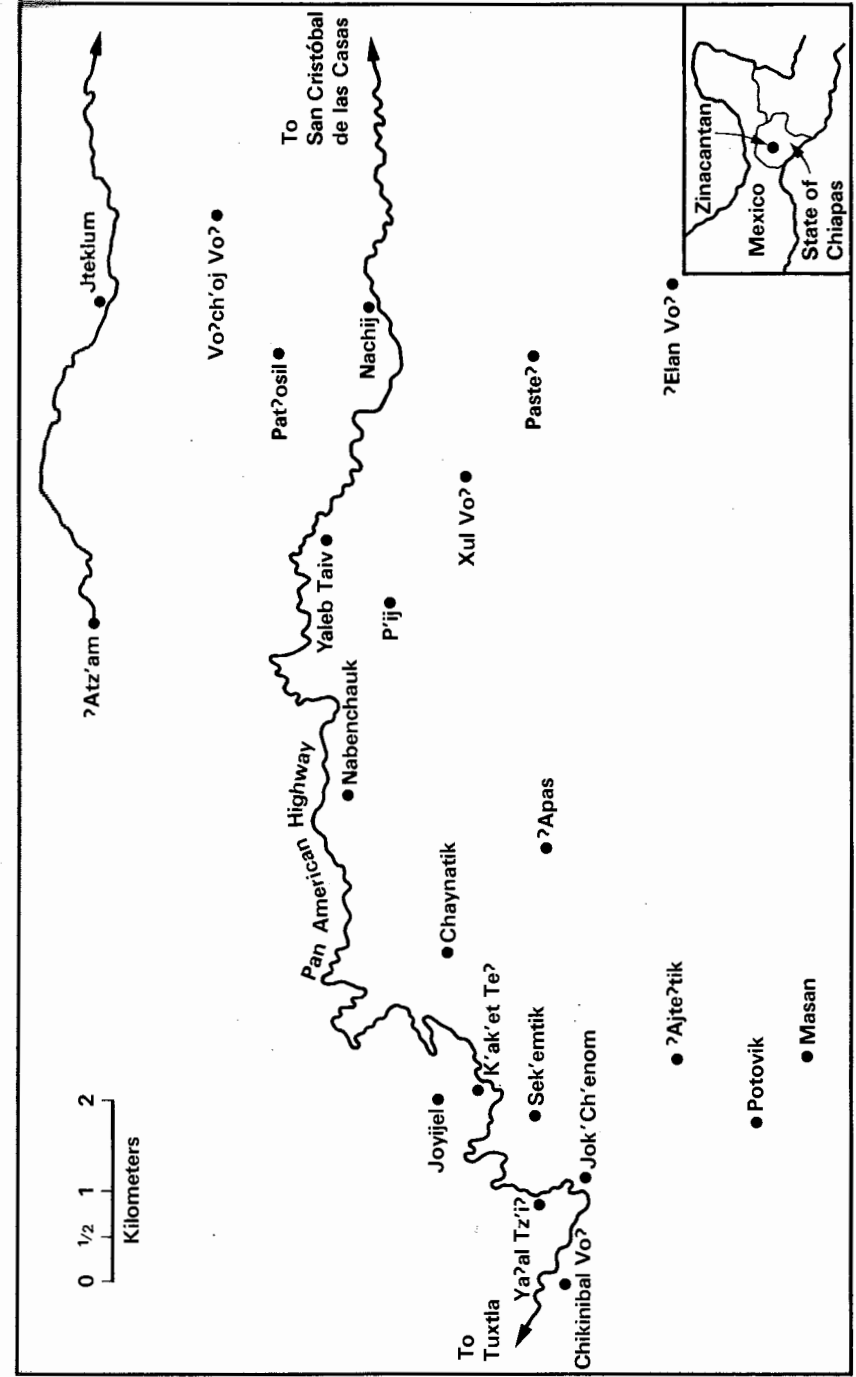
Te to jk'opon jbatik ti bu jnup jbatike.
 "We'll talk again wherever we happen to meet."

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The municipality of San Lorenzo Zinacantan lies along a ridge and adjacent valley in the highlands of the State of Chiapas, in southeast Mexico. Zinacantan lies slightly to the west of the ladino (Spanish-speaking) town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, and just to the south of Chamula, another Indian community whose inhabitants, like the Zinacantecos, speak the Mayan language Tzotzil. The *municipio* lies for the most part at an altitude varying from 2,100 to 2,500 meters (Vogt 1969, p. 4); the weather is therefore cool. The summers are rainy and damp; the winters are dry, warm in the day and frosty at night, with a clear sky marred only by a haze of smoke during the months when fields are burned off in preparation for planting.

Zinacantan is composed of hamlets scattered through the municipal territory, with a ceremonial and political center, or Jteklum, at its northeastern corner (see map 1). The political and social factors which govern settlement contribute definitely to a Zinacanteco's conversational *resources*: the people he has to gossip with, the people he knows well enough to gossip about, and the things he has to say about them.

Vogt describes hamlets as "subdivided into three basic social units of ascending size: the domestic group living in one or more houses in a compound; the SNA, consisting of two or more domestic groups; and the waterhole group, composed of two or more SNAs" (1969, p. 127). A man's domestic group includes the people he commonly eats with—with whom he shares a house com-



Map 1
Zinacantan

pound and a house cross, the symbolic point of entry to a house for ritual functions (Vogt 1969, pp. 127–28).

At a given moment a household may include a man, his wife, and their unmarried children. He may share his house, or at least his house compound, with his youngest son after marriage; and as he grows older he retires as the central figure of the domestic unit. The household thus defines the smallest pool of shared information. The recipient of an old man's knowledge of the past is likely to be a son or grandson who lives in the same domestic unit. And the household creates a continuous context for talk. People perform domestic chores, wash, and farm most comfortably within the privacy of their house compound—*ta yut mok* ("inside the fence"). Here conversation can proceed in confidence. At mealtime a family commonly exchanges the day's information and discusses the doings of neighbors and kin.

I was sitting by the fire at dinnertime with Old Petul. His daughters had just returned with jugs of water which they had filled near the town hall.

"Father, Xun is at the town hall. He is drunk and shouting."

"Your brother Xun?"

"Yes. They say he fought with Mikel from the corner store."

"They both had mud on their clothes."

"How stupid! That wife of his is ruining him. She's just playing with his money. He told me that she had encouraged him to buy twelve beers there drinking with his friends."

"Yes, she is leading him wrong."

The larger "units" of a hamlet, the *sna* and the waterhole group, are counters in a geographical code which Zinacantecos employ to map the *municipio*.¹ Often houses cluster in such a way that their location may be labeled by the name of the predominant family in the cluster. Thus an *area* at the edge of the valley of Zinacantan Center is known as *sna Muchiketik* (the home of the Muchiks), though men from other families live there or nearby (particularly sons-in-law living uxorilocally).

Similarly, groups of houses whose inhabitants draw water from a common waterhole form a "waterhole group" named after the waterhole itself. For the more dispersed hamlets these waterhole names serve to identify the significant locales in which people live. (Zinacantecos sometimes use the Spanish word *lugar* ["place"] to describe the area identified by a waterhole name.) Vogt (1969) describes various ritual activities based on these groupings.

In fact, natural landmarks (trees, rocks, notable formations) mark the map almost as frequently as do house groups or waterholes. The

latter are transitory, in any case, as families move from one site to another (one fifty-year-old acquaintance of mine has lived in about ten different houses in four distinct locations during his life) and as they dig or affiliate themselves with new waterholes.² A hamlet like Nabenchauk, where my family and I lived, falls into several natural areas (the "first curve" in the road, the ridge "overlooking low country," the "central water tank," etc.), each of which contains several house groups, some notable landmarks.

In conversation a man may be asked about the doings of other people in his neighborhood—in his *sna*, if he lives in one, or in his waterhole group—though he is not expected to be as well informed about those living farther away.

"What about Petul? Does he have any faults?"

"Eh, I haven't heard anything."

"What do you mean? Why haven't you heard anything? *You* are his neighbor, but we know nothing about him, living far away as we do. But what do people who live nearby say about him?"

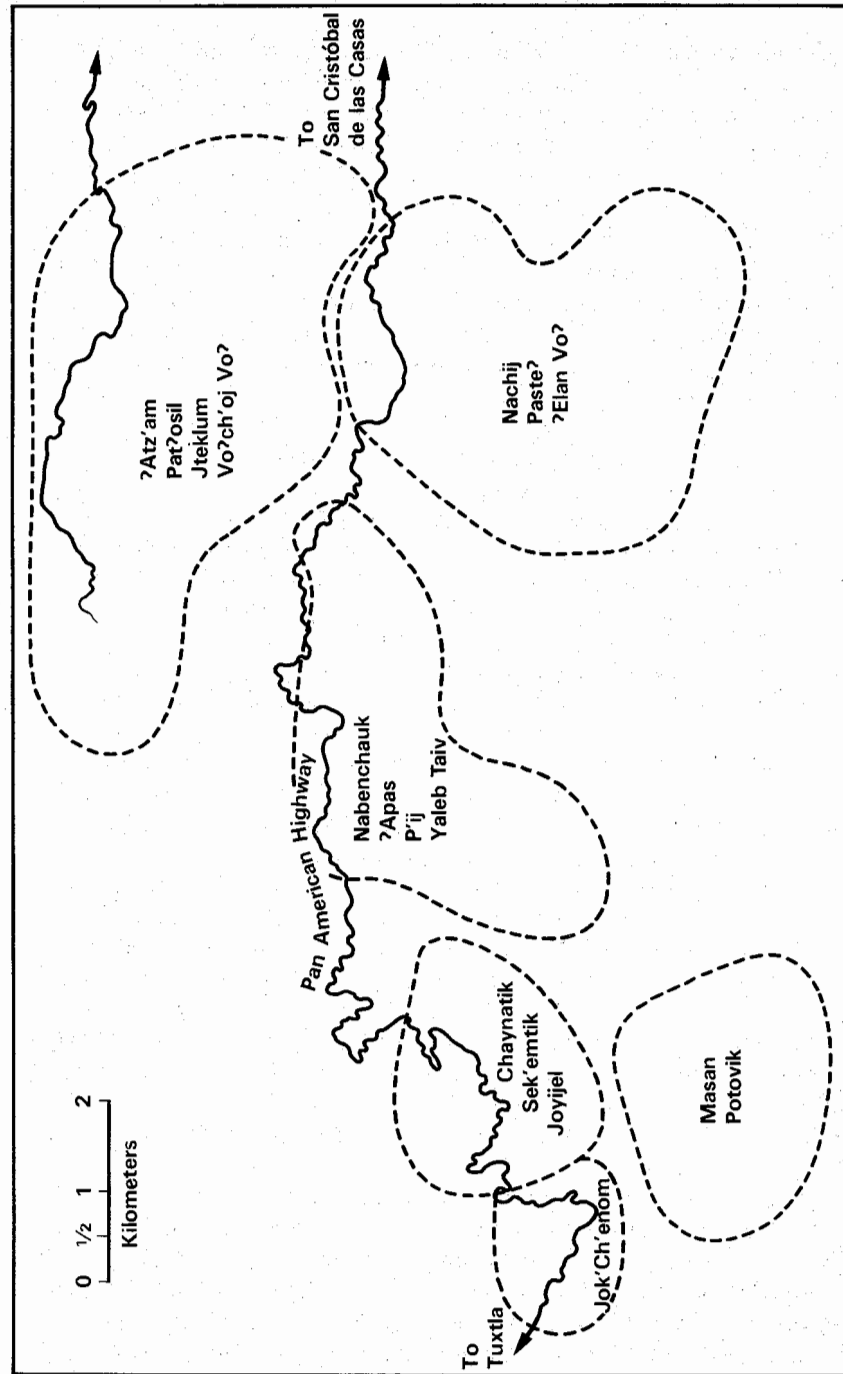
"Well, just that he is an ugly drunk, that he beats his wife—treats her just like a *burro*."

"Ha ha ha. There, you see. . . ."

"Ha ha ha. Perhaps you've given the wife a few blows yourself."

The hamlet, or *paraje*, in some cases represents a unit well defined both geographically and politically, grouping together several waterhole groups. In other cases, hamlet "boundaries" split waterhole groups, and living "in" a hamlet represents only an affiliation with certain institutions such as tax rolls or a school committee.³ Moreover, there is considerable variation between hamlets in density of settlement. These factors complicate the relationship between one's hamlet of residence and the pool of neighbors about whom one can gossip. A man from Nabenchauk—a rather compactly settled *paraje* with a tightly focused political, social, and ceremonial life—will be likely to know about nearly everyone else in Nabenchauk, whereas a man from the section of Nachij called ?Avan Ch'en may be better versed on the doings of his nearby neighbors from the hamlet of Paste? than those of his hamlet-mates from the opposite end of Nachij.⁴

Geographical and historical considerations suggest further divisions of Zinacantan above the hamlet level. George Collier (personal communication) reported disproportionately frequent ties of ritual kinship (*compadrazgo*) between certain hamlets, indicating a higher-level grouping of "superhamlets" as shown on map 2. The routing of important roads through the municipal territory perhaps accounts best for these

Map 2
"Superhamlets" of Zinacantan

close affiliations between *parajes*. Zinacantan Center (Jteklum) and ʔAtz'am both lie on the old main road from Tuxtla to San Cristóbal. Nabenchauk and ʔApas share a common access point to the Pan-American highway—the major paved road linking highland Chiapas to the rest of Mexico, linking the *municipio* of Zinacantan to markets in San Cristóbal and Tuxtla and to lowland cornfields—as do, for example, Nachij, Pasteʔ, and ʔElan Voʔ.

People in Nabenchauk use these superhamlets in a kind of geographical shorthand. The ceremonial center and its surrounding hamlets are often simply called ʔAk'ol ("higher"), whereas hamlets to the west down the mountains are often called collectively ʔOlon ("lower") or Chobtik ("cornfields")—a reference to the reputation of these warmer areas as good corn-growing lands.

Moreover, these larger divisions of the *municipio* seem roughly to coincide with *gossip areas*. A man from Nabenchauk could be expected to know a good deal about his neighbors in ʔApas. A resident of Nachij might take me aside to dispute an account of events offered by a man from Pasteʔ, and so on. Gossip seems to follow the same paths that men walk (or ride).

Given this expanded notion of "area" within Zinacantan, I agree with Jane Collier:

Individuals in Zinacantan appear to be closely tied to a single area. Few people move from one hamlet to another, and marriage partners are usually found among neighbors. Zinacanteco women know few people beyond their own kin and close neighbors, but men have opportunities to form a wider circle of acquaintances. Young boys, like the women, know few people, but as they grow older and serve in the religious hierarchy, they meet office holders from other hamlets, while a politically active man can participate with other hamlet leaders in making community-wide decisions. [1973, p. 7]

In the rest of this chapter I shall enumerate institutions which allow Zinacanteco men to extend their circles of gossip.⁵

Just as most of a Zinacanteco's life revolves around corn, corn provides the focus for much of his contact with others. A casual visitor to San Cristóbal could not fail to notice circles of Zinacanteco men near the market, often near the corn-selling stalls, weaving hats and talking prices and politics. But selling corn gives less opportunity for conversation and joking than does growing corn. Work in the cornfields is grueling, especially during the long weeks of weeding in wet season; yet Zinacantecos look forward to these periods of labor.

"I want to learn how people talk together, how they joke with one another." [Conversation with a *compadre*]

"Ah, but compadre, if you want to hear the best gossip, the best joking—then you must go where we work, in Hot Country, in our cornfields. When we have finished work late in the day, we eat. That is when the real joking starts. Then people have verbal duels; they mock each other. People will say whatever comes into their heads; they will make lewd jokes. It is too much!"

Farming groups are usually composed of kin, but friends and ritual kinsmen may often share in the cultivation of rented plots. As elsewhere in Latin America, Zinacantecos acquire *compadres* by asking other Zinacantecos to become godparents to their children (see Vogt, 1969, pp. 230–39). Friends and *compadres* often lend each other money and associate at fiestas, drinking together and amusing each other with conversation.

When work in the cornfields slackens during the winter many Zinacantecos seek work on government road-building and agricultural projects. Robert M. Laughlin has remarked to me that myths and other stories are likely to be recounted in the context of such roadwork. Similarly, in recent road-building projects within Zinacantan, the *ʔabtel ta be* ("workers on the road") are notorious gossips, whose sharp eyes and tongues are to be avoided.

These days young men spend increasing portions of their time in wage labor, often far from Zinacantan. The fifteen-year-old son in the family with whom I lived had a one-year contract for work with a lowland road crew and was home only on weekends. His brothers helped his father with corn cultivation, and he brought home cash wages. His circle of acquaintances at home was severely restricted, while the number of non-Zinacantecos—both Indian and ladino—he knew was unusually large.

The religious calendar and the system of religious cargo positions which supports it multiplies a Zinacanteco's opportunities to widen his circle of friends and his store of knowledge about other people. There are four hierarchical levels of cargoholders, or *ipas ʔabtel* ("work-doers"); the "work" they perform is a year of service to a particular saint—caring for the saint's image through regular ceremonies and holding calendrical church fiestas. A man serves one year at the lowest level, then progresses through higher levels of ritual "work" as he gradually accumulates sufficient resources (Cancian 1965). Passing through all four levels of the system represents the pinnacle of traditional success; only older men who have enjoyed considerable wealth attain the status of *pasaro* ("one who has passed").⁶

Entering the cargo system brings a man into close contact with men from other hamlets and of various ages. Senior cargoholders and their formal ritual advisers are often respected powerful older men, while cargoholders on intermediate levels are generally men with considerable

economic success. At the lower cargo levels, and serving in the capacity of helpers, scribes, *sacristanes*, and so forth, are young men with ambitions for success through traditional religious service.

Performance in the ritual hierarchy is one of the most frequent topics of conversation in Zinacantan. Men are constantly calculating a cargo-holder's outlay of money and reexamining the schedule of incoming and outgoing offices. Other indexes of personal ability and success are related through conversation to cargo performance.

"Didn't old Maryan spend 12,000 pesos in his cargo?"

"Yes, but they say he owes 25,000 to the bank in Tuxtla."

"30,000 I heard."

"Yes, he may be rich, but they say it was from all his sons that he got that way. They do the work. The old man himself doesn't work at all anymore."

"What about old Petul, the musician?"

"People say that he also doesn't work much himself. He just passes cargos through the labor of his daughters. Perhaps it is from selling tortillas that he passes his cargos—so some people say. Or maybe from selling feathered wedding gowns. But he hasn't ever planted much corn—just one *almud*, or perhaps two."

Men take pride in their mastery of correct procedures and orthodox behavior in cargos. They must learn to pray, sing, and joke.

"But let me tell you, that ʔAlperes Trinirat just cannot joke. He doesn't know how to do it."

"Kere."

"If you throw him a challenge, an insult, he doesn't know what to respond. He just says 'hmmm, hmmm' and hides his head in his kerchief."

"Ha ha ha. He just bows his head."

"When I was ʔalperes, the musicians wept when I left my year in office. Maryan, the musician, said to me. 'It will not be the same without you here to joke with us.'"

Political activities open to a Zinacanteco man further widen his knowledge of other Zinacantecos and their doings. Men gain political influence in Zinacantan by controlling important decisions, through skill at dealing with outside forces, or both. Thus, each hamlet has elders "known for their wisdom in settling conflicts, who can be approached by a person involved in a dispute" (J. Collier 1973, p. 26). It is easy to discover the names of such powerful men in each hamlet and to identify them with factional groups: to identify them, that is, as decision-makers on questions important to the hamlet and *municipio*. Moreover,

people remember past political leaders and give vivid accounts of the disputes in which they were involved and the alignments of power.

"*Putá*, there was a big fight over it; they made a lot of trouble over it. . . ."

"Hiiii, that was a long time ago."

"They grabbed old man Okotz. They even managed to arrest old Sarate and old Chep Krus—that was when he was *presidente*, or maybe treasurer—I've forgotten which. *Putá*, they tied him up anyway. Soldiers went to his house. And they brought out the money, too; the embezzled money was found in his house. . . ."

"Yes, you're right, that's the way I heard it."

". . . it was soldiers who found the money and recovered it. Anyway, as for old man Okotz—he fled; old man Sarate also fled. They ran off into the woods to sleep, they couldn't sleep at home anymore."

"Who brought the accusations?"

"Well the ones who started the trouble were that old Petul Tzu, old Papyán Chayna, old Maryán Xantis and his brother Palas, as well as old Antun Okotz. They were the real leaders; they were behind it all. But they had their men, their supporters. . . ."

"Sure, probably lots of them."

Mexican law provides for the existence of certain civil officials to serve three-year terms at the town hall, the *cabildo*, in Jteklum and peripherally in the *agencias* or hamlet-level governments. Though they have other duties as well, these officials—chief of whom is the *presidente*—are most often called upon to decide questions of a certain gravity (e.g., murder accusations) or to rule on disputes which have not been resolved by hamlet elders. Serving in such a civil office, most anthropologists have argued, does not in itself lend prestige and political power; but such people are considered to have become skillful at settling disputes and may therefore be asked to help settle disputes after their terms have expired (J. Collier 1973, chap. 1).

"That's just the way it is: when a man has a civil office people slander him behind his back. There are always two sides."

"That's right."

"One side likes him if he has agreed with what they want. The other side, with whom the *agente* doesn't concur, will say, 'See, he's no good.'"

"But there can only be one side for whom the quarrel turns out well. For the others it doesn't go so well. They come out the losers. . . ."

"What people want is always to get to the town hall first; they want whoever is going to settle the affair to listen to them first, so that they won't be made to look at fault."

"That's what they want. But when the official assigns guilt equally to both parties, even if one party has spoken first—well, then they say he's good for nothing."

"They're annoyed."

"It didn't do any good, my talking to him, my giving him good strong rum,' they say. 'He didn't settle the dispute for me,' they say."

"But it's because the *agente* hasn't favored them. Instead he has settled the dispute evenly."

Some ambitious Zinacantecos acquire power and influence outside the schedule of religious and civil offices. This is often a matter of learning to manipulate or extract advantage from non-Zinacanteco institutions. Just as post-Conquest *naguatlato*s (native translators) used their linguistic skills and familiarity with Spanish ways for power and gain (Heath 1972), in recent times politically strong Zinacantecos have been those men able to accommodate themselves to ladino authorities. Notably, since the Revolution, control of land reform under *ejido* laws has been the basis of political power. The most recent clear political boss on a *municipiowide* scale came to control Zinacantan's *ejido* through a unique series of circumstances. His power stemmed not only from his control of the land itself, but from the network of subordinate *ejido* officials upon whom he could count for support in other issues (Vogt 1969, p. 286). More recently a man rose to political prominence in Apas and Nabenchauk by heading a movement to obtain a new tract of lowland cornfields under present *ejido* laws. He gained prestige (as well as the hostility of some of his seniors) by rapid progress through the cargo system; but he took advantage of his knowledge of Spanish and personal charisma to manipulate ladino authorities with skill and persistence.⁷

There is a small group of men who are reputed to be clever representatives before ladino courts, a class of Zinacanteco lawyers. These men are fluent in Spanish, and they have experience in confronting ladino authorities. Such men are in increasing demand as Zinacantecos become aware of the discrepancies between traditional rules of dispute settlement and Mexican law—and try to exploit these discrepancies to their own advantage (Cf. J. Collier 1973, pp. 239ff.). Mexican authorities have only recently come to suspect these legal "brokers" (W. Freeman 1974).

"But that is really evil, to charge such interest on a loan. If someone borrows one hundred pesos, the interest soon reaches one hundred, and first he must pay off the first one hundred pesos he received."

"The principal."

"Then the one hundred pesos of interest remain, and that amount in turn gathers new interest."

"It doesn't end."

"The years go by. . . ."

"If someone is stupid he will lose his lands that way."

"Or perhaps he will have to sell his children. . . ."

"Or his horse will be sold. . . ."

"Yes, but that's only for those who aren't clever. The one who knows how will come into San Cristóbal; he'll hire a lawyer and avoid paying."

"It doesn't occur to all of us, you see, to do that. All we can think of is the jail waiting for us in Jteklum."

"That's right: it's off to jail for us stupid ones."

As men amass supporters and learn to manipulate the various agencies of coercion—from the hamlet elder to the San Cristóbal court—factional arguments arise over a broad range of specific issues: road placement, government projects, communal labor, and so forth (cf. Rush 1971). It is these factional disputes, as well as the domestic fights and cases of violence made public at open hearings at the town hall, that provide the juiciest input to the gossip stream in Zinacantan.⁸

"What's happening to Antun and his wife?"

"I don't know. Is anything?"

"I saw him standing at the *cabildo* this morning, but I didn't hear what was going on."

"Here comes Maryan. Let's ask him. He's always hanging around the town hall." [Conversation overheard on path]

The day-to-day flow of talk in the hamlet where my family and I lived reflected these various sources generating and radiating gossip. Even though the town hall where disputes were settled was in a distant part of the village, by the end of the day accounts of virtually every case had filtered back to the compound. Women on routine errands were the vehicles of this talk. Gathering firewood, tending sheep, carrying boiled corn to the mill to be ground into tortilla dough, women set aside time to exchange news with their friends and cousins. In our household, much gossip originated with a cousin whose father held a civil office at the municipal town hall and who spent two weeks out of every month hearing court disputes. The daughter was a much sought-after companion, always ready with some fresh scandal.

Men in the compound made somewhat more distant forays into the world and accordingly brought home more esoteric news, from other hamlets, from San Cristóbal, from the lowlands. During the several days of community labor to clear roads directly after the Fiesta of Todos

Santos, all the men of the hamlet gathered together into work gangs and caught up on recent events between swings of machete and hoe. But outside of such infrequent occasions of public work, or sporadic visits to other hamlets, or chance encounters on the path, men did not have regular opportunities for gathering rumor and gossip.

Instead, people in the house compound kept a constant watch for the doings of their neighbors. At least one pair of eyes was constantly focused on the main paths near the house, ready to spot and identify passersby, and their cargos or companions, and to prompt speculation about their business. A gathering of people, an untoward noise, was excuse enough to dispatch a young boy, or, lacking that, a girl or young woman as a spy to find out what was going on.

A funeral passes: "Who was the dead girl? I didn't know Old Papyan had another daughter."

A drunk shouts on the path: "Has Lol finally been kicked out by his wife?"

And all this with a conspiratorial air, dripping with secrecy and muffled giggles: for even in such a compactly settled hamlet, where most neighbors are also kin, people in our compound maintained only very limited friendly contacts with other households. Of some ten other households of aunts and uncles, open, regular contacts were maintained with only two. People were interested in the others, but acquired their information only through espionage.

The corollary is privacy and circumspection at home. Members of the family were obsessed with secrecy, constantly running to hide when strangers appeared, evasive and hedging when forced to talk to outsiders, always apprehensive lest I, a clumsy incompetent, might reveal too much about the family's doings.

"Is Xun Tontik going to pay you back the money he owes you?"

"Well, yes, he promised to give me corn."

"When?"

"He says he doesn't have enough corn. He says his harvest was poor."

"Ah, but is he telling you the truth? Yesterday I saw him leaving for Tuxtla with two big bags to sell."

"Well, he says he can give me half in corn, half in cash."

"Ah, in that case, won't you sell me one bag of the corn he gives you? I have almost none left, and I won't finish my harvest for another month."

"Um."

"And try to get him to give you all he owes in corn. Tell him that you have run out. Tell him that you need corn to feed your animals. But don't say anything to him about your selling some corn to me."