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What do Zinacantecos gossip about? I have hypothesized that Zinacantecos' conversations about their neighbors will not, in fact, range over all possible subjects but will center on selected topics of interest—a wide but limited range. I suggest that a corpus of Zinacanteco gossip could be organized to form an encyclopedia of Zinacanteco social life; that what Zinacantecos gossip about is a good index of what they worry about.

A survey of the gossip I heard in Zinacantan turns up just such a limited range of topics and preoccupations. To give the reader a glimpse of this range, in this chapter I consider the information about people that surfaced during Who's Who sessions, including those offhand remarks clearly designed to lead into more elaborate stories as well as the recurrent themes of the gossip I heard in less restricted settings.

The Who's Who of Zinacantan captures part of the shared knowledge available about well-known and notorious Zinacantecos. Starting with lists of people generally well known, George Collier and I added to the lists by asking for the names of people who fitted certain categories. The categories themselves, in turn, grew out of short characterizations and descriptions which occurred when members of the Who's Who panels identified people among themselves. If, for example, a man was identified as

"Xun from Paste?, the curer"

we added the word *j'ilol* ("curer") to the set of categories.

Table 1 shows the entire category list (which is discussed in more detail in Appendix 2). This set of descriptive phrases, I reasoned, was a kind of catalog of Zinacanteco social personae. The most common identifying labels, I suspect, mark precisely those macroidentities (at some gross analytical level; see Keesing 1970) which are most culturally or practically salient. Especially in a society where names are often insufficient to identify an individual unambiguously, the best identifier will be a person's most significant feature, the source of his widest reputation: for example, Xun, the *curer*.

Often more suggestive information emerged from the Who's Who. In the midst of discussions about a man's nicknames or his cargo history someone might interject a remark like,

"He fights with his elder brother," or

"His wife is a Chamula, not a Zinacanteca," or

"He tried to murder his neighbor."

Most such comments constitute *incipient* gossip. They demand amplification, hinting that there is more to be said, if others are willing to take the time to gossip. A few such remarks, all of which arose spontaneously during Who's Who discussions of a single hamlet, show what sort of conversational tease will pique a Zinacanteco's interest. I have arranged the examples into several rough categories.

a. Courtship, marriage, and sexual habits

Ibat ta pojbel slekom.

"He had his fiancée stolen away."

J-poj-tzeb.

"He is a girl thief."

Many courtships fail because an engaged girl takes up with another boy (J. Collier 1973, pp. 211ff.). Since courtship involves considerable expense, losing a girl to another man is both an affront and an economic setback. News of fractured romances and illicit liaisons kept our own household constantly entertained. The wronged suitor is thought a fool, whereas the girl thief is considered laughable for failing to curb his sexual impulses.

Conversations start, as well, with intimations of promiscuity or sexual deviance.

J'elek' mis, j'elek' ?antz.

"He is a pussy stealer, a woman stealer."

Lek chak' matanal.

"The woman gives many free gifts."

Ispas preva xchi?uk sni? me?el.

"He had a try with his mother-in-law."

Table 1 Who's Who Category List

	Tzotzil	English
Cargoholding		
1.	jpas ² abtel	cargoholder
2.	pasaro	man who has finished cargo hierarchy
3.	totil-me ² il	ritual adviser
Religious service and auxiliary personnel		
4.	ch'ul mol	holy elder
5.	jk'echnomal	saint-bearer
6.	pixkal	sacristan
7.	chk'ot ta ch'omil	serves as ritual helper
Civil offices		
8.	?abtel ta kavilto	work at town hall
9.	preserente	municipal <i>presidente</i>
10.	?ajensya	hamlet-level <i>agente</i>
11.	krinsupal	hamlet representative, <i>principal</i>
12.	komite	member of <i>ejido</i> committee
13.	lukasyon	member of school committee
14.	jtzobtak'in	tax collector
15.	jjunta	<i>fiesta</i> committee member
Ritual specialists		
16.	jchik'pom	incense burner
17.	jjapkantela	candle-bearer
18.	jvabajom	musician, flutist, drummer
19.	j ² amarero, jtampolero	
20.	jtenkamaro	cannoneer
Curing		
21.	j ² ilol	curer
22.	jtamol	midwife
23.	jtz'akbak	bonesetter
Dispute settlement and secular skills		
24.	jmeltzanejk'op	dispute settler
25.	sna ² rason	wise
26.	xtojob ta k'opojel	capable talker
27.	sna ² k'op ryox	prays well
28.	sna ² kastiya	speaks Spanish
29.	sna ² vun	literate
30.	?ep xpetomaj	often chosen as godfather
31.	jva ² anejna, j ² alvanil	house builder, mason
32.	jtz'ispixalal	sews hats
Economic indicators		
33.	jk'u lej	rich
34.	?oy skaro	truck-owner
35.	?oy smulino	owns corn mill
36.	?oy styenta	store-owner
37.	?oy svakax, ska ² , xchij	owns cattle, horses, sheep

38.	xak' ta ch'om stak'in	lends money
39.	xak' ta jolinom stak'in	lends at interest
40.	jchon ² atz'am	salt-seller
41.	j ² ekel- ² ixim, -turasnu, -nichim	reseller of corn, peaches, flowers
42.	sna ² slakan pox	distills liquor
Negatively evaluated characteristics		
43.	?oy sryox	owns talking saint
Witchcraft		
44.	j ² ak'chamel	witch
45.	sna ² xchonvan ta balamil	sells souls
46.	sna ² xk'opoj ta balamil	deals with Earth Lord
Aggression		
47.	jmilvanej	murderer
48.	jmakbe	assassin, bandit
49.	j ² elek'	thief
Troublemaking		
50.	jsa ² k'op	troublemaker
51.	jchukvanej	man who jails others
52.	?ep sta chukel, lek xa ² i pus	often jailed, enjoys jail
53.	pukuj yo ² on	ill-tempered
Poverty, drunkenness		
53.	jjyakubel	drunk
54.	mu sut yu ² un yil	unable to repay debts
55.	me ² on	poor
56.	ch'aj, mu sna ² x ² abtej	lazy
Mental incapacity		
57.	chuvaj	crazy
58.	jvoviel	madman
59.	xchujil	feeble-minded
60.	sonso	stupid
61.	sovra	worthless, good-for-nothing
62.	?uma ²	dumb, with speech impediment

In a slightly different vein, it is noteworthy for an adult to be unmarried.

Te stuk, ch'abal yajnil.

"There he is, all alone, without a wife."

No man, and few women, in Zinacantan can survive unmarried. For a man to grow old without a wife is considered, at best, unnatural; and the widower is truly pitiable, turning from one female relative to another for his food.

b. Wealth and poverty

Comments about another Zinacanteco's riches or lack of riches are rarely idle. Sometimes the attribution of wealth is accompanied by sinister suggestions:

Jk'u lej tajmek, ?olon staoj.
 "He is very rich; he found his wealth in the lowlands" [i.e., by witchcraft].

Similarly, to comment on another Zinacanteco's poverty is often to complain about debts unpaid—

Tzinil ta ?il.
 "He is tightly entwined in debts."
 Mu ?altikuk tzpas yil.
 "He just incurs new debts without a thought."

—or to moralize archly about the failings of humankind:

Ch'ajch'ajtik yilel.
 "He seems a bit lazy."
 Ibat ta burdel stak'in.
 "His money went to the bordello."

c. Temperament and physical peculiarity

Some people depart from the even-tempered, sociable ideal. The observation that someone

pukujtik yo'on timi sa?bat sjole
 "is evil-tempered if provoked"

invites an anecdote to prove the point. In the same way, though deformities and physical oddities often prompt nicknames,¹ certain disclosures obviously lead into further interesting stories.

Staoj k'a?el, solel xtuet.
 "She contracted rot and became simply foul."
 Lajem ta bala snuti?al-?at.
 "His scrotum was ruined by a bullet."

d. Religious and civil office

Most offhand remarks about cargo performance or civil office deal with failure, through reluctance or inability, to carry through the responsibilities of a job.

Ch'ayem smartomoreyal.
 "He lost his opportunity to be *mayordomorey*."

Te toyel toyel batel yu'un.
 "He kept putting off and putting off [his entry into public office]."²

Other remarks highlight the incongruity between failure in ritual duties and respected old age.

Tol xvay ta totil-me?ilal.
 "He sleeps too much when he is ritual adviser."
 Mol ta yech.
 "He is an old man good for nothing" [i.e., despite his age he never finished the cargo system or became a ritual adviser].

Cargo performance, both successful and unsuccessful, is a preoccupation of gossips in Zinacantan. I shall discuss the ethnographic content of the great volume of resulting talk in chapter 6.

Offhand remarks of the kind I have called incipient gossip demonstrate a clear link between identifying schemata—taken as standard formulas by which gossips pinpoint and identify protagonists—and frequent gossip topics. A particular man may, in certain circles, be recognized as, say, "Xun from Nabenchauk," whereas in another context his name will be unknown, while part of his reputation—as, say, "the man who was jailed for drunkenness on the first day of the Fiesta of San Lorenzo last year"—will be sufficient identification. Identifying schemata thus form a rough continuum, ranging from highly specific and neutral (names, kin relations, places of residence, etc.), to identifying items of information, often with evaluative overtones, that draw on wider parts of the audience's knowledge of reputation and past gossip. Hence, frequent gossip topics, sometimes in the form of reduced "incipient gossip," feed the corpus of characterizations which can be used, in turn, to identify individuals. It is for similar reasons that a person's "good name," in our society, consists of a good deal more than his or her name.

Soon the Who's Who panelists stopped alluding to gossip stories and began telling them. The resulting tales, and all the gossip material I gathered in other situations, both formal and natural, during my stay in Zinacantan, form a corpus of texts whose recurrent themes can be extracted, if not properly quantified. By means of a flexible coding system³ I arrived at a categorization of themes and subject matter, which appears in full in Appendix 3.

Table 2 shows twenty common gossip subjects, raised frequently in stories told during Who's Who sessions as well as in other contexts. These twenty categories include all those topics which occur in 5 percent or more of the (roughly one thousand) discrete stories in the corpus.⁴

Table 2 Most Common Gossip Themes

Subject	Number of Stories in Who's Who	Number in Other Gossip	Total
1. Drunkenness, drinking, and drunken behavior	64	68	132
2. Divorce, child support	69	42	111
3. Illicit sexual relations, incest, fornication	68	48	116
4. Jail, other punishment	66	35	101
5. Wealth, poverty	52	38	90
6. Kin disputes	45	45	90
7. Courtship	33	46	79
8. Adultery	34	40	74
9. Fighting, beating	44	28	72
10. Stealing, embezzlement	41	29	70
11. Cargos	36	32	68
12. <i>Cabildo</i> scenes, dispute settlement	32	40	72
13. Witchcraft	48	19	67
14. Promiscuity	32	31	63
15. Scolding, quarreling	37	24	61
16. Sickness and death	24	30	54
17. Curing	35	20	55
18. Marriage disputes	33	21	54
19. Murder	36	18	54
20. Fleeing	22	28	50

Table 3 shows further topics which occur with notable frequency in either Who's Who gossip or other gossip, but not both. In what follows I give examples of the sorts of stories Zinacantecos tell involving some of these frequent conversational topics.

1. Drunkenness

It would be easy to select from conversational texts all passages having to do with drunkenness by cueing the root *yak*, which occurs, for example, in *-yakub* ("get drunk"), and a few others. The category is unambiguous, and the topic is omnipresent: more than one story in ten contains at least a reference to some sort of drunken behavior. Consider the following stories.

Several drunken men terrorized an innocent tourist who had the misfortune to stray into a Zinacanteco village off the Pan-American highway. The ladino authorities dragged the drunken offenders from their beds in retaliation, taking them to jail without their pants.

A woman curer is known as a heavy drinker when she cures; when drunk she rants and raves and has even been known to curse the saints.

Table 3 Additional Frequent Topics in Gossip

Subject	Number of Stories
Frequent Topics in Who's Who Gossip	
Borrowing and lending	36
Factional and land disputes	33
Troublemaking, <i>sa²-k-op</i>	30
Past and ancient events	28
Miscellaneous violence	25
Frequent Topics in Other Gossip	
Rape	34
Nicknames	26

A man is so accomplished at sewing the traditional style hats that he could surely support himself at this trade were it not for his propensity to drink. Sometimes he will sew an entire hat for just one litre of liquor.

A man recently died in Hot Country after falling into a river while stone drunk.

Conversation is scattered with remarks like

Batz'i lek xa'i pox le'e.
"He really likes his liquor."

and observations about a man's drinking habits, even when stories are not explicitly about the consequences of drinking and drunkenness.

2. Divorce

Zinacantecos talk a lot about divorce: the circumstances leading to it and its terms—including the provisions for child custody and support. Some gossip is about particular cases.

The son of a powerful man divorced his first wife. The husband's family thought the girl was too lazy: she wouldn't get up early to grind corn for her husband's tortillas; she spent too much time at her parents' home. The woman was sent packing with her child.

A man abandoned his wife and child to take up with a mistress. Since the marriage had included a civil ceremony—and was thus listed on official *municipio* records—the wife went to San Cristóbal to demand a civil divorce and support for her child. The man was jailed for not producing the money, and he eventually made up with his wife and returned to her.

Other gossip relating to divorce has to do with the habits of people while divorced (bereft men sitting in fireless houses; gay divorced women seeking multitudes of lovers, etc.). And the following story is about a divorce-monger.

An old woman used to serve frequently as a mediator between married people having fights. But she tended to encourage the woman not to make up with her husband and, instead, to seek divorce. She fanned the flames of disputes.

3. Illicit sexual relations

This category includes stories of sexual relations between unmarried people and incest. (Adultery, having slightly different legal consequences, is listed separately below.)

A cargoholder was chagrined when his daughter was caught fornicating with a sacristan while she was supposed to be washing the clothes of a saint image.

A notorious witch is reputed to have screwed his own mother in front of a cave in which he had performed witchcraft ceremonies—this in order to render his spells especially potent.

A man was glimpsed having intercourse with an unknown girl in a dry creek-bed. Passersby pelted him with rocks.

Zinacantecos feel that sexual mores are degenerating. Whereas in past times unmarried boys and girls could be whipped for merely talking to one another, according to a man from Zinacantan Center nowadays one frequently comes upon couples embracing in the shelter of trees and bushes near paths. Gossip turned so often to illicit sexual relations during the Who's Who sessions that the panel coined a new euphemism for intercourse: *'ak' ?inyeksyon*: literally, "give injections."

4. Jail, and other punishment

Almost every gossip story about a public dispute ends with the jailing of one of the principals. And a frequent source of gossip is the news that springs from a fresh jailing. There are other sorts of punishment:

A man had planned to enter an expensive and prestigious first-level cargo. However, because he beat his wife so often, he was made into a *mayol* by the presidente. [A *mayol* is a very low-prestige first-level cargo, and its duties amount to little more than serving

as errand boy and occasionally as policeman at the service of town hall officials.]

A man and a woman caught as adulterers were not only given jail terms but also were forced to perform public labor clearing the waterways of Zinacantan Center during a large fiesta when crowds gathered to watch and mock them.

5. Wealth and poverty

Much gossip is devoted to the acquisition and outward manifestations of wealth. Similarly, gossips often cluck their tongues over the loss of wealth and the hardships endured by the poverty-stricken.

A wealthy man claims to have started out as a poor farmer. He got his first money from distilling cane liquor and "taking money from drunks." He and his wife went to the church in Zinacantan Center and prayed to San Lorenzo for wealth. In a dream the wife saw herself before a woman inside the church who handed her a bag full of gold coins. From that moment, the man claims, he has prospered.

The son of a wealthy man, who used to own a "ranch" with cattle and horses, squandered all his money on whores in Tuxtla after his father died. He is now poverty-stricken.

A man who has for a long time claimed to be sick, and who walks with a limp, is so poor that he sometimes goes to Tuxtla to beg.

A woman from Nabenchauk was divorced by her husband and faced the prospect of raising three children with no means of support. She sold one of her sons to work as a *mozo* [indentured laborer] in San Cristóbal, and used that money to survive.

Zinacantecos argue that acquiring wealth requires diligent work, good luck, and piety. Extreme poverty, on the other hand, is most often due to laziness and dissipation; Zinacantecos take the selling of children or property as a sign of desperation induced by lack of money.

6. Kin disputes

Jane Collier (1973, pp. 169ff.) characterizes public legal disputes between kinsmen as "usually presented by both parties as disputes over land or other physical property."

She distinguishes three general categories: problems that arise between a boy and his guardians or parents (pp. 171–73); disputes between siblings (pp. 173–76); and problems that arise over property held by women (pp. 176–78). Though conflicts between kinsmen may ultimately take the form of property disputes if they reach the town hall, gossip is able to dig more deeply into the motivations of kin conflict and its immediate manifestations.

Two men from different hamlets who share a common grandfather were cooperating in building a house in Zinacantan Center to be used by members of the family and friends for their cargos. One man, the owner of the land in question, had lent money to the other; when the money was not repaid in time the two men quarreled. The first man calculated how much his cousin had contributed to the building of the house; he deducted this amount from the other's debt and thenceforward excluded the other from use of the new house.

A respected old man is estranged from his daughter. His sons, after marriage, all moved out, leaving him only two daughters. He invited the elder girl's fiancé to come live in his house compound in order to have another man there to work with him. But the boy also crept into bed with the man's younger daughter and deflowered her. The old man married the younger girl off immediately in an inferior match, and he threw out the offending son-in-law. But the first daughter, longing for her husband, finally herself abandoned her aged father and went to live with the husband. Now the old man has hardened his heart against the daughter and will no longer speak to her.

I have also included gossip about disputes between a man and his in-laws under the category of kin disputes.

A young man who quarreled with his father-in-law over the performance of his new bride has recently tried several times to implicate his father-in-law in theft. He accuses the old man of having gotten him drunk and having stolen a one-thousand-peso bill from him. Everyone agrees, however, that the story is a lie concocted "so that he could get his father-in-law jailed."

A man who had moved in with his wife and his widowed mother-in-law after his marriage argued so much with the old woman that she eventually moved out, even

though the land was hers. "He couldn't live in the same house with her so he drove her out."

7. Courtship and courtship disputes

Most gossip about courtship has to do with broken courtships requiring court settlement (cf. Jane Collier 1973, chap. 10). One informant told me with great glee about the troubles that a respected elder in Nachij had over his sons' courtships. The first son lost his fiancée to an interloper after several years of courtship; then the second son himself broke up another courtship and was forced to marry the girl and pay back the injured suitor's expenses. Both cases were ultimately settled at the town hall with great scandal.

The gossip covers a range of events that did not necessarily end at the *cabildo*. In one story the bad performance of a suitor had drastic consequences.

A boy had asked for the hand of a fierce old man's daughter. He was accepted as a suitor, but the girl's family was not pleased with the boy's evident poverty or the fact that he had no hat [or other proper young man's furnishings]. The boy went down to Hot Country with a bottle to get into the good graces of his future father-in-law and brothers-in-law who were working there. But the others turned on him and murdered him by throwing him off the mountainside.

In other cases the suitor is simply rejected outright.

A man whose mother was known to be evil-tempered had a hard time getting a second wife after his first wife divorced him. He approached one girl, but her family refused to let her go off "only to be scolded, only to be scorned and beaten" by the boy's mother.

A boy born in a now-abandoned hamlet had difficulty finding a wife. Girls mocked him, saying, "this is not your hamlet; you cannot take a wife from here."

The gossip also includes stories in which a boy and girl elope, thereby denying the girl's family its rightful bride-price; cases in which a prospective bride flees marriage at the last minute; cases in which a boy abandons a courtship (when he hears that his fiancée has "gotten injections from another" or when he tires of the expense); and stories of excessive bride-prices (one man even charged interest on a delayed bride-payment for his daughter). Very rarely does gossip touch on courtships which seemed outwardly successful.

One of an old man's several daughters was considered remarkable because only she, of all her sisters, *tuk' inupun* ["got married correctly"].

8. Adultery

Adultery is by far the most frequent topic of gossip about married couples. Jane Collier (1973) states the formal position regarding charges of adultery as follows: "Although gossip implies that many Zinacantecos indulge in extramarital affairs, a formal accusation of adultery, by either husband or wife, is a serious matter usually leading to divorce. Unless the accusation is dismissed as false at a hamlet hearing, the case goes to the town hall, where the aggrieved husband asks his wife's lover to recompense him for the bride-price and has the guilty pair jailed, or the aggrieved wife demands a divorce and a substantial share of her husband's property" (p. 189). Gossip about adultery does not wait for a husband or wife to make a public complaint. Furthermore, there is no doubt about the bias in men's gossip about adultery: a cuckold is made foolish by his adulterous wife; a man committing adultery is simply following his natural (if excessive) impulses (Can you blame him if he is a man?), even if he wrongs his wife in the process.

A man who spends considerable time in Tuxtla working as a bricklayer's apprentice is mocked for not visiting his wife more often. Everyone suspects, though, that the woman gets a bit of sexual satisfaction on the side; her husband can't know about such adultery "because it doesn't leave marks the way, say, sandals do."

A woman once asked her neighbor to help her fix up the corn bin while her husband was away. She then complained to the visitor about her husband's lack of ingenuity and pluck. The neighbor, seeing his opportunity, offered to take care of her in still more ways, and the woman agreed. She made arrangements to leave her door open at night; and he told his wife that he had to go out to make a deal with a truck owner about having corn delivered. The adulterous liaison went on for some time until the man was spotted climbing out of his neighbor's window.

A powerful elder has an illegitimate child, product of an adulterous union from his youth. He had approached an old man about borrowing a horse; the old man sent his daughter along to help catch the animal. The girl, once they were out in the woods, solicited the man's attentions, and finally he agreed to oblige her. Later the

girl kept pestering the man despite the fact that he had a wife; when she got pregnant she charged that he had raped her. He denied it and related the whole story, defending his action before the presidente saying, "Would *you* refuse such a gift?" He made up with his wife and simply gave money to have his child reared.

9. Fighting, beating

Casual observation in Zinacantan would reveal little overt violence; only drunks are sufficiently uninhibited to punch and push each other. This is not to say that ambushes and sober fights do not occur.

The hamlet *principal* was walking near the gate of a girl who was known to have several lovers. Suddenly a group of men jumped out of the bushes, beat him up, and stole some money from him. He accused several boys later, but all agreed that the leader was probably Antun, the girl's most jealous lover.

Two well-known witches once got into a fight. One hit the other about three times. The beaten man then threatened to kill the other by witchcraft, but nothing happened. "Perhaps their powers are equal."

Two brothers have long been fierce enemies. "They almost bite each other when they meet on the path."

Still, men rarely come to blows; aggression is usually covert, as when a man resorts to secret witchcraft. Thus, it is always news when two men actually square off.

10. Stealing

Not all theft is punished by the town hall; in fact, few petty thieves are caught in the act, and there is usually no way to prove theft after the fact.

A young man is now known as "Turkey Thief." He used to round up his neighbor's turkeys, put them in a white flour sack, and carry them to Tuxtla to sell. He was discovered when an old lady neighbor went searching for a turkey that had strayed into the cornfield; she looked in his house and couldn't see anything because her turkey was inside a bag hanging from the rafters. But she heard it, and the boy was made to pay.

An *agente* from Nabenchauk was removed from office and forced to flee after it was discovered that he had

embezzled leftover funds from various fiesta taxes and school levies and spent the money himself. He eventually returned about one thousand pesos, though rumor has it that he stole considerably more.

As I mentioned above, a few old women and lazy young men have reputations for light-fingeredness: they pick up clothes set out to dry on house compound fences, grab fruits or tools left unguarded in other people's yards, and steal squash as they walk through cornfields. Other men steal more systematically.

A good-for-nothing man (who used to take his whole family to visit his father, when he knew the old man would be eating, just to be given a free meal) hired himself out as a laborer when his father was harvesting corn. But instead of picking all the corn he saw, he left a considerable amount on the plants; later he went back to collect what was left for himself.

Another good-for-nothing married a clever woman who had her own money. He forced her to lend him large sums of money which he squandered on his own projects—lending to enhance his prestige, buying a liquor still, building a large brick house with a lock on the door—never repaying a *centavo*. He walks around in a warm woolen tunic, but he bought it with money stolen from his wife.

Thus, despite the fact that relatively few cases of theft come before the presidente, the idiom of "stealing" (Tzotzil root *-elk'*) is frequently used in describing unearned gain.

11. Cargo performance and failure

Because of the general interest in cargo affairs much conversation has to do with the schedule of officeholding, the identities of future cargo-holders, and so on. Such conversations are neutral; they concern un-evaluated matters of fact.

The cargo system contributes to more highly charged gossip when a man's performance—good or bad—comes under scrutiny. Gossip recounts how men fail to enter their cargos on time because of wrongdoing or insufficient funds; it scorns men for incomplete cargo service, for leaving their cargos in the middle, or for serious misconduct in office. The cargo system gives rise to gossip about other peculiar situations.

An extremely old man has asked for a first-level cargo. Everyone considers it odd, indeed, that he should begin his service so late.

People laugh about the apparent fact that in the whole hamlet of 'Elan Vo' nearly no one has passed any cargo except the low-ranking *mayol*, the presidente's errand boys.

In the next chapter I shall examine cargo gossip in some detail.

12. *Cabildo* scenes, dispute settlement

Table 2 shows that more than 7 percent of the stories in the gossip corpus include accounts of formal dispute settlement, either by hamlet elders or at the town hall. Many stories, that is, have to do with events which ultimately lead actors to conflict that must be formally resolved; the gossip includes the settlement as part of the story.

13. Witchcraft

Gossip about witchcraft dwells first on different techniques for sending sickness and death. People are interested in the details of petitions to the Earth Lord to exchange souls for wealth, and in the ghoulish remnants of witchcraft ceremonies found in caves or dug up in the cemetery. Zinacantecos are fascinated, horrified, and amused all at once by stories like the one in which a witch has intercourse with his own mother to make his spells irreversible. There is a morbid, half-joking narrative style which characterizes accounts of supernatural powers.

"People just say that he goes out at night and becomes a goat."

"*Carajo!*"

"That's what I hear, that he has singular habits."

"Something of a witch, eh?"

"Yes. He turns himself into a goat, and then wanders about on the path. He has frightened lots of people there near his house, I hear."

"But how did the people see him? Did he just transform himself while they were watching?"

"I guess that they saw all right."

"While they are just this far away, why then he just comes at them shaking his whiskers and his furry hide from side to side. . . ."

"Aha!"

". . . and then when he gets up close; "Bee ti bee ti bee bee," he says. He stamps his front hoof."

"Indeed!"

"And if they try to get him—if they've brought their shotguns, or if they have machetes perhaps, they say to themselves, 'Let's see if he can be hurt at all. . . .' But that old goat refuses to be hurt. He just goes on terrifying people. That's why they call the old man 'the Goat'."

Another large segment of witchcraft's gossip is concerned to pin the blame for individual cases of sickness and death on particular witches. Circulating the rumor that a particular man is a successful witch helps Zinacantecos to know which witches are dangerous enough to avoid and which only make empty threats.

During an argument a self-confessed witch said to his opponent: "We'll see how things turn out tonight or tomorrow"—a veiled threat of witchcraft. His opponent replied: "If you really know how to do it, go ahead, eat [me, my soul] if you have no meat of your own." But no harm came to the man who had quarreled with the witch, leading others to speculate that he is not a witch, but just "says so with his mouth."

And sometimes during gossip sessions Zinacantecos speculate about the credibility of alleged witchcraft phenomena.

"Kere, you musn't believe that there are witches! No, sickness comes by itself."

"That's what I say, too: that sickness comes of its own accord. Sickness is ubiquitous."

"I don't believe in witches; they exist according to curers, but I say that is one of their lies. (Ha ha ha.)"

"Well, okay, but—you see we all contract sickness. As for witches, they just torment us; we just get sick from them. But we don't die of it. We will only die one day when sickness comes and, well, we die. But that is according to the command of Our Lord."

"Yes, that is how it is. If we have only a small time, if our destinies are not long, then if we have made enemies and at the same time get sick, well then we conclude that we have been witched."

"Ah, yes, that's what we say. . . ."

"Even if it isn't true."

14. Promiscuity, womanizing

In some moods Zinacantecos will claim that sexual moderation is desirable; that husband and wife ought to remain faithful to one another; that promiscuity is bestial, doglike. Yet a high percentage of gossip has to do with loose women (whom I have arbitrarily labeled "promiscuous") and insatiable men (whom I have called "womanizers"). The metaphor of "giving" pervades descriptions of the sexual act.

When a notorious woman was first divorced she "gave freely," it didn't matter where or to whom. She "made a gift of it" to other people. "She went to be doctored elsewhere, got lots of injections."

A man is ridiculed for divorcing his wife to marry his mistress. "But she wasn't only *his* mistress; she had lots of masters. She gave alms to any man who wanted."

Men with insatiable sexual appetites are likely to suffer from their propensity for *tzak-²antzile* ("woman grabbing"); whereas promiscuous girls are labeled *loko* (literally, "crazy").

"And after he told me how he had seduced old Petul's wife I said to him, "But you are just a wicked old fucker, *compadre*."

"Ahh, but I am a *man*," he replied. (Ha ha ha.)"

During gossip sessions Zinacantecos are eminently able to conceal their own histories and join in moral speculation. (One of the men who gossiped most actively about the sexual exploits of others is reputed to be the father of at least ten illegitimate children!) Similarly, dispute-settlers may not practice what they preach.

An ex-presidente was mocked for being self-righteous while on the bench. He would say to rapists and adulterers: "*Putá*, but what kind of behavior is that?" But he had his own wicked tendencies, and was beaten once by the mother of a girl he had violated.

A man with two wives may ridicule the sexual appetites of his neighbor who has three.

There is a considerable native theory about sexual desire. "Itchy" women are supposed to have red-colored bugs in their pubic hair. It is considered natural for young women to have as much curiosity about sexual contact as young men.

Several eligible young women of Nabenchauk have failed to attract suitors. People worry that if no young men

appear to ask for their hands properly, their "heads may stop functioning" and they will search out lovers in secret.

Old women are considered to retain sexual sensitivity until their sexual organs shrink away.

People joke about an old woman who was recently raped while tending sheep. Her son asked her, "Did you see who it was?" "It was Chep," she replied. "How was it?" "It was enough, it was enough," said the old woman.

15. Scolding, quarreling

A feature of all conflict and dispute is the verbal dueling and skillful scolding of which Zinacantecos are capable. Special words appear in scolding, and occasionally a man will be moved to speak in couplets when he rails against another. Laughlin (1975, p. 28) distinguishes the speech categories of "scolding speech" and "denunciatory speech," the former being an informal mode "used characteristically when one wishes . . . to upbraid another" and the latter being the use of formal couplet speech "in self-righteous declamations at home or at the courthouse" (p. 28). I assigned gossip stories which included bits of indirectly quoted scolding to this relatively large category.

The remaining categories listed in table 2 are largely self-explanatory. Stories of "sickness and death" (category 16) have to do with the circumstances of illness, especially fatal illness. Gossip takes special interest in venereal disease ("rot") and in the loss of life force engendered by extremely violent sexual intercourse (called "losing one's *chon* ['animal']"). Category 17 contains stories having to do with curing ritual, the curing powers of certain individuals, and even a few recipes for potions to cure exotic diseases. (One Who's Who session contains a long discussion of how to make an aphrodisiac.) Category 18, "marriage disputes," contains all stories about marital discord except cases of adultery: wife-beating, husband-scolding, sexual incompatibility. Category 19 includes stories of murder or attempted murder. Finally, category 20 includes stories in which people run away, from their hamlets or from Zinacantan, to escape punishment or to avoid marriage or cargos. (Appendix 3 lists and describes all the topic categories which figure in the gossip corpus.)

I have sampled the most common gossip themes to arm the reader for considering the following hypothesis: the ability to gossip is a general manifestation of cultural competence (i.e., the knowledge one has of a culture) and, hence, as a corollary, the collected gossip of a community

contains the germ of the ethnography of the place. I shall be concerned in the last chapters of this book with the ramifications of such a hypothesis for the theory of ethnography.

Consider first the relationship between the thematic concentrations of gossip and the results of other ethnographic analyses of similar topics.⁵ Do people gossip about the same sorts of things which cause conflict and result in legal settlements? Do they gossip and joke about the same topics?

Victoria Bricker (1968, chap. 4) isolates "two main humor complexes" in Zinacantan. She defines the complexes in terms of "cultural categories" as follows:

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Class 1 | Self-Image Complex
Clothing
Filth
(of body or clothing)
Awkwardness
(i.e., stumbling, falling down)
Caught
(i.e., tied up, limbs imprisoned)
Losing
(when it appears with <i>clothing</i> , refers to loss of articles of clothing)
Violence
(hitting, beating, fighting)
Drunkenness |
| Class 2 | Male-Female Relations Complex
Marriage
Lust
(illicit intercourse, seduction)
Efficacy
(when it appears with <i>Marriage</i> or <i>Lust</i> , refers to sexual prowess)
Exchange
(when it appears with <i>Marriage</i> or <i>Lust</i> , refers to exchanging women)
Violence
(hitting, fighting, beating)
Deceit
(lying, tricking)
Drunkenness
[p. 54] |

Bricker found that the norms governing these ethnographic categories were "implicit in the deviant behavior which Zinacantecos seem to regard as humorous" (p. 52). That is, Zinacantecos are most likely to laugh at people who fumble the rules for maintaining self-image or to ridicule deviance from the standards governing the relations between men and women (cf. Bricker 1973a, pp. 145-49).

The reader has no doubt come to understand that most gossip in Zinacantan is funny, at least to Zinacantecos, and that gossip sessions are occasions of laughter and joking. It would be comforting, then, if the humor complexes Professor Bricker describes were familiar to us as students of Zinacanteco gossip. In fact, the humorous complex having to do with male-female relations seems to lend itself well to gossip; consider the frequent gossip topics of divorce, illicit sexual relations, courtship problems, adultery, promiscuity, marriage disputes, and rape.

As for the Self-Image Complex, gossip seems at least to be looking nearby. A few stories mention clothing deficiencies as a device to highlight other objectionable qualities a person may have.

"I said to the girl, 'Well, won't you marry Petul since he was the first to ask for your hand?'"

"'Why should I bother to sew up his rotten pants for him?' she replied. 'Do you think that's the kind of man I want? He has barely covered his asshole. I want a good man, one who wears his pants a bit longer.' (Ha ha ha.)"

"Because that guy just wore his pants right up to here. . . . He really had to squeeze himself in. . . ."

Gossip emphasizes the deviant actions which accompany drunkenness rather than the foolish, mud-stained image of the drunk. Bricker finds that drunkenness is the object of humor insofar as consumption of alcohol is an "obstacle to the Zinacanteco's desire to present himself with demeanor in public" (1968, p. 76).

Similarly, fighting and beatings create juicy gossip, just as drunken brawls engender laughter (Bricker 1968, p. 79). Fights prompt gossip, especially when they mark preexisting hostilities or some inherently scandalous underlying situation, for example, adultery.

Nonetheless, gossip is not simply concerned with the demeanor and physical state of individuals in the way Bricker describes for Zinacanteco joking. A large component of joking takes place in contexts where the most available source for a good put-down is appearance or demeanor: the musician who mocks a drunken cargoholder (and thus reprimands him) during a ceremony is joking, but not gossiping. And gossip growing out of the incident emphasizes not simply the man's stupor but his ritual failure.

Table 4 Categories of Conflict

1. Witchcraft

witches who send sickness by themselves
 witches who ask for sickness
 witches who perform specific actions (e.g., burying meat, cutting candles)
 witches with supernatural powers
 talking saints
 petitions to the Earth Lord
 'ok'itabil chamel ("sickness called down by crying")

2. Aggression

threats of witchcraft or murder
 false accusations
 drunken insults
 fighting
 beatings
 causing sickness (e.g., by frightening)
 rape
 forcible entry
 theft
 attempted murder
 murder
 malicious curing (i.e., hastening the death of patient)

3. Kin disputes

boy vs. guardian or parents
 disputes between siblings
 disputes regarding women's property

4. Marital disputes

wife-beating
 adultery
 divorce

5. Courtship disputes

breaking a courtship
 elopement
 third-person interference in a courtship

6. Disputes between neighbors

debt
 unfulfilled curing contract
 damage to person (by nonrelative)
 damage to property
 accidental damage to property
 intentional damage—*theft*
 unintentional damage—*drunken destructiveness*
 long-term neighbor fights
 political battles

7. Disputes between individual and community

hamlet-level wrongs (failure in obligations to hamlet)
 wrongs against entire *municipio*
 accusations against high officials

Jane Collier (1973) categorizes conflict leading to legal battles; I have extracted her categories in table 4. Again, since gossip draws heavily on the public scandal which flows from town hall court cases, it would be reassuring if conflict categories resembled gossip themes.

It should be clear from inspection that there is a close parallel between what Zinacantecos find interesting to gossip about and what they find worth fighting about.⁶ We know that gossip often deals explicitly with town hall settlements and with the jailing that follows a dispute. Gossip precedes the courthouse; gossips may be aware of a dispute and its causes before a public conflict erupts. The corpus of gossip contains stories on each of the conflict themes Collier lists. Indeed, Collier reports some famous cases which enjoyed *municipiowide* notoriety; these stories reappeared almost word for word in Who's Who gossip sessions. For example, she lists as a case of "wrongs against the community" the story of a trip to lowland caves by a group of men who wanted to exchange the souls of their neighbors for wealth from the Earth Lord (J. Collier 1973, case 8, pp. 142-43).

It seems clear that the gossip corpus points to areas of Zinacanteco life which are interesting enough to talk about. What comes up in gossip parallels cases at the town hall, behavior that Zinacantecos ridicule. I suggest that the implicit subject of gossip is rules, somehow understood, underlying proper Zinacanteco behavior.

Gossip and the Cargo System

*Pero mi yora ch'ech' ta 'abtel
timi ilaj i tak'ine?*

"But can he survive a cargo
if his money is finished?"

6

In the last chapter I reported that cargo service was a frequent topic in the gossip I heard in Zinacantan. People continually discuss the schedule of officeholding in the hierarchy, the performances of cargoholders past and present, and their own plans and experiences in the cargo system. Less directly, men often use the cargo system to locate and identify particular people—as, say, the *martomorey* of a particular year—and to comment on them in a telescoped but significant way:

"the man who was *martomorey* three years ago but who ran away halfway through the cargo."

This conversational preponderance is a symptom of the importance of the cargo system to most of the Zinacantecos with whom I gossiped. Zinacantecos, like other people, talk about what interests them; the best clue—though not the only one—about what is on their minds is what is on their lips.

Contemporary ethnographers of Zinacantan have been similarly fascinated by the cargo system, a religious hierarchy characteristic of communities throughout the Maya area (and, indeed, a widespread concomitant of the Catholic conversion that followed Spanish conquest). The system of religious offices has been deemed central to Zinacanteco society. Pioneering ethnographic work in Zinacantan in the early 1960s suggested that "the degree and manner of a man's participation in the hierarchy is the major factor in determining his place in the community" (Cancian 1965, p. 2). The accepted analysis of the