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Preface

I first arrived in Zinacantan at the beginning of June 1966, fresh from college and just in time to celebrate my saint's day and be christened with my new Tzotzil name, Xun. I was, I thought, just passing through, in a brief flirtation with anthropology before getting on with my serious plans (I was a philosophy student). My name was soon extended to Xun Jvabajom ("John musician") as I spent that summer tagging along behind Zinacanteco musicians, who taught me to play and sing and who began my instruction in talking, joking, and being polite.

It turned out to be more than a flirtation. I was back again the next year with my wife Leslie, and a couple of years later with our daughter Sophie—to stay, by then, for a year. I had fallen into an easy identity in Zinacantan (as one of those Harvard anthropology students, but one who pretended to be a musician and could pass as one in a pinch), but I had never really *earned* my reputation. As a musician I could manage the tunes and follow songs, but I could neither joke nor lead ritual nor advise on procedure. As a private citizen I could construct grammatical Tzotzil sentences and conduct myself without offending others with my clumsiness (though I frequently amused them), but I couldn't really *talk* to anyone about anything that mattered (farming, land, politics, cargos, neighbors). I had friends, ritual kin, and debtors, but I felt that I knew very little about them (as, indeed, they knew little of me).

Thus began the struggle to penetrate more deeply into the lives of my Zinacanteco victims. This book documents a part of that struggle.

By the time I began the studies described here I had become familiar with current anthropological theory bearing

on the knowledge that natives are said to have of their cultures. I knew that Zinacantecos were able to manipulate lexical sets; that they could perform complex calculations of rank and prestige; that they could classify kin and produce corn both to eat and to sell. And I had been taught that whatever they knew, I could learn; that whatever they had learned from I had access to as well. How was it, then, that I found their conversation, their gossip, so impenetrable? This book charts my wobbly entry into the world of Zinacanteco talk, and it ultimately questions received notions of cultural knowledge or competence.

I eventually came to feel that my studies had brought me rather far. Studying the language of motives, causes, reasons, rules—charting people's missteps and disasters, their miscalculations and failures, as well as their less-discussed triumphs—through gossip had led me to some central questions. I began to consider in a new light the interrelations between rules, as promulgated through conversation, the goals at which people aimed (or claimed to aim), and, finally, the institutions in which rules are embedded and which in large measure create the goals and purposes of men. Gossip—which is ordinarily talk about rules and goals as much as it is talk about the doings of others—makes problematic the nature of this embedding: the standards which gossips summon are themselves intertwined with a way of life. The rules justify the institutions of the society, which in turn promulgate the rules. Conversation manipulates events and opinions to produce order—an order that agrees with (and is agreeable to) the institutional order.

So far so good: here is a self-validating cultural circle, which we can penetrate and observe in action by attention to gossip. And getting even this far is a task whose complexity and formidableness many theorists have failed to grasp. This book will, I hope, at least demonstrate that the circle is hard to enter.

And yet, with this research behind me, I now fear that my beginnings have been false ones. It is possible to ask transcendental questions. On the one hand, talk of rules and codes, of the gossip's cultural competence, and of cultural grammars (even in fragments) may simply be an elaborate dodge, allowing us to forget that we have both modeled away those mechanisms of mind and brain that we do not understand and also merely skimmed off the abstracted and manageable regularities from what remains an almost

totally mysterious jumble of behavior. We progress from real people behaving, to "native actors" who know something about behavior, to gossips whose only behavior is to juggle talk about that knowledge. The gossip is quick to interpret but slow to act.

There is a still more immediate objection to the sort of study I offer here. In conversation people construct, through the application of an elaborate cultural mechanism, order, reason, and meaning from a capricious world; but this process may also be at the heart of mystification. To enter the circle of a way of life and the rules and ideas which validate that way of life is so far not to ask, Why *this* way of life? Or, What sort of life *is* this, anyway? Perhaps the elaborate scheme of cultural rationalization is self-contradictory, deluded, illogical, even destructive, in the face of real constraints on Zinacanteco life. The consciousness of the Zinacanteco gossip is perhaps as selectively fogged as the view of the Zinacanteco woman who sees, among the hundreds of bustling figures in the ladino town of San Cristóbal de las Cases, only her own hamlet neighbors. For her, the rest do not exist. In a similar way, for the Zinacanteco gossip, neither do ladino landlords, government manipulators, coffee *fincas*, truck-owning monopolies, missionaries, foreign or domestic anthropologists, lawyers, storekeepers, or multinational corporations exist. They do not figure in the order he creates in talking, although they do figure (often decisively) among the constraints which govern his life.

This book, then, at once strikes deep into the heart of Zinacanteco culture and ideology and at the same time simply misses Zinacanteco society as a real part of Chiapas, of Mexico, and of the rest of the world. A good deal may occur in the realm of discourse which gossips create, which people think; but Zinacantecos actually inhabit the real world, where they live, work, and die. My own worry with what I have written stems not from a dissatisfaction over what I have learned about how Zinacantecos think and talk—I am glad to have gotten as far as I have—but from the fear that much of this book is irrelevant to the lives of Zinacantecos and the conditions that underlie those lives. There is one consolation: Zinacanteco ideas of the forces governing their lives may be similarly deluded, so that a central part of future work in Zinacantan and neighboring communities must be devoted to overcoming these ideas and forging a new awareness. I hope in my future work to be a part of such an endeavor.

Acknowledgments

My primary debts are to my family and teachers in Zinacantan, to whom I address the following words. (I write Tzotzil, throughout this book, in a practical orthography described in Appendix 4.)

Kolavalik akotolik yu'un ti achi'inikon, ti achanutasikon, ti ap'isikon ta vinik ta avamikoik. Ko'ol ijchi'in jbatike, lek ijtzak jbatik ta lo'ile, ko'ol liyakubotik 'une. 'Ak'o mi chalabanon, 'ak'o mi chavuton, pero yu'nán sa'bil ku'un, toj sonsoon. Avalbeikon jp'eluk k'op, avalbeikon jset'uk rason, ijchan 'o k'u cha'al chilo'ilaj, k'u cha'al chi'abtej, k'u cha'al ta jcha'le jba.

Koliyal tajmek li jmol kumpare Xun Vaskis ta Nabenchauk xchi'uk jkumale me'el, yu'un slekil yo'onik, ijch'amunbe sna ta Jteklum, xchi'uk ta jnatikotik ta Nabenchauk 'une. Jal ich'ay jjol ta lo'il xchi'uk li jkumpare mole, k'alal liyalbe kwentoetik yu'un ti 'antivo moletik, ti vo'ne krixchanoetik. Mi li'ipaj lek lispoj, liyak'be kantela. Lek lixchabibe li kunen tzebe, li xch'ul ch'amale.

Koliyal li jmol kumpare Petul Vaskis ta Nabenchauk, xchi'uk jkumale Petu', xchi'uk sManvel, sChep, yAntun, sLoxa, skotolik. Ta primero ijchi'in jbatikotik ta pas kobral ta 'olon. Lavie, ko'ol jnatikotik, ko'ol jbetikotik, ko'ol ka'altikotik, ko'ol jk'optikotik, ko'ol jjoltikotik. Jchanojbe sk'op srason. Lek listzak ta lo'il, ijchan 'o k'u cha'al chitak'av, k'u cha'al ta jpak lo'il 'une. Ta jp'is ta jtot jme'.

Koliyal li jkumale Paxku' stzeb li jkumpare Petul 'une. Ko'ol kilojbe jbatikotik jnatikotik. 'Ijchan 'o k'u cha'al chilabanvan, k'u cha'al chilo'iltavan, k'u cha'al chitze'in. Mi livi'naj liyak'be yot jve'. Mi sik ika'i liyak'be jk'u jlap.

Koliyal li ?anima jtot Petul Buro ta Jteklum xchi?uk jme? Mal. Lisp'is ta skrem, ijch'amunbe sk'ob ta vob ?une. Lastima mu p'ijuk li jjole, komo vokol ijchan.

Koliyal li jkumpare Chep K'obyox ta ?Apas. Buyuk jnup jbatikotik, lek ijchi'in jbatikotik. Ko'ol chi?abtejotikotik, lek chilo?ilajotikotik, lek chkuch'tikotik.

Koliyal li mol Manvel Tulan ta Nabenchauk xchi?uk jme? Xunka?. ?Ati chopluk yo'on li jme? Xunka? ?une, solet t'anal chixanav k'al tana, yu?un lisjalbe jpok'-k'u? jtzotz-k'u? li me?ele xchi?uk sTinik. Li?ay ta ch'omil ta yabtel li mol Manvel ?une, ijchan ?o k'u cha?al mu xivayotik ?une.

Koliyalik li mol Lol Romin ta Nabenchauk, li jkumpare Xun Sukipan xchi?uk jmol kumpare jme?el kumale, li jkumpare Maryan ?Ach'eltik ta Nabenchauk, li jmol kumpare Chep Pulivok ta ?Apas xchi?uk jme?el kumale xchi?uk jch'ul ch'amal Mal, li jmol kumpare Maryan Konte ta Pera, li mol Chep Nuj ta Nachij, mol Xalik ta Vo? ta Petej ta Chamu?, k'ox Romin ta Nabenchauk, li mol Romin Teratol ta Jteklum, xchi?uk skotol jkumpare-tak jkumaletak kamikotak tzjunul jteklume.

I would never have gone to Zinacantan at all, nor pursued anthropology, without the Harvard Chiapas Project, personified by Professor Evon Z. Vogt and Catherine C. Vogt. Vogtie and Nan opened Zinacantan to us and kept it open, welcoming my family and me into their home, into their family, and into the anthropological world. George and Jane Collier were my first and most valued teachers in Zinacantan, and they have more than once shared house and larder with us. Robert Laughlin shared with me vast amounts of Tzotzil, and I feel I have barely scratched the surface of his knowledge.

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My family has shared my life in Zinacantan and made it not only richer but possible at all. My wife Leslie and my daughter Sophie have been through all of it and done better than I. My brother Peter has run me ragged from

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Finally, Christopher Boehm deserves special mention (a share of the blame?) for inspiring this whole enquiry. One evening in a Cambridge delicatessen, while over cheese blintzes I pondered my research plans for Zinacantan, Chris and Leslie were engrossed in a violent, shocking gossip session. Awakening to what was going on I realized in a flash the fascination of gossip; hence, this book.