

## Chapter 2

### The Ethnographic Context for Gossip

Te to hk'opon hbatik ti bu hnup hbatike....(We'll talk again sometime wherever we happen to meet)

For me the task of learning about Zinacantan coincided with the task of learning to understand Zinacanteco gossip. As the reader may have discovered in Chapter 1, understanding talk about the world presupposes knowledge about the world. We are able to enter the particular Zinacanteco worlds depicted in gossip through a process of constantly modifying our assumptions that Zinacanteco worlds are like our own. The process is like (and, indeed, includes) learning a language; we progress from tentative translations of new words by old words to understanding utterances without an intermediary language. Similarly, the more gossip I heard in Zinacantan, the more I was able to appreciate what Zinacantecos did, what they were concerned with, and what they noticed enough to comment upon.

A claim of this thesis is that a man's knowledge of his own culture has a complex structure which is more easily learned than described; and that we may probe the deepest levels of this structure by observing native actors' conversations with each other, in particular their gossip. In fact, I am prepared to suggest that there is no more direct way to penetrate the tangle of rules we call 'cultural codes'

than the study of gossip.

I benefitted in the field from exposure to the results of considerable previous ethnographic research in Zinacantan. The extraordinary range of this research is documented in Vogt (1969). The ethnographic background material provided me with certain skills and useful information that I could not have obtained in so short a time otherwise. But it was only when I heard Zinacantecos talk with one another, and when I really began to listen, that I came to feel any genuine understanding of what was going on around me. In this thesis I shall not be concerned with recounting ethnographic phenomena elsewhere described. Instead, I shall try to lead the reader to certain discoveries about Zinacantan by sharing some of what I heard people say to each other.

In Chapter 5 I compare the picture of certain ethnographic facts as seen through gossip with phenomena portrayed by ethnographers. There is no need here to reproduce the general description of Zinacantan which the interested reader can find in Vogt (1970). A certain ethnographic background, however, is necessary to put Zinacanteco gossip in context. My first task in the field was to discover where Zinacantecos

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These codes certainly involve certain kinds of skills, units, objects, etc. that never enter gossip at all. Cf. Chapter 8. Various suggestions about what a 'cultural grammar' includes are to be found in: Kay (1966); Keesing (1970), (1971).

got together to gossip; and I knew where to look.

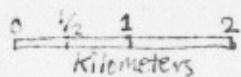
The municipality of Zinacantan lies along a ridge and adjacent valley in the highlands of Chiapas in South-east México. Zinacantan is just to the west of the ladino (Spanish speaking) town of San Cristóbal las Casas, and just to the south of Chamula, another Indian community whose inhabitants, like Zinacantecos, speak the Mayan language Tzotzil. The municipio lies for the most part at an altitude varying from 2100 to 2500 meters (Vogt (1969:4)); 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 being burned in preparation for planting.

Zinacantan is composed of hamlets scattered through the municipal territory, with a ceremonial and political center, called /Hteklum/, at its North-eastern corner. (See Map 1.) The political and social factors which govern settlement contribute definitely to a Zinacanteco's gossip resources: the people he has to gossip with, the people he knows enough to gossip about, and the things he has to say about them.

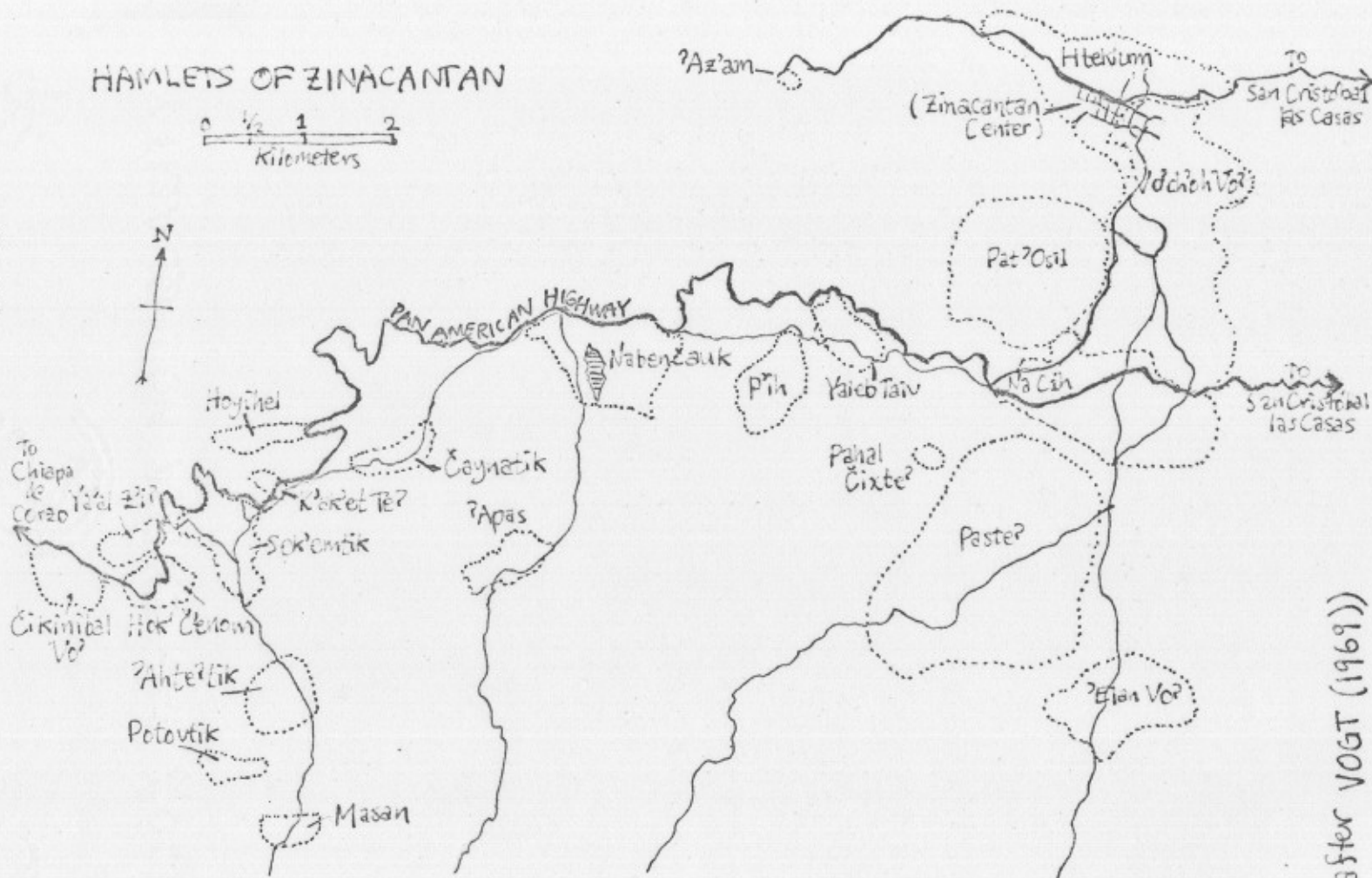
Vogt (1969:127) describes hamlets as

"...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."

# HAMLETS OF ZINACANTAN



MAP I



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(after VOGT (1969))

A man's domestic group includes the people he commonly eats with, with whom he shares a house compound, and a house cross --- the symbolic point of entry to a house for ritual functions. (Vogt (1969:127-8)).

At a given moment in time, a household may include a man, his wife, and 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; and it creates a continuous context for gossip. At mealtime a family commonly exchanges the day's facts and discusses the doings of neighbors. Moreover 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.

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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, Cep is at the town-hall. He is drunk and shouting." (G 56)

"Your brother Cep?"

"Yes. He fought with Mikel from the corner store they say."

"They both had mud on their clothes."

"How stupid! It's that wife of his who is deceiving 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."

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The larger 'units' of a hamlet, the /sna/ and the waterhole group, are actually counters in a geographical code which Zinacantecos employ to map the municipio.<sup>2</sup> Often houses cluster in such a way that their location may be labelled 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 Muciketik/ ("the home of the Mucik's"), 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

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Vogt (1969) intends these units to have greater importance ritually and socially than I accord them here. He defines the /sna/ as "the grouping that is composed of one or more localized patrilineages" (p. 140). Ordinary Zinacanteco usage, however, does not necessarily entail genealogical relations of this kind. Moreover, patrilineages and identifiable lineage segments are not always localized, though there is a preference for patrilocal settlement after young men marry. Cf. G. Collier (1968), especially pp. 12-17.

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 which are based on these groupings. I need here only mention that a man, in conversation, 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.

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"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. We never know anything about him, living far away as we do. But what do people say about him at home?"

"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 her a few blows yourself...."

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The hamlet, or paraje, in some cases represents a unit well defined both geographically and politically, grouping

together several waterhole groups. In other cases, paraje 'boundaries' split waterhole groups, and living 'in' a paraje represents only an affiliation with certain institutions: tax rolls, a school committee, etc.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is considerable variation between hamlets in the 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 /Nabencauk/ --- a relatively compactly settled paraje with a tightly focussed political, social, and ceremonial life --- will be likely to know about everyone else in /Nabencauk/. Whereas a man from the section of /Na cih/ called /7Avan C'en/ may be better versed on the doings of his nearby neighbors from the hamlet of /Paste7/ than those of his hamlet-mates from the opposite end of /Na cih/.

Such geographical considerations, combined with the recent patterns of communication routes within the municipio, (foot trails, truck roads, paths to the lowlands, etc.) as well, no doubt, as factional allignments (see below), allow us to postulate rough divisions of Zinacantan above the hamlet level. George A. Collier (personal communication)

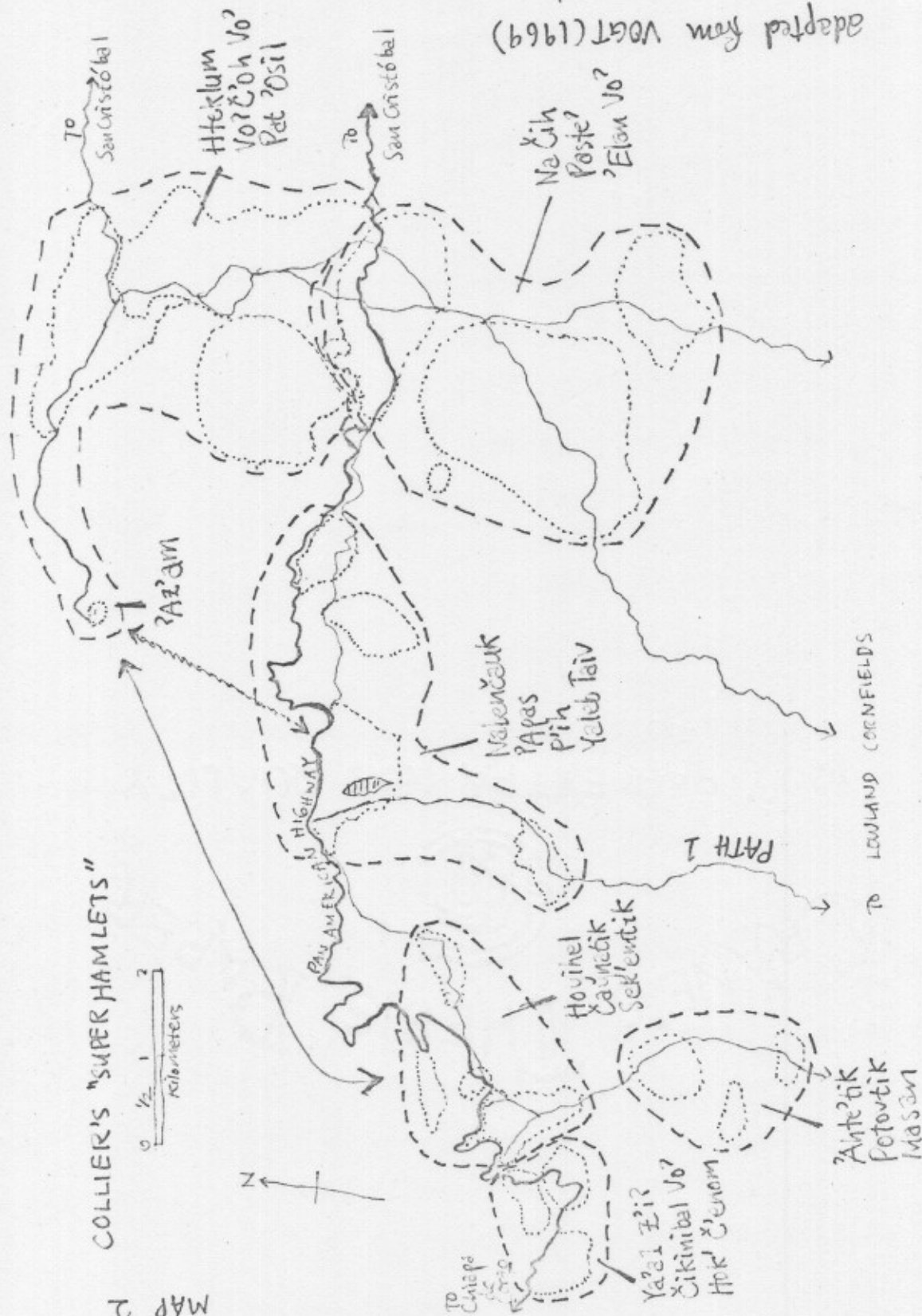
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<sup>3</sup> For example, in the area of the hamlet of /Vo7 c'oh vo7/ called /szelleh/ or mina carbon, individuals associated with the hamlets of /Na cih/ and /Paste7/ are to be found.



COLLIER'S "SUPER HAMLETS"

MAP 2



found that comparison of the numbers of ritual kinsmen which important Zinacantecos from each hamlet had in other hamlets suggested especially close links between hamlets as indicated on Map 2. A number of factors might contribute to these groupings. Since the Pan-American Highway is the most important commercial route in the area, common access points to the road clearly link /7Apas/ to /Nabencauk/, and /Paste7/ and /7Elan Vo7/ to /Nacih/. The presence of the road, moreover, has made travel west, down the mountains, more convenient for the westernmost hamlets so that stronger commercial and political ties can be established with communities to the west, rather than with Zinacantan Center and San Cristóbal. Trails suitable for mules and horses still represent the most important routes by which Zinacantecos travel to their principal farming areas, and to rented cornfields in the low-<sup>4</sup>lands. Main trails heading south (southwest) on Map 2 show clearly the communications link between /Nabencauk/-/7Apas/, /Nacih/-/Paste7/-/7Elan Vo7/, and /Sek'emtik/-/Hok'C'enom/-/Potovtik/. We may note that these main trails lead to the main plots of ejido land granted to Zinacantecos under land-reform laws. It is further interesting that path 1 leads to a tract of land which a group of Zinacantecos from /7Apas/ and /Nabencauk/ have cooperated to obtain under land-reform laws

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Some Zinacantecos now rent cornfield at great distances, and must reach them by truck.

over the last five or six years.

In any case, Collier's suggestions lead one to postulate geographical divisions within the municipio which seem also to represent gossip areas. During gossip sessions, people from /Nabencauk/ and /7Apas/ complemented each other well; and a man from /Na cih/ revealed to me that another man from /Paste7/ had been withholding information about certain /Paste7/ people... information he himself was eager to supply. Similarly, a single man from /Sek'emtik/ was well versed on the affairs of those from /Caynatik/ and /Hoyihel/ to the East, as well as /Hok'C'enom/ and /Potovtik/ to the West.

Given this expanded notion of "area" within Zinacantan, I agree with Jane Collier (1970):

"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. Hamlets thus appear to be endogamous units made up of several local descent groups. 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 resemble women in knowing 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." (Pp. 10-11)

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

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I concentrate on men's gossip throughout this thesis. As the passage above may suggest, women are likely to be in a position to gossip about a limited number of people. Moreover, I found myself singularly unable to get women to talk freely in my presence.

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 in San Cristóbal could not fail to notice circles of Zinacanteco men near the market, often near the cornselling stalls, weaving hats and talking animatedly. But selling corn gives less of an opportunity for conversation and joking than does growing corn. Work in the cornfields is grueling, especially during the long periods of weeding in the wet season; yet Zinacantecos look forward to these periods of labor.

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"I want to learn how people talk together, how they joke with one another." (Conversation with a compadre).

"Ah, but 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!"

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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 requesting other Zinacantecos to become

godparents to their children. (See Vogt (1969:230-239)). 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 have in the past sought work on government road-building 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 /h7abtel ta be/ ('workers on the road') are notorious gossips, whose sharp eyes and tongues are to be avoided.

The religious calendar and the system of religious cargo positions which supports it multiplies the opportunities which a Zinacanteco has to widen his circle of friends and his store of knowledge about other people. There are four hierarchical levels of cargoholders, or /h-pas-7abtel/ ("work-doer"); the 'work' they perform is a year of service to a particular saint --- caring for the saint image through regular ceremonies, and holding calendrical church fiestas. A man serves at the lowest level, and 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 elder men who have enjoyed considerable wealth attain the status of /pasaro/ ("one who

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has passed").

Entering the cargo system brings a man into close contact with men from other hamlets, of various ages. Senior cargoholders and their formal ritual advisers are often respected powerful elder 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 channels.

Performance in the ritual hierarchy is one of the most frequent topics of conversation in Zinacantan. Men are constantly calculating a cargoholder's outlay of money and re-examining the schedule of incoming and outgoing offices.

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One might give a hypothetical cargo career, using cargo positions mentioned in the gossip of Chapter 1. A man assembling sufficient wealth might 'pass the cargo' of /martomorey/ at about age thirty. After a year's service, he retires to recover from the debts incurred. At age forty he may take another cargo, say, /7alperes santorenso/ ('the ensign-bearer of Saint Laurence'), during whose tenure he will associate with all the other alfereces in their ritual functions. At age fifty, if he has the money, he may become a /rehirol/ --- a third level position, and one of the Elders. Finally, at age sixty he may pass the cargo of /muk'ta 7alkalte/ --- the highest ranking cargo position. Having finished four cargos --- a complete career --- he retires permanently as a /pasaro/.

Other indices of personal ability and success are related through gossip to cargo performance.

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

(H18)

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

"30,000 I heard."

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

"What about old Petul, the musician?" (H26)

"People just say that he doesn't work much himself. He just passes cargos through the labor of his daughters. I don't know if it's from selling tortillas that he passes his cargos --- or so they say. Or maybe from selling feathered wedding gowns. But he hasn't ever planted much corn --- just one almud, or perhaps two."

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

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"But let me tell you, that /7Alperes Trinirat/ just

cannot joke. He doesn't know what to do." (G 59)

"/Kere/."

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

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

"When I was /alferes/, the musicians cried 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.'"

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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 decisions of importance, or 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 (1970:27)). It is easy to elicit 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 of importance 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.



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"..../puta/, there was a big fight over it; they made a lot of trouble over it...." (W 39)

"Hiiii, that was a long time ago."

"They grabbed old man Okoz. They even managed to apprehend old Sarate and old Cep Krus --- that was when he was Presidente, or maybe Treasurer --- I've forgotten what they said. /Puta/, they tied him up anyway. Soldiers went to his house. And they brought out the money, too; the 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 Okoz, 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 Zu, old Papyan Cayna, old Maryan Xantis and his brother Palas, as well as old Antun Okoz. They were the real leaders; they were behind it all. But they had their men, their supporters...."

"Sure, probably lots of them."

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Mexican law provides for the existence of certain civil officials who serve three-year terms at the town-hall,

the cabildo, in /Hteklum/, and peripherally in the agencias or hamlet-level governments in /Nabencauk/ and in /Sek'entik/. Though they ostensibly have other duties, 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 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 (1970:70)).

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"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." (W 54)

"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 --- well, 'See, he's no good', --- that's what they say."

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

"What people want is always to get there 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 somebody 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...."

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An alternate route to political power leads ambitious and capable Zinacantecos to manipulate non-Indian institutions for the benefit of an Indian constituency.<sup>7</sup> The prime example has been use of the ejido laws by individual Zinacantecos to control the distribution of land under land reform. The most recent clear political boss on a municipio-wide 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

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George Collier is responsible for the suggestion that manipulating non-Indian institutions in favor of Indians was one of the most effective --- and certainly one of the craftiest --- ways to gain political power. Engaging in activities that have disadvantageous results only for non-Indians hurts no potential supporters.

network of subordinate ejido officials upon whom he could count for support in other political issues. (Vogt (1969:286)). More recently a long-time anthropological informant has risen to political prominence in /7Apas/ and /Nabencauk/ by heading a movement to obtain a new tract of lowland cornfields under present ejido laws. He represents a new sort of powerful Zinacanteco. He has gained prestige (as well as the hostility of some of his seniors) by rapid progress through the cargo system; but he has taken advantage of his knowledge of Spanish and personal charisma to manipulate ladino authorities with an almost incredible persistence.

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 (1970:222)).

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"But that is really evil, to charge such interest on a loan. If someone borrows one hundred pesos, and the interest also reaches one hundred, first he must pay off the first one hundred pesos he received." (W 93)

"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. We just remember the jail waiting for us in Hteklum."

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

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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. (Cf. Rush (1971)). It is these factional disputes, as well as the domestic fights and cases of violence which become public at open hearings at the town-hall that provide the juiciest input to the gossip stream in Zinacantan.

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"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)

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