Chapter 4

/Mi 7oy slo7iltael le7e?/

(Is there any gossip about him?): The Structure of Zinacanteco Gossip

Though I could soon understand the words people used in gossip and conversation in Zinacantan --- that is, I could understand Tzotzil [1] --- it required half of my field stay for me to discover what skills and knowledge I lacked and must acquire to understand the gossip itself. I tended to share Gluckman's pessimism: that I never could get it all. I had to learn even where to begin.

I found myself hearing much conversation that seemed relevant. At every meal, my Zinacanteco hosts rambled on about people they had seen or heard about during the day. At fiestas, I noted my companions pointing out faces in the crowd and commenting confidentially among themselves. At the cabildo, and near it, I could hear the shrill tones of formal pleading, women's tears. In San Cristóbal I listened in on the hilarity of men's talk, their political intrigues. But I found myself unable to record what I was hearing --- what was there to take notes on, except for individually interesting words? What made gossip absorbing for the participant but rendered it meaningless to me as observer? I

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[1] I spent the summers of 1966 and 1967 in Zinacantan, as well as the summer of 1969, before I went into the field to study gossip. Thus, I had acquired some competence in Tzotzil before embarking on the present work. See my field schedule, Appendix 2.

discovered that my primary problem was to learn who the people appearing in gossip were; afterwards I could devote my attention to what people were doing and why it mattered enough to talk about.

The relative importance of the three sorts of questions I could ask about a given gossip item (who? what? so what?) became clear as I unravelled the elements of gossip sessions. I found that the immediate conversational conventions were invariant in all gossip situations; and I discovered that most full gossip 'texts' shared a common structure.

There are essentially two participants in a gossip exchange in Zinacantan: the storyteller and his interlocutor. [2] Even when there are more than two people involved in a gossip session --- more than one person who knows the story, and more than one who wants to hear it --- a single primary storyteller emerges, and a single listener takes over the responsibility of answering for the whole audience. Others may make comments, but at any given moment it may appear that one man is talking to one other, and that the rest are merely eavesdropping.

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[2] These participants are not named in Tzotzil, nor is there a name for what the interlocutor does. (He does not simply /tak'/ ('respond') or /tak'av/ ('answer').) It is interesting to note the similarities between the situation in Zinacantan and in the Saramaka village of Kadjoe, Brownsweg, Surinam where I worked in the summer of 1968. There, the positions of storyteller and listener are formal and invariant; in fact, the headman of the village, once wanting to make a formal speech to me, had to go out and find a 'listener' before he could talk at all --- since I myself was unable to 'listen' with the appropriate responses.

But the interlocutor is more than a listener. He actively
participates in the story, interjecting appropriate comments,
exclamations, questions, etc. He has a fairly standard
repertoire of phrases, words, grunts to be used more or less
for rhythm at neutral points. The storyteller, similarly,
talks in short phrases, pausing between each for the inter-
locutor's response. He, too, has a set of fillers from which
to draw while he collects his thoughts.[3] Here, by way of
illustration, is an excerpt from a two-man gossip session in
which all the interlocutor's remarks are included. (The
interlocutor is person B, the storyteller, person A.)

B /Mi 7o spasik yec krixcano?/ (G 1)
   'Have people done anything like that?'

A /7oy spas yec 7ac' toe/
   'There is a recent case of that kind.'

B /Aaaa/
   'Oh'

A /7Ali ha7 x..../
   'Um, it was....'

B /Muc'u/
   'Who?'

A /Szeb li 7anima mol Manvel 7Iyene/
   'The daughter of the late old Manvel Iyen.'

B /Aaaa/
   'Oh'

A /Ha7 szeb li 7anima mol Manvel 7Iyen li7 ta..../
   'Yes, it was the daughter of the late Manvel Iyen
   from....'

B /Aaa/
   'Yes...'

3

 See Gossen (1970:195-196) for examples of such fillers in
Chamula narrative.

A /ta 7az'ame/
'... from Salinas'

B /Aaaa/
'Oh'

A /ta 7on te7tik xalike/
'...from the Madron Grove, as they call it.'

B /Manvel 7Iyen 7ati i7ec' ta bolomale/
'You mean the Manvel Iyen who played the jaguar
(at the fiesta of San Sebastian)?'

A /ha7 7un bi/
'That's the one.'

B /Aaaa/
'Oh'

A /Pwes, ha7 primero isk'uban skrem li mol Maryan
Konzarese/
'Well, first she was engaged to old Maryan Konzares's
son.'

B /7Ali...rehirole/
'You mean the...third-level cargoholder?'

A /Ha7e/
'That's right.'

B /Aaaa/
'Oh'

A /Isk'uban ba7yi/
'He first asked for her hand.'

B /Bweno/
'Okay.'

A /Bweno, pwes, iyak' matanal ya7el, ba yak' hset'
huteb ya7el ta na 7un/
'Well, so he went to give gifts, he went to give
a little (liquor) at the house.'

B /Li mol Maryan 7une/
'Who? Old Maryan?'

A /Mol Maryan 7une/
'Yes, old Maryan.'

B /Bweno, mi itak'av ya7el ti sme7 li zebe/
  'Okay, but did the girl's mother answer (favorably)?'

A /Sme7 li zebe, tak'av/
  'The girl's mother agreed.'

B /Bweno/
  'Fine.'

...

A /Bweno, solel tey ispak'alin sba to7ox li vinike
  ce7e, porke slok'el yo7on.../
  'Well, anyway, the man just offered himself (to
  the girl) because he sincerely desired her.'

B /ispas kasto ya7el/
  'He went to some expense then?'

A /ispas kasto ya7el, ibat ta vula7al/
  'He had expenses, he went there to visit.'

B /k'usi halil ismak ya7el/
  'How long did he court her?'

A /7iii, te nan cibuk habil 7un/
  'Mmmm, it was about two years.'

B /Cib habil/
  'Two years?'

A /Cib habil/
  'Yes, two years.'

B /7ihola/
  'Son of a bitch!'

A /Cibuk/
  'About two.'

B /Bweno li cib habil 7une, cak' matanal.../
  'Okay, so those two years he gave gifts...'

The storyteller talks in short phrases with considerable

repetition. (In fact, in the example shown the storyteller

is well known for speaking slowly.) The interlocutor res-

ponds with: (a) neutral grunts, (b) exclamations (e.g.,

/7ihola/ from Spanish hijo de la chingada),(c) questions as
to the identity of the indefinite subject or object of a
sentence, and (d) questions of clarification (about the
identity of one of the actors in the story, or about matters
of fact.)   Drawing out the storyteller without intruding on
his style involves considerable skill: and the man who has
to face a dumb audience is thrown into confusion and finds
it hard to speak at all.

The exchanges from this story illustrate one of the re-
current structural segments found in all gossip stories. If
two men begin to gossip in the most natural context --- i.e.,
brought together for some other purpose, they start to talk
about noteworthy recent events --- then the resulting gossip
story will have three parts: (a) identification, (b) the
story, (c) evaluation. The excerpt above begins to show
how the storyteller identifies the people about whom he is
gossiping so that the interlocutor can understand from some
personal vantage point who they are. He offers a sequence
of "identifying formulae", each time responding to a probe
from the interlocutor. He identifies the girl in the story
by means of the following sequence of formulae:

    (i) Daughter of Manvel Iyen (now deceased),

    (ii) who lived in the hamlet of /7Az'am/ ('salt')

    (iii) in the particular section of /7Az'am/ called
          /7on te7tik/ ('grove of Madron trees')

    (iv) and who had passed a particular second level

religious cargo which entailed performing as a
'jaguar' at the Fiesta of San Sebastian.

This sequence is sufficient to identify the girl's father and
hence the girl. (It turns out later that the interlocutor
was well-acquainted with the father --- had held a different
religious cargo simultaneously --- though he did not know the
daughter in question.)

The first boy mentioned, the girl's first fiancé, was
identified as

(i) The son of old Maryan Konzares

(ii) who (the father) had been a regidor (a third
level cargoholder).

Again, primary identification of the father is achieved by
reference to the religious hierarchy. In this case the
interlocutor turned out to know the boy himself; he was able
to name him after a further disclosure:

(iii) /yu7un copol hp'eh ssat/
'One of his eyes is bad.'

The interlocutor was then able to say

(iv) /ha7 li Telexe/
'Then it was Telex (a particular son of the old
man).'

Occasionally the interlocutor is left in the dark and
can ask no pertinent questions to identify a character.
The storyteller ordinarily makes a concerted effort to
establish some pathway which will lead the interlocutor to
the person in question --- he may use kinship ties. Another
suitor who appears later in this same gossip session is

identified through the following sequence:

(Interlocutor: 'Whose son was that?')

(i) He was the son of a man they refer to now as the late Antun.

(Interlocutor: 'I don't know him.')

(ii) Well, he was also the son of old Maryan Konzares's younger sister (if that helps).

These long sequences of identifying formulae are extremely important parts of all Zinacanteco gossip; in fact, gossip sessions often break down into lengthy genealogical discussions. Some people seem to pride themselves on their knowledge of kinship and family history, not only for their own families but for those of their neighbors. Similarly, people have fantastically accurate memories of the cargo careers of other Zinacantecos, even from distant parajes. It became clear that to begin to understand gossip, I would need to tap the shared knowledge that people had of others throughout the municipio which made identification possible.

A limited number of schemata recur in identifying formulae; the nature of these schemata hinted at the information I needed to gather. To establish a pathway the storyteller need only establish kinship relations between the person he has in mind and a well-identified person. Identifying formulae commonly move down generations or stay at the same generation. That is, the beginning of a path may be an elder person, well-known; the individual being identified may be his sibling, child, or son- or daughter-in-law:

/yik'oh szeb li mol Petule/
'He's the one who married old Petul's daughter.'

Hence, the set of kin relations which occur frequently in such identifying formulae includes child, sibling, spouse, and sibling-in-law (particularly brother-in-law).

The following schemata often appear to identify an individual from whom a path can proceed:

i.   focal individual (a well-known name); e.g., /Mol Maryan Sarate/ (the political boss); /mol preserente/ (the municipal Presidente).

ii. religious cargo position; e.g., /mol pasaro/ ('elder who has completed the hierarchy); /7ec'em ta santa krusal/ ('was a mayordomo in charge of the saint image called Santa Cruz').

iii. civil office; e.g., /lok'em komite/ ('used to serve on the ejido committee'); /mol hwes/ (town hall official).

iv. talent or skill; e.g., /h7ilol/ ('curer'); /hvabahom/ ('musician')

v.   place of residence; e.g., /ta 7on te7tik/ ('from Madron grove'); /yolon mukenal/ ('who lives below the cemetery').

vi. (By far the least frequent) reference to past gossip and reputation; e.g., /hmilvaneh/ ('the murderer'); /xc'akoh yahnil/ ('the one who divorced his wife').

An identifying formula can involve just these schemata in combination; or it may combine schemata with kinship pathways, as we have seen above. In order to make sense out of such identifying sequences a Zinacanteco must have at his disposal a vast array of information about others in the community, their relatives, their cargo careers, and their past transgressions.

After all the characters have been identified, a gossip session proceeds to the story itself (though, of course, new characters may be introduced during the course of a story). But the story is more than a narrative. The interlocutor can ask about particular points of interest; we are thus given explicit evidence about what counts, what actions and words are crucial to the situation and its outcome. The basic plot of the story which I have been examining in this chapter is this:

> Old Manvel's daughter is courted by Telex, son of old Maryan. She rejects him and is hauled into court after running away to avoid him. Despite the Presidente's arguments she continues to reject him; she agrees to pay back the money he has spent in courting her. Telex persists and finally rapes the girl with the encouragement of her mother. She still rejects him and marries someone else...

The interlocutor is particularly concerned with the form of the courtship: did the suitor act properly so as to insure that the girl was obligated? Did the girl reject him wrongly? Was anyone's behavior extraordinary? The nature of the interaction makes it possible for both interlocutor and storyteller to emphasize the relevant aspects of the affair; the gossip session serves as a practical moral lesson by allowing participants to reflect on particular behavior and observe its outcome before making explicit evaluations.

Here are some examples of the questions that the interlocutor asked in this story:

During the original courtship petitioning, did the

girl's mother /-tak'av/ ('answer favorably')?

When the girl rejected her suitor, was she already /k'openbil ta yan/ ('spoken to (i.e., propositioned) by another')?

How long did the courtship proceed? How much expense did the unsuccessful suitor go to in buying gifts, etc., for the courtship?

When the girl fled, where did she spend the night? (The implication of the question is: did the boy have grounds to suspect her of eloping with another?)

Another feature of Zinacanteco narrative is the liberal use of dialogue.[4] Gossip audiences seem particularly to enjoy what amounts to a dramatization of conversations which the characters in the story are alleged to have had --- especially if such conversations are heated.

"'Will you marry this boy?' said the Presidente.

"'I don't want to,' she said.

"'Well, if there is some other person who has already proposed to you, say so, admit it openly,' she was told.

"'No one,' she said.

"'Well then you should marry him for awhile. See if he can feed you; gradually you will become accustomed to one another,' said the Presidente.

"'No,' said the girl.

"'Perhaps it would be better for you to have a civil marriage(which makes it harder to be divorced),' said the

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[4] Robert M. Laughlin has remarked to me that a similarly outstanding feature of dreams in Zinacantan is that they are filled with dialogue. Characters in dreams always talk to one another.

<u>Presidente</u>. He started to go into his office (to issue the papers).

"'No, I don't want him,' said the girl. 'Why don't you just give him your own daughter if you have one?'"

"Son of a bitch!"

"The fucking girl!"

"'Listen,' said the <u>Presidente</u>. "What gives you the right to talk to me this way; are you superior to me? You are nobody, but I am a settler of disputes. I didn't just take my seat here at the townhall yesterday; I've had years in this office. Now are you going to tell me to give my own daughter? Are you going to give me orders? You are just acting pretty snotty,' said the <u>Presidente</u>."

After the story is told, a gossip session enters the evaluative stage. When all have heard of a man's trans-gressions or misfortunes, storyteller and interlocutor are moved to comment on the moral implications of the story. Sometimes such comments are tossed off sarcastically. After hearing about a case of adultery or even a murder, a Zina-canteco is likely to say

/baz'i lek spasik krixcanoetik yo7e./
'People over there do the nicest things.'

Often there is more to be said. In the story I have been discussing, participants in the gossip session laid much of the blame for the girl's misconduct to the fact that her father was dead and could not discipline her.

(a) /ha7 xa ti k'u spas ta stukike, komo c'abal xa
     stot ca7ie/
     'That's the way she acts when she is alone, for
     she realizes that she has no father.'

(b) /li sme7e, mu xa sp'is ta vinik/
     'As for her mother, she cannot respect her.'

(c) /sme7e, mu xa baluk/
     'Her mother was not enough.'

(d) /7ati kuxluk ti stote, xc'un mantal nan bi a7a/
     'If her father were alive, then she would obey!'

(e) /k'alal sme7 xa no7oxe, mu xa xak' ta kwenta/
     'If her mother is just alone, then she will pay
     no attention.'

(f) /k'alal kuxul li totil ya7el ce7e, syempre ha7
     mas cak' xi7elal, komo vinik cava7i/
     'When a father is alive he always gives more
     cause for fear, because, you see, he is a man.'

There is a clear sense in which this part of the gossip session is the most active part: people build ethical theories on evaluations of such situations. Zinacantecos continually test ordinary rules and evaluative words against actual behavior. In Chapter 7 we consider further the words which allow Zinacantecos to carry on these moral discussions and the rules through which gossip's moral dilemmas are expressed.

I designed a research strategy in the field around the three typical segments of a gossip story: identification, story, and evaluation. I needed a systematic way to elicit gossip in a more or less natural form, and to supply myself with the peripheral information which could render each segment of the stories intelligible.

I collected and made notes on all gossip which I heard
in the ordinary course of my life in the field. (In fact,
I kept 'gossip notes' rather than ordinary field notes.)
As I stayed longer in the field these notes became more and
more accurate. I learned to understand conversational Tzotzil
better, and began to know my neighbors and other notables
by name. I supplemented these notes on naturally occurring
gossip by asking my various acquaintances to provide the
details of half-heard or misunderstood conversations. These
stories are numbered with a G-prefix (for Gossip), (e.g.,
(G 3a)). I had hoped to work exclusively with gossip which
arose in strictly natural contexts, but I found early in my
field stay that my presence in conversations tended to in-
hibit gossip; that Zinacantecos who felt themselves responsible
for me tended to avoid social contact with other Zinacantecos,
in an effort to keep me invisible.[5] To a large extent,

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[5] In December, 1969, shortly after I arrived in the field,
a band of thieves broke into the church in Zinacantan, as well
as several other churches in the Chiapas highlands, and made
off with religious objects --- saint images, a golden chalice,
some money being collected for new church furnishings, etc.
The thefts have never been solved; Zinacantecos --- and, indeed,
most Chiapanecos --- seemed to believe that the marauders had
been gringos. Hence, all gringos --- especially gringo anthro-
pologists (who had previously enjoyed full access to the church)
--- came under suspicion, as did any Indian who associated
with anthropologists, thereby exposing himself to criticism
as the man who had betrayed the community, fingered the
saints for theft. I tried to show my good faith by remaining
in Zinacantan, trying not to act suspiciously; and my Zina-
canteco friends supported me. Nevertheless, it was a long
time before I felt comfortable mingling freely with random
groups of Zinacantecos after the thefts.

Zinacantecos avoided topics of conversation which they thought
I would not understand; without the expertise to ask appropriate
questions, I had to remain in the dark. It was only towards
the end of my field stay, when I had devised other means for
expanding my sources of information, that Zinacantecos began
to treat me as an appreciative and knowledgeable interlocutor
and began to include me in their natural gossip sessions.

In an effort to provide myself with background informa-
tion about my neighbors in Zinacantan Center (where I borrowed
a house for the year of 1970), I recorded conversations with
an experienced anthropological informant in which I asked
about the residents of each house in the neighborhood. These
stories are numbered with the prefix H for /Hteklum/. These
conversations were especially notable in that they demonstrated
a phenomenon similar to the "interanimation of sentences"
which Quine (1960: §3) suggests obtains with belief systems.
The reputations of /Hteklum/ residents were best described
in terms, not only of their past behavior, but with respect
to items of belief (about the nature of the world, super-
natural forces, etc.), theories of personality (about, e.g.,
motivation, evil propensities), and causal arguments masked
by obscure leaps of reasoning. Stories about particular
people were more than gossip: they were rife with tidbits of
cultural knowledge and lore which I had always imagined to be
inaccessible.

I supplemented these stories and checked on the consistency

of reputation by collecting 'gossip texts' about particular
individuals living in Zinacantan Center. That is, I asked my
informants to select cards from a deck containing the names
of individuals taken from my house-census and to write down
their /-lo7iltael/, if any. These stories are numbered with
the prefix A (for /7Ak'ol hteklum/ ('upper Zinacantan Center')
which is that segment of the valley of Zinacantan which lies
within the hamlet of /Vo7 c'oh vo7/) and O (for /7Olon Hteklum/
('lower Zinacantan Center').) Many of the same stories which
appear under prefix H are repeated in text form under prefixes
A and O.[6]

I still had found no satisfactory solution to the problems
implied by identifying formulae. I had no means to penetrate
the pathways which Zinacantecos used to identify people in
ordinary gossip. I needed, at the very least, a list of all
'focal individuals' in the municipio --- all the people whose
names are well known to every Zinacanteco; better still, I
needed some list of individuals who were known (or could be
described) not just by name, but by cargo performance, civil
office record, professions, etc. --- who could be identified
by formulae that occur in gossip sessions. In short, I
needed a "Who's Who" for Zinacantan.

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 During the conversations which produced H-prefix stories,
I myself was the interlocutor; my ineptness in that role may
well have impoverished the resulting sessions.

With the encouragement, financial and practical assis-
tance of George A. Collier I undertook to create such a
"Who's Who" during the summer of 1970. We reasoned that
panels of Zinacantecos, selected to be representative and
knowledgeable about each hamlet, could produce lists of the
well-known people in each hamlet and then supplement these
lists with basic identifying information about each person.

We found that it was, indeed, possible to elicit lists
of names for each hamlet. The work had two stages. First
our panels (of three to five Zinacanteco men) would respond
to the question

/Muc'u mas x7ohtikinat zkotol parahel/
'Who is best well-known in all the hamlets?'

When we had exhausted this question, we asked the panel to
name people from the hamlet who fell into various categories
(e.g., curers, moneylenders). (Cf. Chapter 5 for a complete
description of the categories we used.) For each name we
elicited a cargo-history, a record in civil office, age,
some rudimentary genealogical information, and we noted short
descriptions which occurred while the men on the panel tried
to identify individuals among themselves. We realized that
we had managed to capture the skeletal forms of reputation ---
that we were dealing with incipient gossip, as the men on the
panel discussed each man at length, argued over his past

performance, and joked about his nickname.

I realized that the format of Who's Who eliciting sessions was amenable to gossip as well as to the census-taking we were doing. Therefore, I used the same panels of Zinacantecos to generate gossip about each of the people on the Who's Who lists, for three hamlets. The gossip was tape-recorded and either edited into English (numbered with E prefix), or fully transcribed in Tzotzil (numbered with prefix W (for Who's Who), or P (corresponding to the page number of the full transcription.)) This was by far the richest source for gossip: I recorded and transcribed more than forty hours of actual gossip sessions, wild laughter, joking and mocking as the panel considered the reputations and exploits of Who's Who notables from /7Elan Vo7/, /Paste7/ and /Nabencauk/.

7
 The Who's Who lists contained a revelation about naming.
Collier and Bricker (1970) have demonstrated that the system
of nicknames in Zinacantan is not only the most efficient
of the naming codes (most likely to give each individual a
unique unambiguous label) that operate within a hamlet; but
also that nickname groups correspond to significant lineage
segments. Hence, as lineages fissure over time, nickname
labels are institutionalized as ordinary surnames marking
the resultant groups. The Who's Who sessions indicated that
nicknames operate not only at the level of the hamlet, but that
they function as the only names in common use to describe
individuals throughout the municipio. Occasionally an infor-
mant would announce what a man's 'real name' was; the others
would reply "But we don't understand that; we don't know
who that is." The extent of municipio-wide knowledge about
nickname groups is not yet clear.

Losing its initial inhibition, the panel gradually warmed to
the task of gossiping; Prof. Collier and I were able to
withdraw completely from conversation, and let the men gossip
naturally. Conversations often continued long after we left
the workroom and turned off the tape recorder. Except that
we asked the group to talk about one man at a time (a restric-
tion we could not always enforce), the panel was self-directed:
the participants decided what stories to tell to one another.
The dynamics of the group determined which of a number of
men who might know a particular story told it.

These various collections of discrete gossip stories
(Collections H, A, O, G, E and W-P) [8] along with the Who's
Who itself, and the various observations which grew out of
collecting gossip in the field form the basis for this thesis.
When I speak of 'ordinary usage' or 'ordinary conversation'
I mean the occurrence of words or phrases in the gossip
texts or transcriptions: that is, in natural speech contexts
as opposed to artificial environments.

There are obvious gaps in my knowledge about Zinacanteco
gossip, which we may consider briefly here. First, I made no
effort to check the accounts I collected for veracity, if there
is any sense in which that would have been possible. I made,
in any case, no systematic attempt to elicit alternate versions
of stories; the alternate versions that do occur in my corpus

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[8] See Appendix 1 for description of these collections.

are fortuitous, and little weight can rest upon them. It
is possible to claim, of course, that the 'truth' about events
is irrelevant to Zinacanteco speculation about events (though,
as we have seen, it is possible to <u>talk</u> about truth, in oppo-
sition to mere hearsay.) For example, J. Collier(1970)
points out that dispute settlement in Zinacantan is not
premissed on prior discovery of the true facts of a dispute:

> "Zinacantecos may feel that truth exists, but the
> assumption does not play an important part in their
> legal procedures because their solutions are based
> on a compromise between the conflicting versions of
> the facts presented by the litigants. Zinacantecos,
> like Americans, use witnesses and physical evidence
> to support one version of the facts over another, but,
> unlike an American litigant, they are not bound to the
> version they originally presented. Zinacantecos are
> free to change their stories in accordance with new
> evidence, or to delve into the past for an incident
> which can be tenuously related to the issue at hand.
> As long as the litigant can be brought to express a
> verbal agreement, the 'true facts', if they exist,
> are irrelevant." (p. 81)

Nonetheless, I consider the lack of alternate versions for
most of the gossip I have collected to be a serious lack.

Moreover these collections of stories, and the gossip
panel for the Who's Who, were not controlled for what seem
intuitively to be important variables. I have no way to
assess the effect of kinship-ties, factional-groupings,
friendship, etc. between participants in gossip sessions,
or between storytellers and their subjects. We do not expect
a man to slander his best friend or to speak well of his arch
political enemy; thus, unless we know which people are friends
and which enemies, the full import of the gossip we hear must

elude us. Actually, in some crucial cases having to do with factional disputes, the nature of the gossip and the exchanges between participants unmasked factional alignments within the gossip panel. Similarly, information about factions allows convincing analysis of Who's Who gossip after the fact. For example, in one long gossip session in which the panel discussed the machinations of a group to get control of a gasoline-run corn mill, one participant was notably silent; I discovered afterwards that his father had been heavily involved, and that he himself was the brother-in-law of one of the main trouble makers. In another case, one of the participants in a gossip session was mocked and ridiculed for having taken part in an abortive and much scorned attempt to dig up a supernatural bell.[9]

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[9]

It is at least arguable that we learn about how people feel towards each other, what their factional alignments are, with whom they are closely associated, etc. from what they say --- both in each other's company and out. That is, natives (and we ourselves, in our native lands) use conversational clues as much as others to unravel the social positions and relations around them. Thus, the relevant underlying facts may very well be implicit in gossip sessions; Zinacantecos themselves are simply more sensitive to nuances of their gossip than I am.

There is no doubt that Who's Who sessions suffered from each participant's fear that his remarks would somehow leak out and become public. Each new man who entered the sessions was calmed by a disclaimer from the old hands: I was not going to replay my tapes at the town hall, or repeat what I had heard to the people in question, etc. People seemed to talk freely, but occasionally there were noticeable clam-ups. Often a man would tell me privately after a session that another had been holding out --- not
(see next page for continuation of note)

One might further fault this collection of gossip as unrepresentative. There is no way to guarantee that people in long gossip sessions talked about the same range of subjects that might appear in more natural contexts, with less time to talk. Furthermore, my eliciting procedure may have induced unnatural thematic transitions from story to story. When left to talk freely, Zinacantecos will develop on one tale of rape with another tale of rape, will progress from a case of witchcraft to a case of soul-selling.

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9 (continued)

telling all he knew. As I discuss in Chapter 6, knowledge-able people tended to feign ignorance in order to extract from others their versions of stories and events.

An amusing incident gave me second thoughts about my work. In one long witchcraft account several men go to a cave to petition the Earth Lord for money. In exchange they agree to provide the Earth Lord with lists of the names of suitable Zinacantecos --- their enemies --- whom he can recruit (kill supernaturally) to serve as his laborers. The man telling the story --- at the point of describing these lists --- looked me slyly in the eye and said: "The lists were just like those Xun here is making right now." My nerves twitched even as I laughed off the joke.

Similarly an opportunity arose one afternoon to gossip about one of the panel members who had failed to appear that day. Everyone joined in with gusto. The participants were continually worried thereafter that the man in question might chance to hear portions of the incriminating tape, or catch a glimpse of the transcript of accounts of his courtship or fights with kin.

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"Was that his real daughter?" (W 28)

"Yes, he fooled around with his true daughter."

"I guess that's just like old man Okoz..."

"You mean old Markux Okoz?"

"That's right; of course who knows if it's true, that
is something one can't know..."

"Well, the story has been circulated; I've heard a little
bit about it myself, about how he..."

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Hence, in long sessions like those of the Who's Who a
disproportionate number of stories may appear about rape,
or about /zak-7anzile/ ('woman grabbing') --- such stories
are the most entertaining --- while stories about, say,
factional fighting or land manipulations will be suppressed
until another day. On the other hand, the fact that I in-
duced people to gossip by asking about specific individuals
may lend a false variety to the corpus of gossip; gossip
surely arises naturally event by event rather than man by
man.

This observation brings us to a final major complaint
about the material from which I worked. Because most of the
gossip I collected came either from private, staged gossip
sessions, or was prompted by my questions about partially

gossip which may be intended to have a specific effect on the audience. In wholly natural contexts people have motives for gossiping: the desire to further factional ends and recruit supporters; the desire to defend oneself against the audience's bad impressions by ridiculing another; and so on. By restricting the latitude my informants would ordinarily have had in picking topics and audience I doubtless filtered off much of this effect, (though not all of it). As we shall see in Chapter 5, there is no small amount of political manoevering and self-aggrandizement in the gossip I did collect.

Let me repeat that I have had no success in including women's gossip in this thesis. It was clear to me after a few attempts to eavesdrop that only by taking totally inappropriate and suspicious interest in women could I hope to hear their conversations. I was aware that some women are storehouses (if not broadcasting stations) of incriminating information about their hamlet neighbors. One afternoon I stopped to visit a woman who was weaving a woolen tunic for me. On the way to her house --- but still at some distance --- a young woman stopped me on the path and asked me to agree to a favor; I demurred, explaining that she would have to make a formal request at my home. Our conversation lasted less than a minute. I arrived at my distination, and after a short conversation, the woman asked me what the girl had wanted who stopped me on the path. I realized that, from her vantage point high on a hill this woman could see everything

that went on in the paths in one entire end of the hamlet.
My hostess then proceeded to tell me why I should have
nothing to do with the girl who had stopped me:

/7Ali sme7e, iyelk'anbe smalal lakumale/ (G 55)
'Her mother stole away the husband of your comadre.'

The girl was the daughter of a well-known loose woman (who
had caused the husband of one of my ritual kinswomen to
desert her), and she therefore had a tarnished reputation
herself. My informant was clearly well versed on the doings
of everyone nearby; and she clearly had the temperament of
a successful gossip. But with the exception of occasional
contacts of this kind, my research did not include the
gossip of Zinacanteco women.

These complaints may be taken to demonstrate that all
that can be learned from gossip cannot be learned from what
I have gathered. Nonetheless, the gossip I collected is,
in an important sense, genuine. It preserves natural inter-
active constraints on talk. And it exposes the ordinary
ambivalence towards gossiping: an uneasiness about saying
nasty things, coupled with an eagerness to be entertained
and entertaining. Finally, as I hope to show in the next
chapter, this corpus of gossip reveals a good deal about
Zinacantecos and their exploits.