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Walking along a path I met a group of Zinacanteco men and stopped to join their conversation. Old Xap had just been sent to jail by his in-laws.

"I don't know if it is true, but they say that old Xap was embracing his own daughter."

"He was giving her injections, they say. . . ."

"Yes, young children discovered it—it was little Xun who is always playing nearby. I hear that the old man was tickling his daughter inside the house. When the children came near, they peeked inside—the little brats looked under the rafters, though they didn't know what was going on. 'I'll take a look at what they're doing in there,' said one of the little fuckers. What he saw was father and daughter lifting each other onto the bed, playing one another's music. (Ha ha ha.)"

"The kids probably sat right down to hear how the daughter would sing. (Ha ha ha.)"

"Yes. Then one of those damned kids went right up to the door, and spoke. 'Are you here, mother Paxku? Are you here, father Xap?' he said. He pretended to ask if they were home. And they were indeed home: they were embracing each other on the bed."

"What happened?"

"Then the kids went home to tell their mother. 'I don't know what mother Paxku' is doing with grandfather Xap,' they said upon arriving home. 'They are sleeping together in bed.'

"When the woman heard what the children were saying, she went next door to have a look. But when she arrived, the old man and his daughter were just seated by the fire. The music was already finished. (Ha ha ha.)"

"But is that Paxku' old man Xap's real daughter?"

"Yes, his own daughter. . . ."

"Damn! So that's why his brothers-in-law jailed him."

For me the task of learning about Zinacantan coincided with the task of learning to understand Zinacanteco gossip. When I first went to Zinacantan I benefited from the extraordinary range of previous ethnographic research there, research documented in Vogt (1969). From the library I brought skills and information whose acquisition would have otherwise been slow indeed. But it was only when I began to listen to Zinacantecos talking with one another that I came to feel any genuine understanding of what was going on around me.

This is a book about Zinacanteco gossip. Much of the book in fact *consists* of fragments of Zinacanteco conversation, rendered into English and robbed of real names. Understanding talk about the world presupposes knowledge about the world; what Zinacantecos say leads to an appreciation of what they do, what they are concerned with, what they find worthy of comment.

Though I shall not be concerned with recounting ethnographic phenomena elsewhere described, some facts of Zinacanteco social life, glimpses of some Zinacanteco faces, will emerge from the gossip. I shall try to lead the reader to certain discoveries about Zinacantan by sharing some of what I heard people say.

This is also a book about the *process* of learning about Zinacantan. I intend not a description of my own family's fieldwork in Zinacantan but rather a demonstration of the process by which attention to conversation leads to knowledge. We are able to enter the particular worlds depicted in Zinacanteco gossip by constantly modifying our assumptions that Zinacanteco worlds are like our own. The process is like (and, indeed, includes) learning a second language: we progress from tentative *translations* of new words by old words to direct, un glossed understanding of utterances. There are certainly more direct ways to find out *about* another culture, but we must not confuse what we learn about Zinacantecos by these direct methods with what Zinacantecos themselves know about themselves.

Conversation turned to old Xap's poverty.

"He hardly raises any corn at all. I think he survives by selling charcoal, which he makes in the mountains."

"But is it true, as people say, that one should not sell charcoal?"

"Why not?"

"I've heard it said that charcoal is terribly hot. One's luck will turn hot from handling it; then one's cornfields will refuse to grow.

Perhaps that is why old Xap has so little corn. . . ."

"But must we believe that? Old Petul's sons sold charcoal after he died, but it did not sour their luck."

A person's knowledge of his culture has a structure perhaps more easily learned than described; I shall argue that we can probe the deepest levels of this structure by observing people's conversations with one another, in particular their gossip. Through such a study we can penetrate the tangle of rules we have called "cultural codes" to discover salient skills, categories, and objects.¹ I am prepared to suggest that there is an intimate relation between the native's knowledge of his own society and his ability to gossip (or to understand gossip).

Ethnographers construct, or pretend to construct, or offer suggestions about how to construct, fragments of cultural descriptions, based on some particular theory of culture (Keesing 1974a). Minimally, the ethnographer seeks to describe some subset of people's actions and institutions and to *account* for them according to standards that vary from one anthropological fashion to another. He may argue that underlying observed actions are certain "standards" (Goodenough 1961, p. 522), precepts, or rules: "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to" the members of the culture (Goodenough 1957, p. 167). His account may then consist of a description of the components of this knowledge and its organization. Or the ethnographer may try to discern meanings which attach to people's actions, so that his account amounts to an interpretation of sequences of behavior, of acts, and of events (Geertz 1973). Gossip as text and gossiping as commentary, explicit though often severely bounded by context and convention, are particularly illuminating guides to either sort of account. In fact, whatever one's views of acceptable analysis, whatever one's convictions about the ultimate transcendence of anthropological analysis over native awareness, one quickly discovers that the gossip knows (though perhaps cannot consciously formulate) more than the novice ethnographer about what the facts are (e.g., what people are doing) and what they mean. This is, then, also a book about the nature of ethnographic accounts; I propose to reconsider, in sketching fragments of Zinacanteco ethnography, the tasks of "describing a culture," of "untangling cultural rules," and of "interpreting" or "coming to understand the meanings of" social action.

As conversation continued, someone mentioned that old Xap was also the owner of a talking saint.

"Yes, but for him it is only a pretext to steal money."

"It is the same story with all talking saints. They only lie."

"I have forgotten who it was who exposed Old Xap. Two boys, it was, who went to trick him. They said their mother was sick.

"What's wrong with her?" asked old Xap.

"We don't know. Please ask the saint for us," they replied.

"The old man was willing to ask the saint, but the boys had to offer it a bottle of liquor.

"Oh, but we have brought no liquor. Please sell us a bottle here," they told old Xap. "We'll pay you tomorrow. We were so worried about our mother—What if she were to die?—that we forgot to bring along payment," they explained.

"So the boys wanted to consult the saint?"

"Yes, that was why they had come. 'Very well,' agreed old Xap, and he had his wife pour out a bottle of rum. 'Here it is, son,' he said, handing it over to the boys.

"Thanks," they replied, "We'll come back and pay for it tomorrow. Let's drink it. Please, father Xap, do us the favor of asking the saint about our mother who is very ill."

"In a moment old Xap began to squeal and murmur—the way talking saints sound—you know the sound. He started nodding his head; he arranged his scarf around his head this way. 'The saint is about to start talking,' he said. He started to make little noises now, and seemed to be talking to his saint.

"In a moment he said to the boys, 'Aaaa, tomorrow or the next day, only a few days to wait—she's going to die. Yes, your old mother has been taken very severely ill.'

"Aaa, we understand," exclaimed the boys. "She's going to die. Well, all right, we understand. We'll come back tomorrow to pay for the rum."

"Think well," continued old Xap. "Perhaps if you decide to have a curing ceremony for her, then perhaps the saint will manage to cure her."

"All right, we'll consider well," they replied. "We'll come speak to you about it later."

"Agreed," said old Xap.

"But as soon as the boys were outside they began to laugh. 'Shit, that old son of a bitch, pretending that his saint can talk! The bastard just talks pure lies,' they said to each other. Because, you see, their mother wasn't even sick; it was all a trick."

"Ha ha ha ha."

"She was going to die, but she wasn't even sick. Ha ha ha."

J. L. Austin, in "A Plea for Excuses" (1961), suggests that moral philosophers may profit from examining the excuses people offer for their misdeeds and errors. At the same time, Austin's plea embodies his conception of what philosophy (and philosophizing) must be like, of what it means to unravel certain philosophical tangles by attention to ordinary language. People's excuses are well suited to the analytic methods of ordinary language philosophy. We discover what counts as a successful (or unsuccessful) moral argument by observing how people use critical words to get themselves off the hook. The study of excuses represents a sort of philosophical "fieldwork." The philosopher investigates the logic of moral reasoning through particular bits of actual excuse-making (or by imagining *possible* excuses for hypothetical transgressions).

I wish to make an analogous plea for the study of gossip in ethnography. Just as excuses reveal how people ordinarily think and talk about certain kinds of moral dilemmas (which is in part to show what these dilemmas are), gossip reveals how native actors examine, use, and manipulate cultural rules in natural contexts. Just as excuses point up the aspects of an act or situation relevant to ascriptions of fault or responsibility, gossip dwells on those features of behavior which call cultural rules into play—those items of information that enable people to make evaluations. Finally, just as excuses provide verbal raw material for philosophizing (Austin looks at, among other things, morally tinged adverbs), gossip displays, by example, ethnographically important words. Gossip distills verbal characterizations of significant roles, situations, and behavior.² Both gossip and excuses arise with departures from normality—a symptom of the general axiom that people find only such departures worth talking about. Both gossip and excuses occur in natural conversation; people both gossip and make excuses in ordinary, uncontrived language. Hence, as ethnographers or as philosophers, we have access to both gossip and excuses in our favorite form: as words and phrases in context.

But there is a stronger parallel between Austin's plea for excuses and my plea for gossip. Austin urges not simply that excuses are interesting in themselves but further that the study of excuses exemplifies the form of philosophical inquiry; that if we see how excuses can be put to work we shall see how one arrives at solutions to philosophical problems. I argue that while the study of gossip is certainly a powerful ethnographic tool capable of uncovering otherwise inaccessible facts and phenomena, if we appreciate the native actor's ability to gossip and to understand gossip then we must revise our notions of what constitutes ethnography. We must expand our view of the "cultural competence"

of native actors and alter our conception of what it is to understand ethnographic phenomena. I argue implicitly for these claims in the last chapters of this book.

Gossip has, of course, been a favorite source of information for anthropologists at least since Malinowski. Field notes and diaries, if not actual monographs, are usually filled with natives' gossip about their neighbors (and often about the ethnographer as well). In communities where news is passed by word of mouth, the ethnographer who fails to intercept at least some part of this stream of talk will remain woefully uninformed.

But gossip has most often appeared anecdotal and scattered, recording only anomalies and missteps, the ripples initiated by disruptions in the orderly flow of social life. Thus, Elsie Clews Parsons begins a chapter on "Town Gossip" in Mitla this way: "In any systematic town survey much detail is necessarily omitted and the life appears more standardized than it really is; there is no place for contradictions or exceptions or minor variations; the classifications more or less preclude pictures of people living and functioning together" (1936, p. 386). Here appears the disconcerting suggestion that "systematic" analysis of society must necessarily impose order and regularity on social phenomena and cannot therefore accommodate certain sorts of information. Parsons goes on to comment on the particular bits of ethnographic detail she hopes to convey by recounting gossip. "From these impressions will be imparted, I hope, some appreciation of the disposition of the townspeople, what they laugh at, what they are willing to talk about, and what they keep to themselves; the kind of behavior they condemn or are indifferent about; how they feel about customs they know are lapsing; their manners and conventionalities" (1936, p. 387). What striking omissions, on this account, would plague an ethnography which failed to include gossip! Far from being superfluous and incidental to scientific description, such details as townspeople's dispositions and propensities to laugh or condemn seem central ethnographic concerns.

Most anthropological attention to gossip has centered on the properties of groups within which gossip occurs; gossip is reckoned a mechanism for social control, able to police the boundaries of the group and to sanction misbehavior. Gluckman's (1963, 1968) early statements on gossip and scandal sound his familiar refrain: gossip is circumscribed by, and in fact helps maintain, the relevant groups within a society. That is, only insiders can gossip to each other about each other. Gossip is incomprehensible to the observer who is unacquainted with the protagonists or inadequately informed about their habits and histories.

Gluckman characterizes a new member of a group as follows: "He may learn the rules of technique which keep the group in being, and

he may be on excellent terms with the other members of the group, but he does not belong to the group until it is impossible for him to be rude to one of its members unintentionally" (1963, p. 314). A similar (though perhaps less categorical) criterion applies to the novice gossip; learning to gossip in a group implies, among other things, learning what constitutes *rudeness*, and further learning enough about everyone involved to know, at least most of the time, what to say to whom and what *not* to say. Don Handelman makes a related point concerning the knowledge of workers in a Jerusalem workshop about their fellow workers and the conventions governing talk in that context; in the course of working in a fairly stable (if small) social setting over time workers "developed fairly early good conceptions about the kinds of information which they could use in their interaction without eliciting rebukes" (1971, p. 396). One must learn to respect the dangers of gossip before one can enjoy its virtues.

I suggest in chapter 4 that in Zinacantan in the baldest sense one cannot understand most conversation without information about important "focal individuals." I can attest from personal experience that it is possible to exist successfully in Zinacantan observing most ordinary canons of etiquette and correct behavior without possessing any of the knowledge or conversational skills which allow one to gossip. Gluckman argues that gossip is possible only within the boundaries of a group and, further, that gossip is a "social weapon" by which a group protects itself from incursions by outsiders: how better to snub a newcomer than to demonstrate his alienness by gossiping in front of him? Whether or not people always use gossip consciously in this way (outside of the circles Professor Gluckman mentions), it is clearly possible to chart the boundaries of a social group by the ability of individuals to participate in its gossip.

Professor Gluckman also addresses himself to the elusive relationship between gossip and the "morals and values of social groups" (1963, p. 308). It is easy to suggest that gossip asserts or supports values (whatever these latter may be); in Zinacantan, at least, "values" are implicitly the *subject* of the evaluative portion of most gossip sessions (see chap. 4). Gluckman expresses the nature of the relationship more subtly in other passages. He suggests that among the Makah "values and traditions largely persist in the gossip and in no other way" (1963, p. 311).³ Again, even when conflicting groups have opposing interests, Welsh villagers "evaluate people as leaders, as good villagers, and the like, so that gossip also serves to bring conformity with village values and objectives" (1963, p. 312). Commenting on Paine's claim (1967, p. 280) that people appeal to group values in gossip only insofar as this furthers their own self-interests, Gluckman observes that "when one man advances

his prestige by gossiping against another with allegations that the latter has broken the code of the group, he may value and desire to preserve the code. Even if he does not, the fact that he acquires prestige by defending the code, validates it" (1968, p. 32).

It is at least clear that a gossip group forms what F. G. Bailey calls a "moral community"; that is, a group of people "prepared to make moral judgements about one another" (1971, p. 7). Members of such groups themselves possess reputations and are familiar with the reputations of others; and they consider themselves entitled to comment on and evaluate the behavior of other group members (even behavior that they do not see, but only hear about). In chapter 4 I show that Zinacanteco gossip dwells on the moral dilemmas posed by the narrated events. Gossip in Zinacantan encourages speculation about such matters as, for example, how a girl should behave in courtship or the proper way to raise children. The moral argument in gossip sessions clearly has the *appearance* of being based on a shared set of ethical precepts. It is by such precepts, which we may be tempted to call "values," that people's reputations are reckoned and constituted. And "the relevant values and categories are near to the surface: they rise to people's lips, when they pass judgement upon one another" (Bailey 1971, p. 9). I shall return to these difficult issues in chapter 8.

Paine (1967, 1968) emphasizes the function of gossip as a tool an individual may use to attain certain ends. People "gossip, and also regulate their gossip, to forward and protect their individual interests" (1967, p. 280), which may be (and usually are) in conflict. This view of gossip has implications both about the nature of gossiping groups and about the relationship between gossip and "public morality." First, even if gossip implicitly serves to maintain the boundaries (hence the "unity") of a group, gossip explicitly furthers the ends of some individuals or factions against those of others within the group. A man once gossiped to me about the disobedient and disrespectful behavior of his son (who had moved out of his father's home without making a proper request) specifically in order to influence my willingness to lend money to the boy. The man, it turned out, was involved in a legal dispute with his son and wanted to eliminate the possibility that the boy could hire a non-Indian lawyer with my money.

Gossip is most obviously instrumental in furthering *factional* ends in Zinacantan when a well-spoken person, accomplished in legal argument, is recruited to support one side or another in a dispute. Various individuals bend the man's ear with accounts of their enemies' wrongdoings. Zinacantecos are aware of the power of gossip in this connection. One man told me how two groups of habitual enemies tried to enlist his aid in settling a marriage dispute (which had become the focus of their

factional split): a man from one faction would invite my informant for a beer and tell him his side of the story, while a man from the other faction would eavesdrop on what they were saying. As soon as the one left, the other would accost my friend and harangue him with another interpretation of the facts. By convincing this man, one side in the dispute would gain a powerful ally.

Paine remarks that "gossip serves to pattern issues which were but vaguely or confusedly perceived by a local population" and hence that "gossip is a powerful social instrument for any person who learns to manage it and can thereby direct or canalise its catalytic effect" (1967, p. 283). A man gossips to control others and accordingly fears gossip as it threatens to control him. Hence, a man tries to manage the information⁴ that exists about others and himself by gossiping about others (and drawing others into gossip-laden conversations), on the one hand, and by trying to limit gossip about himself.⁵ Zinacantecos, as will become clear, are passionate in their desire to acquire and spread information about their kin and neighbors, while very consciously suppressing as potentially harmful the dissemination of information about themselves or their immediate households. They often fail, of course, to stay inside the one-way screen. Thus, whatever one's intentions, to advance one's ends through gossip requires a good deal of skill and craftiness in handling the encounters in which gossip occurs.

Nor is the relationship between, say, factional ends and the *content* of factionally motivated gossip necessarily direct. Bruce Cox suggests that, in looking at factional divisions through the mutual gossip of the two sides, "one cannot forget what is being fought over. Since . . . we must focus on the impression the parties wish to give of themselves (and of others), and the way they attempt to manage information in order to do so, we are bound to learn what each thinks important in the dispute" (1970, p. 97). On the contrary, factionally based talk in Zinacantan seems most often to mask rather than to expose the basis of conflict. Thus, for example, the large factions of the hamlet where I lived square off periodically over land boundaries, public works, schools, the presence of motorized corn mills and *cantinas*, and so forth.⁶ But the disputes which come to court, result in jailing, and generally proliferate gossip usually have to do with, for example, alleged witchcraft, assassination attempts, or, often, shouting matches and traded insults rather than with the more obvious political issues (Rush 1971). The gossip, that is, has less to do with power and political ends than with the personalities and propensities of the disputants.

Even if we cannot always assume that enemies will reveal in gossip the true nature of the conflict between them, it is nonetheless undeniable that natives as well as observers incorporate talk about their neighbors

into the body of knowledge they construct to understand the world in which they live. Various authors have used, in this connection, the metaphor of a map. Hannerz (1967)⁷ suggests that where a community makes available a large number of life strategies and value orientations (and, concomitantly, a large number of possible interactional networks, that is, groups of friends and associates), gossip provides an individual with "a map of his social environment including details which are inaccessible to him in his own everyday life. He learns, in the most efficient way possible, what persons are currently desirable or undesirable associates from his point of view, and he also learns something about how one might profitably deal with them, as inferred from their latest gossiped-about characteristics" (1967, p. 57). Thus, generally, "gossip may serve to channel network affiliations" (1967, p. 45) by distributing various kinds of instrumental information by which one decides one's own program of action. Such a phenomenon may be observed in Zinacantan, where economic changes and government policies have provided individual Zinacantecos with alternatives (although limited, heavily constrained alternatives) to "traditional" agricultural or trading careers. Gossip dwells on sources of individual livelihoods, on men well connected to government agencies and outside labor opportunities.

F. G. Bailey argues a more general point, that gossip helps map the community for its members.

An event or an action is public not only to those who see it, but also to those who hear about it. Indeed it is speech which defines the nature of that event: the moral evaluation, which is what matters, is of its very nature unseeable. Comment relates event and action to the "eternal verities" (egoism, equality, and so on) and just as these abstract qualities are invisible, so also are the events which are judged in their light. The map which a man has of the community around him, of what is going on and of how he should respond to others, is a map created by the spoken word, by the information circulating around his community [1971, pp. 284-85]

Importantly, on this account, gossip not only supplies a raw "description" of certain events but rather an *account* of events, with interpretation and often evaluation attached.

Here we confront again the interdependence of gossip and norms. Paine emphasizes that appeals to norms are motivated by more than the desire to validate them. "Important data concerning the 'moral order' of a group are the manipulations it is possible for individuals to make concerning their interests, and gossip is a device used in these manipulations" (1967, p. 282). If we observe gossips in action we soon understand that one does not just *appeal* to norms or rules; rather, one applies

them, manipulates them, and interprets them for particular purposes. Gossiping *requires* such manipulation of rules;⁸ its great attraction and potency stem from the opportunity it provides to bend the "moral order" to a particular purpose. And where there are alternative strategies for success, alternative sets of values and ends, gossip allows people to sound out the opinions of their associates and to influence the values and assumptions of their neighbors.

Discussion shifted from old Xap's talking saint to his own abilities as a curer.

"At least he is a good curer. He's not a witch, is he?"

"He may not be a witch, but he gets too angry when he is curing. He wants too much liquor during curing ceremonies."

"Wasn't he responsible for the death of Maryan's child?"

"Yes, yes, he was called to cure illness at Maryan's house. But all he said was: 'You have been fighting too much among yourselves; you scold one another too much. That is what has brought this illness; it must be turned around.' Then he asked for half-litre bottles of liquor to be brought out. 'Quarter-litre bottles will not cure the illness,' he said."

"Indeed, when old Xap goes to cure, all the helpers, all the assistants must each be given half-litre bottles."

"But this time everyone got so drunk, even the patient, even the husband, that they got into a fight. The curer even struck his patient. Ha ha ha."

"Damn!"

"Yes, they had to settle the affair at the town hall. 'It's all your fault,' old Xap was told, 'for asking for so much liquor.'

"So, you may say that he is a good curer if you like. But he has his little stupidities as well."

In chapter 3 I propose a loose working definition of gossip which circumscribes an area of activity (conversations between Zinacantecos about absent third parties) which I took as the object of study. I discovered that, although there is no native single-word equivalent of "gossip," Zinacantecos have clear ideas about gossiplike conversation, its dangers, and the considerations that motivate it. Moreover, I discovered that such conversation displays a recurrent structure, which I shall detail in chapter 4. Briefly, a gossip conversation typically consists of three segments: (a) an introduction, in which the protagonists are identified; (b) an account of the events, a story; and (c) a series of evaluative comments. My field research revolved around these components: I needed a systematic way to elicit gossip in a more or less natural

form and to supply myself with the peripheral information which would render the stories intelligible.

My family and I set up housekeeping successively in two different Zinacanteco villages, first in a borrowed house in the ceremonial center and later as guests in a large house compound in the outlying hamlet of Nabenchauk (map 1, chap. 2). I made notes on all the conversation I heard in the ordinary course of life. (In fact, I kept "gossip notes" rather than ordinary field notes.) As I stayed longer in Zinacantan these notes became fuller. I learned to understand conversational Tzotzil better, and I 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.

I had hoped to work exclusively with talk which arose in natural contexts, but I found that my presence in conversations tended to inhibit gossip; that Zinacantecos who felt themselves responsible for me tended to avoid certain sorts of social contact with other Zinacantecos, in an effort to keep me invisible. To a large extent, Zinacantecos avoided topics of conversation they thought I would not understand; and without the expertise to ask appropriate questions, I remained in the dark. It was only 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 information about my neighbors in Zinacantan Center (where my family and I borrowed a house for a year), I recorded conversations with an experienced anthropological informant in which I asked about the residents of each house in the neighborhood. These conversations were especially notable in that they demonstrated the "interanimation" (Quine 1960, sec. 3) of Zinacanteco belief. The reputations of Jteklum residents were best described not only in terms of their past behavior, but with respect to items of belief (about the nature of the world, supernatural forces, etc.), theories of personality (about, for example, motivation and 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.⁹

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 several literate Zinacantecos to select cards from a pile containing the names of individuals taken from

my house census of the hamlet and to write stories about them, if any were known.

I still had found no satisfactory solution to the problems implied by the identification segment of gossip conversations. I had no means to penetrate the pathways Zinacantecos used to identify people in ordinary talk. 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, and so forth—who could be identified by formulas that occur in gossip sessions. In short, I needed a *Who's Who* for Zinacantan.

With the encouragement and the financial and practical assistance 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, 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

Much'u mas x'ojtikinatzkotol parajel?
"Who is best-known in each of 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. Appendix 2 for a complete description of the categories.) For each name we elicited a cargo history, a record in civil office, age, and 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.¹⁰

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 stories about each of the people on the *Who's Who* lists for three hamlets. The stories were tape-recorded and either edited or fully transcribed in Tzotzil. This was by far the

richest source for gossip: I recorded and transcribed more than forty hours of such gossip sessions, replete with wild laughter, joking, and mocking as the panel considered the reputations and exploits of Who's Who notables. Losing its initial inhibition, the panel gradually warmed to the task. Professor Collier and I frequently withdrew from the conversation completely and let the men talk naturally. Conversations often continued long after we had left the workroom and turned off the tape recorder. Except that we asked the group to talk about one man at a time (a restriction we could not always enforce), the panel was self-directed: the participants decided what stories to tell one another. The dynamics of the group determined which one of a number of men who might know a particular story told it.

Armed with this meaty material, I myself became a formidable gossip partner when my family and I moved into the hamlet of Nabenchauk. I found myself in the embarrassing position of knowing about a person's dirty linen when I did not even know his or her face. But throughout the daily routine of life in the house compound I found myself able to follow the fragments of stories, the veiled allusions, the secret jokes about hamlet neighbors. Our family no longer assumed us to be uninformed and thus suspended the protective censorship we had noticed earlier during our stay in Zinacantan. (In fact, periodic absences from the village often meant that my information about the doings of its residents was dated, so that our hosts' confidence in our knowledge-ability was often unjustified.) They merely appended to disclosures about their neighbors certain cautionary instructions to insure that I not blurt out what I knew to the wrong person.

The stories I collected from these different sources form the basis of this book. When I refer to "Zinacanteco gossip" I mean this varied corpus. When I speak of "ordinary usage" or "ordinary conversation" I mean occurrences of words or phrases transcribed from natural speech. Zinacantecos converse, exchange information, and sharpen their cultural expertise in a variety of situations which I characterize as "behind" or "inside the fence," *ta yut mok*—that is, within the confines of the house compound, in private, and sheltered from unwanted ears. I use "gossip" as a convenient and suggestive gloss for conversation in such circumstances—a gloss which must not obscure the fact that stories people tell about their neighbors may go well beyond what we should be inclined to call "gossip" in ordinary English usage.

It is true that not all that can be learned from gossip can be learned from what I heard. During my time in Zinacantan I participated in and overheard a good deal of gossip, but my corpus may well not be representative. It is, at least, *genuine*. It preserves natural interactive constraints on talk. And it exposes the ordinary ambivalence toward

gossiping: an uneasiness about saying nasty things, coupled with an eagerness to be entertained and entertaining. Finally, as I hope to show, this corpus of gossip reveals a good deal about Zinacantecos and their exploits.

I have arranged my argument to proceed from some general ethnographic background (chap. 2) to a more detailed look at what gossip is in Zinacantan (chap. 3) and how gossip interactions are organized (chap. 4). I then catalog the subject matter of Zinacanteco gossip (chap. 5), with particular attention to the aspect of public identity that derives from performance in the religious hierarchy (chap. 6) and to the lexical resources Zinacantecos have at their disposal for describing and evaluating their neighbors (chap. 7). In the final two chapters I consider wider issues surrounding "cultural rules," their relation to action, and their place in ethnographic description. Throughout I have found it illuminating to proceed from particular examples (of gossip, conversation, or Tzotzil usage)—all inextricably rooted in an ethnographic context—to reflect on the nature of the surrounding rules, the ideational and semiotic structure within which people act.

Down the path someone spotted a young man named Xun, whose reputation as a drunkard made everyone anxious to be on his way.

"If you meet him drunk on the path, he has no mercy. He won't listen to what you say, that Xun."

"He doesn't understand what you say; you're right. If he's just a bit tight when you meet him on the path—*puta*, 'Let's go, let's go,' he'll say. You will be forced to drink."

"But doesn't he get angry?"

"No, no. He'll just say, 'Let's go have a little soft drink.'"

"He's good-natured."

"But he doesn't bother to ask if you're in a hurry to get someplace. . . . (Ha ha ha.)"

"No, he's good-hearted. (Ha ha ha.)"

"If you find yourself in a hurry to get somewhere and you see him coming the best thing to do is hide. . . ."

". . . or run away."

And with that, the various men went on about their business.