

# Gossip, Reputation, and Knowledge in Zinacantan

John Beard Haviland



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"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!"

Like all people, the Indians of Zinacantan, in highland Chiapas, Mexico, gossip about their neighbors and friends at home, in the fields, or at the town hall. In this sophisticated anthropological study, John Beard Haviland transcribes and analyzes segments of Zinacanteco conversation and evolves a theory in which the ability to gossip is a general manifestation of cultural competence. Consequently, the anthropologist may gain knowledge of a people through understanding the patterns of their talk about each other.

Proceeding inductively, Haviland first catalogs the sort of information that is exchanged in informal conversation and describes the ways Zinacantecos comment on and evaluate the activities of their acquaintances. Several features characterize the common structure of their speech behavior. Generally, it involves a storyteller and an interlocutor who follow a set conversational sequence as they identify the protagonists, recount the events, and then evaluate them. Haviland notes that the subject matter of Zinacanteco gossip is a kind of ethnographic index for the community, involving courtship, marriage, and sexual habits; wealth and poverty; temperament and physical peculiarity; and performance in civil office and in the cargo system—their important hierarchy of religious offices.

More theoretical conclusions are presented in the final chapters, where Haviland demonstrates the interrelationship between the reflection and

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the creation of cultural rules via conversation. Gossip allows people to examine and discuss the rules they espouse, to change rules, to redefine the conditions for application of rules, and to exploit the interpretative potential of rules to advance personal and factional ends. A linguistic analysis of Tzotzil, the Mayan language of the area, demonstrates how the language is used to gain, perpetuate, or ruin reputations and to manipulate opinions.

Haviland's highly innovative approach to his subject, providing both transcriptions and analysis of conversation, gives this volume unique appeal both to Latin Americanists and to social anthropologists.

JOHN BEARD HAVILAND is a research fellow in the Department of Anthropology, Institute of Advanced Studies, Australian National University.

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