Les rituels du dialogue

PROMENADES ETHNOLINGUISTIQUES EN TERRES AMÉRINDIENNES

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Warding off witches:
Voicing and dialogue in Zinacantec prayer

The cave at Isak’ik

It was just dawn as we started to pick our way down the steep path leading to the cave at Isak’ik (“Potatoes”). The sky had begun to lighten while we were driving up the winding gravel road from Atz’am (“Salt”), named for the sacred salt wells just outside the church of the Virgin which had been our first stop. We had left the hamlet of Apas shortly after midnight, hoping to arrive at the church in Atz’am before any prying eyes or overhearing ears were likely to be around. We were embarked on a twenty-four hour curing ceremony designed to release my goddaughter Antel—now a 35 year-old mother of seven—from the grips of witchcraft.

The hired driver had parked his battered VW combi by the side of the road, near the cross that marked the trail down to the cave. He had then promptly curled up for a nap on his front seat. The other helpers had gone to collect firewood. This left seven of us to walk down to the cave. First were the patient and her husband, together with the curer. Then came the curer’s husband, who also served as her mesol or deputy. He was heavily burdened with candles, flowers, and the live chickens to be left as a sacrifice in the cave. Then there were the two anthropologists—my wife and me, Antel’s godparents—and a couple of children, our 8-year-old daughter and another small boy who carried several liters of cane liquor.

The descent was difficult, and the women straggled behind. The rest of us halted at the end of the path, still only halfway down the mountainside. Looming above us on a sheer rocky outcropping was the mouth of Isak’ik, several meters above us, gaping dark and cold in the morning light. On my previous visit, fifteen years before, the only way into the cave was to scramble up a rickety, makeshift ladder. Now concrete steps led up to the lip of the cave.
There was a certain reluctance to enter. The patient's husband, Maryan, carried his load of pine needles up the stairs and ventured inside. One by one we followed him into the gloom, hearing the scuttling and pumping of bat wings, our eyes blind in the darkness even after the meager light of dawn. The rock floor of the cave underfoot was damp and greasy. As our sight gradually returned we could make out piles of desiccated flowers and pine boughs, stubs of old candles, and a small passageway to the east, the walls black with what appeared to be the soot of creos.

The curer and her patient had now made their way up into the cave, and they knelt to cross themselves by the entranceway. Facing the small passageway, they began to pray. The shaman's fierce voice echoed off the walls, drowning out the words of her patient Antel, a much younger woman who knelt to one side. They addressed the lord of the cave, explaining their mission and announcing their intention to enter the depths of the earth.

Here is part of the curer's introductory prayer, delivered in the characteristic parallel form of Zinacantec Tzotzil prayer.

[1] At the cave mouth

1. CU chyłaav ni pas un //
   chyłaav li yo pasken un
   my back will pass //
   my humble side will pass

2. ak' u sk'ap'in un //
   ak' u sk'eb'in un
   let her desire //
   let her enjoy

We had come to this foreboding place after more than a year in which Antel had suffered from unexplained swellings, pains, and periodic blackouts. Her youngest child, almost two, was sickly and feeble, still unable to walk or talk. The small village where they lived, several kilometers from the Pan-American Highway that winds up into the highlands from the central plains of Chiapas, Mexico, was divided by factional political and religious fights, fights that Antel and her husband—a former hamlet official for the dominant but recently besieged political party—could hardly avoid. Several hamlet shamans had been called to attend Antel when her child would take leave of her body, causing her to fall into an unexplained faint. Now this elderly j'ilal "see or curer," one of
Antel's *comadres* or ritual kinswomen, had prescribed a major curing ceremony to rid Antel of her ills once and for all. This ceremony entailed considerable planning, preparation, and expense. It involved a journey first to visit the Virgin, patroness of the church in Atz'am, then to the cave at Isak'tik where the *yapal balamil* "Lord of the Earth" gathers together Zinacantán's ancestral deities, then to another altar at a rocky outcropping, *Ch'ul Ton* "Holy Rock," a little way up the road toward the ceremonial center of Zinacantán, and then three more stops back in Antel's village, ending finally at her house where she would be bathed and put to bed for three days and nights (see map). Such a journey required that Marvan hire a vehicle to make the two hour drive from their village to the remote hamlet of Atz'am, and stopping twice on the return. He also had to buy or collect the flowers prescribed by the curer, as well as to purchase candles, chickens (born to eat and to sacrifice), and cane liquor in abundance for the various stops on the curer's itinerary.

The cave at Isak'tik, as everyone knew, was a site not only for reversing but also for performing witchcraft—selling the soul of one's enemies to the Lord of the Earth, in exchange for wealth or favors, or sometimes out of pure *k'ak'al o'omil* "heated heart," that is envy and hatred. The place radiated danger and power. *Kusul li balamil le'e*, people would say, "the earth there is alive." Worse, things had already taken a disturbing and non-propitious turn before we ventured into the cave. Contrary to our expectations, someone was waiting at the church, even before we arrived in the blackness of predawn Atz'am. It was a drunken man, Romín, a shaman himself, but more than that, a notorious and dangerous witch, who refused to leave our curing party in peace, overlapping the curer's prayers with his own, and lurking on the edges of our little party until he was offered his own share of our liquor and food. Mól Chep, our curer's husband and the man in charge of burying the sacrificial chickens, had been forced to drink more liquor than he should. He was by now reelıng from its effects, muttering to himself in slurred but distinctly parallel couplets as he prepared the flowers and other decorations for the cross inside the cave at Isak'tik. Our curer, too, was angry. Why had that other drunken man come to *tuk'bale sk'opik* "cut her words"? Why was her own husband, an experienced ritual helper, so undisciplined as to drink without necessity, knowing that considerably more *pox*—the locally distilled bootleg cane liquor that punctuates all curing ceremonies—remained to be consumed?

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[1] The introductory prayer concludes

12  *mu me ilbqinibulik li me- li state //
    mu me ilbqinibulik li xokone
    may her back be not molested //
    may her side be not molested
KJRTHN M.

warding off witches

In a recent paper, Judith Irvine (1996) invoke the idea of "shadow dialogues" — a potentially multifaceted layering (Clark 1996, ch. XII) of occasions of talk, past and present — which maintain echoes in and lend sometimes hidden structure to any given stretch of verbal interaction. There are, in Irvine's earlier terminologies (1947), "implicated participants" lurking behind the words, the attitudes, the sentiments, and the actions of even solitary monologists. Scrapping away some of the layers exposes part of the diachronic social history of speech, a topic of central interest to an ethnographer of the social life of language. My purpose in this essay is a small exercise in the archaeology of shadow dialogues.

zinacantec ritual language

The language of prayer in Zinacantec Tzotzil, as in other Mayan languages and, of course, in languages throughout the Americas and beyond, is organized into parallel structures. Song (Haviland 1967), formal denunciation (Laughlin 1973), and, indeed, much ordinary talk (Haviland 1992, 1996) share with prayer the use of stylized images and sentiments, lexicalized as more or less fixed pairs (and sometimes triads or quaternaries) of expressions used together in a tightly structured way. The overall form of Tzotzil prayer is well described, although, with the exception of several lengthy but largely uncontextualized texts, little work has described such speech in its natural habitat; for example, prayer intended to be efficacious in curing a suffering patient. Although the primary aim of this essay is to sketch the multi-vocal and dialogic nature of the prayer in Aurel's curing ceremony, it will nonetheless be useful to discuss prayer structure first.

1. As recent work by Barlow (1997) shows, this parallel structure is carried over into the considerably less regimented prayer of Tzotzil converts to evangelical Protestantism, who employ a kind of stylized thức (the newly acquired genre.

2. Studies exist on Tzotzil, a close relative and neighbour of Zinacantec. See for example, Breglein: Monge 1980. Although similar parallel structures are known to exist in other languages of the region, there are surprisingly few detailed studies of other the structures themselves or of the performance of prayer. A notable exception is the work of William Hanks (1984, 1990, and especially 1996).


4. Perhaps the best collection for Tzotzil is found in Laughlin 1980, with selections from personal prayer, curing prayer, formal denunciation, and song. More song texts from Zinacantec are presented in Haviland 1990.

As they prayed, the curer and her patient were engaged in two seeming monologues, albeit simultaneously delivered and at least partially coordinated with each other. Despite this appearance, they clearly were addressing their words to a complex audience which included the assembled members of the curing party — friends and relatives — as well as the nominal addressees, indexed by the second person forms scattered throughout the prayer: the ancestral deities and, above all, the Lord of the Earth whose domain we had entered by crossing the threshold of Isak'ik. The monologue of highly structured prayer thus echoed through a cave replete with dialogic possibilities (Bakhtine 1981, 1986) inherent in the social circumstances.
In its canonical form, a Zinacantec curer's prayer proceeds as a series of strictly parallel lines, usually pairs of lines which differ from one another in only a single element—sometimes a lexeme, sometimes just a root. Although every Zinacantec in one degree or another can master at least some couplets, and although other Zinacantec specialists may be extraordinarily proficient at the elaborate parallel speech of religious ritual, curing prayer is considered to be a gift from the gods. Individual curers may have very different styles of delivery, and although all are likely to use a core of standard phrases for a given situation, some j'iilotek are known for employing unusual, even novel images and wording. In Zinacantec theory, the ability to cure one's fellow human beings of a variety of maladies, which crucially includes the ability to pray fluently, effortlessly, and appropriately in a range of circumstances, is bestowed by the ancestral gods in a dream (or a sequence of dreams). It is not something one can learn to do.

There are two highly productive aspects of the parallel structure. First are the paired doublets (or triplets) which alternate in the frame of a single sequence of lines. Zinacantecs in general know many such doublets, and they know as well their conventional significance. For example, the paired nominal roots k'op “word” // n' “mouth” refer to speech in general, and to the genres of speech that employ parallelism in particular. Zinacantecs understand that to refer to speech in prayer one will employ these paired roots. The roots themselves ordinarly require morphological elaboration as full words, and the language thus provides a means for multiplying possible couplets by applying both inflectional and derivational mechanisms to the roots. Thus, for example, one can form parallel lines (see lines 6 and 18 of the fragments quoted) around the pair j-k'op // j-n' “my words // my mouth” (where j- is a first person possessive prefix), and equally well around the verbalized nouns k'opnel // n'ind “speaking (words) // speaking (with the mouth).” The morphological creativity of the language thus augments the already large inventory of paired roots, creating possible doublets tailored to particular contexts of speech. More importantly, at the level of cultural meaning, these doublets have a dual character. On the one hand, they are the cells from which the tissue of prayer grows, the irreducible units of ritual expression. On the other, they are highly evocative images compressed into the minimal elements of speech. Thus k'op // n' both make available a means for referring to prayer itself, and at the same time incorporates a culturally complex image (prayer, like other k'op or “words,” with suggestions of socializing, negotiation, and even fighting; but also prayer as embodied in the n' “mouths” of both curer and patient).

The second productive device of the ritual genre derives from the frames within which doublets appear. Sometimes a pair of lines consists of nothing more than the couplets themselves, appropriately dressed syntactically and morphologically. Thus in lines 9–11, the curer announces in prayer that the sacrificial chicken (the jelol // lok’el “replacement // copy” of the patient) will be left as an offering, continuing by simply inverting two further doublets in a row without elaboration: “There will remain the replacement // the copy, of the sick person // the ill person, (and also) her pine // her candles.” Sometimes, however, there is a wider frame—parts of a line that are repeated without change in a parallel construction. These frames themselves seem to comprise a highly restricted set of possibilities, reflecting the conventionalized content of prayer just as the inventory of doublets represents its conventional imagery. Sometimes a particular phrase in prayer always co-occurs with a particular doublet. For example, the phrase that begins chaj-ta-tik (ASP-INE-find-IPLNCE, i.e., “we find you, we meet you”), in lines 6 and 18, always ends with a doublet based on the pair k'op // n'. Thus “We meet you with my words, with my mouth” as shown in line 6 may alternate with

chajtik ta k'opnel //
[chajtik] ta n'ind

We meet you with speaking (words) //
[we meet you] with speaking (with our mouths)

(Frequently part or all of the repeated frame of the second line is elided, as shown by the bracketed words in this example.) Sometimes a single frame admits a number of different paired doublets, with slightly different meanings resulting. To describe passage in or out of a sacred space (for example, the inner cave at Isak’tik where candles will be planted before a cross), ritual language uses a frame based on the stem jelav “pass,” as in lines 1 and 21. However, the verb can be combined with either a doublet referring to the body (joj // xekon “back // side”) of the person who will cross such a boundary, or with a doublet (based on the pair ba // sa “face // visage”) referring to the sacred space itself (ta anichimal ba // ta
asichimal sat “before your flowery face // before your flowery visage,” i.e., at your altar).

In fluent prayer, some curers enter an almost trance-like state. The words are delivered rapidly, without hesitation, and with remarkably little repetition. When Antel’s j’ol (“curer,” literally “seer”) was interrupted in her delivery—for example, when she broke off praying to bark an order at her mayol—she would often recycle the current parallel doublet of lines from the beginning in order to get herself restarted. Each line exhibits one of a characteristic range of repetitive melodic and rhythmical cadences, with several lines grouped into phrases whose prosodic structure exhibits the same kind of repetition as its wording.

The dual imagery of the couplets of Mesoamerican ritual language has prompted theorizing about complementarity in thought, binary oppositions, and duality in general. Here, in passing is the first aspect of “dialogue” in the prayers at Isak’tik. The very structure of Tzotzil ritual language incorporates a kind of second-order dialogicity, because in many cases both the lexical choices available to prayer and the stylized sentiments or formulae embodied in its frames are the clear sediment of a historical dialogue between Indian and friar during the Conquest of this part of Mexico. At the most obvious level, one observes the presence of Spanish loanwords (loanconcepts) in the doublets themselves (tay // kanteka “pine // candle,” which employs an archaic Spanish word candela “candle”; matetik // ajetik, “oceans // lords” where the Spanish loan mar “sea” is combined with a Tzotzil plural marker -tik and paired with an ancient Mayan root Ajy meaning “lord”). Similarly, the formulas of Catholic prayer have been taken over in full cloth as both the introductory and closing sequences of each prayer episode at Isak’tik: yi, jesukristu, kajak “God, Jesus Christ, my Lord” and batzy’ ch’ul ryok totit, batzy’ ch’ul ryok nichi’om, batzy’ ch’ul ryok pirin santu “True Holy God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.” Tzotzil prayer thus freezes a dialogue of five centuries ago— involving theological, cosmological, and social ideas—into the ritual practices of today. Moreover, insofar as the meanings of many archaisms—whether Spanish or Tzotzil in origin—remain obscure to modern speakers, their presence in prayer also represents for Zinacanteces a virtual dialogue with the past, or with the ancestors who knew exactly the meanings of formulae that speakers today can only repeat.

Meaning and propositionality

Prayer as a code thus employs a limited constructional “syntax” and a large, but heavily conventionalized, imagistic “lexicon.” One piece of evidence that Zinacanteces cite to show that the ability to pray is a gift from the ancestral gods to those with sufficiently strong souls is the difficulty of the genre: skilled shamans can pray for hours at a sitting, improvising appropriate and non-repetitive prayers throughout ceremonies that can last for more than twenty-four hours. Wherever the Zinacantec metathory of divine inspiration, the constrained structure of ritual language very likely facilitates the remarkable fluency a skilled shaman brings to curing prayer. A relatively limited repertoire of “propositions,” and a relatively fixed inventory of “referring expressions,” themselves structured in parallel, are the raw material for which the shaman must provide the indexical engine—that is, which the shaman must tailor to the occasion at hand.

It is in curing prayer, this most highly efficacious of language, that we see perhaps most clearly how talk, in the Malinowskian dictum, is “part of action and equivalent to action” (Malinowski 1935: 9). The efficacy of prayer, linked to its parallel imagery and the conventionally disguised meanings of its words, makes ritual speech the very opposite of “plain talk.” One does not, in shamanistic prayer, simply “say what one means” or “express one’s thoughts,” since the explicit aim is to effect a cure. Something other than just “performativity” is at stake, as well. The words of the prayer have conventional propositional meanings, often strung together in conventional declarative form; however, these meanings have been deflected from those of ordinary talk, and their illocutionary forces have been similarly redirected.

[3] Prayer while beating the patient’s back with pine boughs (see video clip Beat)

1140 CU an yi,y jesukristu kajak

God, Jesus Christ, my Lord
WARDING OFF WITCHES

The curer has passed a bunch of pine boughs carefully over the candles and flowers that have been offered to the lords of the cave at Isák'tik. As the patient bows her head forward, the curer intones the words of Fragment 3 and gently beats her neck and back with the boughs, “cleaning” the patient through the virtues with which the boughs are now imbued. Although the conventional imagery disguises the curer’s intended meanings, each line of her prayer is intended to have an immediate effect. The shaman refers first to the patient’s ills—“her tiredness // her exhaustion”—and to her desperation in illness—“will there no longer be goodness for her back // her side?”—using explicit interrogative form. (The form raises a further issue, to which I shall return: to whom are the questions addressed?) She refers to her actions—beating or “cleaning” her patient with blessed pine boughs—euphemistically, as the “descent of my feet // my hands.” What is the purpose of this beating? “Just let it be punishment [or admonition] (it is said) // just speaking [advice] (it is said); just raising the head [in pride] // just bowing the head [in humility].” (And why does she say “it is said,” using the evidentially distancing particle la apparently to attribute these sentiments to someone else’s voice? To whom this “other voice” might belong is another issue to which I shall return.) The action takes place on the stage of the body (“her back // her side”) of the sick woman (“your bought woman // your paid for woman,” i.e., “the woman for whom you have paid”). (One last issue to be postponed until the next section: who is the “you” referred to?)

Here, then, is a second sort of virtual dialogue, which connects the words of the prayer with the actions of the moment. The words follow the rhythm of the actions, and the actions draw force from the words.

Dialogicity and multivocality

A third sort of dialogue present in the anti-witchcraft prayer at Isák’tik is more explicit and familiar. It involves the real interlocutors of the moment, not simply those of several centuries ago, nor the virtual “interlocutors” drawn from the realms of non-speech. The ritual is guided by the shaman herself, but it nonetheless proceeds in negotiated stages, through interactions between the shaman, the patient, the shaman’s assistant, and the other helpers present. Moreover, by invoking—indexically creating—a range of otherwise invisible interlocutors, prayer produces dialogues and miniature social worlds that go well beyond the narrow limits of the immediate curing party. I turn to some of the most explicit of these dialogic encounters, and the voices that they comprise.

Pronominal forms running through the prayers establish a sequence of interactive spaces, some embedded within others, and all defined by their implicated participants. For example, in all the prayer fragments presented so far, the triangle of persons has been roughly as in Figure 1.

Thus, in her prayer at the crosses atop Ch'ul Ton “Holy Rock,” our next stop after leaving Isák’tik (see Fragment 4), the curer refers to herself—kneeling at the cross (line 1), praying (lines 8 and 9), or interceding on behalf of her patient (lines 4–6) with first person pronounial forms. She refers to her patient (or in this case her patient’s young daughter) with a generic third person (“her
back // her side,” i.e., her body, in line 7), coding the reference to the sick baby with a conventional doublet to refer to a child as a flower, “the little carnation // the lily” (line 3). Finally, she reserves second person forms for the ancestral spirits who inhabit this place, honoring them with a reference to “your flowery faces // visages” (line 2) and acknowledging their power through second person verbs (lines 4–6).

1 1st person: the curing
2 2nd person: the ancestral gods
3 3rd person: the patient

Figure 1 — The normal allocation of person marking.

[4] Unmarked triangle of pronominal reference. Praying at Ch’ul Ton (see video Ch’ul ton):

1 cu ja’ me kejelon o tal // ja’ me katalon o tal
   Thus have I come kneeling // thus have I come prostrate.
2 ta yo lanichim ba // ti yo lanichim sate
   To your flowery face // to your flowery visage.
3 xchi’uk li laasena // xchi’uk li assena
   With the little carnation // with the lily.
4 mu xanathikon wn // mu xanathikon wn.
   Do not beat her for me // do not scold her for me
5 mu xak’ul xi’ikleben wn //
   Do not see her with anger, for me //
6 mu xak’ul xi’ikleben wn
   Do not look on her with anger, for me
7 ti yo xchoke wn
   Her lowly back // her lowly side
8 ja’ me lag o jk’um o li ch’ul personal //
   I have finished asking for holy pardon //
9 lag o jk’um o li ch’ul lenenza
   I have finished asking for holy permission.

To make more direct reference to the deities to whom she nominally speaks, the curing has recourse to a variety of address forms. She may use simple second person pronominals, both singular and plural. (For example, when she implores the lords of the cave to “stand up // stand firm” in taking responsibility for her patient’s well-being, her expression is explicitly plural: xawa an abatik // xatik’an abatik “you will stand yourselves up // you will make yourselves stand firmly.”) Or she may call directly on her addressee(s) using such doublets as: tot // kantsal “father // my lord,” me // kantsal “mother // lady,” or most explicitly referring to the lords of the place by name: isak ch’ul manpek // isak ch’ul mesetik “Isak’(ik), holy oceans // Isak’(ik), holy ciders,” or here at Ch’ul Ton, maryan rosary, vinjel ante // vinjel sinora “Mary of the Rosary, heavenly woman // heavenly lady.”

Correspondingly, the shaman is able to triangulate the third person references to her patient by explicitly linking the sick person to her addressees, usually calling Antel avalab // anich’ub “your child // your offspring,” or amanhil ante // antuhil ante “your bought woman // your paid for woman” (i.e., the one for whom you have paid, the one you have bought, i.e., taken charge of— or, in the case of Christ, whose sins you have “bought”).

Only at one point during the whole ritual at the cross inside Isak’ik does this basic unmarked allocation of persons switch. When the cross is decorated and the candles prepared, the curing turns to her patient and invites her to light the candles and initiate a long prayer, asking for forgiveness, as the candles burn. Here, momentarily, a direct dialogue between curing and patient is indexed by the pronominal triangle shown in Figure 2.
FIGURE 2 — Complementary triangles of persons in direct dialogue.

[1] Switching addressees: dialogue between curer and patient (see video Portonal)

687 CU
chkom y t yo latjap
Your lowly pine will remain // your lowly candle will remain.

689
mu teyde nox ti ija // mu teyde nox ti k'we une
May the sickness not merely be there // may the pain not merely be there

690 ja' jehing y tal k'ap uk // ti mantal awa
I have also come obeying the word // the order

691 mi bii kel ch'awak // mi bii kel napal
Will it be well received? // will it be well met?

692 ti yo stoj une // ti yo lakantela une
Her lowly pine // your lowly candle?

Even here, the curer seems momentarily to slip back into the established participant frame of Figure 1 in which her patient is the third person. In Fragment 5, at line 692, the curer refers, within the same doublet, to the patient's offerings first as stoj "her candle" and then as akantela "your candle," perhaps correcting herself in mid line, perhaps briefly switching intended addressees. (As she speaks, the shaman is simultaneously adjusting the candles she has lit in front of a flower-bedecked cross, and also turning to touch the forehead of her patient who bows periodically to her as the prayer proceeds. The line in question is uttered as the shaman is in the midst of this transition from looking towards the candles to addressing her patient directly.)

As the prayer continues, the interplay—fully in prayer—between the curer (whose speech is shown by the abbreviation "CU") and patient (shown as "PA") is particularly obvious. The patient (not all of whose speech is transcribed in Fragment 6) echoes the curer's turns with just a fractional delay. Curer, at line 693: "we will leave your substitute // your replacement (i.e., the sacrifice for you)."

Patient at lines 694–5: "My replacement // my substitute will remain (here in the cave)." Curer: "beneath the feet // beneath the hands (i.e., at the altar)" (line 704) of Isak' holy oceans // Isak' holy lords" (lines 704, 706)—echoed verbatim by the patient (lines 705, 707–8). This is conventionalized, responsive dialogue; curer and patient maintain their immediate, individual perspectives while directly engaging the other's talk.

[6] Contrapuntal prayer between curer and patient (see video Portonal)

693 CU
ji yo k'ep uke // ti yo fak'el uke
Your lowly substitute // your lowly replacement

694 PA
ja' me chkom =

695 =a ti yo k'ep // chkom a ti yo fak'el uke
Here will remain my lowly substitute // my lowly replacement

696 CU
ja' xaw me =

697 =chuy.

698 ja' xay me ch'ay'u =ap u // ch'ay u =ap u
For that reason I am talking to you // for that I am speaking to you

699 mi xayuon abe // mi xayuon abe
Will you kneel // will you prostrate yourself

700 PA
la j'ap un ti ch'ul portonal // =

701 =ta j'ap un ti ch'ul =ap
With that I will ask for holy pardon // with that I will ask for holy forgiveness

702 CU
mi xay un // mi xay awan
Will you weep // will you cry?

703 PA
ja' mi j'ap u ti ta-

704 ti yolun yak // ti yolun sk'khe
Thus will I (we?) come beneath his feet // beneath his hands

705 PA
ti ta yolun yak // ti ta yolun sk'khe
beneath his feet // beneath his hands

706 CU
ji isak' ch'ul marte // ji isak' ch'ul qarip uke
of Isak' holy oceans // of Isak' holy lords

John B. Haviland

The patient leads, curer elaborates

There are, of course, multiple possible "third persons" represented in the curer's prayer at Isak'tik. She frequently indexes as third persons not only the patient, but also her own husband, the majol /// j'akati "deputy /// aide" whose job it is to prepare and bury the sacrificial chicken. As we have seen, the curer also refers to Antel's two-year-old baby with the doublet lavelena /// asaseuna "the little carnation /// the lily." A more shadowy background presence is the presumed witch, responsible for Antel's illness. This personage is rarely accorded even a pronominal reference, masquerading instead behind such images as k'ak'ul o'oni /// tkajol o'oni "the heart (i.e., jealous) heart /// the red heart."

The curer may also modulate voice, delicately indexing the relationship of intermediary which she has between her patient and the ancestral deities who will cure her. In Fragment 7, for example, the curer falls somewhat behind the patient in the contrapuntal chorus of prayer. Whereas normally it is the patient who will echo the lines of prayer previously uttered by the shaman, here the shaman appears to take up a line pronounced by the patient. At line 805 Antel observes in prayer that she has "come kneeling /// prostrate."

The patient makes the following plea in lines 812-13: "let there be an end, please, to the one sickness /// the one illness." Now the shaman introduces a subtle, dialogic, shift of perspective. She repeats the patient's words in lines 814-15, but with a single substitution. The patient uses the desiderative particle me in phrasing her request, signifying that it represents her own desire expressed to the ancestral deities directly. The shaman replaces this particle with an evidential particle Le7

This part of the ritual is especially dramatic, and it points up the explicitly supernatural dialogue represented by the ceremony as a whole. Why have we come to Isak'tik? This dark and somewhat frightening place is known to be one entry point into the malevolent underworld, where the fat, cigar-smoking Earth Lord dwells in shadowy splendor, tending his flocks and cattle, and occasionally exchanging wealth for the souls of human beings offered up by witches to descend into the darkness to be his slaves. It is thus a
place where the patient, and the curer on her behalf, can make a plea with the same Earth Lord for the return of a bartered soul. Prayer is the only medium through which such a plea can be made. It is, therefore, the vehicle for dialogue with the powers of earth and heaven that can cure illness. In Fragment 8, curer and patient pray together as the helper prepares to leave the sacrificial chicken brought as an offering to the Earth Lord. Antel (whose words are largely drowned out by the stronger prayer of the jilol) is overcome with emotion, weeping and sobbing, hardly able to squeeze out the words that ask the spirits of Isak'tik to take pity on her plight, to recognize her abject state. Her shaman simultaneously intercedes on Antel's behalf, at once describing the actions she is taking to please the gods (at lines 821–2 she mentions explicitly the gifts of cane liquor, candles, and sacrificial animal they have brought to the cave), and relaying further requests from her patient (at line 826–7, again using the evidential la, asking on behalf of Antel that her body be no longer punished). This is, typically, a multivocal and multidirectional dialogue. Both curer and patient ostensibly speak to a supernatural addressee, the shaman using both her own authorial voice and relaying the desires of her patient. The patient, in turn, constantly monitors the shaman's words, trying to synchronize her own prayer with that of the older, more powerful woman. (Notice how the patient repeats the shaman's image of "kneeling // prostrate" at lines 829–32.) The shaman's prayed "reports" about her patient's actions (for example, her reference to the great expense the ceremony represents for the patient and her family in lines 833–34) thus serve as hints to the patient herself about how she ought to pray.

[8] Patient weeps as she prays, with curer

819 CU jaa'xa me chapatik ta krapen //
820 jaa'xa me chapatik ta ye ti'me!
Now we find you with our talking //
now we find you with our lowly speaking

821 (jipish) ti ta ye' ake //
jipish ti ta ye lal 'e
One drop (of liquor) for your lowly mouth //
one drop for your lowly lips

822 chak' o citkokal ti kayumul // ti kaj whawil wae
It is delivered by my deputy // by my sheriff

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821...
824 PA (weeping) mu xa bu xetad an //
825 mu xa bu xelk' tal an
It does not come // it does not come forth

826 CU ma li h la mejer / ti qut /
827 ma li h la mejer li xokem
May she not suffer punishment on her back //
may she not suffer punishment on her side (she says)

828 ti jh'ul chawle // ti jh'ul keple wae
my holy patient // my holy ill sufferer

829 tshatshe me tsj lkejlo // tsj paslon
may you see that I am kneeling well // that I am well prostrate

831 ti yo skol wae // ti yo skol wae
her lowly sin // her lowly evil

832 PA ja me ta keylon o tal // ja me ta paslon o tal
I have come kneeling // I have come prostrate

833 CU shpinke xae =

834 =la ti takame // shpinke xae la ti mere
They have already touched money // they have already touched coins

FIGURE 3 — An evidentially transposed dialogue.

This sort of transposed dialogue, in which the shaman relays by second hand the patient's request, is schematized in Figure 3.
Switching in and out of the genre

The main business of the visit to the cave at Isak'tik was to perform the rituals—prayer, offerings, sacrifice—designed to cure Antel of her debilitating symptoms. The frame of prayer, as we have seen, is in many ways predetermined by the circumstances and heavily constrained in structure. Nonetheless, practical exigencies from moment to moment, ranging from deciding how to decorate the cross or bury the sacrificial chickens in a cave with no soil, to the distress of Antel's baby girl as the ceremony dragged on or the curer's helper's unexpected drunkenness, all required extemporaneous alterations in what might have been the original design of the ceremony. Conceptually one may thus imagine a further dialogue: between the plan of the curing ritual, directly expressed in the sequence of events and the prayers that tracked them, on the one hand, and on the other, the contingencies of the moment. Many such contingencies, in turn, find expression as breaks in the frame of prayer, moments when, for example, the curer is forced to drop out of parallel speech into normal conversation.

One such illustrative moment is transcribed in Fragment 9, a sequence which immediately precedes that shown in Fragment 3. The curer has now lit and prayed over the main offering of candles, and she is about to begin gently beating Antel's back and legs with the pine boughs which she has blessed. This is an expected part of the cure itself. However, Antel's two-year-old daughter is currently strapped in her mother's shawl, trying fitfully to sleep. The baby has been whimpering with fear and distress during the previous long prayer of forgiveness. (In fact, the patient's father had been holding the little girl during much of the previous prayer sequence, until the baby began to cry so strongly that her mother herself broke off praying to ask her husband to pass the child back for nursing.) Aware that the apparent violence of her blows might upset the child farther, the curer breaks off from prayer at lines 1137–8 to ask her patient whether they should simply abandon the next phase of the ritual. When the patient suggests (line 1139) that the baby will not be frightened by the feigned blows, the curer immediately begins praying again (lines 1140 ff.) and the ceremony continues.

[9] Breaking prayer: "Will your baby be frightened?"

1132 cu 1l xe ms shalak'che homel ti schamele // ti skyle
May you thus remove from her her sickness // her illness
1134 buti' ryox oti
true God the father
1135 buti' ryox nich'ani
true God the son
1136 buti' ryox spiritu santu kapi
true God the holy spirit, my Lord
1137 mi ja' nox su' une
Can we just do it?
1138 mu jna' mi xi' nan avole
I don't know if perhaps your baby will be frightened.
1139 pa i' nan, k'un k'un
Perhaps not, it will just be gentle
1140 cu an you jeua kapi kapi
God, Jesus Christ, my Lord
1141 k'un yepol un...
How much will...

After the curer begins the beating treatment, Antel's child does indeed begin to cry (see again the final part of Video clip Beat), and the curer truncates the ritual so as to cause no further distress to the child.

This and other similar moments show the permeability of the ritual idiom. Despite its insistent and fluid parallelism, the structure of prayer is nonetheless interruptible. When the curer is worried about the well being of the patient's daughter, or when she is annoyed by her drunken helper/husband's intransigence, she is able to break off praying even in mid couplet, back an order, and resume almost exactly where she left off. She maintains a constant dialogue with circumstances by monitoring her surroundings and punctuating her performance as needed.

Authority and improvisation

The idiom of prayer is permeable in yet another way, also related to dialogicity. Although according to native metatheory, prayer has a rigid form, circumstances may oblige an expert ritual
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Later, after leaving Isak’tik, the curing party stopped again at the crosses at Ch’ul Ton “Holy Rock” where the curer had originally planned to leave large one-peso size candles. Since they had substituted these larger candles for the broken fifty centavo candles at Isak’tik, there were now not enough to go around. In her prayers at Ch’ul Ton the curer switched the blame for an incomplete performance of the patient herself—ja’ nan smul lavalaba // lanish nahi “perhaps the fault is with your child // your offspring”—since insufficient candles had been purchased to make up for such an eventuality. Indirect references to the broken candles and to the curer’s own blamelessness in the mishap were interspersed throughout the prayer at Ch’ul Ton.

[12] Oblique reference to the broken candles at Ch’ul Ton (see video clip Ch’ul ton 2)
Perhaps the most extreme example of the curer’s authoritative voice imposed upon prayer is in her explicit instruction to others about how to pray and what to say. In normal circumstances, the shaman leads prayer, and others—patients, helpers, relatives—follow her in their own prayers. However, the shaman’s lead can be more directive. In Fragment 13, for example, the curer is preparing the pine boughs which she will use to “cleanse” the patient in the besting treatment we have already seen. The patient herself, in the normal course of events, is expected to ask the curer formally to begin the treatment, but at this moment Antel has forgotten. At lines 2–5, the curer remarks, ostensibly in prayer to the ancestral spirits, that the patient has “said nothing,” prompting Antel, at line 4, to remark that she has forgotten, after which the prayer proceeds normally.

[13] The shaman reminds her patient of something, via prayer (see video clip save ot)

1 cu k’elari la tot // k’elari la hagpal
Look here, father // look here, my Lord.

2 mu nak o chal ta asulah //
Your child didn’t say anything //

3 mu nak o chal ta awh hah ane
Your offspring didn’t say anything.

The curer intervened more directly in the somewhat incoherent prayers offered by her mayol—her husband—who had gotten unacceptably drunk and was thus only marginally able to carry out his duties. His main obligation was to carry the sacrificial chicken into the upper reaches of the cave, where he was to bury it in pine needles with an offering of flowers and cane liquor. Unfortunately, this tipsy mayol became too frightened of his precarious perch high in the cave, and he descended precipitously without having managed to light the candles. In Fragment 14 the mayol takes leave of the cave with a truncated prayer tearfully addressed to the lord of Isak’tuk. However, the shaman is dissatisfied both with his performance as helper and also with the formulation of his prayer. He has neglected the central issue, namely whether or not the patient’s offerings have been successfully received by the lords of the cave. In an ordinary voice, but still in parallel constructions, she overlaps her husband’s prayer (which is mostly concerned with whether he himself has escaped unscathed from his encounter with the cave). She appears to feed him lines, suggesting a reformulation of his prayer (see lines 1037 and 1043). Here is yet another kind of multi-voiced dialogue: as the mayol (“my”) addresses the gods, the curer

4 FA an thay xha’i
Why, I forgot.

5 cu pas ya’u an me shambogvan //
But still I want you to fix for me

6 ya’u an me shambogvan chiv’el
I want you to prepare for me

7 ti shamel uwe // ti nagul uwe
The sick one // the hurt one

8 li jojel uwe // ti tsy‘ap’al uwe
The spinning one // the tripping one

9 li la chikom ta yo laviv’eh uwe //
May it remain here in your eating place

10 li la chikom ta yo lauch’eb uwe
May it remain here in your drinking place

11 ti ip uwe // ti k’woc uwe
The sickness // the pain.

8 As the most appropriate alternate person, the patient’s godfather—in that case the anthropologist—was called on to clamber up to the top of the cave and complete the job.
The parallel language of Mayan prayer is said to be conceptualized, in naïve metatheory, as an “ancient genre” (Gossen 1974), whose content and form have been handed down from the primordial ancestors. As we have seen, Zinacanteces locate its source in divine inspiration. Yet in the depths of the cave at Isak’tik prayer is located firmly within a miniature, if complex, social order. It is at once fixed and fluid, prescribed and improvised, monologue and multi-vocal dialogue. I have identified several moments of dialogue in just a few short segments of a much longer event, which traveled across a wide social terrain, encountering and incorporating further voices all along the way.

Let me recapitulate some of these dialogues before concluding my story.

1. First there is the dual imagery of the couplets themselves, each element resonating off its partner, suggesting alternate ways (alternate voices) for saying “the same thing.”

2. There is an implicated historical dialogue: in the deepest cultural history a resurrected interaction with the so’ne moletik / me’leetik “the ancient men // the ancient women” or toti mo’leetik “father-mothers” whose imagery is put to use in curing the children // the offspring. In the bilingual structure of many prayer doublets there can also be heard a dialogue in colonial history with the Spanish conquerors // evangelizers whose language and beliefs left an indelible imprint on the talk (and the world) of today.

3. In the progress of a curing ceremony, punctuated and tracked in prayer, there appears a dialogue between words and action, in which the “plot” of the prayer both reflects the “events” of the curing ceremony and at the same time effects results and produces actions creatively.

4. In the performance of prayer there is a literal conversation, with multiple and shifting participants: shaman, patient, helper, consort, onlooker, and even the patient’s child. All these identities and roles in the unfolding curing process are delicately indexed in the language of prayer.
woman frequently brought her patients to Isak'tik in search of relief. One year before our curing ceremony, the elder sister had read in Antel's pulse that such a cure would be efficacious in this case. This older curer, however, had died suddenly before completing Antel's cure. It fell then to the younger sister—the present shaman—to carry out the prescribed treatment. Here in prayer she acknowledges the shadow presence of her deceased sister, and indirectly she speaks with the other's voice—her mouth // her lips // her words // her reason.

My first conclusion is crystalized in the shadowy presence of this now deceased shaman. She may have passed "beneath the earth // beneath the mud," but her voice lives on, even in the most prescribed and formally restricted language of prayer. My theme in this essay has been the fundamental dialogicity of shamanistic prayer in Zinacantec, a subplot in the overall drama of the dialogues of ritual. However, it is a feature of language in general, in the enactment of speech, that it is multivocal and layered, a sediment of (sometimes miniature) social history. This is, indeed, what makes speech a rich tool of ethnography.

My second observation is an old one, indeed, a truism, although one often forgotten in structuralist, and semiotically minded studies of language. The main business of much saying is doing, and this is nowhere more obvious than in the cave at Isak'tik. Prayer would not, of course, exist were it not efficacious. The language of Zinacantec anti-witchcraft prayer, however beautifully crafted and laden with cultural, historical, and personal meanings, is primarily designed to work. Its life is defined by what it accomplishes more than by what it says (or means). The journey to the cave at Isak'tik was mounted in order to put the language of prayer squarely into action.

What, in the end, did the prayers of Antel, of her shaman, and of their drunken helper accomplish? Disease, curing, and witchcraft are all complicated phenomena in modern Zinacantec. The jealousies and envy that have always plagued the township, and which in the past were often reputed to induce witches to sell their enemies' souls, have grown only more intense as differences in wealth and resources have become vast in the wake of economic boom and crisis in the Chiapas countryside (Collier 1995). Still worse, in Antel's village, religious divisions in the wake of Protestant evangelization as well as fractious party politics have produced new cleavages and enmities, replete with possibilities for supernatural punishment and illness.
Antel soon recovered from the fainting spells and the aching joints that had plagued her for more than a year. Her little daughter suddenly began to walk and talk, and turned from a crying, frightened baby into a normal Zinacanteco toddler.

The curer and her husband were less fortunate. Within a few months of returning from Isak'tik, the curer herself was stricken with an inexplicable paralysis of the legs, which curved up and would no longer support her weight. She and her husband, fearful for the state of their souls, flirted briefly with one of the evangelical sects—unusual but not unheard of even for the apparently most "traditional" of healers. The shaman did not recover, however. Within a year of the visit to Isak'tik the curer died, never having regained the ability to walk.

Antel, listening now to my recordings from the cave, is struck by the lines that her shaman spoke, in her opening dialogue with the lords of Isak'tik, and with which we in turn began the present excursion into the dialogues of prayer. She hears in them a prophetic dialogue between the shaman and the ancestral deities who cured the patient, but who allowed the shaman herself to succumb.

[16] Prophetic couplets?

12  mu mu ilbilinbilvak // muu mu ilbilinbilvak li xokone
may her back be not molested // may her side be not molested

14  v'onikan mu ilbilinbilvak li jeb'ule // li jenina one
and even me, may my soul be not molested // may my spirit be not molested

16  ta lek mu un // ta wiz mu un
for good // for happiness

17  kajnal
my Lord

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FLAVIA CUTURI

"Tal vez estamos aquí."
Autoridad, responsabilidad y "antidepressivo" en las interacciones dialógicas rituales huaves*

En este ensayo presentaré dos discursos, mipoch Dios ("su palabra de Dios"), enunciados por dos alcaldes del municipio huave de San Mateo del Mar (Oaxaca), frente a la asamblea política de los hombres del pueblo: el primero con ocasión de la así llamada asap apal postis "toma asiento autoridad", o sea, la asunción del cargo; el segundo, con ocasión de una junta municipal de rutina en la que se tenían que resolver problemas importantes acerca de la tierra; éste era la presentación del tema acerca del cual la asamblea había tenido que discutir.

En apariencia, estos discursos tienen una forma monológica, en el sentido que no se prevé que haya turnos de toma de la palabra. Al final del discurso de asunción del cargo de alcalde, los principales (montang ombas "los que tienen cuerpos grandes"), es decir los mayores de edad que ya cumplieron todos los cargos posibles, se limitan a enunciar pocas palabras formuarias de asesoramiento positivo, que no se vinculan con el contenido del discurso del alcalde.

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1 San Mateo del Mar, el mayor de los pueblos huaves, se ubica a lo largo de la costa pacífica del litoral de Tehuantepec. Es un pueblo de 1000 habitantes incluidos las colonias y las rancherías, unido entre dunas de arena que caracterizan el hábitat seco de las dunas, y lagunas de agua salobre donde la mayoría de los hombres pesca canudres y pescara para el consumo doméstico, sea para la venta por mayores del diedo a cabras por las mujeres. El huave es una lengua aislad; únicamente, así como en otros trabajos, el alfabeto elaborado y propuesto por los miembros del Instituto Lingüístico de Verano, STAIRS y SCHAEFFER (1981) que tiene como referencia el del español, excepto por el á [e], a [e], o [o], x [i] y x [i]. Desde hace poco tiempo un grupo de maestros, procedentes de todos los pueblos huaves, están estudiando la posibilidad de integrar la propuesta ortográfica de los Starr, fundamentada en el dialecto de San Mateo, algunos de los cargos femeninos de los otros dialectos huaves. También con razón de estas dificultades, no se ha difundido un uso del huave escrito, los que tienen necesidad de escribir, por ejemplo los especialistas de los rituales, lo hacen cada uno a su manera.