

Mu'nuk jbankil to, mu'nuk kajvaltik:
"He is not my older brother, he is not Our Lord."
Thirty years of gossip in a Chiapas village
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Introduction

In mid 1970, my compadre Maryan, chatting with a group of other Zinacantec men about the important people of his hamlet (Haviland 1977), described his son-in-law Chep. Chep's relatives had despaired of his ever being able to make a living. "*Kere pero le'e batz'i mu xve', batz'i ben ch'aj,*"¹ the boy's uncle had told Maryan, "Boy, that one will not be able to eat. He is really lazy."

Chep married Maryan's eldest daughter after a long and difficult courtship. The new son-in-law apparently straightened out, in Maryan's words, learning to *ch'un mantal* "obey orders" and *och ta be* "enter the path." Nonetheless, Maryan was forced by his partners in gossip to confess to having reservations about the youth's past reputation for *sa' k'op* literally, 'looking for words,' that is, arguing or making trouble.

When I began to work in Zinacantán in the late 1960s gossip was the lens through which I tried to produce a synchronic snapshot of "cultural knowledge"—what Zinacantecs "knew" about the structures and standards of their lives. Since no Tzotzil speech category unambiguously resonated with the connotations of the English term 'gossip' I adopted a simple working definition for the object of the study: stories about absent third parties. Such stories, I reasoned, to be "tellable" or to warrant a "hearing," must embody locally legislated topics of interest, as well perhaps as other defining interactive features. Thus someone's *-lo'itael*² was not just any story about that person, but a story one's interlocutors would want to listen to, one that Zinacantecs might actually relate to an audience appropriately constituted in the victim's absence. Depending on the circumstances, the Zinacantecs I worked with largely chose to relate about their absent fellows only stories we would quickly identify as gossip: scandalous romances, shameless misbehavior both public and private, fights, drunkenness, divorces, and other discord.

As my earlier work showed, there is explicit native Zinacantec theory about such *lo'itael*. Stories about absent others, on the local view, display a tension between truth--since every narrative must, people suppose, have a grain of fact somewhere at its heart--and gratuitous nastiness--since people's *ye* 'mouth' is generally thought to be venal and destructive. Moreover, since stories can escape the jealously guarded privacy of house plots and yards (see Haviland and Haviland 1982, 1983), reputation is vulnerable and exposed. Uncontrolled dissemination of information is dangerous and betrays both bad judgement and poor upbringing. Talking about one's own affairs is something Zinacantecs are taught obsessively to avoid, just as they are constantly on the lookout for information about others.

There is a related kind of Zinacantec narrative which is not "gossip" according to this lax definition because the targets—the third parties with whom the stories are concerned—are not absent but rather all too present. This is the hostile, sometimes

violent, public airing of complaints directly before magistrates during official court sessions at the town hall, where putative wrongdoers ordinarily stand right in front of plaintiffs.³ Stories told in court resonate with features of the gossip examined here, but they have a different dynamic.⁴ For one thing, face-to-face accusations are directly actionable, especially when authoritative witnesses are present. For another, the allocation of the "floor" to different narrators is controlled, sometimes directly and sometimes by more subtle means, in such face-to-face contexts. Nonetheless, narratives in legal disputes share important features with Zinacantec "gossip": the active participation of the "audience" (see Haviland 1986), and the fact that stories are joint productions of multiple (sometimes simultaneous) tellers.

Although the techniques I used to gather a "corpus" of "gossip" were interactive—I assembled panels of Zinacantec men to talk about other members of the community—the dynamics of the process were of little concern to me; the discursive techniques the Zinacantecs brought to the task were largely invisible; and the social-historical embedding of the occasions for gossiping was beyond my grasp. The discursive histories, the Bakhtinian play of voices behind and embedded in each of the "stories" that I collected, went unheard in my earlier study.

Still, I learned much about Zinacantán from these hilarious, multi-vocal, often ribald conversational sessions. I myself became a competent, though somewhat hollow, gossip, learning how to keep my interlocutors talking, and assembling an encyclopedic knowledge of many Zinacantecs whose dirty linen I saw without ever having seen their faces or heard their voices. More substantively, I began to understand what made a Zinacantec's reputation, what triumphs and disasters a Zinacantec life could encompass. For example, gossip provided a corrective for the view that through service in the system of yearlong religious positions dedicated to saints—a system characteristic of Mexico and Central America—Zinacantecs mechanically traded wealth for prestige (see Cancian 1965, 1992). Performance in these "cargos" was sometimes exemplary, but sometimes laughable, and the nuances of wealth and power were laid bare under the merciless eye of gossip. The same was true of secular political leaders—elected officials at the local town hall—whose reputations were also vulnerable to the gossip's sharp tongue. Ethnographic themes were crystallized in the evaluatively loaded expressions gossips used. Panelists in "Who's Who" sessions were fascinated by such topics as land squabbles and marriage disputes—matters also prominent in Zinacantec legal proceedings, then (see J. Collier 1973) and now. Allusions to Maryan's son-in-law's propensity for "making trouble" derived from a long fight between the younger man and his own half-brother over their inheritance. The story involved a recurrent motif in Zinacantec affairs central to this essay: the competition between sons for the land of their fathers, the fact that daughters did not share fully in such inheritance, and the concomitant tensions between siblings and parents over who deserved which pieces of land.

Nonetheless, my analyses of the gossip tidbits garnered from staged Who's Who sessions were seriously deficient. I had amassed a corpus of interaction with the interaction filtered out. The afternoons spent in the confines of a San Cristóbal ranch with various adult Zinacantec men talking about their absent fellows represented a single,

limited context of "gossiping," only tangentially related to the discursive scenes of daily life.

True, the stories exemplified typical language and subject matter, especially culture-specific vocabulary of criticism, scorn, and mockery. They also exemplified *meta-gossip*, gossip whose subject matter is gossip itself. Zinacantec narrative often consists of more deeply embedded narrative; today's conversations about somebody cite yesterday's conversations with him or her.

However, I paid little attention to the conditions in which Zinacantec gossip ordinarily occurs. Indeed, it has taken me several decades to glimpse the complexity of such "natural" contexts. In particular, one must grapple analytically with the triangular relationships between speakers, recipients, and "victims," or more generally between interlocutors in a gossip session (and perhaps other participants—silent onlookers or overhearers, for instance⁵) and the targets of their talk.

Zinacantec "gossip" differs from the "free floating stories" envisioned by the editors of this volume.⁶ It is firmly anchored in a specific moment of telling. In a Zinacantec village, discourse rarely "floats," nor is it free of explicit attempts at control. Stories do not, of course, remain still for long, but they flow along monitored, though not always leakproof channels. Narrative is tailored to the circumstances and concerns of the moment, and to the interlocutors at hand. What makes of different pieces of gossip a "single story" is a commonality of narrated events, but the voices and motives of the narrators (and of those who allow themselves to listen) vary with each version. Similarly, although my earlier study was based on linguistic analysis of the gossip "texts," it paid little attention to questions of voice. I mean not simply the identities of the interlocutors or the protagonists, but the representations of these personae in performance.

However, the most crucial gap in my earlier study of gossip was its ahistoricity. A synchronic snapshot, no matter how rich, is frozen in a single moment. It is outside of time. Gossip, however, always has past and future trajectories. Only with the passage of time can I set these "texts" into their diachronic contexts and sketch a natural history of gossip. My compadre Maryan and his wayward son-in-law Chep will be the foil for just such an excursion into history, as stories about them surface in certain contexts and are then refashioned and retold in others.

Ongoing fieldwork

In periodic fieldwork from 1966 to the present I have established evolving relationships with several extended Zinacantec families in the hamlet of Nabenchauk in the highlands of central Chiapas, Mexico. There live both Maryan and Chep, and our families are linked by ties of real and ritual kinship. In 1970, when Maryan gossiped about his son-in-law, these ties were incipient. Chep had only recently married Maryan's daughter, and the two men had begun to collaborate in farming, the older man overseeing work in the cornfields, while the younger man sought other employment using his linguistic and political skills. There was promise in 1970 that the two men would enjoy a collaborative future.

In 1998 there is total rupture between Maryan, now an old man, and his son-in-law Chep, a powerful political figure and past municipal president. The two families do not collaborate in work, in curing ceremonies, or in other social events. Members of

neither household talk to members of the other. They refuse one another even the minimal greetings Zinacantecs routinely exchange on the path. They do not, in Tzotzil parlance, *sk'opon sbaik* 'speak to each other,' having *yutoj sbaik* 'scolded each other.'⁷ They are like *yan krixchano* 'unrelated people.' How has this rupture come about, and what role does gossip play in this disastrous turn of events?

My understanding of the process is itself partly discursive. Along with a variety of quotidian and ritual activities--working, eating, making music, and so on--the bulk of my time in Zinacantán involves talking. My research focuses on an amplified "linguistic competence": not just the knowledge one has of grammar and lexicon, but the interrelated skills that allow one not only to speak appropriately in a range of situations but more generally to act effectively through speech. I have tracked the flow of stories through the community, on a wide range of subjects and about just about everyone in town. Inevitably, my understanding of events is thus never "neutral" but always situated within particular shifting personal alliances. Since I am more closely tied to the family of Maryan than to that of his son-in-law Chep, my perspective is located more in one camp than in the other.

Important for understanding the dispute between Maryan and Chep are radical economic and political transformations in Zinacantec life that have characterized this extended period of field research. Three areas of change are especially relevant: economic reorganization, political upheaval, and the growing influence of Mexican legal and political institutions in Zinacantec land affairs.

In 1970 hard work in agriculture was the key to economic success in Zinacantán. The source of most people's income was collaborative agriculture on sharecropped lowland fields. Kinsmen and friends from highland villages worked in groups to raise corn, beans, and related crops. During gaps in the intensive agricultural cycle, some men supplemented their incomes with unskilled labor on roads and other construction. During the late 1970s and 1980s this pattern changed radically, partly as a result of the oil induced boom and subsequent crises in Mexico. Local agriculture was transformed from small scale, labor intensive, cooperative work into a capital intensive, stratified, entrepreneurial venture, dependent on chemical fertilizers and herbicides. Wealthy Zinacantecs began to hire their other Indians to labor in their rented fields. Moreover, the importance of other gainful activities—what George Collier (1990) calls "seeking money" as opposed to simply "seeking food"⁸—grew steadily. Zinacantecs turned away from their *milpas* towards market gardening, pure commerce, transportation, and salaried labor as ways of making a living. Being a successful cornfarmer was no longer a prototypical sign of success for a Zinacantec, and many people "left the hoe" entirely, or returned to corn farming as one business among many, or as a way to supplement other sources of cash. The economic changes in the region produced a new stratification in communities like Nabenchauk, as some people grew extremely wealthy, and others fell into abject poverty (see Collier 1994b).

Related social changes—the weakening of ties of interdependence and cooperation that characterized collaborative sharecropping, for example, and competition for extra-community resources tied to government and other institutions—also gave rise in the late 1970s to divisive, sometimes violent party politics. Maryan's son-in-law Chep

was elected municipal president precisely when dissatisfaction with the elite *caciques* or 'political bosses' took the form of active, partisan opposition. Political factionalism that became institutionalized in the late 1970s became more virulent in the next decade and took on still new forms after the Zapatista rebellion of 1994 (see Collier 1994a).

Finally, the period has seen a gradual erosion of Zinacantec practices surrounding the tenure and inheritance of land. There were at least two causes: the changing significance of land in the evolving economy, and a growing influence of Mexican law about property and inheritance. One tension surrounds different standards for who should inherit land and under what conditions. In "traditional" Zinacantec practice of the 1960s and 1970s, a man's children did not inherit his property equally. The bulk of the land, particularly productive agricultural land, went to sons. Daughters were expected to be provided for largely by their husbands. Inheritance was in any case delicate and brittle. Parents were expected to divide their lands as part of a "patrimony" that their children deserved. But receiving an inheritance also generated obligations to care for the aging parents. Children who did not comply could be stripped of their lands.

However, the growing bureaucratization of the local land commissioners—who began routinely to measure tracts of land and to issue legal titles—and the insinuation of Mexican law affected both parts of this relationship. Bequeathing land to one's children now became formally a voluntary matter. Once legally handed over, however, land was permanently that of the beneficiary—no subsequent shifting of allegiances could automatically revoke a transaction.

A growing population and the reduced importance of large-scale agriculture also changed people's needs for land. House plots inside villages, as opposed to woodlands or highland fields, began to assume a special significance. Such sites grew scarce, and commercial possibilities for land near roads and centers of habitation became more important. The idea that men were more deserving than women of inheriting their parental lands began to fade, as the underlying logic changed. Women were able to conduct small scale commerce and thus began to lay stronger claims on house or garden plots within or near villages.

The fight between Maryan and Chep

The history of the relationship between Maryan and Chep provides a framework for understanding how changes in the circumstances of the village play themselves out in real lives. It is also the locus for a natural history of gossip. Chep married Maryan's oldest daughter Maruch in December 1966, just as the older man was finishing his third level religious office. Chep and his new bride were in their mid twenties at the time. When Maryan gossiped with his friends in 1970, the young couple's first child, a son, had been born. A second son followed a year later, and then two daughters.

Maryan was a man of considerable traditional wealth. He owned farmland in the highlands near his village, and he had long-established contacts with non-Indian landowners in the lowlands of the Grijalva River valley where he rented fields for large-scale cornfarming. His sons helped him with his corn farming operation. After marrying they maintained independent cornfields but always in collaboration with their father. The older brother-in-law Chep, having no brothers of his own, amalgamated his farming with that of his wife's family. Maryan was an experienced corn farmer, with a voracious

appetite for long hours and physical work. Chep had other ways of making a living. He parlayed his knowledge of Spanish into a sequence of salaried jobs, both with anthropologists and with agencies in the government Indianist bureaucracy. He served a term as a low-level civil official, establishing a reputation as a skilled dispute settler. In the meantime, his father-in-law Maryan finished a distinguished career in the hierarchy of ritual office.

In 1978 Chep was elected municipal president. He thereby acquired considerable power and prestige in the community and relations of political patronage with non-Indian government officials at state and federal levels. Until 1978 the civil officials of Zinacantán and other Chiapas Indian municipalities belonged to the dominant government political party, the PRI.⁹ There had long been factional divisions in the community, but it was only in 1978 that a powerful group of Zinacantecs, opposed to Chep's entry as President, decided to defy the PRI and to ally themselves with the main national opposition party, the PAN.¹⁰ The resulting violent division split the whole township, mirroring similar processes elsewhere in Chiapas. For example, Maryan and his immediate household remained allied with his son-in-law, who completed a 3-year term as the official PRI municipal president. The rest of Maryan's relatives, however, gave their allegiance to a shadow PAN opposition government. The resulting ugly family split lasts to the present day.

When he left office in 1981, Chep renewed his corn farming operation, and over the next few years he and his father-in-law embarked on enterprising schemes to rent or buy productive cornfarming lands. The balance of power between the two men was somewhat reversed. Maryan, growing older, had the knowledge to manage the week-by-week work of growing corn. However, it was Chep, with contacts in the government development bureaucracy, who could manipulate forces that were transforming Zinacantec agriculture. It was Chep who negotiated credits for the fertilizer and herbicide that were replacing the old labor intensive hand cultivation with which Maryan had grown up. It was Chep who used his contacts to rent land from government agencies. It was Chep who had links with a growing class of Zinacantec entrepreneurs who bankrolled large-capital intensive cornfarming operations.

The life cycle of a Zinacantec family here combined with the tide of change sweeping over indigenous Chiapas. Chep's authority in the family came not only from a growing autonomy from his aging parents-in-law but also from his position of influence in the community. Party affiliations had begun to loom large in local manifestations of power: control over resources, bestowed by the ruling party on its followers, and an authoritative voice in settling conflicts. Chep's importance in the family was also heightened by the fact that Maryan's own sons were singularly lacking in ambition, given to too much drinking, and fighting with their wives and neighbors. It was left to Chep to *nitvan*, 'pull people,' that is, to be the leader of the family, always somewhat in competition with Maryan.

Maryan's elder status as an outstanding participant in the hierarchy of religious "cargos" and a productive cornfarmer was somewhat vitiated by the waning importance of ritual service. Alternate routes to power and prestige were now derived from capital accumulation and political connections. Maryan's position was ironically further

weakened by party politics. During Chep's presidency, the opposition PAN party took control of the municipal hierarchy of religious offices, ousting the PRI affiliated Maryan from a supposedly lifelong position as Holy Elder in the ceremonial center of Zinacantán.¹¹

Moreover, Maryan was blessed (or cursed) with several unmarried daughters, whose presence created a structural imbalance between the old man's household and those of his sons and son-in-law. The issue was land. As he grew less able to farm his property, Maryan was expected to divide it up among descendants. Under ordinary circumstances, unmarried daughters could expect to inherit little more than a house plot, if that, with the bulk of the old man's farmland going to his sons. Such an arrangement was not acceptable to Maryan's daughters who occupied a powerful position in the family, having essentially dedicated their lives to the care of their aging parents, while their brothers had set up independent households of their own.

Early in 1985 an outbreak of political violence culminated in a shooting. Chep's wife, Maryan's daughter Maruch, was wounded by a stray bullet fired by a prominent member of the PAN political party. The incident represented a previously unknown level of political violence in the community of Zinacantán—a foretaste of things to come in the following decade. The incident is also notable in the present context, because it engendered a retelling of one of the gossip "stories" with which we began.

Retellings

One theoretical defect of my early study of Zinacantec gossip was its static synchronicity. Narrated events were taken as tiny windows onto cultural standards of behavior. Most of the stories were caught as one-time performances, with little opportunity for follow-up, re-thinking, or re-evaluation. A hallmark of gossip, though, is that it flows inexorably from one mouth (or one ear) to another. Zinacantecs quite consciously create political and affective ties via gossip. They gossip both to prospective allies and to prospective enemies. They tell stories to civil officials, both in and out of court. They rehearse stories, and they rework them, interactively tinkering with wording, deciding what to leave out or what to emphasize. And they are aware that the evaluative moral of a given incident can be altered dramatically, from one telling to another.

Chep's rumored propensity for *sa'-k'op* 'making trouble' surfaced as an oblique allusion in 1970. Then it served as an index of Maryan's ambivalence about the new son-in-law, a potentially powerful man, but one whose relish for disputes could prove troublesome. Chep's past behavior was taken as evidence for the nature of *sjol* 'his head,' i.e., his propensity for making trouble.

After his wife was wounded in 1985, Chep set out to destroy the political enemies who were responsible. He put in motion the powerful machinery of PRI politics, as well as his position of authority as lands commissioner to accomplish this end. As I accompanied him back and forth between Nabenchauk and San Cristóbal, visiting lawyers and political allies, Chep himself told me how, as a youth, he had fought with his own half-brother over land, suffering many reversals, he said, but ultimately triumphing after four years of legal struggle. What in 1970 was evidence for Maryan of his son-in-law's litigious personality was here cited, in Chep's own discourse with me, as proof of his persistence in the pursuit of justice.

Petul understood Maryan merely to mean that his sons had married and moved out into separate households of their own. However, Maryan used Petul's own previous gossip to elaborate his current situation. "I am all alone," he continued. "And one of my sons is doing just what you describe in your own family."

The interaction set the stage for the gossip to come, and also characterized Maryan's situation as recognizable, if lamentable: this is the way (Zinacantec) sons are, Maryan seems to say, enlisting his interlocutor's sympathy by aligning their shared positions in parallel disputes.

Maryan said that he had instructed his wife not to let the quarrelsome son into the house should he come to visit. When Petul remarked that his father had proposed the same strategy, Maryan launched his new story.

| | | | | | |
|-------|----|------------------------------|----|----|---|
| 28 | m: | je' le' ta ... | 28 | m: | And that one at- |
| 29 | | ta jap osil to me a'a | 29 | | living up at the high point. |
| 30 | | yik'al . mu'yuk ya'el . xtal | 30 | | He, too, is not welcome here. |
| 31 | | ya'un mu ya'uk ochuk tael | 31 | | "Don't let him in either." --that's what I say. |
| xichi | | | | | |
| 32 | p: | hmm | 32 | p: | hmm ¹⁴ |

Maryan revealed that he had also banned from his house his son-in-law Chep, a man well known to Petul, and in fact the latter's former political ally. Maryan referred to his son-in-law in a neutral way. Chep was identified only as "that one who lives at the *jap osil* 'high place'." Maryan thus avoided any expression that would link Chep, the third party, either to himself or to his interlocutor--a symptom of the analytical truism I have already mentioned that the triangular relationship in gossip between teller, recipient, and target is always significant. Both the fact that Maryan refused to entertain his son-in-law in his house, and also his deliberate referential distance from Chep revealed to Petul that Maryan and his son-in-law were having *k'op*, literally 'words.'

| | | | | | |
|----|----|-----------------------------|----|----|--|
| 33 | m: | ya'un oy jutuk jk'optikotik | 33 | m: | Because we are having a slight argument. |
|----|----|-----------------------------|----|----|--|

Maryan remarked that the dispute was over land. Petul responded that land always causes fights, and that if people want land they should simply buy it rather than quarrelling with their parents; his comment is typical of the evaluative (if rhetorical) assessments that make gossip such a useful ethnographic tool.

| | | |
|----|----|--|
| 36 | m: | And the whole dispute began over land, too. |
| 37 | p: | It's always about land! |
| 38 | | I just don't know what business it is of theirs. |
| 39 | | Why don't (they) just buy (their) own land if-- |
| 40 | m: | OK, but the land--. |
| 41 | p: | --if they feel they want to own land. |

Petul thus aligned himself with Maryan's position by mirroring the older man's impatience with land-based disputes.

Maryan next emphasized that the problem was not that he refused to bequeath land. Instead, his intention had been to give land away, in a proposed exchange. Nonetheless, the person "living in the high place" had refused the deal. Maryan spoke in a highly indirect fashion, using the quotative particle *la*¹³ to distance himself evidentially from his son-in-law: "it is said that he didn't want (to accept the land swap)." Exactly who said what is left conveniently unspecified. Maryan himself does not claim direct knowledge of the other's position.

| | | |
|----|----|--------------------|
| 51 | m: | ja' la mu sk'an un |
|----|----|--------------------|

51 m; *But it is said that he didn't want it.*

Maryan now explained the details. His daughter, Chep's wife, had a small piece of land at the far end of the village, land that Maryan had given her as part of her inheritance. This plot was remote from her own house. Maryan was currently in need of money to pay for a curing ceremony. He had proposed to sell a plot of his own land which happened to be in a more desirable position. His daughter then expressed interest in this better land, and they had agreed to a swap. Maryan would sell his daughter's inheritance for the money he needed, but in return he would replace it with the plot of land he had originally proposed to sell. This latter piece, he added, would make a marvelous site for a house at some future time, since it was close to where he lived.

Maryan performed a fragment of his dialogue with his daughter about this transaction. He used a characteristic Tzotzil style of reporting conversation "verbatim," framing the reported speech with explicit verbs of speaking (see %Lucy 1992), such as *xi* 's/he said,' or *xkut* 'I said to him/her' (lines 61 and 62, for example).

- 58 m; *"Decide whether you will sell it yourself,*
 59 *"or whether I should sell it for you.*
 60 *"I'll exchange (your land for another plot).*
 61 *"And you will get this (piece of land) over here," I said to her. (=xkut)*
 62 *"OK," she said. (= xi.)*
 63 *"Please do me the favor," said my daughter.*

Now came the central drama of the story. Chep the son-in-law—now referred to somewhat hesitantly¹⁴ as *li mole* 'the gentleman'¹⁵—heard of the proposal. He grew angry, insulting his father-in-law with insulting epithets.

- | | | | | | |
|----|----|--------------------------------------|----|----|---|
| 65 | m; | <i>ora ya'i li . mole</i> | 65 | m; | <i>But later, the gentleman (her husband)</i> |
| | | | | | <i>heard about it.</i> |
| 66 | | <i>k'u la yu'un ta jchon balamil</i> | 66 | | <i>(And he asked) why I was selling land.</i> |
| 67 | | <i>k'u la yu'un batz'i lok'</i> | 67 | | <i>(And he asked) why I was so intent on</i> |
| | | <i>balemon ta chon osil</i> | | | <i>selling off property.</i> |
| 68 | | <i>puta molon la</i> | 68 | | <i>(And he said) I was a goddamned old man.</i> |
| 69 | | <i>kap o me un</i> | 69 | | <i>He got very angry over it.</i> |

The exact syntax of Chep's reported reaction here is important. Maryan carefully framed each reported phrase with a quotative evidential particle *la* (lines 66-68) that put the quoted words into his son-in-law's mouth; the words were attested not by his own ears but by those of an unidentified third party, who allegedly heard Chep and in turn reported Chep's words to Maryan. This is, then, gossip about gossip.

Maryan went on to explain.

- 71 m; *He told the commissioner of lands.*
 72 *And the commissioner told me.*
 73 *"This is what he said. This is what he said."*
 74 *"(He asked) 'What business of yours is it to sell land?'"*
 75 *"You are just intent on selling land."*
 76 *"You are a goddamned old man." [= puta molote]*
 77 *That's what Lorenzo [the commissioner of lands] said to me.*

It was in conversation with the commissioner of lands that Chep uttered these insults, which the commissioner repeated to Maryan.

Just to be sure he had heard the insult correctly, Maryan, in his narrative, made a second check.

- 79 m; *"Did he say that?"*

80 "He said that."

81 It was on the first Friday (of Lent) that Lorenzo told me about it.

According to Maryan, the land commissioner then asked about the land deal. Where was the property in question and whose was it officially? The land I wanted to sell, Maryan had told him, was all mine, not part of my children's inheritance. Learning the facts, the commissioner authorized Maryan to go ahead.

103 m: "You can sell it then," he said.

Maryan finished his account by rehearsing what he and the commissioner of lands had agreed Chep should be told about the transaction. Again, the sequence is carefully framed by metapragmatic verbs that invoke other embedded, hypothetical conversations: *sk'oponot* 'he talks to you,' *ava'i* 'you heard,' *uto* 'tell him,' *chkalbe* 'I'll tell him.'

104 atimi tsɪ to sk'oponote

104 "If he comes to speak to you again,

105 ixchon yosile

105 "(Tell him) 'He sold his land.'

106 mi ava'i mi xie

106 "If he asks, 'Have you heard about it?'

107 ka'yoʒ uto me un xkut

107 "Tell him 'I've heard about it.'" I said to

him.

108 yan le' mu ʒk'an xa yech ali

108 "I don't want people to say I'm just selling

ta jchon ta mukul osii

land in secret."

110 cha'i xa komite xkut

110 "(Say) 'The commissioner has heard about

it.'" I told him.

111 p: mm

111 p: mm.

112 m: bweno yech chkalbe xi

112 p: "OK, I'll tell him that," he said.

With the multiple embeddings of speech (distinguished by verbs of speaking and also by pronominal transpositions¹⁶), and explicit instructions about what phrases the commissioner is to repeat if asked, we here have gossip about hypothetical future gossip, talk about talk about talk. Offenses of others are passed from mouth to mouth, but in the absence of those gossiped about, no direct confrontation between the disputants occurs anywhere along the line. Maryan takes elaborate care with diction, phraseology, and evidential precision, since what is important in his rendition of the events is what was said, to whom, and with exactly what words. The verbal medium and social setting of gossip are at issue, and the substance of the gossip is other gossip. This is layered "he-said-she-said"¹⁷ talk with allusions to other talk past and future.

The key phrase in the story is the epithet *puta mol* (*puta*, from Spanish, 'whore,' *mol* a term for an elder male—see note 15). The expression is highly offensive, especially uttered to a public official about one's father-in-law, and it has resonated through the succeeding seven years as the leitmotif of the ruptured relationship between the two men. Indeed, the phrase quickly percolated out into a wider social universe. Only two days after this gossip session, there was an angry confrontation between Chep and Maryan's youngest son Xun, who was not (at that point) estranged from his father. I quote from my field notes.

"June 27 1991. . . . It turns out that when drunk Xun had gone to shout at Chep, yelling *k'u yu'un xap'is ta puta mol li jtotike* "why do you show your respect for our father, [that is, Maryan] by calling him a *puta mol*?" in response to remarks Chep had made publicly about the potential sale of his wife's land."

That a whole family could be torn apart by a single alleged abusive epithet suggests, of course, that far more than words were at stake. Before the abortive land sale,

there had been tensions between Maryan's unmarried daughters and the bossy son-in-law, whose wife had complained to her sisters about his autocratic style around the house. There had been unsuccessful financial deals, botched attempts to obtain credit or to arrange new farm lands, in which Chep had convinced Maryan to invest his resources, uselessly according to the daughters.

Around Maryan's hearth as the year went on one began to hear scurrilous news about the son-in-law who had previously been an unassailable figure of authority and good judgement. One of Maryan's daughters told me¹⁸ "how badly Chep had behaved on the occasion of the castration of [the family horse]—agreeing only very unwillingly to help in the event, and afterwards refusing both to eat and to accept a soft drink from [another man] who had come to help."

Chep's wife Maruch that same day advised her father not to invite her husband to another family ritual since, as I wrote at the time,

"he would just get angry. [Chep] says, 'never mind, I just make the old man angry, and he shows me no respect.' The plan henceforward is to say no more to him about family affairs. There are, as everyone has observed, other people who speak Spanish and who know how to comport themselves. Chep is not the only one."

Chep was thus distanced from his in-laws, who had previously depended heavily on his counsel and support.

In subsequent months, relations between the two families remained sour. Chep's teenaged sons began to have difficulties in their attempts to find wives—difficulties that were discussed with some glee around Maryan's hearth. Later Chep's daughter eloped, and Maryan agreed with great reluctance to attend what should have been an obligatory event: the reconciliation between Chep, his daughter, and her new husband. Maryan cited the still simmering anger about the aborted land sale as the main reason for his unwillingness to attend.

In early 1993 came a still more dramatic rupture in the family, precipitated by the unexpected marriage of Maryan's youngest daughter, who everyone had thought was destined to become a spinster like her older sisters. Suddenly a new son-in-law was introduced into the house, threatening the potential inheritance of Maryan's sons and grandsons. Chep refused to help settle the dispute engendered by the marriage. Ever since the failed land sale/swap of two years before, Maryan told me, "we have been angry with each other." According to my field notes¹⁹, "although Chep has denied that he ever called his father-in-law *puta mol*, *pendejo mol* [damned old man, stupid old man], since the land commissioner reported such a conversation, things have gone downhill."

Maryan's frequent allusions to the earlier event were designed to distance his interlocutors from his son-in-law. The "puta mol" gossip was aimed at the triangles linking gossipers (Maryan and his daughters), gossip recipients (including me, for example), and gossipee (Chep, a prominent figure in the community). Midway through 1993, the family was in full crisis. Chep and Maryan were now declared enemies. Worse, Maryan's sons had allied themselves with their brother-in-law, against their father and the interloper married to their sister. Details of their dispute had become public

knowledge. I received a visit in June 1993 from one of Maryan's nephews who had heard all the stories and who proposed that the two of us try to bring the feuding sections of the family back together.

However, by this point Maryan had decided to escalate. When we proposed a reconciliation, he uttered the words that form the title of this essay.

Example (2): Maryan, on non-reconciliation with his son-in-law²⁰

mu'nuk jbankil to
mu'nuk kajvaltik
vo'on ba'yi chik'opoj.

*He is not my older brother.
He is not Our Lord (i.e., God)
That I should be the first one to speak.*

Maryan, who had given the other his daughter in marriage, was not going to be the one to break the impasse. Moreover, he told me that Chep had made a similar declaration.

Example (3): Chep, reportedly on non-reconciliation with his father-in-law²¹

mu jtek'be sti' sna
mi tana
mi ok'ob²²

*I won't step over his threshold,
Not today,
Not tomorrow*

Maryan now plotted to take his complaints to the civil authorities, to use Zinacantec law to disinherit his sons and son-in-law. He would strip them of the lands he had given them, since they were not complying with the rule that only those who cared for and respected their parents received an inheritance. Early on July 21 1993, Maryan visited the Nabenchauk *agente municipal* 'town magistrate.' He asked that his sons be summoned to explain why they should not have their lands taken away, why they should not be forced to *stam smaleta* 'pack their bags.'

Maryan also complained about his son-in-law—a delicate business since the magistrate was both Chep's compadre and a close political ally. Maryan wanted to introduce the fight over the sale of his daughter's land into the discussion, but he needed a link to that story. He appealed to the magistrate's official position, by mentioning that his daughter, Chep's wife, had just the day before gone to visit another civil authority. She had a domestic complaint that her husband had been unable to resolve. Maryan then launched a moralistic criticism of his son-in-law, once again referred to impersonally as *li mole* 'the gentleman.'

Example (4): Another version of the "puta mol" story, told to the Nabenchauk magistrate, 21 July 1993

- 1 m: *The gentleman--*
- 2 *He has served to settle disputes.*
- 3 *He has served to resolve fights.²³*
- 4 *For others who have had problems.*
- 5 *But he himself, in his own house,*
- 6 *is doing badly.*
- 7 *(His domestic fight) is not resolved.*
- 8 *Our own house should be in order,*
- 9 *if we are reasonable people.*
- 10 *We should be able to settle (our own) problems.*
- 11 *Then even our children behave well.*
- 12 *And whatever problem arises is settled.*
- 13 a²⁴: *Oh, that's how it should be*
- 14 *That's how it should be.*

15 m: *That's how it should be, but this one ...*

16 a: *One should give counsel not only to other people.*

18 *There must be wise counsel at home as well.*

19 m: *Exactly, exactly.*

Maryan opened by drawing the magistrate into a sympathetic alignment with his position, potentially against his son-in-law. Dispute settlers must put their own houses in order before they presume to help others settle their arguments. Something must be wrong with Chep if he can't resolve his wife's complaint.

Now Maryan launched the story he had been waiting to tell. This time he cast the moral of the failed land exchange in terms of Chep's private unreasonableness despite a public reputation for good sense. In this detailed retelling, Maryan emphasized that his original intention to sell land was communicated first to those who had primary claim on a purchase, his sons and son-in-law. Indeed, in this version of the story Maryan discusses his intention to sell land with Chep even before seeking out a buyer.

44 m: *"Chep," [I said].*

45 *"I want to sell some of my land.*

46 *"Do you think I shouldn't sell it?" I said to him.*

47 *I was showing him my respect [by asking his advice].*

48 a: *Ah.*

49 m: *"Where is it?," he said.*

50 *"It's there above my well.*

51 *"I might sell some part of it.*

52 *"Because I need the money*

53 *"For a curing ceremony,*

54 *"Since I have no money," I told him.*

Maryan depicted Chep as worried about whether the proposal would prejudice the interests of the old man's daughters, including his wife.

56 m: *"Oh," he said.*

57 *"Well, have the girls received their inheritances?" he asked.*

58 *"As for the girls,*

59 *"Land has been reserved for them.*

60 *"This would not be the end of the land,*

61 *"Because I still have lots of property.*

62 *"I will divide it among them," I told him.*

63 a: *Ah.*

64 m: *"Oh," he said.*

65 *"OK, sell it if it is part of your own share."*

66 *"It's mine alone," I said to him.*

67 *"You can sell it then," he said.*

68 *"All right, in that case think it over—perhaps you [and your wife] want it," I said to him.*

69 *"No," he said.*

Maryan represented himself as giving Chep due respect, valuing his opinion, and giving him first option to buy the land.

Next, Maryan said, he offered the land to his sons.

74 m: *[I said to them] "You have sons.*

75 *"You have many children.*

76 *"What if you don't find house sites for them when the time comes?"*

- 77 *"I want to sell some land," I told them.*
 78 a: *Hmm.*
 79 m: *"Eh, [we're] probably not [interested]."*
 80 *"Sell it," they said.*

When none of his immediate family wanted the land, Maryan began to look for another buyer.

However, Maruch, Chep's wife, expressed interest. Maryan put words into his daughter's mouth, subtly insinuating that she and her husband were having domestic problems.

- 94 m: *My daughter heard about it,*
 95 *Chep's wife.*
 96 a: *"Are you going to sell your land?"*
 98 *"I am."*
 99 a: *"Oh, if only I had the money,*
 101 *"I would buy it myself.*
 102 *"It's good land.*
 103 *"I would put my house there.*
 104 *"It's near (to you all).*
 105 *"It's nice and flat.*
 106 *"I would put my own house there.*
 107 *"If I were to move down in this direction."*
 108 *"Think about whether you [plu.] want to buy it.*
 109 *"I already offered it to your husband,*
 110 *"But I don't think he was interested." I told her.*
 111 *"I'll think about it," she said.*

Maryan proposed the land swap, as in earlier versions of the story. However, in this retelling to the magistrate he carefully advised his daughter to take the matter up with her husband Chep. (His plural verb in line 108 suggests that both Maruch and her husband consider the proposal.) This is clearer still in the hypothetical dialogue between Maruch and Chep that follows.

- 126 m: *"But speak to each other about it.*
 127 *"Decide whether you want to sell that other land.*
 128 *"Talk about it, see what he says.*
 129 *"If he says 'Let's sell it!'"*
 130 *"Then you can sell it," I told her.*
 131 *"If he says 'No!'"*
 132 *"Then you won't sell it," I told her.*
 133 *"Right," she said.*

Maryan now allowed his biases to shine through. The conventional use of reported dialogue in Tzotzil narrative allowed him to project not only his protagonists' words but their voices. What happened when his daughter mentioned the land swap to her husband? Mimicking angry tones, Maryan acted out his son-in-law's alleged reaction.

- 135 *"Ah, no, you won't sell any land!"*
 136 *"That land has lots of apple and peach trees.*
 137 *"Why should you sell it?"*
 138 *"Where will the boys [i.e., our sons] live?"*
 139 *"That land is for your sons."*
 140 *The gentleman is said to have said.*

Rather than editorialize directly to the magistrate, Maryan allowed his own character in the narrative to express his critical stance against Chep. His opinion emerges indirectly as a spontaneous reaction to his daughter's news.

- 144 "The gentleman, then,
 145 "Has he no land?
 146 "What good is the gentleman?
 147 "What does he want to have children for if he has no land?
 148 "What land does he propose to divide among his sons?
 149 "It is not the mother's land that he should give them.
 150 "It is not the land of his wife that he should give his sons for them to reside on.
 151 "The gentleman has his own land," I said to her.

Since Chep opposed the swap, Maryan returned to his original plan simply to sell off his plot. However, his daughter continued to be interested. Her reported words allude again to the domestic problems with which Maryan had introduced his gossip.

- 165 "Do you know what, father? Please find a buyer for my land.
 166 "I definitely want to sell it.
 167 "Because we have begun to fight, the gentleman and I.
 168 "And I will come after all,
 169 "I will put my house here closer to you, on the land you are selling.
 171 "I definitely want to buy it," she said.
 172 "You'll buy it?," I asked her.
 173 "I'll buy it," she said.
 174 "Are you [plu.] having a fight?"
 175 "Ah, fight? Don't even ask," she said.

Maryan began to negotiate the sale of his daughter's land, in anticipation of the trade. By bad luck, the potential buyer was Chep's ritual kinsman. Unaware that the land belonged not to Maryan but rather to his daughter, this buyer went independently to ask Chep to be an official witness to the transaction. Chep flew into a rage and went immediately to complain to the land commissioner. In this version, too, his insulting words—*puta mol*—form the crucial centerpiece of the story.

- 326 m; So that Chep,
 327 Right away he went to tell the land commissioner.
 328 a; . Ah.
 †
 329 m; "Bastard!
 330 "My land is gone!
 331 "He's sold it!
 332 "He is up to no good.
 333 "The damned old man is a land thief, the bastard!"
 334 "Let him just take back everything, all the woodlands he has divided up!
 335 "Let him gather it all, the damned old man! (= *puta mol*)
 336 "He's a seller of land, damn it!.
 337 "A land robber,
 338 "A land thief," he said—that's what Lorenzo told me."

Maryan ended this version, as he had others, by adding details to reinforce the verisimilitude of his gossip, and to emphasize that his son-in-law's slanderous words had been publicly reported.

- 340 m; It was on the first Friday [of Lent].
 †

- 343 a; Ah.
 342 m; At Carnival.
 343 a; Hmm.
 344 m; "Oh," I replied [to the land commissioner].
 345 "Did he really say that?" I asked him.
 |
 346 a; Ah.
 347 m; All the members of the land council were gathered in front of the church.
 |
 349 "Did he really say that?"
 350 "He did," said he.

After hearing Maryan's tale of woe, the magistrate agreed to try to arrange for a settlement. Nonetheless, the official resolution that Maryan had hoped for did not take place, as Maryan's sons and later Chep managed to find ways to avoid a formal court hearing.

Toward the end of 1993 Maryan, in failing health, had a major curing ceremony. Scandalously, neither Maryan's sons nor Chep took part. Shortly thereafter, in January, 1994, family squabbles were thrust dramatically to one side by the Zapatista rebellion. Over the next few months, the political situation of all Chiapas was in turmoil. The repercussions percolated down even to hamlets like Nabenchauk. By July, 1994, for example, even as Maryan was repeating to me the story of the *puta mol* insult from three years before, the PRI political bosses of Zinacantán, including influential former officials like Chep, were being accused of a wide range of corrupt practices. Chep himself went into hiding, worrying about what he called *matanal milel* 'getting killed gratuitously.' At the fiesta of Todos Santos, at the end of October, he took refuge for some weeks in Maryan's compound, during which time relations between the two families were somewhat eased. Unfortunately, Maryan's sons remained estranged from their father, and Maryan suspected that his son-in-law was giving them advice and moral support. (*Ja' yoyal* 'he is their pillar,' he complained to me.)

In February 1995, Maryan and his sons finally had an official hearing at the municipal courthouse to decide who was to pay for the expensive curing ceremonies the old man needed as his health deteriorated. The hearing ended with more quarrelling. The wife of one of Maryan's sons made insulting remarks about not wanting to care for a *tana-jol mol*, *xoka-jol mol*, *luk- 'akan mol* (bald-headed, spotted-faced, skinny-legged old man). During the rest of 1995, as Maryan's tried one remedy after another for his failing eyesight and hearing, he was supported only by his daughters and his new son-in-law. His sons remained hostile and his son-in-law Chep distant if not openly aggressive. (Chep told me at the time that he was ready to beat up Maryan's new son-in-law if the opportunity presented itself. For their part, Maryan and his daughters were always on the lookout for chances to criticize Chep—for getting drunk, for mistreating his wife, for not including them in new agricultural schemes, and so on.)

In March 1996, Maryan sought a signed legal agreement about the children's responsibilities for their parents in return for their inheritances. A Mexican official as well as past magistrates and land commissioners were to be present at the town hall to ratify the agreement. Two days before the court date, the magistrate informed Maryan that Chep had declared he would neither take part nor be present in court that day. The

puta mol story again reared its ugly head. According to the magistrate, Chep refused to participate because he was "angry that [Maryan] had sold off all his land, including that of his daughters." Without retelling the story in all its detail, Maryan defended himself by rehearsing to the magistrate a brief version of the abortive land swap.

The settlement at the court house took place in the absence of son-in-law Chep. Maryan's sons agreed to pay their father twice yearly amounts of corn and cash. The daughters, too, were asked to sign the document guaranteeing their more modest obligations to their aging parents. However, when town hall officials were dispatched to bring Chep's wife to the courthouse to put her thumbprint on the document, they were met by an angry Chep who refused to let her leave the house. "She doesn't even know how to read or write," he shouted, "why should she sign a piece of paper?"

Throughout the past two years, relations between Maryan and Chep have worsened. Chep's wife Maruch quarreled with her unmarried sisters and thereafter herself stopped visiting her parents. At the same time Maryan, virtually blind with cataracts and almost totally deaf, reestablished cooperative relations with his youngest son Xun, who in turn became an enemy of his older brother and brother-in-law. There have been shouting matches and many near fights, both drunken and sober, between the four younger men involved: Chep and Maryan's elder son on the one hand, Maryan's younger son Xun and the husband of his youngest daughter on the other. There have also been two further attempts to resolve the dispute in court, both ending with Maryan declaring that he wished nothing more to do with his thankless children, who themselves crowed, "You see, he doesn't want our help."

Maryan worries about the battle he expects over his land when he dies. Several times he has asked me to sort through his important papers, separating the official title to Chep's wife's inheritance, "so as to obviate any excuse Chep might have for looking through the papers when [the old man] is *telel* 'laid out [for burial].'"²⁷ Maryan has had several further serious illnesses, although no effort has been made to recuperate the costs of the curing from the estranged son and son-in-law.

As recently as September 1998, Maryan continues to brood on the deep division in his family. Recently, as we sit in the courtyard to which he is largely confined these days, Maryan has gossiped with me about the factors that have given his life its current somber tone. One is the *puta mol* story. Chep's insulting epithet still rings in Maryan's ears. As he tells the story now, the events remain the same, but he has recast his son-in-law as explicitly self-interested, ill-tempered, and uncooperative. Gone is the potential ally, the helpful son-in-law that Maryan had hoped for at one time.

Maryan's story now portrays naked conflict between Chep and his wife. Maryan recounts how he first invited his sons and son-in-law to buy the plot he intended to sell. In this telling, however, he suggests that Chep never bothered to inform his wife about the sale, a symptom of their domestic problems.

Example (5): Maryan recalls the abortive land swap, with me as his interlocutor, September 14, 1998.

94 m: *Perhaps [Chep] was not accustomed to conversing at home.*

95 *Who knows what customs the idiot had?*

96 *Your comadre [Chep's wife] somehow heard [about the land sale].*

- 97 "Are you selling your land?" she asked
 98 "I am," I told her.
 99 "You've heard, have you?" I asked.
 100 "I have.
 101 "But don't imagine that [Chep] said anything about it to me.
 102 "He said nothing.
 103 "He's not in the habit of telling me things," she said.
 104 "Ah," I replied.

Chep's reported reaction to the proposed land swap was vehemently negative, a reaction that Maryan, in this telling, appeared to anticipate. (Note at line 128 that Maryan puts into Chep's mouth a hypothetical refusal that precedes the actual reported refusal starting at line 133.) Maryan insisted that his daughter take the matter up with her husband before proceeding.

- 124 m: "First go and speak to each other about it.
 126 "See if he will come to receive the land officially.
 127 "Otherwise he might take it badly.
 128 "What if he says, 'I have no use for that [land].'
 129 "It will just cause an argument," I said to her.
 130 j: Ah.
 131 m: "I'll tell him," she said.
 132 So she evidently told him.
 133 "'Ah, I'm not interested in [that land].'
 134 "'Forget it! That land gets flooded [in the rainy season].
 135 "'What do you want land for?'
 136 "'The other land [the original inheritance] is fine.'
 137 "'Don't accept it!'
 138 "'Forget about it!'
 139 "That's what he said to me," she said.

When Maryan's daughter proposed the land exchange, in this version her cards were clearly on the table: she planned to divorce.

- 145 m: "So, father,
 146 "Find me a buyer for my land.
 147 "Whether you want to sell me [your land],
 148 "Or whether we exchange plots, in any case I am going to come [to live closer].
 149 "I'm going to abandon the gentleman.
 150 "He'll just stay behind.
 151 "I'll leave him sitting where he is."

On this occasion, Maryan related in detail the *stz'i`al* 'doggishness' or misbehavior Maruch attributed to her husband.

- 154 m: "Why?" I asked her.
 155 "Eh, his doggishness is too much!" she said.
 156 "What does he do, then?" I asked her.
 157 "He doesn't let anyone touch his money," she said.
 158 "If you look at his money,
 159 "He immediately goes and checks the numbers.
 160 "To see if his money is as he left it.
 161 "'Who touched the money?'
 162 "'Who picked up the money,' he says.
 163 "'The money was not stacked up this way,' he says."
 164 "What, do you have so much money?"

165 "Hum, there are a few banknotes," she said.

166 "Ah," I said to her.

Not only was Chep obsessive and miserly, he also ignored domestic necessities.

167 "He doesn't think to buy soap," she said.

168 "He doesn't think to buy salt," she said.

169 "As for the beans [we harvest],

170 "If he uses some, then I sell some in secret.

171 "Also his coffee, if he takes some out, then I sell some in secret.

173 "That's how I buy my soap,

174 "That's how I buy my salt,

175 "Or whatever we have to eat.

176 "The gentleman doesn't know what it takes for him to eat.

177 "He just has no shame."

178 That's what Maruch said when she came [to see me].

179 "Geet," I said.

180 "Does the gentleman have a bad head, then?"

181 "Ah, his doggishness is just too much," she said.

There is also added spice to Maryan's account of his encounter with the land commissioner. This is when he learned of the abuse his son-in-law had heaped upon him.

223 m; I went to the church

224 So, there was the commissioner.

225 "Have you come for the procession, Mr. Maryan?"

226 "I have come," I said.

227 "Ah," he said.

228 "And that land here by the house of P**.

229 "Is it true that you have sold it?" he asked.

230 "No, I haven't sold it," I told him.

231 "But, according to Mr. Chep you have sold it.

232 "He came to tell me.

233 "(He said that) you should sell all the land that you have given away in the woodlands,

235 "Or behind the village of Apas.

236 "You should get rid of it all, he said.

237 "The damned whore of an old man," he said when he came by," said the commissioner."²⁸

In this version, once Maryan had clarified the details of the land deal, the land commissioner criticized the son-in-law, despite the latter's vaunted skills as a dispute settler.

297 m; I explained the facts to him

298 "Damn, but that gentleman!

299 "Mr. Chep just doesn't want to understand the situation, either.

300 "He should have gone to ask you directly

301 "whether it was true that the land had been sold."

Also, in this most recent retelling, Maryan foreshortens the protracted and tortured negotiations surrounding the land swap, representing himself as canceling the whole affair on learning from the commissioner about Chep's insult.

314 m; "I give you permission to sell it right away," he said.

315 "No, I no longer want to get involved," I told him.

316 "Never mind," I said.

317 "Let it just remain there empty, or whatever the owner wants to do with it," I told him.

Conclusion

In this extended history of a relationship, seen through retellings of a key event in gossip, the themes central to recent Zinacantec history lurk close to the surface. There is competition for land, in an era of demographic pressure. There is competition for authority within families, exacerbated by changes in the bases for power and control. There are gender imbalances and shifts in the ties that bind people to the land, or to one another across generations. Gossip, that is, retains its virtues as a unique ethnographic lens.

The central focus here, however, has been the interactive dynamic of Zinacantec gossip. I have concentrated on three aspects of this dynamic. (1) First, gossip lives not as disembodied stories "flowing" from one mouth to another, but as minimally triangular interactions between interlocutors. Who tells what stories, about whom, to whom, and when—all are indexes of the social relations within which a gossip event is embedded (and of which it is partially constitutive). The miniature social universe of conversation—with complex and shifting participation structures—is one arena in which adjustments to these social relationships are accomplished. Maryan has been motivated to tell the "puta mol" story—now to a compadre, now to an anthropologist, now to a magistrate—by the micro-politics of his unfolding life, and one assumes that Chep for his part has done the same.

(2) A second aspect of the dynamic central to my argument is internal to discourse, but parasitic on (1), the indexical embedding of gossip in interaction. Consider that much gossip is about gossip, and that many narrated events are events of narration. Following generic conventions of Tzotzil, one relates events through what protagonists say as much as what they do. Thus are Tzotzil narrators provided with powerful expressive material all of which derive from the fact—point (1) again—that gossip is interaction. These materials include the voices of protagonists, the required "back channel" (Yngve 1970) or responses of interlocutors which are never empty of evaluative overtones, marked Tzotzil speech genres such as the couplet structure which indexes both formal occasions and affectively charged states, and the interactive delicacy of evidential particles like *la*. Since gossiping is political action writ small, representing gossip in gossip is a powerful device for portraying the social and political texture of one's community.

Finally, (3) there is a diachronic dynamic to gossip. As gossip is told, retold, and retold again, with the passage of time the layering of contexts of interaction (dynamic 1) and their embedding in narrated interaction (dynamic 2) allow the same events, the same "story" in the mouths of different narrators, projected to the ears of different interlocutors or even the same interlocutors at different moments, to have very different consequences. The diachronic tracking of a "single gossip story" gives us a view of narrative as a mechanism of interpersonal alignment and control. For Maryan, the "puta mol" story started as an expression of temporary rupture in a brittle but functional relationship. It was transformed into a weapon in the battle for authority within the family. In the end it has become an icon of a failed relationship and the inherently flawed personality of its principal protagonist. The story is the vehicle for reinventing history, for investing past

events with the perspective of the present, as the social universe of the narrating moment is projected onto that of the narrated events.

Such was clearly the case with one of the gossip fragments with which this essay began. In 1970, Maryan's son-in-law was his ally, and Maryan presented him as a formerly lazy youth whose "soul had arrived," who had come to his senses and learned to work. It was only his insurrectionist interlocutors who induced Maryan to acknowledge his son-in-law's previous disputes and the correlative flaws in the young man's character. Later Chep himself used his own version of the fight with his half brother to portray himself as a dogged battler for his own rights. Almost thirty years later Maryan retells this story about his now estranged son-in-law, and how he manipulated Mexican law to steal his half-brother's share of their father's land. Here is the process of "rewriting history" in microcosm, as Chep is now his declared enemy. The long ago events touch on currents flowing through Maryan's troubled relationship with Chep over the years: competition for land, rivalries between siblings, the mingling of Mexican law with Zinacantec practices, the machinations of power, and Chep's unabashed appetite for making trouble.

Speaking now about his son-in-law as a youth, Maryan says:

Example (6): Chep as a young man.²⁹

1 m: sokem onox
2 batz'i ben onox kavron
tajmek ich'i le'e.

..1 m: He had already gone bad.
2 He was a real bastard even as he
was growing up.

No events in Chep's remote past have changed since Maryan gossiped with his companions back in 1970. But it was not at that point appropriate for him to be running down his son-in-law. It is only now that he bestows his own derogatory epithet—*batz'i ben kavron* 'a real bastard'—on Chep, gossiping with a mixture of relish and humor, awe and revulsion, that brings thirty years of Zinacantec gossip full circle.

¹ Tzotzil, a Mayan language spoken by 250,000 people in Chiapas, Mexico, uses a practical orthography based on Spanish. Notably, the symbol *j* represents IPA [x], and the digraph *tz* represents IPA [ts].

² This word is an obligatorily possessed noun based on a verb formed from the root *lo'il* 'conversation' plus a transitivity suffix *-ta*. The verb *-lo'ilta* means 'to make conversation about' or 'tell stories on' someone.

³ Zinacantecs also engage in direct shouting matches with their enemies, especially when inebriated. Drunkenness is considered a mitigating circumstance partially excusing antagonists for what they say and do.

⁴ See Haviland 1997b for a discursive study of aspects of Zinacantec legal proceedings.

⁵ See Goffman 1979.

⁶ "Gossip and rumor [are] free floating stories which bear important power implications" (letter from van Ginkel to Haviland, 20 January 1998.)

⁷ It is a significant symptom of the centrality of language in Zinacantec social life that the metaphor of speech pervades such expressions of basic sociality.

⁸ The Tzotzil expressions are *sa' tak'in* 'look for money' and *sa' abte!* 'look for work.'

⁹ *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, or Institutional Revolutionary Party, the party of the Mexican government for, at that point, almost half a century, with institutionalized support from organized labor.

¹⁰ *Partido de Acción Nacional*, or Party of National Action, at the national level a conservative group with strong ties to business and the Catholic Church.

¹¹ He was later recruited to an analogous position in the ritual hierarchy of his own hamlet, where PRI politicians installed a competing set of ceremonies. See Haviland (1987).

¹² With these short responses, Zinacantec interlocutors fulfill a named conversational role in Tzotzil, that of *jtak'vanej* or 'answerer.' In multiparty conversations, usually one of several listeners will take active responsive part in the conversational exchanges with such minimal but often evaluatively loaded turns.

¹³ See Haviland 1987, 1989.

¹⁴ In line 65, as elsewhere in the transcripts, a period (.) (in line 65 before the word *mol*) represents a perceptible pause: Petul hesitates before deciding how to refer to his son-in-law.

¹⁵ *Mol* refers to a senior male: it is often prefixed to a proper name (e.g., *Mol Maryan* 'Mr. Mariano') and it can also be used, in both address and reference, as a sign of mild respect.

¹⁶ See Hanks 1989, 1990, Haviland 1996a, Lucy 1992.

¹⁷ See C. Goodwin 1980, 1990.

¹⁸ Fieldnotes of 27 June 1991.

¹⁹ January 7, 1993.

²⁰ From my fieldnotes, 15 July 1993.

²¹ From my fieldnotes of July 20 1993.

²² Note that both men frame their sentiments in parallel constructions; see note 23.

²³ Maryan uses a genre of speech in which a single image is presented via paired doublets (see Haviland 1992b, 1996b). The close parallel structure between the two lines is obvious in the original Tzotzil:

lok'em ta meltzanvanej (lit., he has emerged in fixing people)

lok'em ta chapavanej (lit., he has emerged in preparing people)

The two lines differ only two verb roots—*mel* 'repair, set straight,' and *chap* 'prepare, coil neatly'—that when applied to humans implying settling of disputes. The parallel style is characteristic of ritual contexts and of emotionally highly charged talk. Similar parallel structures are evident elsewhere in these gossip narratives, as well as in the brief utterances in examples 2 and 3.

²⁴ "A" is the municipal magistrate or *agente*.

²⁵ The Tzotzil phrase was *jpoj-osil li puta mole, kavron* "the *puta mol* is a land thief, bastard!" The loan word *kavron* (< Span. *cabrón*, 'cuckold') is used here as a sign of Chep's anger, not as an epithet directed at (predicated of) his father-in-law.

²⁶ Maryan omitted the evidential *la* from this whole dialogue, emphasizing that he was reporting what the land commissioner had said to him directly.

²⁷ Fieldnotes from 26 October 1996.

²⁸ The Tzotzil again includes the insulting epithet: *batz'i puta mol xi me ayei xi* literally: "'He really is a damned old man,' he [i.e., Chep] said when he was here," he [the commissioner] said.

²⁹ Fragments recorded 5 September 1998.