
John B. Haviland

The Politics of Ritual and the Ritual of Politics: Holy Week in Nabenchauk, Mexico



In April 1981, in the Tzotzil-speaking village of Nabenchauk, in the municipality of Zinacantán, in the highlands of Chiapas, southeastern Mexico, newly created Easter rituals for a new saint called Jmanvanej were performed. While these ceremonies appeared to be a somewhat deficient copy of the traditional Holy Week rituals of the municipal ceremonial center, the origins of the new ceremony relate to political and economic factionalism that finds expression in religious observances. These Easter ceremonies allow comparison of the creation of new ritual, with theories about the nature of ceremonial life in Zinacantán and in other Maya and Mesoamerican communities. This research traces the development and evolution of the Holy Week ceremonies in Nabenchauk over several years since 1981.

The author lived in the hamlet of Nabenchauk, in highland Chiapas, Mexico (Figure 1), with a *compadre* (ritual kinsman) during Holy Week of 1981, 1983, 1984, and 1985. His research focused on:

- the relationship between the ritual events of the hamlet ceremonies and the original parent rituals after which they are patterned;
- the form of factional and political competition more generally, and its ramifications for a conflation of ritual and secular authority, along with economic and political power;
- the negotiated and extemporized nature of the creative process itself, in which the participants, the equipment, the procedures — in short, all aspects of the ritual — are worked out seemingly on the spot; and
- the dynamic force of the ritual, which produces social and ceremonial consequences that find expression in further ritual elaboration: the creation of new rituals and new religious offices, involving more of the community residents in public ceremonial obligations and expenditure.

In April 1981, in Nabenchauk, preparations were under way for a newly created and elaborate community ritual. By the Friday before Holy Week, villagers were deeply involved in major ceremonial duties at the hamlet church, sponsoring ritual for a newly acquired saint image called Jmanvanej (the Buyer or Redeemer of Men). These rituals, in turn, were patterned upon but did not duplicate similar Easter celebrations held formerly only in the *cabecera* (ceremonial center) of the municipality of Zinacantán, of which Nabenchauk is but one village. Ultimately, the author became the official photographer, in response to requests from hamlet authorities whose historical sense demanded that a record be kept of this first Easter celebration in Nabenchauk.

From the beginning, though, there was a conundrum. Early on Ash

John B. Haviland (3312 S.E. Woodstock Blvd., Portland, OR 97202) is an anthropologist, with a special interest in language, who has worked among Tzotzil-speaking peasant Indians in southeastern Mexico, and among Aborigines from around Cooktown on the Cape York Peninsula of northeastern Australia. He has taught at Harvard University, the University of Chicago, the Australian National University, the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia in Mexico City; he is currently visiting associate professor of linguistics and anthropology at Reed College in Portland, Oregon.

Wednesday of that first Holy Week in 1981, Mol Petul, the author's compadre, walked down to the Nabenchauk church to wash the sacred image of the new Jmanvanej in rose water. At that same moment, Petul's own compadre, formerly a close friend and fellow member of the group of Holy Elders not just for the hamlet of Nabenchauk but for the whole municipality, was boarding a truck bound for Zinacantán Center, where he himself would help wash the municipal Jmanvanej. While half of Nabenchauk came out to pray and make offerings to their new saint in the hamlet church, the other half made the 30-km trip, in the back of 3-ton cargo trucks, over the mountains to demonstrate their allegiance to the old saints of the ceremonial center.

The creation of a new Easter ritual in Nabenchauk, then, seemed to pose a dilemma of divided loyalty for the members of this Tzotzil community. No less so did it seem to challenge understanding of the relationship between the community rituals that express at least the public face of Zinacanteco religion (Vogt 1986) and the individual's underlying sense of identity, cosmos, and polity with which Mesoamerican religion is, on the conventional analysis, interlocked.

Rituals and Politics

Anthropologists who have swarmed over the Chiapas highlands during the past 30 years have argued that here, and in most of Mesoamerica, public ceremonial life and the civil-religious hierarchies that maintain public ritual are central components of Indian culture and society — if not, in some sense, their prime determinants. On the one hand, religious *cargos* — positions that require their incumbents to spend considerable amounts of money sponsoring elaborate rituals during a year in office — have been seen as the modern incarnations of the ancient Maya Year Bearer, a god who carried the year “with a tumpline, passing it along to the next bearer at the end of the year” (Vogt 1969:246). Men are expected, at the points in their lives when they have accumulated sufficient wealth and social knowledge, to assume these ritual positions, usually caring for saint images and bearing the financial burden of public fiestas. In this sense, cargo ritual, combined with shamanistic performances for sickness and agricultural success, embodies native religion.

On the other hand, it has been argued that “the degree and manner of a man's participation in the [civil-religious] hierarchy is the major factor in determining his place in the community” (Cancian 1965:2). Elaborate and expensive public ritual, and the hierarchy of offices that supports it, have been taken as basic devices both to insulate Indian communities like Zinacantán from “the pressures for change that exist in the environment” (Cancian 1965:136) and to promote integration within these communities. The received argument holds first that consuming wealth on public ritual “acts to impede the mobilization of capital and wealth within the community in terms of the outside world which employs wealth capitalistically” (Wolf 1955:458) — hence promoting insulation. Second, it holds that civil-religious hierarchies integrate and consolidate the internal social order of the community, predominantly by ranking “the members of the community into a single social structure” (Cancian 1965:135) — hence furthering integration. The last part of the argument remains true whether religious performance levels wealth differences among individuals (by keeping “any one family from accumulating very much surplus cash or property” as Nash [1958:69] has argued), or whether, in Cancian's words



Figure 1. Southern Mexico, showing the location of the study site.

(1965:140), "service in the cargo system legitimizes the wealth differences that do exist and thus prevents disruptive envy."

Such a view of ceremonial life in Zinacantán agrees with many of the facts, and it reflects rather well Zinacanteco discourse about religious offices and rituals. It is, however, open to criticism on at least two grounds. First, at a personal level, performance in ceremonial life does not seem to predict individual benefits and effects. Engaging in a cargo career is fraught with the same dangers and possibilities for failure as more secular pursuits; moreover, performance statistics, at least in recent years, do not support the view that the cargo system can rank, level, or legitimize differences among all members of the community. There are too many nonparticipants, both hapless and defiant, both marginal and powerful; too many men with excellent cargo records are counted as disasters in other areas of social life (Haviland 1977).

A more important criticism, articulated on the basis of historical studies (e.g., Rus & Wasserstrom 1980; Wasserstrom 1978, 1983), questions the relationship between ceremonial organization and the postulated processes of insulation and integration. Some ethnohistorical evidence suggests that the systems of public ceremonial activity have evolved both as a result of direct outside manipulation and in response to changes in wider economic and political arenas. Furthermore, Rus & Wasserstrom (1980:467) claim that in their modern forms,

civil religious hierarchies arose during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to regional patterns of economic development and demographic change. . . . Far from constituting a bulwark of traditionalism . . . civil religious hierarchies seem to have emerged in such communities as local inhabitants were drawn into those relations of social class which evolved throughout the region.

Both archaeology and history suggest pre-Conquest parallels for many aspects of modern Mesoamerican civil-religious hierarchies (Farriss 1984, Vogt 1983). But whatever deep roots in the Maya past scholars can discern in the origins of modern cargo systems, what is their modern nature? Rather than insulating Indian communities from outside forces, on this argument the civil-religious systems have themselves been decisively affected by the interaction between community members and those forces. Furthermore, Wasserstrom (1983) argues that changes in the socioeconomic organization of highland Chiapas communities have been reflected in corresponding reorganizations of the ceremonial life. Rather than acting as a socially conservative force, religious and ceremonial organization has been a dynamic device for reconstructing socioeconomic relationships between communities. Wasserstrom argues that the historical record of new churches, hamlet-level additions to the cargo hierarchy, local fiestas, and ritual saint exchanges between locales shows that ceremonial structures index — that is, both reflect and reinforce, whether or not they legitimize — political or economic autonomy or its lack. The causal arrow is here reversed: it is not a ceremonial organization that guarantees or promotes societal integration; rather, patterns of change in political or economic affiliation have been reflected in a restructuring and fragmentation of the public ceremonial life — a possibility that Cancian himself foresees for the future of Zinacantán, but ranks as a less likely outcome than a diminished importance for cargo performance in the face of improved economic conditions in Zinacantán (1965).

In this context, a new public ritual, springing seemingly unexpected into the Zinacanteco universe, has an obvious fascination. Where does it come from? Why is it happening? Who is making it happen? What are

its consequences? What does the ritual mean in terms of Zinacanteco religion and Zinacanteco social organization?

The circumstances surrounding the new Easter ritual in Nabenchauk can be seen as an ethnographic analogue of the small-scale phonological variation in a speech community that constitutes evidence for the mechanisms of linguistic change (e.g., Labov 1972). Given a theory of structural changes in language over time, it remains to examine the patterns of minute variation at any single point in time, to give a convincing account of how change occurs and what its determinants are.

Similarly, it is also a given that the cultural life of peasant Indian communities like Zinacantán is neither autonomous nor insulated, but, rather, constrained and shaped by the material forces of wider Chiapas (and Mexico) economic and political life. Far from being isolated enclaves of traditionalism, superstition, and a 400-year-old Maya–Catholic syncre-



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tism (what were, in once-accepted Mexican parlance, known as *regiones de refugio* (refuge regions) [Aguirre Beltrán 1967, Collier 1975]), these communities have been transformed, pressured, and pushed by the economic needs of region, state, and nation. Their responses have been dynamic, if reactive, and creative, if defensive.

Figure 2. The four most senior Nabenchauk Holy Elders (*ch'ul-moletik*) formally greet one another in pairs, the junior man bowing and being touched on the forehead by the senior man, while both pray in formal Tzotzil couplets, in preparation for starting the Easter rituals.

The New Ritual

The Nabenchauk version may appear to be a somewhat impoverished copy of the “traditional” Easter ceremonies in Zinacantán’s ceremonial center. As an antidote it is important to observe how the Nabenchauk ritual has evolved through its own internal dynamic.

Holy Elders

The entire roster of ritual personnel required for Holy Week ritual is a bit too complex to summarize here, but the position of the *ch'ul-moletik*

(Holy Elders) is of special importance. According to Vogt (1969:259), the six Holy Elders (Figure 2)

have special life-tenure positions. This group is self-perpetuating; when one dies or retires, the remaining five select his successor, ordinarily from the pool of *pasados*, or men who have passed through the hierarchy [of religious cargo positions] and have completed their service in four levels. Their functions are limited, but of great ritual significance: they nail the Christ image to the Cross on Good Friday.

In 1976, Mol Petul was a newly elected municipal *ch'ul mol*, having had a distinguished career in the religious hierarchy and also having been much in demand as a ritual adviser to other cargo-holders. By 1978, he had been thrown out of the group of Holy Elders in Zinacantán Center. The fact that this same *compadre* had, in 1981, reemerged as the most senior Holy Elder for the Nabenchauk Easter ceremonies represents in microcosm the entire process of political, social, and religious restructuring that the creation of this ritual exemplifies.

Mol Petul had progressed through a distinguished career as a performer in the ritual hierarchy by virtue of a long-standing family commitment to ritual performance and supported by traditional wealth: considerable highland land near his hamlet which he could farm and garden, three sons who aided him in agriculture, powerful and influential kinsmen, and established lowland corn-farming contacts.

In fact, Petul was the only fully qualified candidate for the position of Holy Elder available in Nabenchauk under the circumstances. That is, he had completed a distinguished career in the religious hierarchy, and he had already been a *ch'ul mol* for the municipality-wide Easter rituals. He therefore automatically became the most senior of the newly recruited Nabenchauk Holy Elders. The other five positions had to be filled by people with the next best approximation to *pasado* status, although none of the others had actually completed a full ritual career. (In 1984, one of the Nabenchauk Holy Elders passed a third-level cargo in the municipal hierarchy, thereby boosting his qualifications as Holy Elder but creating the anomalous and embarrassing situation in which his conflicting ritual duties in the municipal center prevented him from fulfilling his hamlet role as Nabenchauk *ch'ul mol*.)

Petul also has a political life, although not an active one. From time to time he has been embroiled in property disputes, first with his brother, later with his father, later with most of his kinsmen. On one occasion he also squabbled with hamlet officials and neighbors with whom he had cooperated on a new land-reform venture. His allegiances in these different affairs were determined as much by haphazard circumstances of kinship and chance as by more motivated assessments of his own interests. For example, his brother spent several years in exile from Zinacantán, having been accused of community crimes. On returning to the village the brother sought the help of members of a particular political faction, sending Petul by default to members of the other main faction for advice and support. Similarly, Petul's most powerful and closest ally has regularly been his lone son-in-law, whose own political career has aligned him with a branch of the established government Indianist bureaucracy, and with the dominant political party. Mol Petul has usually remained tied to his son-in-law's political alignments. Petul's political allegiances are central to his role as Nabenchauk Holy Elder.

The Buyer of Souls

Holy Week ceremonies center around a saint called *Jmanvanej* (literally Buyer [of people], or Redeemer), or *Santo Entierro* (Burial Saint), a

Christ-figure craftily jointed so that he can be raised to the cross and crucified. Vogt (1969:360) writes:

According to the Zinacantecos, Santo Entierro used to live on earth. He was chased by the demons, who caught him and put him up on a cross in the ceremonial center to kill him. When the demons went to eat, Santo Entierro came down from the cross. He took a blue rock and threw it high into the air, creating the blue sky. The demons returned and put him back on the cross where he died. In dying, he paid the price for our sins; this is why he is called “the buyer.” If he had not done this, we all would have died. Later Santo Entierro came back to life and went up to heaven to live.

Saint images in Zinacantán are treated with extreme respect and reverence (Figure 3). They are (Vogt 1969:360):

regarded as gods of extraordinary power, with souls located in the statues. Their “homes” are the churches or houses of the official cargoholders. They must be bathed by water from the sacred waterholes and their clothing must be periodically washed and incensed — just as the clothing of a patient in a curing ceremony is purified by being bathed and by having his clothes washed and incensed. Like the ancestral gods, the saints expect prayers and offerings of candles, incense, music, and flowers.

The original Jmanvanej in the church of San Lorenzo in Zinacantán Center and the giant wooden cross on which he was crucified at Easter were quite old, and were cared for by two first-level religious officials known as *martomo santa krus* (Stewards of the Holy Cross).

Replacement

However, in 1977, at about the same time that political events in Zinacantán caused a major, still unhealed factional split — the same split that lost Mol Petul his position as Holy Elder in the municipal hierarchy — the main church of San Lorenzo caught fire, and almost all the saints were burned. The original Jmanvanej was reduced to a charred stump, and his cross totally destroyed. Most Zinacantecos saw the event as an apocalyptic disaster, but new saint images were procured, among them a new Jmanvanej, for subsequent Easter crucifixions.

It was in part the novel idea that the ancient and sacred municipal saints could be replaced that inspired the creation of Easter ritual in Nabenchauk. The new Buyer of Souls who appeared in Nabenchauk in 1981 was reckoned to be a close relative of the new Christ-figure in the ceremonial center of Zinacantán. He, like the new municipal saint, was sculpted and painted in the distant Chol community of Tila, whose patron saint, the widely renowned Señor de Tila, according to Nabenchauk people, is another embodiment of Santo Entierro. The inhabitants of Tila do a thriving business in Christ images, complete with wigs, stigmata, and ersatz gold crowns. The new saint was carved from wood provided by Nabenchauk men, and had arrived in Nabenchauk only the week before Holy Week. The 1981 ceremonies were his first unveiling before an admiring Nabenchauk crowd.

Because the Easter celebration in Nabenchauk competed with the traditional festivities in Zinacantán Center, much was made of the comparative virtues of the two saints. Particularly disconcerting for the people of Nabenchauk was a rumor circulated during Holy Week in 1981 that the old, burned Buyer of Souls had begun spontaneously to regenerate, although it had not yet managed to grow enough limbs to be crucifiable. (In fact, in 1983 the original municipal saint was repaired, again by an expert sculptor from Tila. In Zinacantán Center there are now two full-sized Christ-figures, of whom only the older, original, but now “rejuvenated” saint is crucified at Easter.)



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Figure 3. The sacristans of the church wash in flower water before entering the church to assist the Holy Elders in washing the saint.

Conclusion

The creators in Nabenchauk are clearly trying to overcome the limitations of reduced personnel, incomplete equipment, and somewhat haphazard circumstances, to make their ceremonies close equivalents to the parent rituals of the ceremonial center. Table 1 shows the sorts of activities that are involved throughout Holy Week, culminating in the climactic moment on Good Friday when the Jmanvanej is crucified on a giant cross in the church (Figure 4).

Easter Ritual and Nabenchauk Politics

Ritual

What of the conundrum: the two compadres setting out in opposite directions on Ash Wednesday? It appears that the whole Easter celebration in Nabenchauk was mounted explicitly in competition with the established rituals of the ceremonial center of Zinacantán. But mounting the ceremonies required more than religious fervor. It required both manpower and finance.

The new rituals entailed acquiring a new saint at considerable cost. They demanded new ceremonial positions: in addition to the local Holy Elders, the ceremonies required the analogues of the *paxyonetik* or *pasioneros*, who, in the ceremonial center, stand watch over the saint at the church. The corresponding helpers were recruited, in Nabenchauk, from past incumbents of the local mayordomo positions. The ceremonies also required a flautist to accompany these men during their long vigil in the church. And the existence of new ritual duties in turn created the possibility of new ritual positions to fulfill them.

The hamlet officials also spent money on a good deal of new equipment: in addition to the saint himself, his bier and clothes, the church required the platforms to represent Calvary, the paraphernalia — gourds, nails, blessed hammers, and so forth — associated with the crucifixion, and, importantly, the huge cross itself. The cross was fashioned by a local carpenter from a gigantic trunk of “holy tree,” a type of cedar (Laughlin 1975) which had to be surreptitiously and illegally felled in temperate forests. This operation fortunately was supervised by the local Nabenchauk agent of the state reforestation project, a prominent politician who was a central figure in establishing the new ritual.

These expenses and new responsibilities were not shared equally by Nabenchauk's 2000-odd inhabitants. In fact, participation in the ritual split Nabenchauk almost exactly down the middle, with half of the population actively involved as participants or onlookers, and the other half pointedly boycotting the proceedings.

Politics

On the sixth Friday of Lent, the hamlet of Apas celebrates a fiesta. In 1981, and again in 1983 and 1984, this neighboring fiesta was marred by a violent brawl between members of two competing political parties: PRI (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional or Institutionalized Revolutionary Party), the entrenched party of government at both local and national levels throughout Mexico; and PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional or Party of National Action), the traditional, essentially conservative opposition party. In 1981, the brawl included PRIistas from Nabenchauk, all of them sponsors of the nascent Nabenchauk Easter celebrations, who traveled to Apas by truck, partly with the express intention of disrupting the festivities. These celebrations were, in turn,

mounted by the PANistas from Apas, who controlled the local Apas chapel and the Lenten fiesta going on there.

Nabenchauk is divided, as is the entire municipality of Zinacantán since 1977, into two bitterly opposed political factions currently allied with PRI and PAN. These party labels, however, obscure differences that cannot be linked to party ideologies, except in the rather spare sense that PRI is the party of established government and power and PAN, the established opposition. In Nabenchauk, these party labels are totems: the duality between PAN and PRI is merely a particularly clear-cut way of demarcating a major factional division that has existed in Nabenchauk under different guises for more than 30 years. The PRIistas of Nabenchauk created the new Easter rituals while the PANistas boycotted the local ceremonies and pointedly attended the established festivities, largely manned by fellow party members, in Zinacantán.



Figure 4. The Nabenchauk *Jmanvanej*, "Buyer" or "Redeemer of Souls," hangs crucified.

Table 1. Holy Week Ritual, Zinacantán* Versus Nabenchauk

Zinacantán	Nabenchauk
LENT Processions around the churchyard on the six Fridays, in which the Holy Elders carry the Jmanvanej, and the other cargo-holders carry their respective saints.	Only a token meeting of the Holy Elders and the mayordomos (stewards, or first-level cargo-holders) on the last Friday in Lent. In 1981 the new Jmanvanej had his first procession on this day, with the patron saint of Nabenchauk, the Virgen de Guadalupe, also in procession, representing the Virgin Mary.
PALM SUNDAY A Catholic Mass, performed by a Catholic priest from the nearby town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, along with a procession of mostly ladino (non-Indian) palm-bearing Spanish-speakers who live in Zinacantán Center.	Since 1981, Palm Sunday has been an established day for obligatory hamlet-wide <i>ávej mantal</i> (literally, "hearing of orders," or public political meetings), usually to resolve land-related issues. Palm Sunday is a particularly appropriate day for such a meeting since all the heads of household are expected to be home, returned from agricultural work or wage labor away from the municipality, in preparation for Holy Week.
TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK A small procession of first-level mayordomos around the churchyard.	The Holy Elders prepare their ceremonial rosaries and make sure that their special ritual garments are ready. In Tzotzil, the Elders are said to <i>tz'aki</i> (become complete) when they wear their special costumes.
ASH WEDNESDAY The Holy Elders wash the figure of the Jmanvanej. There is a full procession inside the church, and the <i>pasioneros</i> (special cargo-holders whose duties are largely confined to Holy Week) stand watch over the saint throughout the night.	In the morning the figure of Xutax (Judas) appears. In fact there are two Xutax figures, one hung above the church door and the other tied to a lamppost in the churchyard. Later in the morning, the Jmanvanej is washed carefully in flower water, redressed in new clothes, and carried in procession around the inside of the church, the Holy Elders bearing the Christ figure, and the mayordomos and other helpers carrying the other saints. This is the first time that the Elders don their special clothes, which they wear whenever handling the saint image directly. In the afternoon, the <i>skusob kajvaltik</i> (the wads of cotton used to wash the saint, heavily impregnated with rose water and cologne) are distributed to the crowd of onlookers.
MAUNDY THURSDAY A ritual breakfast is presented by two first-level cargo-holders, and at noon there is a reenactment of the Last Supper (with a traditional meal of snails), followed by a procession of the giant cross around the churchyard. A small crucifix is buried in rose petals and an armed guard is set at the church for the night.	The Holy Elders, together with the president of the church and his sacristans, preside over a mass meeting to read and confirm the waiting list for religious cargo positions at the Nabenchauk church. Around midday, a small crucifix is buried in rose petals, with considerable and elaborate care. The cross is moved in procession around the churchyard. The Holy Elders attend a formal meal of snails, salted fish in a white corn sauce, and white beans. Specially recruited armed guards begin their all-night vigil over the buried crucifix and the reposing Jmanvanej. The vigil over the "dead Christ" is accompanied by a lone flute player who for the next 24 hours plays a short, mournful phrase over and over—a musical phrase heard at no other time in Zinacantán.
GOOD FRIDAY The figure of Judas is hung in front of the church. The crucifixion is reenacted and the assembled crowd gives offerings to the "Buyer," who is then lowered and carried in procession, redressed, and ultimately returned to his resting place. The flowers that decorate his bier are distributed to the assembled multitude.	The small crucifix is disinterred and moved from its overnight resting place by the altar at the front of the church to a straw mat by the main church door. It is accompanied by an armed guard, who also keeps track of the offerings that accumulate as people enter the church during the day. The cross is erected and decorated with pine boughs and bromeliads (see page 134). The Holy Elders dress in their special white garb. They lift the saint into position, behind a huge purple banner, and nail him into place on the cross. As the crowds cry and pray before the crucified Christ-figure, the mayordomos light basketsful of candles, offered by the public along with gifts of flowers. The Holy Elders leave the church and distribute their half-liter bottles of strong cane liquor to the church officials and other helpers. The saint remains on the cross for about two hours. Then he is lowered and taken in a procession (Figures 5 & 6), then redressed, and his flowers and ribbons distributed. After the crowds have dispersed, bearing their blessed flowers and, in some cases, bags of seed corn which accompanied the saint, sitting at his feet or under his bier during the week, the Holy Elders redress the saint in his ordinary clothes and return him to the glass coffin where he normally resides (Figure 7).
EASTER SATURDAY The mayordomos clean the church, which is otherwise restored to normal by the sacristans. Judas is burned.	The church is cleaned and renewed by the two stewards of the Virgen de Guadalupe and the president and his sacristans. (Saturday and Sunday are normal days for flower-change ceremonies in the Nabenchauk church in any case.) The Holy Elders meet to plan further joint activities, including recruiting and visiting future cargo-holders. At dusk the two Judas figures "fly back to Mexico": they are consigned to a huge bonfire, accompanied by dancing and inebriation.
EASTER SUNDAY The second-level municipal cargo officials, who have no hamlet counterparts, dance in front of the main church—something they do at major festivals all year.	This is a day to return to work after the festivities of Holy Week.

*Zinacantán ritual is described in detail by Vogt (1969:556-559).

Mounting a local Easter celebration in Nabenchauk represents a deliberate symbolic thumbing of the nose at Zinacantán Center, as did the creation of an independent hamlet church some 30 years earlier. To understand these events one must invert the argument that the elaboration of ceremonial life in outlying hamlets, and the concomitant exchange of saint between these hamlets and the ceremonial center, allows Zinacantán to “command . . . ceremonial and political allegiance from the hamlets with chapels and saints of their own” (Vogt 1969:365). Rather more convincing is the view implicit in Vogt’s own later observations

Figure 5. Scattering rose petals before the Jmarwanej, an assistant, accompanied by wooden noisemakers, leads the procession from the church after the Christ-figure has been lowered from the cross.



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about gods and politics. He notes (Vogt 1973:108) that despite the fact that Zinacantán's most powerful *cacique* (political boss) for almost 30 years, whose influence grew out of his control of land-reform (*ejido*) tracts, lived in Zinacantán center and maintained a strict allegiance to the traditional church,

his power [was] constantly challenged by other caciques in various outlying hamlets, as for example in the hamlet of Nabenchauk (which has its own church) where one large faction was at one time in favor of seceding from Zinacantan and setting up an independent municipio.

The church in Nabenchauk has, it seems, always been a symbol of political and economic autonomy, born of secular interests. Compare Wasserstrom's (1978:204) suggestion that ceremonial elaboration in hamlets like Nabenchauk is evidence that "having asserted their political and economic independence, the hamlet's authorities took steps to declare their spiritual autonomy from the municipal center."

Nabenchauk is known for its political squabbling, but the feuding has maintained a fairly stable pattern. Despite the fact that both local and government rhetoric phrases the factional division in terms of a conflict between traditionalists and progressives, a review of factional issues in Nabenchauk since the 1930s suggests instead that major political fights in Nabenchauk — as elsewhere in the region — have centered on the monopolistic control of essential productive resources.

Economics

After the land-reform provisions of the Mexican Revolution began to be implemented in Chiapas, under Cárdenas, the first grants of *ejido* land to Zinacantán enabled Zinacantecos to turn from trading and muleteering to corn farming. They relied on their highland cornfields to ensure against the possible failure of the more productive but also riskier lowland sharecropping that produced the surplus from which they lived. Not all Zinacantecos received *ejido* parcels, however, and the evidence suggests that only men who were already reasonably land-rich participated in the costly and protracted efforts to procure grants. The first recognized *cacique* drew his power from control over this initial *ejido* distribution, and from the patterns of patronage that derived from the organization he headed which administered the *ejido* land (Vogt 1969). Those who opposed him, it seems clear, objected to his monopoly not only over the land itself but also over access to outside authorities who could grant further benefits to Zinacantán. This factional division, and the central figures in these land dramas, lay behind the massive political wrangling throughout the municipality of Zinacantán from the 1940s to the 1960s. It seems likely that the basic factional split in Nabenchauk, in the corresponding period, divided those with extensive inherited highland lands (and thus both the resources and interests to resist attempts to gain *ejido* lands) from the locally land-poor.

Serious factional issues in Nabenchauk in recent years have similarly involved central productive resources and access to avenues of power brokerage. The bitterest disputes in Nabenchauk before 1977 had to do with control of employment in government aid projects: reforestation, road building, construction of a local clinic, a water system, electric installations, etc. Members of one faction mediated contact with the government development bureaucracy, and the rest of the populace either went to these men for jobs or opposed them as self-serving thieves.

In a parallel way, most accounts of the origin of the PAN–PRI split revolve around competition between trucking and transport interests represented by different groups of Zinacantecos. The PRI-sponsored

transport union controlled the trucks that carried passengers between the highlands and the lowlands, but as other Zinacantecos acquired trucks they needed a competing political base to counter this monopolistic control of business. (Even today, however, the PAN-owned trucks of Nabenchauk can legally transport only cargo, not passengers.) The construction of the Pan American Highway in 1947 and more recent road-building programs have had decisive effects on the economic life of Zinacantán, and have altered patterns of settlement. (These programs of road-building can be seen as direct efforts by the economic interests of the state to facilitate access to highland labor for the agricultural enterprises of the fertile lowland regions, which most importantly produce coffee and cattle, as well as corn.) Nabenchauk, which lies directly on the highway, has grown dramatically over the past 30 years. As both corn farming and trading have expanded into more remote areas, Zina-



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Figure 6. The Holy Elders, accompanied by a guard and assistants holding a purple canopy, bear the Jmanvanej's litter in a procession around the Nabenchauk churchyard.

cantecos have become progressively more dependent on transport, and a greater share of their operating costs, whether as farmers or flour-sellers, has gone to truck owners—mostly themselves Zinacantecos.

Notably, the Mexican system of patronage and monopoly seems guaranteed to put people like Zinacantecos in competition with one another, to exacerbate factional divisions within Indian communities rather than to highlight the structural inequalities between those communities and the wider economy. That is, the nature of economic and political relationships between communities like Zinacantán and the wider ladino society promotes what the historian Ranajit Guha calls vertical segmentation, rather than a more generalized horizontal segmentation in the society as a whole.

results

It was stated above that only one man in Nabenchauk was qualified to take on the job of Holy Elder for the new hamlet saint. In fact, there were two such men. Petul and his compadre were both municipal-level Holy Elders in 1976 — formerly close friends who had held religious offices concurrently on more than one occasion. The other man — Petul's compadre — however, aligned himself with the PAN faction in 1977, thereby maintaining a hold over land in a new land-reform colony controlled by other PANistas. Most of the municipal cargo hierarchy, likewise, along with the majority of the residents of the ceremonial center, became PAN supporters. Mol Petul, on the other hand, remained a PRI supporter (for both principled and contingent family reasons) and was thus summarily dismissed as a *ch'ul mol* before Holy Week of 1978. The other man continues to serve the *Jmanvanej* of Zinacantán Center, whereas Petul has now dedicated himself to the service of Nabenchauk's new saint. On Ash Wednesday they go their separate ways. The political import of public ceremony and ritual in this central Chiapas community has no more eloquent demonstration.

Ironically, Holy Week in Nabenchauk has become a peculiarly appropriate time for political wrangling at its most public. On Palm Sunday, 12 April 1981, the PANistas of Nabenchauk staged a mass political meeting to fight about the constitution of the committee that controls and administers hamlet ejido holdings. The members of the committee, all PRIistas, were involved in the organization of the forthcoming Holy Week celebrations, and the PANista meeting was seen as deliberate provocation and nuisance scheduled so as to maximize inconvenience.

In 1982, the ejido committee was dissolved and reconstituted on joint party lines, with three members from the PRI party and three from the PAN group, to satisfy the hamlet which continues to be divided almost half-and-half between the two warring parties. In 1984, and again in 1985 when the Mexican government reimposed a land tax on previously untaxed house plots on communal lands (a return to a practice that older people in Nabenchauk liken to punitive assessments that had been, they thought, eliminated in the Mexican Revolution), it was again on Palm Sunday that special meetings were held in which hamlet officials tried to explain the new laws to the general public.

The Evolution of Ritual Procedure

The first Nabenchauk performance was haphazard, rushed, and often extemporaneous. Like an imperfectly copied tombstone pattern that evolves over decades from death's head to winged angel, the ritual began as a determined copy of the traditional ceremony (and a copy defiantly held to be equal to anything a motley crew of PANistas could put on anyway). And yet, the collection of saints, the roster of religious officials, the equipment — nothing was quite up to task.

Here are some examples. The hapless custodians of the local patron saint, the Virgen de Guadalupe, were completely at a loss about their obligations; when they had originally accepted cargo responsibilities there was no Easter celebration in the Nabenchauk church, and even their ritual advisers were unequipped with ritual advice. Should they remove their cotton *pok' k'ul* (woven tunics) while lighting Christ's candles? Should they remove their long trousers, as tradition demands, even though, in Nabenchauk, cargo-holders do not necessarily sport the hand woven *tunko vex* (short pants) of traditional times?

At the first Nabenchauk Easter in 1981, on Wednesday afternoon the huge cross was raised as a test to make sure that it fit into its base in the floor of the church, that it did not interfere with the roof and the electric wiring, that the special nails to be used in the crucifixion fit into the holes provided on the cross, and so forth. The required equipment, including the cross itself, had only just been acquired in time for that first Easter celebration, and there had been no time to test it before the event itself. The cement in the hole where the cross was to be erected in the front of the church was still wet, and the cross was originally too tall for the roof.

Before the first *anil krus* (the race of the cross), the cross was given its final adjustments. For example, the "INRI" sign at its top was to be painted and attached. (In subsequent years further refinements were added, including painted bloodstains at the points where Christ's hands and feet are nailed.) As the person present with the most years in school,



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the author was selected to paint the sign for the cross. But no paint could be found. And so on.

At every point, the Holy Elders conferred frantically with one another, and negotiated the steps and requisites of the details of procedure. Once, somewhat abashedly, they even asked advice of a *jjapkantela*, one of the old women who holds the candles for the mayordomos, and who had been an incense bearer at a municipal Easter. Nor was it clear that the conceptual apparatus that even ritual experts bring to the new ritual are exempt from this extemporaneous character.

Consider Mol Petul's pig. In 1981, he and his family slaughtered a pig in the early hours before dawn for the family's Lenten fare. Afterwards Petul journeyed into San Cristóbal to purchase extra ribbons to complete his ritual rosary, which, bedecked with carefully measured and brightly colored ribbons is worn inside the specially woven white overtunics that the Holy Elders sport during the crucifixion. Petul also planned to have a

Figure 7. The *Jmanvanej*, Buyer of Souls, reclined and wearing his rosary of coins, lies in the case where he will remain until next Holy Week.

shower in one of the town's public baths. Two years later, however, Mol Petul decided to take only limited part in the butchering of the Easter pig (though he had directed the task in earnest the first year). He reasoned that since later he would be handling the saint image, he must not contaminate his hands and arms in a way that even a hot bath in San Cristóbal could not properly wash away.

Judas

The theory of the ritual, then, seems flexible, as do its symbols. Xutax (Judas), like the baby Christ at Zinacanteco Christmas, comes as a pair: one is hung over the church door (Figure 8), and another stands by the lamppost at the corner of the churchyard. (Whether these are *bankilal* [older brother] and *itz'inal* [younger brother] twins, reproducing a common kin metaphor that pervades Zinacanteco social discourse, is not clear. Recently private citizens in Nabenchauk have also begun to hang their own Xutax from trees around their house compounds, mimicking a common ladino Easter custom.)

These Judas figures are the humorous creations of the first-level mayordomos in the religious hierarchy. Both are straw figures dressed in soldier or ladino clothes with the typical yellow hard hats associated with workmen from the government electricity commission, cigarettes dangling from their straw mouths, dark glasses, bottles of liquor protruding from pockets, armadillo-shell sowing bags hung around their necks. They also provide the vehicle for the analogue of an April Fool's Day banter that begins during Holy Week; one tries to trick one's interlocutor into speaking as though he were Judas himself, or admitting some close relationship to Judas, who is often spoken of as "the gentleman from Mexico City." For example, a dialogue might run as follows:

A: Hello, Xun. Have you just arrived?

X: [Xun, unsuspecting, answers truthfully] Yes, I came last night [from his cornfields, perhaps].

A: Did you come by truck, or did you come by airplane? (Ha ha ha).

[A has trapped X into admitting that he perhaps is Judas, who is reputed to fly in from Mexico for Holy Week.]

X: Your grandfather! [X retorts by suggesting that the one who flew in, i.e., Judas, was in fact A's own grandfather.]

All Zinacantecos, by the end of the week, are wary even of the most innocuous conversational exchanges.

But in Nabenchauk the Judas figure also serves as a vehicle for jokes in a more political vein. Along with the cracks about airplanes intermingle asides about party affiliations. Last year's Xutax bore a sign that read "President of the PAN party of Nabenchauk."

Political Control

Throughout the proceedings, moreover, the blending of religious and secular authority is naked and unashamed. The powerful PRI leaders from the town hall continually press their desires and flex their authoritative political muscles. In fact one of these men, the head of the PRI-controlled trucking union, put up most of the original money to purchase the new saint and in late 1983 insisted on buying a new and superior crown (a hand-me-down from the Señor de Tila) to improve its aspect.

It was another PRI official, head of one of the most lucrative state-funded development projects, sensing that history was being made, who recruited the author as official photographer for the proceedings. It has long been a rule in Zinacantán that photographs are not permitted inside churches; nor are outsiders allowed to photograph processions

containing saint images. When doubts were expressed about photographing on this occasion, this PRIista (who later danced at his own cargo induction in rubber-soled work boots rather than the traditional high-backed sandals) said scornfully: "That's only in *el pueblo* [i.e., in Zinacantán Center] — they're stupid and don't know anything."

On the Wednesday of Holy Week the nature of ritual creation was demonstrated in the matter of ringing the church bell. From the time that the small crucifix is buried on Thursday, the village is ritually in mourning; *chamem kajvaltik* (our Lord has died). Bells may not be rung; instead wooden noisemakers are sounded from the church tower or accompany processions during this time. People are expected to behave soberly and quietly. But, as the Buyer of Souls was being washed on Ash Wednesday, should the bell toll or not? The civil authorities said it should, and loudly, to summon people out of their houses to watch the proceedings. The Elders were dubious, but thought that it should toll infrequently, if at all, as at a wake. The sacristans were dispatched to pull the rope, but every few minutes someone would scurry up the bell tower to demand an adjustment in the pace of bell ringing.

The tension between religious and secular authorities has continued with occasionally surprising results. The theory behind lifetime appointments for the Holy Elders holds that such a self-perpetuating body guarantees coherence and continuity: these experts learn their responsibilities and the corresponding ritual details, in practice; they hand on their expertise organically, replacing their numbers only upon death or total incapacity (with occasional aberrant exceptions as, for example, when Mol Petul's political affiliations rendered him unacceptable to the other PANista *ch'ul-moletik* of Zinacantán Center).

Control of the Church Officials

In Nabenchauk, however, the authority of these Elders has waned as the younger church authorities (the church president and his assistants, all young, literate PRIistas) have taken on themselves more and more responsibility for scheduling and overseeing ritual details.

In 1984, for example, the church secretary began to keep copious notes on the events of Holy Week; he argued that it was getting too difficult to remember all the things that had to be done. By last Easter, this native ethnographic journal, now a hallowed ritual object (like the author's own photographs from 1981), surfaced as the ultimate authority, silencing even the Holy Elders when it came time to decide on the timing of processions or the crucifixion, and even what ritual offerings of liquor, bread, snails, candles, and flowers were required. Mol Petul can still recite the complicated timing of visits, meals, offerings, and processions among the Holy Elders in the ceremonial center, but his vast knowledge has been rendered irrelevant in the rituals in which he himself now takes part as Holy Elder.

The mixing of secular and religious authority is also graphically represented in the following combination of duties: during the period under study, one of the new religious officers serving the new saint was also the local representative of the government reforestation project, charged, among other things, with replanting woodlands and policing the illegal felling of timber. When giant pine boughs were needed to decorate the cross on Good Friday, he directed his crew, in official reforestation project trucks, into the forests to chop down the appropriate trees.

It became apparent during this period of research that the official Catholic church is also taking a larger interest in these new rituals. Well-trained catechists lead hymn singing and prayer in a newly created ver-



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Figure 8. The procession emerges from the church door; one of Nabenchauk's Judas figures hangs above.

bal genre: the matched couplets of traditional Tzotzil prayer (Bricker 1974) require considerable expertise to master; therefore young catechists now read translated Spanish prayers, and occasionally lead the hamlet elders in reciting Spanish prayers without bothering to render them into Tzotzil at all (Figure 9). Change continues, but the nature of the evolutionary negotiation has altered.

Ritual Dynamic

The forces that created this new ritual or, at least, that created its occasion, may well have been independent of the ritual itself and unconcerned with religious sentiment. But the religious performance contains its own internal dynamic force; public ceremony has momentum. Already in 1981 hamlet officials were wondering whether, by the following year, people would come from other hamlets to partake of the Nabenchauk Easter rather than going to Zinacantán Center.

The new saint, once installed, obviously required care and offerings for the foreseeable future; and even hardened PANistas will find it hard to resist the urge to visit him, if only furtively. The other Holy Elder from the main ceremonial center had within a year of the first Nabenchauk Easter admitted his own curiosity: he wanted to know what was going on in the local church, much as Mol Petul felt bereft and abandoned, no longer able to serve the saints in the main church of Zinacantán to whom he had devoted so much of his adult life.

The photographic record, which now rests with the ritual paraphernalia of the saint himself, previsages a future when people will look back to antecedents, as does the 1984 journal written by Nabenchauk's church secretary. There was an Easter celebration in 1982 in Nabenchauk (although enshrouded in the choking ash of the eruption of the volcano El Chichonal), as well as in the intervening years. Already, by the end of that first Holy Week in 1981, talk circulated of new cargo positions: two new mayordomos of the santa cruz, to serve the new saint. The Holy Elders sported newly woven costumes, designed to last for years, and plans were afoot to enlarge the ceremony and further elaborate the new saint's equipment and wardrobe. A major interest in this research has been to trace the growth not only of the ritual but of its ramifications in the ceremonial hierarchy and social life in general.

In 1981, there were only two local cargo positions to be filled for any given year: two *martomo jch'ul me'tik* or Stewards of the Holy Mother (dedicated to the Virgen de Guadalupe, Nabenchauk's patroness), one "older brother" and one "younger brother." Waiting lists record the names of people who have committed themselves to such ritual service. Everyone who has requested a position is obliged to appear on Maundy Thursday, when he presents a bottle of cane liquor to the officials as a signal of his continued intention to fulfill his commitments.

The natural momentum of the ritual process has created new needs, including the need for new religious positions. By 1983, as predicted, two new *martomo santa krus* positions had been created. The first incumbents took office in February and fulfilled their newly created duties during Holy Week of that year.

The first year, no cargo official could appropriately take responsibility for the ritual Last Supper, and it fell to the church president to provide the meal at his house. The meal has now become a major responsibility of the Stewards of the Holy Cross, who must feed not only the Holy Elders but all the people present who are taking part in the ritual preparations:

the Elders, the church officials, the civil authorities, the cargo-holders and their entourages of helpers, and the musicians.

Many of Nabenchauk's wealthiest men who had been waiting for the already established cargo-position of *martomo jch'ul me' tik* decided to switch to the new and somewhat more glamorous post of *martomo santa krus*. Others began using old ploys to avoid or postpone cargo service, requesting positions in the ceremonial center or even changing party affiliation to avoid recruitment.

There are thus new social pressures on Nabenchauk men, especially followers of PRI, to undertake religious service in the community. By 1985, when the third *santa cruz* cargo-holder was in office, waiting lists for the new cargo-positions already extended into the 1990s, and the authorities were stretching the limits of the available PRI men to fill the positions, even dragging potential recruits from the basketball court.



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(During a special Good Friday meeting, a renegade future *martomo*, a PANista who had failed to appear the day before and who was suspected of trying to weasel his way out of his cargo commitments, was fined, publicly berated and ridiculed, and thrown into jail.)

Even the responsibility for standing watch over the Christ-figure has widened to include many besides the official armed guards: it has become an opportunity, an obligation, to show allegiance to the Nabenchauk church and to the hierarchy of officials that support it. Many private citizens spend Thursday night, or part of it, warming themselves by a fire at the church door as specially trained Zinacanteco catechists lead Spanish-style prayers over the crucifix buried in rose petals.

Engineering the new rituals has also allowed Nabenchauk political

Figure 9. The martomo jch'ul me' tik, Stewards of the Virgin, with their heads wrapped in scarves, bear the image of the Virgen de Guadalupe, Nabenchauk's patroness, in procession around the churchyard. The Catholic catechist (in yellow shirt) leads the crowd in Easter hymns, read from a Spanish hymnal.

bosses to legitimize power and economic clout through ritual performance, in a hierarchy they themselves control. The list of incumbents of the new cargo-positions reads like a Mafia genealogy: the first martomo santa krus was the head of the government reforestation project; his successor was a PRI ex-magistrate, owner of a truck and a corn mill, and local representative of Teléfonos de México (the Mexican telephone company); and his successor was the political boss of Nabenchauk and head of the powerful PRI trucking syndicate.

In late 1983 these three men, along with the president of the church (himself the brother of the syndicate leader), his secretary, Mol Petul (the senior Holy Elder), and the current hamlet magistrate (of the PRI hierarchy — there are currently two complementary sets of hamlet civil officials, one for PRIistas and the other for PANistas), returned to Tila where the Jmanvanej was made. There they haggled over two new golden crowns and a wig, adding them with flourish and conspicuous expense to the Nabenchauk saint's equipment. The ritual often seems only the surface reflex of ongoing political intrigue.

Conclusions

Research so far shows the vacuity of a unidirectional analysis of the relationship between ritual and politics. A more perspicacious account appears to run in a causal circle. Economic maneuvering throughout the Chiapas highlands has, at least since colonial times, produced political ripples within and without Indian society. Political factions in Nabenchauk, one symptom of these ripples, also produce symbolic opposition, which in turn finds symbolic expression. Singularly appropriate as a medium for this expression, for historical reasons if not for others, is public ritual. But new ritual creates not only new ritual meanings (new entities in the moral universe) but also new social entities as well. Cargo-positions, obligatory performances, unstated expectations, social pressures, invented consumables — all these constitute new political and economic necessities.

Ethnographic detail provides a partial entry into this circle. Whether Nabenchauk is busily recapitulating an ancient Maya habit of conflating civil and religious spheres, or whether these nascent Zinacanteco capitalists are manipulating familiar ideologies to mask their sticky fingers, it remains to show how the conjuring trick is done. How is the ritual brought off? How are people recruited to it? Who pays? (And who gets paid?) These are questions that only attention to the details of individual decision and choice, often at the most mundane level, can answer.

Whatever the political mechanics and whatever the contingent details, public ceremony in the municipality of Zinacantán clearly creates its own obligations, invoking tangible cultural consequences. It is surely an index of the importance of ceremonial life to Zinacantecos that the most mundane and material concerns of their lives, surfacing as squabbles, fights, and factions, find expression in ritual creation.

Nor should it be inferred that Zinacantecos take this new ritual lightly. Mol Petul has told, with awe, of the first moment he saw the newly carved Jmanvanej, with its eyelashes freshly attached, and knew that the saint was *kuxul*, that it had come to life. Caring for this Redeemer of Souls, every Holy Week for the rest of his life, is of central importance for Petul. Each year, his duties during Holy Week leave him exhausted. After lowering the Christ-figure from the cross and replacing him in his glass case, he kneels, weeping, to beg the saints and *Kajvaltik* (our Lord)

for pardon for his failures. Then, before dawn on Easter Sunday, with the ritual over for another year, Petul, Nabenchauk's senior Holy Elder, boards a truck bound for the lowlands, where it is time to get back to work in his cornfields.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, by the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, and by the National Geographic Society. This article took on its final form largely while I was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California, during which time I enjoyed the support of a fellowship from the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and the National Science Foundation. I owe a considerable debt to colleagues, friends, compadres, and teachers — notably Petul Vaskis, Robert M. Laughlin, Evon Z. Vogt, Robert Levy, Roger Keesing, Leslie Devereaux, Lol Vaskis, Tim and Patsy Asch, Antun K'at'ix, Maryan Ach'eltik, and especially Rick Shweder — for their suggestions and encouragement.

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Accepted 4 November 1986.