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14 PRIVACY IN A MEXICAN INDIAN VILLAGE

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The guarded privacy of peasant life has long been a commonplace of European folk wisdom. One portrait of the peasant shows him to be narrow-minded, distrustful, mean and quarrelsome, having only slightly more use for his neighbour than he has for a stranger, a thorough unbeliever in the concept of the public good, an 'amoral familist' whose social ethics stop at his own front door. Peasant privacy in this picture is but another face of selfish ignorance. Competing with this unappealing fellow is the sturdy, self-reliant, open-hearted salt of the earth, the unhurried husbander of nature's forces, whose elemental skills protect him from the vagaries of modern civilisation. Peasant privacy in this view is the natural outcome of thoroughgoing independence.

In our work in a Mexican Indian village, we too have been struck by the extreme privacy of peasant social life. Zinacantecos have a well-developed respect for self-reliance and the security it brings, a deep distrust of relations with outsiders. One can, in the village of Nabenchauk, and, indeed, in many small farming communities around the world, track a constellation of behaviours that monitor interaction between people, that limit cooperation, and that otherwise isolate social units, of varying dimensions, from one another. We have sought in our research first to characterise this constellation of behaviours in Zinacantan. Second, we have tried to discover, in the social structure of the village, in its economic and political history, and in the beliefs and understandings of its inhabitants, the sources and concomitants of this constellation of behaviours. In seeking to understand Zinacanteco social life, we do not begin with an ideology of privacy – with a 'peasant world view', tracing the shoots of this root idea out into the social relations among people; rather, we begin with the complex relations between the social institutions of peasant life and the material conditions which people interpret in terms of an ideology of privacy and atomism. Finally, from this work, we have aimed to portray peasant social life more generally and to understand its determinants. In this chapter we explore privacy in one Mexican Indian village – the spatial and social boundedness of households, the delineation of property and resources, the careful control of information and the cautious nature of social interaction.

I. Zinacantan

Nabenchauk is one of a cluster of Indian villages known collectively as the township of Zinacantan, nestled in the high valleys of the mountains of Chiapas, in southern Mexico. The villages of Zinacantan share an ethnic identity signalled by their style of dress and by their dialect of Tzotzil, one of four Mayan languages in the region. Zinacanteco ethnic identity is also codified and institutionalised by a long-governing tradition of colonial and republican Mexico, which organised the Indian communities into civic entities with a formal political structure for purposes of intercourse with the wider legal and political framework.

The Spanish conquest reached Zinacantan within five years of the fall of the Aztec empire, and, by the sixteenth century, Zinacantecos were paying tribute and organising forced labour gangs for their new Spanish overlords. In the later years of the colony, and throughout the pre-revolutionary republican era, Zinacantecos progressively lost control of most of their lands. Some became debtor peons on hacienda estates; others exchanged their day labour for rights to farm the marginal lands of the ranches carved from formerly Zinacanteco lands. The return of freed peons to their ancestral villages in the twentieth century and the tide of demographic increase completely outstripped the gains made through the redistribution of land to Indian communities. Zinacantecos today are growers of maize, beans and squash, producers of almost all their material needs, trading in a small way for specialised commodities, and providing a surplus for the metropolitan centres. If they are to feed themselves from their own produce, however, let alone produce a surplus to exchange for cash in the marketplace, modern Zinacanteco farmers must rent land.

The social result of the skimming of surplus production by members of the urban-based society is double. Through it the peasant is socially linked by ties of dependency, whether jural or economic, to the urban society, ties which may proliferate in a market economy. And, by this outflow of surplus production, the peasant is reduced to a subsistence economy at home, in which all hands available in a household are turned to a broad range of productive activities of self-sustenance.

We may surmise – and in part this description grows out of an anthropological myth about traditional Middle American societies – that the ancestors of modern Zinacantecos once inhabited a society of thoroughgoing communality. Land, the principal resource, was held communally by the group; production was organised through corporate groups of kin (lineages). Moreover, ritual practices were aimed at

securing the welfare of the entire group: each individual soul was to be in harmony with itself and with souls of other members of the domestic group; each house participated in common ritual with others who shared the same waterhole; the well-being of the whole community was the joint responsibility of ritual practitioners, whose activities were subsidised by the entire population.

But Zinacanteco life, under the management of the colony, the republic, the revolutionary state and its present descendant, derives from changed conditions which all conspire to render social relations somewhat more individualistic, somewhat more commutable today than yesterday. In numerous ways the social relations among villagers today and the customary exchanges which surround and express them show the ongoing effects of the transformation of Zinacanteco Indians into market-oriented peasants. Social obligations and expectations once satisfiable only through specific goods and services have become market relationships, relationships that can accept a generalised medium of exchange, such as money, in the place of specific, socially imbedded goods and services.

For one example, weaving labour appears once to have been a matter solely of social obligation, the labour given under certain circumstances and to certain people without direct or immediate reciprocation – sister to sister, mother to daughter, aunt to niece. As such, it remained undefined by any specified value equivalencies for the purpose of sale or exchange. Today, as woven garments find a market in the tourist shops of the cities, women are struggling to determine a cash value for their labour input. Very young women and widows today weave for cash the garments needed in the households of their kinsmen to whom only two generations ago they would have given them freely.

Today, the capacity of the agriculturalist to maintain the family by the efforts of the family alone, unimpeded by social ties of kinship and cooperative ownership which characterise tribal horticulturalists, makes of the smallholder a potential social anarchist. In Zinacantan, the scarcity of land and the decreased productivity occasioned by land rent as a condition of production, have prised the individual producing household out of its social imbeddedness, leaving Zinacantecos to define and carry out their life choices individually, within the parameters of the market economy, and with a position in it as illiterate, unskilled producers with an inadequate command of the national language.

Language and dress still set Zinacantecos apart from other Chiapas peasants, and there are still religious ceremonies that engage all members of the municipality and distinguish them from their neighbours,

both Indian and non-Indian. But for a Zinacanteco, ethnic identity is not enough to sustain commonality of interest, not enough to inspire cooperation or to ensure loyalty. It is more like a fence by which an individual Zinacanteco can shield himself from the outside, thus limiting the social universe with which he must deal.

II. 'Public' and 'Private': Problems of Translation in Ethnography

When we come as anthropologists to a village like Nabenchauk, we do not confront a place, a society, a way of life which we already command. We cannot rely, as we look at what is happening around us, on our ordinary presumptions, as competent members of the society. Our need is not only to untangle the conceptual underpinnings of our language in order to describe phenomena; we must discover as well what the phenomena are. Our problem is not a matter of classification or assignment at all ('Is this act public or private?'), but something rather more primitive. At this first stage of understanding, we must discover what counts as an act; we must locate behaviour, belief, institutions; we must learn how to attach meaning to action or to work out functions and purposes. (For the ethnographer in the field, there is often a further, pressing problem: how to behave oneself. And though we may not be completely at a loss, living as we do among other human beings, our blunders will be constant and often disastrous.)

Within this low-level anthropological task, we may make three different sorts of appeal to the public/private dichotomy. We may encounter native notions (as evidenced, for example, through forms of speech) about how social life is conceived by native actors themselves – notions that, for one reason or another, we may gloss by words like 'private' or 'public'. For example, when an event is described in Nabenchauk as taking place *ta jamaltik*, we may feel justified, given a certain context, in glossing the phrase which means literally 'in the open', as 'in public'. Second, it may be that a distinction between public and private domains – places, property, behaviour, information – can enhance our ethnographic analysis, whether or not natives can be seen to employ such notions in their own social discourse. So, for example, we may say, felicitously, that certain behaviour – say, a Zinacanteco girl's running away from a visitor – evinces a 'desire for privacy', even when the most the girl herself can say is *tol chk'elvan*, literally 'people look too much'. Finally, we make more contentious, rhetorical, motivated use of notions of privacy and publicness (appealing to a 'public good' or sneering at 'private interests') as we evaluate native life. Such appeals frequently figure in the discourse of agents of manipulative social and political change – advocates of 'development' – in Zinacantan, a community of habitual victims.

Zinacantecos are, speaking in ordinary terms, extraordinarily private people. This description confounds a common image of small-scale, 'face-to-face' communities, where people are supposed to live in one another's pockets: to have access to everyone else, to have some reason to be interested in them (by virtue of, say, corporate, family-based ties to them), perhaps even to have some say in what everyone else does. According to this common picture, such matters are taken both to be given by physical (brute) facts – proximity, limited resources both material and social – and to have normative force: there is a supposed ideology of communality.

III. Space, Publicity and Privacy

But in Zinacantan, privacy must be seen, first, in relation to geography. The valley of Nabenchauk is rimmed by three intersecting ridges, which form a roughly equilateral triangle. The village houses hug the slopes of these ridges and cluster on the higher portion of the valley floor. At the three points of intersection of the ridges are the passes through which foot trails wind down into the valley from other Zinacanteco settlements. Through the northwest corner a rock-paved truck road enters the valley, straight down to the plaza in front of the church. Here in the centre of the village is the town hall, a government grocery store, four cantinas, and the church, all spaced around the recently terraced and paved plaza area that is a product of the public works projects run by the state government development agency, *PRODESCH*. The plaza is the scene of public dispute settlement, whose focal point is the veranda of the town hall. Except during the Saturday morning market when it is abustle with men, women and children of all ages, the plaza is a rather empty place, too open, too formal for people to sit or even to pass through comfortably. It is, of course, the most 'public' part of town. Next to it, the broad roadway that runs through the middle of the valley, the trails that lead out of the valley, and the footpaths that run along fences and through cornfields connecting the houses to each other are public areas, of free access, and of public, constrained behaviour. Last, there is the lake bed and its flood plain, owned but not tilled, and anyone who wishes may walk there, graze sheep or horses

there, and use the wells and the washing stones beside them. For the rest, all the land – whether valley floor, rocky slope or wooded mountain top – is privately owned.

Almost all the tilled land is fenced in Nabenchauk. no single piece of it larger than three-quarters of an acre. The fields are fenced against straying sheep and turkeys and against the hungry dogs that run down young corn plants and will eat the corn raw in the ear. The house sites are also fenced, both against animals and against the trespass of other villagers. Where a footpath passes close by a house, the fencing is often built up by long pieces of split oak firewood stood on one end and stacked close together to obscure the view to a height of five or six feet.

Almost all of the houses in Nabenchauk are constructed of unplastered adobe brick and roofed with red clay tiles supported on timber beams. Most houses are rectangular, four to five metres by three to four metres, and contain a single room. The cooking fire is built on the packed earth floor, and the smoke escapes upward, unobstructed by any ceiling, through the roof tiles and under the open eaves. No window penetrates the thick brown walls of these houses; the only light which enters comes through the open doorway.

There is no place in the village where a person can be certain to be hidden from the gaze of other people. Years of living with other people in close quarters undivided by interior walls have provided Zinacantecos with many ways of preserving personal modesty, chief among which is the trick of remaining fully clothed at all times, even in sleep. Privacy within the household is also guaranteed by a sense of responsibility for the modesty of others – when intruding unintentionally on someone, one simply averts the eyes. Within the household one is as careful of another's privacy as one is of one's own. Beyond the household, however, such constraint is quite lacking.

The space outside the house itself, within the fence or yard boundaries, is the workplace of the home. On an ordinary day, several activities are going on at once in the yard – the children are playing, someone is weaving, someone else repairing a chair. The yard is a space shared with chickens, turkeys and dogs, which continually wander through in their forages and which must be guarded against lest they soil the weaving or steal a bit of food. In most cases, it is also a space open to prying eyes, often, in this mountainous place, prying from a considerable distance. This lends a certain ambivalence to attitudes toward this area. One assumes that anything done there can be observed, that anything said there above a whisper will be overheard. Even

in a well-sheltered patio a woman's weaving can be heard in the resounding thump of the beater, or seen as the shaking branches of the tree to which her loom is tied.

This is seen in part as a good thing: if one has nothing particular to hide at the moment, one is exhibiting this fact to those who are interested while keeping in good position to see and hear the doings of others on the paths or in their patios. Much of the conversation that goes on between people working in the yard is speculation on the immediate affairs and destinations of the people visible from this vantage point. Similarly, staying indoors or, even more unheard of, closing the house door is a gross and open admission of being up to no good. Prying, with the eyes and ears tuned to all goings on around one, is an ordinary behaviour in Nabenchauk. One expects that all one's business that is carried on where it *could* be seen or overheard is, in fact, seen and overheard. Similarly, one presumes that ignoring any aspect of others that can be perceived is simply foolish.

There are, however, strict canons of privacy which pertain to the physical intrusion by others into private space. A Zinacanteco house is a private area; it is 'set apart'. A new house is dedicated by completing a ritual circuit around it to protect it from the outside. One cannot sleep in a new house until its sides are secure, its orifices sealed. It is spoken of as a sick person (whose soul is not well fastened to his body). Moreover, with illness, during a period of seclusion (and after childbirth), a patient can leave the house only if guarded, and no visitor may enter the house.

The isolation of the house is more than just conceptual: it is material as well. Zinacanteco houses, as we observed earlier, do not have windows. (And when the government development agency built houses for Indians with large, unshuttered windows, their owners carefully papered the windows over or bricked them in. Windows are for *ladinos*, non-Indians, who can sit by the windows where everyone can watch them eat.) Fences surround the yard, and the common phrase to describe one's private place, where members of a household can relax in their own company, is *ta yut mok* 'inside the fence'. There one hopes to be relatively safe from prying eyes, though people watch for spies (there is a monolexemic Tzotzil verb which means 'to observe in secret, from a hiding place') and complain bitterly about new roads near to their yards that allow passers-by to 'look at you'.

E.Z. Vogt writes of the Zinacanteco house compound that 'the patio is of social significance because often guests are entertained there rather than inside the house'.[1] But this remark overlooks the fact

that the choice between inside and outside the house is not just random (a matter, perhaps, of the weather) but significant. There is a scale of admission to the house compound, when visitors arrive, as follows: On the path/just outside the gate/in the patio/on the porch/inside the house in the 'visitors' area' (far from the fire)/by the fire. For a non-member of the household (even an intimate kinsman) entry to each new stage is by invitation only, and most people do not get beyond the first few stages, on most occasions.

All space in Zinacantan is carefully divided by categories of access. You can step up to my gate uninvited, but you can't come in. My brother can draw water from my well, but my cousin can't. Anyone from Nabenchauk can walk into the church, but others have to ask the sacristan. Anybody can graze his sheep near the lake, but only I can chop wood on my plot of forest land. What we have called 'public behaviour' above means, in this context, what one does in public places -- places of unrestricted access. In Zinacantan, in fact, public places constitute a socially *restricted* arena, where one monitors one's behaviour all the more severely for being in the public eye.

IV. Publicity and Privacy in Conversation

The tension between what is private (often, even, secret) and what is public (or allowed to leak out) is most obvious in interpersonal interaction, especially in conversation. Ordinary talk between Zinacantecos is, in fact, almost the canonical case of social intercourse, and the properties of conversation give instructive examples of the tenor of Zinacanteco social life.

Consider how ordinary polite talk in their language, Tzotzil, differs from English conversation. On Grice's well-known analysis,[2] co-operative principles which operate in all well-formed conversation (at least, in the circles Grice frequented) enable a range of interpretations and inferences not available from, for example, the literal meanings of utterances or from discursive conversational organisation alone. These principles constrain participants in conversation to make their remarks relevant, to speak the whole truth (as much as they know within a given context), and so on. Two Gricean examples illustrate these maxims of relevance and quantity:

A: I am out of petrol.
B: There is a garage around the corner.
(Allowed inference: you can get petrol there.)

* * * * *

A: Where does C live?
B: Somewhere in the south of France.
(Allowed inference: I don't know anything more exact than that.)

These maxims are disobeyed from time to time for particular purposes: to be deliberately perverse, to snub, to mislead, and so on.

Elinor Ochs Keenan has suggested, however, that these principles do not obtain (or, at least, not as stated for English conversation) for Malagasy-speaking peasants in Madagascar.[3] There, she argues, information is treated as a scarce good; what's more, Malagasy peasants espouse an ideology of the collective responsibility for action which causes people to avoid any action that draws attention to individual ability or that commits people to individual responsibility. Malagasy conversation, according to Keenan, is non-committal, indirect, guarded, and often, for the Western ethnographer, deliberately stripped of both relevance and quantity.

In a similar way, ordinary polite conversation in Zinacantan is marked by formulaic inanity. On the path one asks another: 'Where are you going?' and receives the ordinary polite reply, 'I am going nowhere.' One asks another about the purpose of his errand: 'What have you to say?' The answer, belied by the occasion, is commonly: 'I have nothing to say.' In many Tzotzil conversations, one party seems to be trying his best to pump information from his interlocutor, while the interlocutor uses every ploy he can to evade and deflect the other's purpose. The formulas of polite conversation set a tone in which Gricean cooperative principles are turned off.

A striking example of the metaphor of ordinary conversation can be seen by comparing standard greetings (for example, when people meet on a path) with 'full conversations' in English and Tzotzil. In both cases, a conversation typically has an opening ('Hello, how are you?'); a body (during which some matter is discussed); and a closing (which in turn has an opening gambit and an ending: 'Well, I've got to be going', 'OK, see you.') In English (or, at least, American), a reduced greeting exchange is lifted from an opening sequence:

Hi, how're you doing?

But the standard greeting in Tzotzil is taken clearly from a closing sequence:

Chibat che'e. (I'm going.)
Batan! (Go then!)

A Tzotzil greeting constitutes a metaphorical shutting down of interaction and communication. A greeting is, formally, a farewell and not

a hello. (In either language, of course, a greeting is essentially empty, a hollow interaction at best.)

Looking at ordinary talk in Nabenchauk leads to the conclusions that all information is taken as inherently dangerous; that people's interests are thought to be inevitably opposed; that access to one another's business invites not shared confidences but breaches of confidence. Living in Nabenchauk involves, as we shall see, constant circumspect hiding. Tzotzil conversation is kinesically well contained. As novices in the village, and as potential inadvertent blurters of household secrets, we were constantly tutored in conversational conventions, often instructed in precisely how to talk about (or to avoid talking about) private affairs.

Here a brief semantic detour may be in order. There are, so far as we know, no Tzotzil words for 'public' or 'private' (despite elaborate syntactic mechanisms for marking possession obligatorily). But consider the sorts of verbs that appear frequently to describe what happens to information:

Tzotzil	English
-vinaj	appear, become perceivable
-lok'	emerge, become public
-lik	arise, begin to circulate
-ˀil-e	be seen, be obvious
-ˀaˀy-at	be heard, be perceived
-lam	be eased, grow less severe
-paj	cease
-mak	be covered up
-nak'	be hidden
-muk	be buried, be kept secret or private
-laj	finish
-ch'ab	disappear, cease to exist
ˀep-bat	increase
-muk'ib	enlarge
-ch'amuj	spread
-batz'ij	become more severe
-kechi	remain, be left over, persist

These verbs, applied to gossip stories, evidence a Tzotzil theory of information and reputation which clearly involves notions of privacy and publicness.

In Nabenchauk, what is private is a matter of gradually (and, one might say, grudgingly) widening concentric social circles to which villagers may belong. What is private, what is one's own, pertains to what is inside the circle; what is public, open (and usually, potentially dangerous), is what remains on the outside. (In fact, for Zinacantan, 'private' seems logically the primitive term; 'public' is defined by opposition to the well-bounded, closed private domains, with no independent motivation, no notion of 'public good' or 'general public'.) But the smallest such circle may not be as small an object as a single, psychologically self-aware individual – socially, there may be no such creature. (Equally, we can imagine societies in which the smallest social unit is less than a single person: a manifestation of an aspect of one person's personality, perhaps, or a spirit – who knows what remains private in an asylum?) In Zinacantan, one starts life as an adjunct to one's parents or grandparents – one's name is usually even a possessed form: *y-Antun li mol Petul-e* 'Old Peter's Anthony'. Full social identity ordinarily comes only when a person establishes his or her own household.

V. Households and Privacy

Every person in Nabenchauk has one and only one *-na* 'house' which can be claimed as his or her own. Statistically, and ideally, households in Nabenchauk are small, usually containing only a nuclear family, although the period of postmarital patrilocal residence, which may last from between one and five years, creates periodic extended family households. Sharing a household can be defined as eating together. Zinacantecos do not indiscriminately lump together the fruits of their individual labours and share them out willy-nilly. If two men eat together every day tortillas made over a single fire, then they have worked together on a single patch of land to produce the corn that is in the tortillas (or pooled their cash resources in an explicitly agreed way to purchase it). Put another way, two Zinacanteco men who farm separate pieces of land keep their harvests separate and eat separately; only people who share the ownership of the staple food resources eat together around the same fire.

Take the case of, say, an old woman who sleeps alone in her own house. If she eats in the house of her married son or daughter, then she shares in the ownership of the corn supply in the same manner as a child in that household does. If, however, she cooks for herself at her own fire in her own house, even though she eats mostly corn supplied to her by her children, producing little income for herself, she does not share in the total corn supply of her children at all. Rather, explicit

gifts, or loans, of corn (or cash) are made to her by her children, and the ownership of that food, the right to dispose of it as she will, is transferred to her. No fraction of the harvest automatically accrues to her, nor can she simply consider her children's resources to be her own. Bag by bag, she must acquire her corn in gifts, formally and explicitly made by them, or formally requested by her. Lest this be interpreted as a mere formal nicety, it ought to be pointed out that many old women with prosperous offspring go about in rags for lack of the wherewithal to buy new clothes.

When sufficient land is available, young married sons prefer to build their houses on land contiguous to their father's land. This may result in a compound of two or possibly three related households, each with its own house and courtyard within the same fence.

With regard to matters of crowding and of personal space – personal body privacy, work space, the noise of children – there is little difference between a single dwelling or several around a central courtyard. What does change significantly when a second household is set up is the question of ownership and the privacy of one's financial affairs attendant upon private ownership. A second household requires a separate supply of corn, separate cooking equipment, and sooner or later separate work tools for farming, weaving and regular maintenance work. Ownership of any item is never ambiguous between Zinacanteco households, although the freedom to borrow back and forth can be extensive when relations are good.

The existence of more than one household as defined here implies the existence of two or more economic units which are at least partially distinct. Where farm land is involved, it will have been divided, as will the household goods. Articles will be bought and sold separately, with separate purses carefully maintained, right down to the cost of the grinding of a bucket of corn which may amount to only 10 *centavos*. This means that in time, and no doubt in a very short time, both real differences as well as perceived potential differences in the interests of the two households can arise.

The coming and going of visitors will be noted between households, but the actual transactions can go on behind the walls of a house, and at night behind closed doors. Visitors to one household in a compound not infrequently time their visits to occur after everyone has closed his doors, and they will enter the yard as silently as they can, whispering at the door of the house they wish to visit. At the very least, such occurrences of events involving one household – a sudden visitor, a shout in the night, whatever – put the other household in the position of knowing that something has happened without knowing what. They then must wait to be told about it spontaneously or be bold enough to ask about it themselves, which amounts more or less to a constant test of the extent of mutuality and trust between them. This is a situation of structural ambiguity – separate units with close historical ties, physically close enough to know *of* one another's business without knowing, as a matter of course, *about* it. Both inquiring and not inquiring, telling and not telling, are active responses in a situation of this sort, and tension and curiosity are the inevitable result. The existence of more than one household in a compound by the very nature of the Zinacanteco household raises ambiguities about space and property that may be at the root of the empirical finding that Nabenchauk residents consistently choose to live either in larger single households or smaller single households and appear to avoid extended family compound living arrangements.

VI. Social Life and Publicness

The domain of the private in Zinacantan, then, is the individual household, what goes on *ta yut jmok* 'inside my fence'. Publicness means *outside* the fence, and its dangers are not unlike the dangers, at another level, of the surrounding *te'tik* 'forest', or of the non-Zinacanteco world of the local Mexican towns where different social rules are in force. However, much ordinary social life *must* take place outside the fence: sociability and publicness are linked conceptually, and danger is involved. Social life requires display of self, invites others to *-k'elvan* 'look at you', and exposes one to the possibilities of *k'exlal* 'shame' or *-ak'ʔelav* 'making a spectacle of oneself'. The defining conditions of Zinacanteco life, the circumstances of productive life, provide for a certain necessary interaction between social units, and all involve potential breaches of confidentiality. They do not, however, promote a higher level of publicness. We shall consider ordinary sociability, features of Zinacanteco marriage, and cooperative labour as telling examples.

A. Women in Public Places

The realities of domestic tasks in Nabenchauk require that a good deal of the household routine has to be carried out beyond the confines of the household fence. Corn, which has for generations been ground by hand on a stone *metate* by the hearth, is today taken to electric corn

mills dotted about the village. These are places fraught with social dangers, and in them constrained behaviour is at its extreme. Women carry their buckets of corn in the crooks of their arm, covered by the lower edges of their shawls; buckets which are carried hanging from the hand by the handle most of the way from home will be shifted to this covered position as the mill is approached.

As soon as women or children come within a few metres of the mill, they lower their voices to a whisper and most conversation ceases. Shawls are raised to cover the mouth, and each person takes her place in line silently, raising her eyes only to scan newcomers in a wary fashion. Once inside the mill people rarely greet each other openly, although some adolescent girls, taking what may be their only opportunity in a day to see one another, often allow friends into the line ahead of them. Most mills have a bench or table on which waiting customers may rest their buckets. Women carefully keep their buckets of corn in order in the line, their rims just touching. If a newcomer is allowed into the middle of the line, each woman in adjusting her own bucket is very cautious not even to touch the bucket of another. To do so is regarded as taking a very great liberty.

Another ceaseless daily labour of women is carrying water. Girls and young women, unable freely to visit one another's houses, time their regular trips for water to coincide with the trips of their friends; in this way they can exchange gossip in low whispers as they walk together on the path. But in Nabenchauk these social moments do not in the least resemble the very garrulous and convivial tones we have witnessed at wells in the water-scarce western villages of Zinacantan, where houses are clearly clustered in patrilineal groups, each group with its special hour for water collection at the community well. In Nabenchauk one may meet *anyone* at the standpipe, and the eyes of any of fifty houses may be watching. It is a moment for very guarded behaviour indeed and, as at the mill, women do not gather at the watertap itself but may cluster in small groups of two or three some five or ten metres away where they cannot be approached except by friends joining the conversation.

Waterholes have two related social aspects: they are both sociable and public. Washing at the waterhole can provide a woman with a good occasion for a prolonged chat with women of other households, an opportunity unequalled by any other task. Since no Zinacanteco drops in on another without good reason, people, and particularly women, can find themselves talking to members of only their own households for days at a time. Even though life is generally unhurried, women do not stop long by the path or at the shop to talk with others lest someone observing take note and make something of it. But washing clothes is a very long business, and who can think ill of anyone for spending an hour or two at the chore chatting the while? For all their anxieties, Zinacantecos love a good joke, and women washing clothes are rarely sober faced and are even, on occasion, boisterous.

On the other hand, these waterholes are undoubtedly public places. Groups of women at a waterhole may laugh and joke continuously, even obscenely, but never freely. They remain ever ready to parry a remark aimed to catch them off guard; questions like 'Where were you going up past the cemetery yesterday?' must never be answered directly but cleverly sidestepped with an implied denial or a vague reply, or outright lie.

On any Saturday morning the women of Nabenchauk will take produce to sell at the village market. Indians of other ethnic groups as well as lowland *ladino* peasants and potters come to this market to exchange their vegetables for fleece, corn and flowers. These foreigners spread their wares in wide circles around them and settle themselves on chairs or tarpaulins in a very comfortable manner, often buying soft drinks from the nearby *cantinas*, lounging back, legs akimbo, to snack on fruit or peanuts, shouting amiably to one another, laughing and verbally accosting the Zinacanteco shoppers as they pass by.

To this rather common market behaviour the demeanour of the women sellers from Nabenchauk could not present a greater contrast. Each woman or girl sits with her belongings closely gathered around her, occupying in this large plaza the smallest space she possibly can. Her legs are tucked under her in the usual manner of sitting, her shawl drawn up over her mouth, her eyes cast downward or at least carefully avoiding meeting the gaze of others. Everything about her seems to say, 'I am not really here.' This is quite normal public behaviour for most Zinacanteco women, in particular for adolescent girls and young women. But on Saturday morning they are there to sell something; whatever it is, it will most likely be well out of sight, wrapped in one of the white cotton flour sacks ubiquitous in the highlands as luggage containers, or in a layer or two of red and white woven bags. Perhaps in front of them will be displayed one or two samples of the goods they are offering; perhaps the passerby will have to inquire what it is they have for sale. Many women will avoid looking at their interlocutor at all as inquiries are made or goods and money exchanged.

At one level this reflects propriety of manner and a nervousness about encounters with strangers. It also, however, reflects the extreme

discomfort these women feel at making known their intentions and their goods in this place which is not merely public. and filled with strangers, but, even worse, filled with villagers and relatives who will thus learn the nature and extent of their business.

B. Marriage and the Privacy of the Household

In Nabenchauk there are only two legitimate occasions for social intercourse with members of another household: business and ritual. Apart from these kinds of events, social interaction between members of different households rarely will amount to more than remarks made in passing, or otherwise brief, guarded and purposeful interchanges. Informal, prolonged, or intimate contact is relatively rare, but when it occurs, it is sure to be between kinsmen or between the pseudo-kin created through the institution of *compadrazgo.*[4]

Virtually all social intercourse is guarded and purposeful, but insofar as deeper intimacy is ever achieved, it is possible only between kin. Conversely, kinship does not carry with it the obligation of intimacy, only the potential for it. Propriety dictates that the impetus in a marriage proposal come from the young man. Most opportunities for young people to observe one another are limited to public moments – to passing on the path, standing nearby while observing a fiesta, while attending a market, or while riding a truck. Moments such as these are precisely those in which Zinacanteco behaviour, particularly female behaviour, is most restrained. At such times even to hear clearly the voice of a possible mate, let alone overhear her conversation, is practically impossible.

The children of one's mother's sister or brother, however, may well be people one has seen on a regular basis since childhood, at weddings and religious ceremonies, while hanging around the washing well or on a wood gathering trip. Similarly young people living in the same part of the village will have many more opportunities to observe one another, albeit at some distance and perhaps clandestinely, than have people separated by such distances and whom they do not cross paths with often. This simple issue of opportunity and intimacy of knowledge determines more than any other the frequency with which matches are sought between neighbours and collateral kinsmen.

During a courtship, and following the marriage, the natal households of the marriage partners come into what, for Zinacantan, is an intense contact; this is particularly true during the years which the new bride will spend in the home of her husband's parents. During this time the newly expanded household lives in the intolerable situation of having in its midst a person who, regardless of her personality, will serve inevitably as a conduit of information about it back to her own natal household. People soon grow anxious and exhausted from the effort of behaving around their own hearth with as much cautious circumspection as they customarily do 'in public'.

These tensions often lead to the failure of the marriage and are a major reason why Zinacantecos prefer to arrange marriages between members of households which are linked already by a marriage in the same or previous generation. Further, marriages between people so linked – especially cousins – provides a network of kin linking the bride to her mother-in-law with whom she has the most intense contact in the new situation.

Once children are born to a new couple, the issue of the ultimate disposition of the fruits of productive labour, especially male productive labour, must arise. The new child represents the beginning of a new generation, whose patrimony must ultimately be separable from that of other potential lines of inheritance. The joint labour of a man and his unmarried brothers can no longer be equally divided, nor do the brothers stand to inherit any longer from the new young father, whose property now ultimately belongs to his offspring.

Land and goods are always passed from parent to child. Siblings never inherit directly from one another, but they do stand to benefit or to be disadvantaged by each other's actions, as wealth amassed by one can be reclaimed by the father and redistributed among his children in times of ill will. Fathers retain the bulk of their property in their own hands until near death, distributing it according to their own preferences at that time.

Siblings, then, remain in competition with one another for parental favour throughout the life of the parent, and tensions between them over responsibility for the aging parent grow over the years. The issue of the ultimate division of property can pit the interests of one household against those of its closest kinsmen; the more closely related the households, the greater the interest in each other's affairs, for the more each one stands to lose or gain by that interest. In this way, households related by kinship have far more potential for acrimony and feud than do those not so related, and the social resource which family ties represent in Nabenchauk is easily turned to liability.

C. Production and the Division of Labour

The division of labour by sex, which remains the most significant division of labour internal to this society, while strengthening the male-

female co-operative tie also renders the conjugal or nuclear family – in technological terms, at any rate – self-sufficient in production (self-sufficient in relation to other Zinacanteco households, although not in relation to the wider society and its markets).

In Nabenchauk most work tasks are structured in ways that allow them to be carried out from beginning to end by a person working alone. Men can and do farm alone, for no aspect of the work so rewards cooperation that men are forced to maintain social groups for its sake alone or fail. The weaving, gardening, cooking and washing that women perform are also arranged for the solitary worker, although the pressures on a woman's time created by the birth of children will inundate a single woman's capacities. The solution to this in Nabenchauk is not the maintenance of extended family residential arrangements nor the creation of social obligations between kinsmen but the establishment of paid services for weaving and cooking between households. This is an example of a primary characteristic of the social relations of work in the village: all labour is paid labour.

The only point in the corn cycle in which the labour of more than one man is absolutely essential is weeding time, when a single man working more land than he can weed quickly risks losing his corn to encroaching weeds. At other points in the corn cycle, a man *can* choose to exploit his own labour to the maximum and simply begin sooner and end later any one task than he would with help. The essential point is that additional labour in the swidden cultivation of corn on the rocky sloping land which Zinacanteco renters farm – land which is not suitable for plow technology – is a matter of aggregating like units of labour and not of complex co-operation. Each man works alone, even if side by side and in timing with fellow workers, moving up the hillside together. They work together for company and motivation, stopping to chat and laugh together, to have a drink and a moment's rest. But aggregating all these equal units of labour does not increase productivity. It is the difference between one man working six days or six men working one day. Except for weeding time it makes little difference to the yield of the field. Thus the actual tasks of the corn cycle do not materially require co-operation, nor do they reward it with higher productivity.

Because landlords prefer to rent land in large blocks, Zinacantecos often form renting groups to acquire land and then parcel it out among themselves. Such an association of men for renting in the lowlands is likely to be formed on the basis of kinship because kinship is the primary social link which exists between households in Zinacantan. But this link does not amount to a necessary association; neither ritual nor economic forces require the maintenance of social bonds between households. The concentration of productive resources and of consumption in the household unit is so strong that it precludes the formation of social units larger than the household.

Zinacantecos actively avoid being obligated to anyone, and they actively reject responsibilities for others; they are equally ambivalent about being debtors and being creditors. Life in Zinacantan is primarily about the acquisition of property – land, cash or corn – and the business of life is the work necessary to this acquisition. To the producer belong all rights in the product, and Zinacantecos appear to like to keep accounts straight right from the start. The distinction between mine and thine is fundamental in this village. The virtue in the work is the virtue inherent in the property – the independence, and freedom from being controlled, which it is hoped it will bring.

Many households do not contain the necessary personnel to maintain the full cycle of male and female production; these incomplete units do not undergo incorporation into larger family groups but maintain themselves through the sale of their labour to other households. No social obligations exist between adults in Nabenchauk which compel a person to care for another in time of need: between brother and brother, sister and sister, father and son, money is lent, not shared; work is paid for, not pooled. It is perfectly possible to starve to death, alone in one's house, in Nabenchauk. Scarce resources pit households against one another through the market economy, which has eroded the obligations and interdependencies of kinship by directing ties outward to the wider economy, and which has transformed socially embedded goods and services into wage labour.

In Zinacantan there seems to be no sense of corporateness, no feeling for an 'all-embracing public good'. True, there is an obvious ethnic and linguistic unity about the place, and there is a religious hierarchy, recruited from all parts of the municipality, which assumes responsibility, year by year, for the rituals which maintain the patron saints of Zinacantan. However, the political and ceremonial cohesiveness of Zinacantan barely impinges on everyday social life in a village like Nabenchauk. Zinacanteco ethnic identity simply defines, for most purposes, the outer limits of the social universe. Within Zinacantan what is good for me (and my household) is construed in opposition to, rather than as part of, what is good for everyone else. In the face of calls for co-operative efforts, spawned by local development agencies and usually phrased in Spanish rhetoric (*la mayoriá, el beneficio de la comunidad*,

etc.), members of our household, at least, express suspicions about the motives of the people concerned: What do they get out of it? What does it cost us? The form of social organisation sets limits to the levels and applications of 'publicness.'

Conclusion

As Benn and Gaus suggest in Chapter 1, above, questions of access, interest and agency are, perhaps, unavoidable in all human social life, requiring different solutions from one culture to the next or in varying circumstances. Distinctions such as those which we draw in our own culture between public and private can also be discovered in other cultures. Nevertheless, the resources, practices and social units which underlie and take shape through these distinctions confound an easy application of these notions cross-culturally. Zinacantecos have a conscious concern with issue of access, for example, but these issues intersect with notions of agency and interest – what there is to be interested *in*, what 'having an interest' means – in culturally specific ways.

The anthropologist quickly learns, in another society, that – whatever the conceptual confusions – the details of what is private and what public may be very different from what he or she is used to at home. Circumstances are different, and appropriate behaviour may be hard to master. There is, as well, a final paradox. For the outsider, at least in a village like Nabenchauk where people are social atoms and where villagers seem to be obsessed with privacy, one ultimately comes to feel oppressed, hemmed in by the constantly prying eyes and heavy expectations of others. Whereas, at the other extreme, in, say, an Australian Aboriginal community where there are no walls and there is no private property, where people barge in, stare unabashedly and comment unreservedly on what they see – the lack of secrecy produces just the feeling of freedom to do what one likes that is so often associated, in western liberal thought, with privacy and restricted access.

Notes

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1. E.Z. Vogt, *Zinacantan* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1969).
2. H.P. Grice, 'Logic and Conversation', in P. Cole and J. Morgan (eds.), *Syntax and Semantics 3 Speech Acts* (Academic Press, New York, 1975), pp. 41-58.
3. E. Ochs Keenan, 'On the Universality of Conversational Implicatures', *Language and Society*, 5 (1976), pp. 67-80.
4. *Compadrazgo* refers to the Meso-American institution of ritual co-parenthood in which the parents of a child form important social ties with other people through the life-cycle rituals their child undergoes in the Roman Catholic Church.