

KINSHIP AND NAGUALISM IN A TZELTAL COMMUNITY,
SOUTHEASTERN MEXICO

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RECENT studies carried out by the writer among the Tzeltal Indians of the state of Chiapas, Mexico,¹ have revealed important aspects of their social organization which had not been reported or had been barely mentioned in previous reports concerning this area.² There will be discussed in this article two cultural complexes occupying prominent places in Tzeltal social organization: the kinship system based on patrilineal clans and the methods of social control through the practice of nagualism. For the student of Mayan ethnology the outstanding discovery is that of a clear-cut case of clan organization. As is well known, the information available on the existence of clans in this area is still very limited and unsatisfactory. Olson, in his documented study of the distribution of clans and moieties throughout indigenous America, says that: The data on clans throughout Mexico and the Maya area obviously leave much to be desired. In only a few instances is the evidence definite or clear-cut to enable us to state categorically that sibs in the true sense were present.³

Beals comes to a similar conclusion after making a detailed analysis of historical sources dealing with the west coast of Mexico. Nevertheless, he adds that: While perhaps no definite conclusions are reached, the data may reinforce the conviction held by many that unilateral organizations lie in the background of Mexican culture history.⁴

Eggan,⁵ basing his conclusions on an examination of kinship terminologies culled from old Maya dictionaries, agrees that the peoples of this language group must have been organized in a system which could have contained one or more of the following elements: cross-cousin marriage, exogamous moieties or clans, and daughter exchange by households. In view of his limited material, Eggan expressed the hope

that further material from the early literature will come to light, and current field work in Central America will yield additional evidence which may support or modify the tentative conclusions reached in this paper.⁶

¹ My acquaintance with these Indians began in 1938 when I made a 300-mile preliminary survey through the whole area that they inhabit. Later, beginning in 1942, I set up camp in one of their communities and spent there some twenty months, divided in two field seasons. This research was under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution of Washington, in connection with a wider sociological study under the direction of Dr. Robert Redfield. The results of the Chiapas work will be published later in a final report now in preparation. Meanwhile all the field notes covering the two periods have been published in the *Microfilm Collection of Manuscripts on Middle American Cultural Anthropology*, University of Chicago Library.

² For a bibliography on this region see Redfield and Villa Rojas, 1939.

³ Olson, 1933.

⁴ Beals, 1932.

⁵ Eggan, 1934.

⁶ *Ibid.*

In the light of the foregoing statements, we can now present new material collected among the present-day Tzeltal.

About 40,000 Tzeltal-speaking Indians occupy part of north-central Chiapas. Having dwelt in isolation, forgotten by authorities for more than three centuries (white people began to settle in the area only a few decades ago), the Tzeltal retained many prehispanic elements of culture. Today they live in communities, each with several thousand inhabitants. Within the political structure of the state of Chiapas these communities are known as *municipios*. Each of them has a peculiar way of life or, better said, a local variant of a common cultural pattern found in the whole region and including the Tzotzil-speaking communities. One can say, generally, that these communities are very similar to the *municipios* of highland Guatemala described by Tax.⁷

Each community can be considered a tribe, differing from all others, defined in terms of territorial limits, its own politico-religious organization, kinship system, linguistic peculiarities, economic resources, costume and other aspects of its culture. Using only differences of costume one can easily place the inhabitants of the various towns. Local endogamy governs marriage in each community; it is not customary for members of different *municipios* to intermarry. In so far as territorial extension is concerned, town holdings vary between 50 and 200 square miles; generally land is scarce, stony and mountainous.

Each community is made up of a central town and an indefinite number of *rancherías* (rural settlements) spread through the mountains. The town is the political, religious and commercial center of the whole *municipio*; there one finds the *cabildo* or city hall, with the offices of the municipal authorities (made up of Indians and *ladinos*), which are recognized by the state. Also found there are the church, the market-place and the stores. This town is the customary home of the few white or *ladino* (persons of European culture, whether white or mestizo) families in the region. The settlements in the hills are small groups of huts spread irregularly over the mountain-side.

In the *municipio* of Oxchuc, best known to the writer, each rural settlement is tied by religious bonds to a certain cave where a cross is kept as the main symbol of its sacred importance. Usually the *ranchería* is known by the name of the cave to which it belongs; thus the *ranchería* of Dzajalchen (Red Cave) is connected with the cave of that name. In addition to this main cave there are others of less importance, but also treated with respect and sanctified through one or more crosses. This mystic devotion to caves has its origin in the belief that it is from them that lightning comes to punish and to disperse the natural elements (hail, winds, storms, etc.) which frequently threaten and even destroy the corn fields.

The entire population of the *municipio* of Oxchuc, some 3000 Indians, is

⁷ Tax, 1937.

divided into two groups known as *calpules*. Each *calpul* has its own patron saint and its own body of officials; the latter are men of greater experience and age. There are no geographic limits to a *calpul*; it is not localized. The land belongs to individuals, not to the *calpul*, so that members of both *calpules* can be found in all the hamlets making up the community. Theoretically membership in one *calpul* or the other is based on personal choice, without any rule of hereditary transmission. Nevertheless, from a survey of actual practice it appears that a large majority of the people prefer to belong to their fathers' and grandfathers' *calpul*. Within the social structure of the group, the *calpules* fulfill the important function of promoting and organizing political and religious activities. In this sense, the Tzeltal think that the *calpul* is nothing but a large fraternity where people of greater age and prestige occupy positions as parents and guardians. In agreement with this notion, the elders and the people of greater prestige are expected to take the responsibility in looking after and protecting their subordinates in all matters of physical and spiritual welfare. They also serve as final and irrevocable judges in case of quarrel, theft, assault and other crimes. They are also resorted to in their roles as healers and diviners. In all these duties the officials depend on the supernatural help of certain spirits known as *lab* in the vernacular or *nagual* to the outsiders, to which return will be made in the following pages.

The leaders of the *calpul* are also priests; it is their duty to organize and lead the more important religious ceremonies of the year. On the other hand, the *calpul* has no relation to marriage rules; one can marry within the *calpul* or outside it.

The clan is the individual's most important affiliation in matters of kinship, inheritance and property rights. In the case of Oxchuc, the whole population is divided into six patrilineal, exogamous clans, neither totemic nor localized. Of these clans, two have declined in numbers and are disappearing; we can limit the discussion to the other four. These clans have no aboriginal names. They are denominated by the following Spanish surnames: Lopez, Mendez, Gomez and Santis. Each clan is subdivided into a number of lineages, to be recognized by their aboriginal names, such as: Nich, Ichilok, Kulub, Cojton, etc. Thus it is enough for an Indian to know a man's full name to determine readily his clan and lineage. Our informant Manuel Gomez Kulub belonged to the Gomez clan and its Kulub lineage. Moreover, as each lineage belongs to a given clan and to no other, the Indians usually limit themselves to the use of the aboriginal name. It is enough to say Manuel Kulub to indicate the man's clan and lineage because Kulub always goes with Gomez. As can be imagined, clan bonds are more intimate between persons belonging also to the same lineage; thus any man called Kulub feels closer to any Kulub than to any other Gomez. Both names are transmitted patrilineally only. There are no myths explaining the origin of the clans; on the other hand there are persons capable of explaining

their lineage relations in genealogic form. As a comparative note, one may indicate that in Cancuc (another, neighboring, Tzeltal community) the clans are more typical, that is, with a larger number of characteristics commonly associated with this unilateral organization. There clans have aboriginal names; they show traces of totemism and there are myths which describe the origin and early form of the clan. They are also divided into lineages, as in Oxchuc.⁸

The direct control of each Oxchuc lineage is in the hands of the oldest members; the same is true for the clan. Authority resides in them; their prestige and magic powers enable them to deal adequately with most problems confronting the group. If there is a conflict or crime or sickness within a given family, the first step is to call in the elders of the corresponding lineage; if necessary the matter may go before the leaders of the clan to which the lineage belongs, and if still unsettled the matter goes in the last instance to the chiefs of the *calpul* to which the litigants belong. Only in extreme and rare cases does one go before the municipal authorities in the main town; these officials act as a link between the local government and the political system of the state.

The social importance of the elders who lead clans and lineages is also reflected in their share in the numerous steps that constitute marriage arrangements; from the moment the bride's hand is promised until the wedding, the leaders of the clan must be present or at least give their consent to all the agreements reached. At the wedding feast they represent the bride and receive the gifts made by the groom as a *stoj-yinam* or bride-price. Special effort is also made to entertain and honor the oldest man of the group who is considered head or "father" of the whole clan. This gathering of important men has great significance, as it offers special opportunity to observe empirically the reality and social solidarity of the clan.

Clans are exogamic, so that marriage between persons of the same surname is considered incestuous. Although there is no direct punishment for the infraction of this rule, it is strongly condemned by the community; in addition the belief is prevalent that transgressors may be punished by disease or other injuries inflicted by the elders through their *naguales*. In the case of the only violation of this taboo that came to notice in the field, the guilty pair preferred to leave the community rather than to expose themselves to the group's sanctions. In so far as marriage with maternal relatives is concerned, it is considered improper to marry the mother's sister or her offspring. Similarly people frown on alliances with the brother's widow. It is less reprehensible to marry one's wife's sister—there is no punishment for this, although it is not recommended. In fact, in two or three of the numerous cases of polygyny found, the man was living with two sisters.⁹ Marriage between true cross-cousins, although theoretically permissible, is not recommended, nor practiced. The type of

⁸ Guiteras Holmes, 1946.

⁹ Villa Rojas, 1946a, pp. 651 and 707.

marriage which is so common as to be considered the general rule is the one which we could call "classificatory cross-cousin marriage"—that is, "cross-cousins" whose fathers are only clan brothers. To give an idea of the frequency of this type of marriage it is enough to mention that of twenty-six couples recorded in the *ranchería* of Dzajalchen, only two did not follow this rule. The twenty-four remaining families were divided as follows:

11 in which the man married the daughter of his father's "sister."

11 in which the man married the daughter of his mother's "brother."

2 families in which both parents were the offspring of two clan "sisters."

The most common household is the immediate family made up of only parents and children. Residence is patrilocal. It is true that in the first few weeks or months after marriage the man must remain with his father-in-law, helping him in his daily tasks, but later he will build his permanent home close to the hut of his parents. That is why, generally, the *ranchería* is made up of three or four old men's huts surrounded by others belonging to their sons or grandsons.

Kinship terminology is classificatory: the terms used for lineal relatives are extended to collateral ones as well. Among the details peculiar to the group we are describing one should mention the following: father's brother is called by a term similar to the one used for father; father's sister is called "elder sister." Mother's sister is considered a second mother and designated by a term which indicates that relation, while mother's brother is considered a distant relative. Sons and grandsons on mother's side are called by the same term as mother's brother; this term is also applied to all descendants of father's sister. The meaning of this widely used term is something like "relative from another clan." Terms used by members of the same clan vary depending on the generation to which they belong. Thus, those of the same generation call each other brother and sister; if they belong to different generations, they refer to each other as "fathers," "sons," "grandsons," etc. Differences in age are always emphasized, there being terms for older and younger brothers, and some even indicate order of birth for children of the same family. Without any exception all terms in use are Tzeltal words.

Land ownership is transmitted only in the male line. The widowed woman who has no male children must give up the house and return to her folks because the land is immediately claimed by the dead man's brothers or other close male relatives. If there be no such close male relatives, the land may be claimed by any clan brothers who feel entitled. Usually land is inherited within the lineage. A woman can inherit land only if she helped her husband to buy it or if she bought it herself; the latter occurs infrequently, as she has few opportunities to save the necessary money. She enjoys the privilege of inheriting the few domestic animals (six or eight chickens, a hog or two) and the crops.

Daughters, being women, inherit nothing: it is expected that there will always be a man to take care of them.

In all essential aspects, present-day Chiapas social structure is similar to that which prevailed in prehispanic times among the Mayas of Yucatan. Diego de Landa who lived among them in the second half of the 16th century tells us that:

The names of the fathers remain always with the sons and not the daughters Those of one name are said to be relatives and are treated as such and for this, when one arrives in some place where he is unknown and he is in need, he immediately makes known his name and if there is one of his name he is immediately received and treated with all kindness and thus no man or woman marries with one of the same name because it is for them a great disgrace. The Indians do not permit the daughter to inherit with sons except by charity . . . the sons divide equally, except to him who most notably has helped gather the estate is given an equivalent return, and if all are daughters, the brothers inherit If one marries one's brother's wives it was considered bad. They do not marry with stepmothers, nor wife's sisters, and if someone did so it was considered bad; with other relatives on the mother's side they could marry, even though they were first cousins.¹⁰

Only two things need be amended in the above statement: in Oxchuc today marriage between first cousins is not preferred and it is not utterly impossible to live in wedlock with one's wife's sister.

One should also note that the kinship system outlined here is similar to the one prevailing among the neighboring Lacandon Indians who have never been conquered nor have they lived near whites. Finally, there are also newly found historical data to strengthen the possibility of a prehispanic origin of the unilateral system found today in Oxchuc.¹¹

Closely interwoven with the familial, political and religious organization is a system of magical beliefs and practices based on the concept of the nagual. The system finds its justification in its efficiency as a method of social control; it makes possible the continued attachment to traditional custom, and sanctions the moral code of the group. As stated above, there is a widely held Tzeltal belief that all chiefs and elders receive the supernatural help of a lab or nagual. In most cases the nagual is thought of as an animal, a dog, a lizard or a hawk. But some nagueles assume diminutive human form, dwarfs not three feet high, dressed all in black, in the vestments of catholic bishops or clergymen. These are dangerous and very powerful. Still others are balls of fire of three different kinds: red, yellow or green. Of the three varieties, the Tzeltal who has broken the law considers red the most effective agent of magical retaliation.

All these figures are incorporeal and invisible, "sheer wind" as the Indians

¹⁰ Cited by Beals, 1932, pp. 471-472.

¹¹ Villa Rojas, 1946b.

put it. Nevertheless there are times when they materialize, and one can then see them walking behind the huts, hiding between trees or behaving as if they were real animals. All this goes on at night, when the naguales go to work following the orders of their owners. In daytime the nagual remains "in the heart" of his master, but at night he can move about alone, quite independently of his owner's body. Nevertheless the belief prevails that if the nagual is hurt or killed, the same fate befalls its owner, whose body shows the wounds suffered by the nagual. Local folklore is rich in stories confirming this belief.

Through the intermediation of these supernatural beings, the elders and chiefs are able to know the thoughts and actions of their subordinates and thus mete out punishment in the shape of illness or other misfortunes. Any person committing a sin, or who plans to violate the community's mores, is exposed to this sanction. Because of their ability to do damage at will, people with nagual are commonly known by the name of *agchamel*, meaning "maker of disease." However, the term is infrequently used because of its abusive connotations; it is comparable to a "sorcerer." There is an ordinary term, *pikabal* or "pulse taker," used whenever one wants to refer to an *agchamel* or any person with curing or divining ability. To such a person, pulse beats reveal many hidden secrets. *Pikabal* is comparable to our word "doctor" and is readily accepted as carrying respectful overtones. A *pikabal* who is only a healer or diviner may not have a nagual, as the only knowledge needed to exercise that profession is an ability to interpret pulse beats. However this condition will not last long, as sooner or later the people will saddle the "pulse taker" with a nagual. The same will happen to all persons of any prestige, authority, or only considerable age within each lineage, clan or calpul, because it seems inconceivable that anybody would have those qualities and not have a nagual. As soon as a man begins to age, rumor spreads that he has a nagual and is able to do harm if his wrath be incurred. People who, in addition to age, are imperious and energetic personalities are most likely to be accused of harboring a nagual.

It is generally believed that people with nagual take it upon themselves to see that good behavior is maintained and the group's moral commandments followed. In carrying out this duty a certain hierarchy is observed: first, it behooves parents-in-law to watch the behavior of their daughters and sons-in-law; the elders of each lineage supervise the members of that group, similarly for the clan, and finally the chiefs of the calpul must also exercise control over their constituents.

To cause illness, all the *agchamel* has to do is to allow his nagual to enter the victim's body and slowly eat its soul. This operation may last days, weeks or even months, depending on the patient's physical resistance. At least two things are needed to cure the ailment: to find out the nature of the sin or crime that laid the patient low and to decide who originated the punishment. To discover both things one needs the help of a "pulse taker" who is guided by the

patient's confession of his sins and by the signs to be perceived in the sick man's pulse. Usually it is enough to clear up these two points to cure the patient, because the confession of sins has a purifying effect and also no agchamel likes it when the activities of his nagual become publicly known. Sometimes the patient has to be whipped to expiate his crime. In very few cases does the agchamel openly assume responsibility by revealing the reasons for his action.

Sometimes it happens that the "pulse takers" called in to cure the patient disagree among themselves and end by blaming each other. In this case, new and better "pulse takers" are called in to clarify the matter. Sometimes it also happens that, although the causative agent is identified, the illness continues. Then the "doctor" takes direct action: he unleashes his own naguales which attack and chase away the evil nagual. Such protective action by the medicine man is based on the idea that it is unfair to continue punishing somebody who has done everything possible to live down his sins.

Exceptionally the agchamel can sell his services to a third party, doing damage to whomever that party indicates. The use of this weapon is rare however, the Tzeltal believing that if the victim dies so will the person hiring the agchamel. Theoretically nagual-owners should use their powers for the good of the community; nevertheless there are cases when they act for their own benefit or in revenge for being denied a request. A case is recorded of a boy who got very sick for refusing to carry the baggage of an agchamel.¹²

In any case, the fewer sins a person has committed the less the chance of getting sick. Among the more common sins likely to attract the penalties of an agchamel are: stealing, having illicit sexual relations, trying to elevate oneself over the rest—particularly in material goods. It is dangerous to buy a house, have a better home or plant too large a cornfield. It is also wrong to gossip or to offend one's neighbors in any way, to expose to publicity's glare intimate personal matters, to forget one's familial duties or the rules of etiquette that must be observed by members of the same clan or lineage and, finally, to adopt city ways, trying to imitate the whites. This is why there is so little inclination to use trousers, flashlights, ladino foods, and other ways of acting or speaking that are identified with the alien city.

As can well be imagined from the above, social relations are not always cordial, and sometimes it happens that certain individuals get to hate bitterly those nagual-owners whom they consider the cause of all their troubles or who, they feel, are constantly watching their private lives. Such resentment of tyranny may lead to murder, putting an end to the anxiety-provoking threat of an unfriendly agchamel. However, such crimes are infrequent because of the terror which the murder of such a personality would inspire. It would be the worst of all crimes, and if the perpetrator were discovered he or his children would get deathly ill. In the area of Dzajalchen there were two such crimes

¹² For fuller information on this point, see the microfilm edition of field notes, pp. 240-337.

in seven years. In both cases the victims were very old people, heads of clans, to whom many cases of illness and even death were attributed. During the field-work two or three young men confessed in a very secretive way that they wanted to kill their parents-in-law. They accused them of inconsistency and ill will, charging them with responsibility for their bad luck and even the death of their children. The reason for seeing me and trusting me with their secret was to ask for some special means (lethal powders, magic formulas) to facilitate their task. As a city man, I was expected to possess efficient means of exterminating my neighbors without any telltale marks.

In addition to these overt animosities there is frequently an atmosphere of resentment, antagonism, and hypocrisy among relatives who do not live together, even those closely related by blood. Except that members of a household who share the same roof and food do not suspect one another, any man within the clan group who has a nagual is a possible enemy who might cause sickness, death or other damage. No man is free of this suspicion, not even a father, a grandfather or a brother. Although those most suspected are older relatives, there are cases in which sickness of a father is attributed to his son, or of an uncle to his nephew. This occurs only when the younger man has achieved a reputation as an unscrupulous *agchamel*.¹³

The belief in nagualism in its more general characteristics was of course common among a large number of Indian groups in Mexico and Central America.¹⁴ There is reason to believe moreover that the particular form that it takes in Oxchuc today, and the way in which it operates in moral control, had analogs in the precolumbian social organization of Middle American tribes. At least among the neighboring Itzas and Cehaches of Peten, Guatemala, it was supposed that the older men of the tribe were the causes of sickness, and became so dangerous on occasion that they were killed by the younger men,¹⁵ and among the Lacandon of Dolores a person afflicted with disease was subjected by the chiefs to a detailed interrogation to determine the particular infraction of the moral code which had made him unclean and hence susceptible to supernatural punishment.¹⁶ It seems probable, therefore, that the details and social significance of such beliefs and practices will do much to clarify understanding of the prehispanic social structure of Middle America as it is revealed in historical materials.

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¹³ Concrete cases are recorded in Villa Rojas, 1946a, pp. 260-261 and 306.

¹⁴ Brinton, 1894, and Foster, 1944.

¹⁵ Means, 1917, p. 132.

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