

"Lines of Strain in a Chiapas Community"
A Preliminary Report on Research
In Villa Las Rosas (Pinola), Chiapas

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Not for quotation

piece of writing taken from a book (see) and
repeated because is interesting or useful

The fact that I have been back only a month and the field data have not been analyzed makes it difficult to generalize and even to draw ambitious hypotheses. I shall use, although stressing certain aspects, a descriptive criterion which will serve the purpose of presenting the data without pretending to come to final statements.

At first, it was my idea to call this "Conflict in a Chiapas Community." But the word is far too dangerous, even when no major field work has been done in the area in this respect, with the exception of that of Metzger in Aguacatenango. There are, on the other hand, publications which cover the subject of conflict from a theoretical point of view. To tackle conflict might be beyond the scope of the material I have with me; therefore, I have chosen as a theme to deal with this data, "Lines of Strain." These lines of strain can be drawn at intra-personal, inter-personal and inter-group levels. This is, in a way, easier than trying a causal classification. Besides, from my point of view it is not yet clear which are the particular causes which determine strain in Pinola. The fact that Pinola is a community where an 80% Indian population is "governed" by a Ladino minority and each has a different system of values, or the fast process of change manifested in dress, new

50%
30%
20%
10%
Pinola

possibilities of work and the coming in of foreign groups could explain the strain. On a different level, the organization of the community in two lados and the maintenance of a traditional body of Indian authorities based on age and respect while new leaders are emerging whose action in dealing with political matters does not follow well known patterns, might as well be mentioned as a cause. The above mentioned factors, either combined or acting with different pressure on the individual, can create tension by the need which arises to accommodate a personal system of values, attitudes and activities to the impact of forces which are impinging in his own small world.

(This type of analysis has to wait.) For the time being I go back to the description of three different aspects of Pinola society which show lines of strain. They are: disease, the revestido and the dual community and its leaders.

mal = enferme d'od

I

enferme d'od
revestido
Comunidad dual y sus líderes

DISEASE.--In Pinola "hay mucho mal." There are several "medicos" with five of which we became personally acquainted and even witnessed some curing ceremonies.¹ (Strangely enough, four out of these five belong to the same family (two brothers and their two nephews),) but they disclaim any possibility of family specialization or training by their elders. The truth is that the parents were also curers. They explain the origin of their practices as arising from dreams during which they were taught how to cure and which specific techniques they should use. Techniques vary with the individual curer but almost all of them cover the common range of disease and can treat: espanto, mal hecho, aire, colico, disipela, and empacho. All of them use pulsing as an aid in diagnosing disease, explaining that the pulse jumps when there is "mal hecho." The traditional spots at which pulsing is done is the common place on the wrist, one side of which is assigned to some regions of the body and the opposite to the other. But next to these there is great variety. (The elbow, the foot, the nape of the neck, the temples are peremptory centers of pulsing according to the possible localization of disease.) An egg broken in a

medicos de
comunidad
filis.

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¹All of these live in the north side of town. To our knowledge there were no Indian curers in the southern half.

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bowl of water can aid in diagnosis, according to the way in which the white and yolk separate. (As for curing, each medico is a strong defendant of his particular technique.) Even if all of them use herbs there are some accessory means, such as bleeding, use of cupping glass, and particular items of patent medicine to which they adhere tenaciously.

The convalescence diet includes a wide range of cold-hot foods according to the corresponding hot or cold disease which the patient has gone through. This concept of hot and cold so foreign to our culture is ^{extended} widespread and everybody can furnish a detailed and precise list of items which belong to either category.

Espanto, mal hecho, aire and colico are diseases widespread in Indian communities. (They reflect tenseness in interpersonal relations and the explanations which have been offered for them in any particular society may be applied to Pinola also.) I will not deal with them. I shall talk about a particular type of disease which is very common in this town. The name by which it is known is "disipela," possibly a corruption of Erisipela. The Tzeltal word for it is "keshlal" (shame). Disipela occurs when an individual "se azarea" (azarar means to get confused, bewildered, rattled). As with many other Spanish words the Ch'apanecos have introduced a modification in this one saying azarear instead of azarar.

The circumstances in which one can become sick with disipela are varied, but all of them have an element in common; it always happens in a social situation. Here we may recall a few examples: My godchild, a pretty twelve-year-old girl, went to a fiesta with her father and the men invited her to dance and tried to woo her; a woman fell in the market and her skirt flew up; another woman was mistreated by her husband in public; a very old woman, skinny and sick, was very upset every time she went to the market where others could look at her emaciated face. All of these individuals had to be cured after the particular experiences described. We ourselves were cause for our comadre getting sick when we approached her in the market, talked to her and even gave her some present for the children. After we left the scene she

was asked many questions about us by onlookers and immediately afterward she felt the first symptoms of disipela. Although the situations described are different, a common theme runs through all of them. The individual is subject to an experience which produces embarrassment and he or she is incapable of solving it by any means; therefore, he gets sick.

The most dangerous places are those in which groups of people gather. The market place and the plaza are especially known for the consequences they may have. A woman who had two daughters in their teens told me that she did most of the marketing, adding "why should the girls go to the plaza? they are going to become sick with disipela." Since most of the petty commercial activities carried on in the market are in charge of women it appears that this sex is more often victim than men. "Men are in the field most of the day and there is not so much of an opportunity." (This does not exclude men, though the instances in which they become azareados varies somehow from that of women.) As several informants put it, one of the most likely occasions in which a man may contract disipela is when he says something wrong. "Sometimes, you know, they cannot talk Spanish well." This could reinforce the idea that disipela arises as a result of Ladino-Indian contact but the incidence of it in situations among Indians only is also high.

Which are the symptoms of disipela? The most common and diagnostic one is a rash which can be on the legs or on other parts of the body. (The anthropologist herself was victim of one of these rashes on her legs and duly submitted to a cure.) But there are other symptoms which also denote the disease. (Flushes, heartburn, headache and toothache are among the most usual ones.) It appears that if one has a bad tooth disipela can enter it. But of this we have scanty information. The cure consists of blowing the patient with a mixture of trago and sal colorada. The curer fills his mouth with the liquid and a few grains of salt and then blows it in a fine spray over the affected parts and others which can be considered vital areas such as head, heart, neck, abdomen and wrists. On this there are minor variations, such as making

crosses on wrists and elbow before spraying, or skipping them altogether. The most professional recipe for blowing is made with an infusion of herbs mixed with trago. I give the names of the herbs in Spanish: ruda verbena, hojita de chacal, xintul, hoja de corconillo, orijuela, maiz colorado and twenty cacao beans, but one gets well on plain trago and colored salt!

Satisfy for plus

To the question of who cures disipela the answer must be "anybody," provided that certain elementary requirements are fulfilled. Usually, persons rush home after an experience of a kind which can provoke the disease and after the first symptoms appear they ask their relatives or other persons present in the house to cure them. (Mothers usually cure their own children). The only precaution to follow is that if disipela has been caused by a man, the patient should be treated by a man; and if a woman has been the agent, then the curer ought to be a woman. In my personal experience I was sprayed by both a man and a woman since it appeared that I had become sick at a social gathering where both sexes were present. Babies do not get disipela, but it appears that if the mother becomes sick she passes it on to the female child and the father to the male one. In that case, the mother or father and the child of the corresponding sex have to be cured. According to one informant the worst disipela is that caused by a Ladino to an Indian and vice versa. This brings up the question, is this disease known and cured among Ladinos? Our belief is that it is, though from talks with some Ladinos they seemed to have a derisive attitude to even the thought of it. The disease seems to be known in other communities. In a talk with an Aguacatenanguera, when I asked about disipela she did not recognize it; but when I used the Tzeltal term, she immediately answered that there was a lot of it in her village.

interesting

Indian curers in Pinola do not consider disipela important. In fact nobody does. (It would, in more than one respect, be the equivalent of a cold in our society.) There is the case of a curer who just does not like to cure it. He applies his effort to worse diseases.

Disipela is never fatal and people draw a clear distinction between it and more serious sicknesses such as espanto. Besides, the fact that it can be cured by a non-specialist involves less trouble and less cost and makes it all the easier. But yet, it bothers many a Pinolteco and there are situations which they dread or avoid directly because they are going to get sick.

The explanation may be found when we look closely at the agents which bring it about, at the particular locus in which it occurs and at the cure. It evidently arises from social contacts. The individual is not equipped with mechanisms and roles which help him in facing certain experiences and is put in a situation where (1) he has no appropriate role to play, and/or (2) any role he plays will be inconsistent with the expectations of at least some portion of his audience. Yet, by simple devices he is reinstated into the group and is made to feel that his inept performance has not alienated him from it.

In order to analyze more deeply the widespread occurrence of this disease two things should be known: (1) the spread of it in other more isolated Indian communities, and (2) its Spanish or Indian origin. In short, as it happens in Pinola, a non-fatal and easily cured sickness may be engendered in a variety of social situations defined as pathological by the victim and by the segment of the society with which he is affiliated because of a tendency to produce a measure of social discomfort in the individual.

I would not be surprised if I learned that it is more common in communities whose members are face to face to changing situations and especially when most of the noticeable aspects of this dynamic process are still going on.

II

DRESS.--Dress in Pinola is not so uniform among Indians as in other communities of the highlands of Chiapas. The traditional costume of women was, many years ago, the blue nagua, the white blouse embroidered and with a square neck line and the white rebozo. Later it was changed, the skirt to what is called "hierbilla," cotton material with a plaid design in blue and white. Even this has been almost completely given up and the reasons

Research

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adduced are that the material has to be bought in Comitán and that locally only one store has it and not all the time.¹ Yet, the Indian woman keeps using skirt and blouse despite the wide range of variation in patterns of design. There can be seen floral patterns, plaids, or solid colors, in materials ranging from cotton to a type of shiny, low quality satin. The blouses also are white with plain embroidery or ribbons in contrasting colors. The white rebozo has given place to a brown or gray one with white thread interwoven, making a small pattern.

*Influence
of
rebozo*

Yet all these differences in dress keep the wearers within the classification of Indians, or naturales as they call themselves. The big change for a woman is when she adopts a dress and that automatically includes her among the revestidas. Indians seem to be very conscious of the date in which a particular individual changed costume and mention was made of women who chose All Saints' Day to become revestidas.

*mandar
f
revestid*

*(Rever!)
conversion*

Indian men wear the ankle length calzones of white coarse cotton, white shirt, straw hats and a band around the waist. The Pinola band is red, yellow, green and blue, but some Indians wear a solid red color band and others black. This does not seem to depend on any particular distinction and when asked, they answered, "I like the red (or the black) one better."

to 0

Women can change their clothing in steps and one sees, in fact, all stages present in Pinola. Some keep the traditional hierbilla skirt but adopt brown rebozos; others change skirts first. With men the process is different. (It appears that they adopt all the new items of clothing at once.) The white calzones give place to bright blue or baggy trousers, very tight at the ankles; the sash is given up and the shirt is more similar to our common man's shirt. The hat is the same as that Indians use. The use of shoes, sandal type, is more permanent than with Indians, but it is not unusual to see revestidos barefoot.

*diferen
cias en
el
movimiento
de 40*

A detailed identification of who becomes a revestido is difficult; an analysis of motivations is premature, and we can

¹Informants agree that the process of clothing change has greatly accelerated in the last 10-15 years.

only conjecture about it. We know of no whole families who decided to change from one type of clothing to the other, but on the other hand, (we have several instances where most of the members of the family wear the traditional Indian costume while one of the members is a revestido, and vice versa.) In one of the cases a member of a very traditional family--a brother--had been away working in the fincas for twenty years and had returned to Pinola where he was being helped by his brothers to acquire some land and animals. He had spent his twenty years away working in the area of Tapachula and had even married there and kept a store; but when we met him he had been back a few years, had married a Pinolteca, and was well on his way to obtaining a productive plot of land. He spoke well of his brothers and indeed on many occasions we saw them together and they seemed to get along amicably. Yet in spite of his reintegration with the family, he still dressed as a revestido.

However, the opposite case is not unknown. (Some revestido men deny the knowledge of Tzeltal language and even pretend to have no relationship with members of the family who are obviously dressed as Indians. In only one case the mother, dressed in traditional Indian clothing but very much an enterprising personality (she travelled every week to Teopisca or San Cristóbal to sell and was very open in her treatment of all kinds of people) said she had decided to dress her two girls as revestidas because it "was better."

As far as a change of activity is concerned for revestidos it is our general impression that they maintain the traditional cultivation of their fields even if some have accessory occupations such as: carpenters, marimberos, curers, barbers, etc. ✓

Indians talk about revestidos, regretting that these turn their backs on their families. "They don't know us any more." This sounds like an exaggeration since there are individuals who seem to lead a peaceful life within the family circle in spite of their being revestidos.

An individual's decision to change from his traditional dress may happen at any age. There is the case of one family with

Actividades de los Revestidos

five children between the ages of 7 and 14, four of which wore Indian dress while one of them, about twelve years old, was revestido. The parents were "dressed."

miras posibilidades

count

It is hard to say what new possibilities are open to the revestido. Several of them have been away working in the fincas but we have no figures as to the percentages within the revestido section, nor do we know how long they have stayed. Figures are also lacking with respect to the amount of revestidos within the total population and of the proportion of women to men who have changed from tradition dress. From the point of view of the Ladinos, the revestido is always a revestido Indian. In a village as large as Pinola, face-to-face contacts are not always possible, but in many cases, when the revestido is personally known, the Ladinos keep a mental record of the change. This does not nullify Wahrhaftig's statement on the process of fraternization in which Ladinos will perhaps come into closer relations when certain distinctions are blurred. Even where this is so, and it may have taken place as a very slow process, it does not alter the fact that the process of change is somehow accompanied with a change in attitudes which need adjustment in the individual and also on the part of the society in which he lives.

wide essay for U.S.

This section about the revestido is very scanty in information. (We have not been able to go deeply into it since, as a research problem, it needs a special approach which we lacked time for.) It may prove interesting for future research. Life histories, new economic activities, attitudes, values and interaction of the revestido, all this should be included in any attempt to explain this section of Pinola's population which seems to be growing every day. No study of the revestido could stop in the local community either. To know which are the formal or informal pressures which act from the outside is also important.

The inclusion of the revestido in presenting lines of strain in Pinola was done on two pieces of information: (1) the fact that many a time we heard complaints stating that the revestidos were much worse than the Ladinos, meaning that they turned their backs on their past and disclaimed membership in the Indian

group; (2) from our direct experience we saw many revestidos refusing to admit knowledge of Tzeltal language and denying kinship ties with people to whom they were obviously related. It is at least a temporary stage of strain for an individual who, for reasons beyond our knowledge, makes the jump from a traditionally oriented group to another in which new possibilities may be uncertain.

COMUNIDAD DVM

III

THE DUAL COMMUNITY.---Pinola is, together with other communities of the Chiapas highlands, organized on a dual basis. It was not easy for us to find this dual division, the members of the hierarchy in each section or other pertinent details. The first mention we ever heard of hechluwal "el otro lado," the other side, was made by an informant early in our stay, who said that when he was young, men could not go to the other side of town to court girls because they were beaten, macheteados and chased away. He insisted that that custom was long gone and that now "estamos todos entreverados." This type of information continued for a long time. Whenever we asked about principales or other members of the hierarchy, the answers followed the same lines. They are all dead; now we are on our own and if somebody needs something, if he can talk then he arranges it; otherwise he goes to somebody who can talk on his behalf. Unluckily this misled us for a long time and the fact that a few strong personalities among Indians seemed to be the leaders because they had bridged the gap with the Ladino world did not help us much either. For some time we assumed that Pinola's civil hierarchy had disappeared altogether to give way to new leaders who, in that community, could get the best for the group they were representing but always in terms of their capability to express needs and claims in Ladino terms. The most striking personality, and the one which everybody accepted as the leading Indian man, was M. C., president of the Comisariado Ejidal. Next to him there were two other figures: an old man who apparently derived his influence from close contacts with the priest; and another who had been president of the Comisariado in former years knew how to read and write well and could present any case before the authorities. At this point we found ourselves at a dead end.

