

Ph.D. Proposal

Esther Hermitte
April, 1963

Title: Supernatural power and social control in a modern
Maya community.

Introduction.

The data for my dissertation were collected in Chiapas, Mexico, under the sponsorship of the University of Chicago Chiapas Project, from July, 1960 until December, 1961.

These data will form the main body of information for analysis; in addition comparisons with the findings of other authors on the same subject will be undertaken whenever pertinent.

The emphasis will be on supernatural controls as they are explained by a belief system which survives in spite of outward changes and which regulates the behavior of the local Tzeltal Indians, maintaining the social cohesion, cultural homogeneity and ordaining the channels of acculturation.

For the sake of clarity, I will divide my thesis into sections dealing with the different aspects of social control, although these conform to a total pattern. Again, as an analytical device, I will treat the subject of social control in two sections: first, a description of the world of a Tzeltal Indian, his myths, his conflicts and anxieties as he lives them; and, second, a theoretical analysis of these data.

Present knowledge of social control among the contemporary Maya Indians and plan of this study.

Studies carried out in the Maya area deal mainly with partial aspects of the system of social control or with survivals of the Maya religious ritual. A total and integrated analysis of beliefs, leading roles, sanctions and

actual functioning of the ways of social control among the modern Maya is lacking.

Such an analysis can only be made by taking the beliefs and observing their relation to one another within the conceptual system and also by considering the actions to which they correspond as parts of the social system.

The concept of the soul, fundamental to an understanding of supernatural sanctions, has been dealt with mainly by Brinton (1894), Foster (1944), Villa Rojas (1947) and Guiteras-Holmes (1961), although in different contexts. The first three authors mentioned have had as their main interest, the concept of the "animal soul" or nagual, while the last in her recent book, "Perils of the Soul," devotes an important section to the analysis of both the animal and the "human soul" (or chulel) of the Mayas of S. Pedro Chenalhó. There is agreement among these authors that man and his souls partake of the same essence. Yet they have either attached a decisive influence to one or the other of the souls, or have tried to establish a rigid dichotomy between the function of the animal soul and those of the "human soul." I shall deal in some detail with this problem for which I collected abundant material in the field. I intend to carry this analysis further than was done by the authors cited above and expect to differ with some of their interpretations, in an attempt to clarify the role of the different souls in the life of a Tzeltal, in the power structure, in the local theory of dreams, and in disease.

Adherence by the Indians to the norms of the Tzeltal community is reinforced by supernatural sanctions. The power to punish by witchcraft, attributed to the leaders, men of strong or "high" souls, is the most effective means of social control in this village. The men who have the largest number of naguals and the "highest flying" souls (thunderbolt, meteor, and whirlwind) form part of the hierarchy of supernatural guardians. These spiritual powers

enable them to protect the town from outside harm and to punish the transgressions against the strict moral code of the members of the Indian community.

The important roles in this society, those to which are attributed supernatural powers are: 1) the curers, 2) the witches, and 3) the guardians (or Meiltatiles). These roles overlap in part and will be the object of analysis as to their respective functions in the social system.

In Pinola there is no organized body of "supernatural" leaders. On the other hand there are factions of a more or less temporary nature, reinforced sometimes by ties of ritual kinship. Nevertheless, the individual experiences powerful guidance to righteous conduct in the form of the diseases which befall him and in the content of his dreams.

A total of 50 cases of witchcraft obtained in the field will permit us to understand better the dynamics of supernatural control. The cases of witchcraft have been ordered in charts, according to the following criteria: name of curer, name of witch and relationship to the victim, symptoms of the illness, pretext for bewitching (type of transgression), and therapeutical techniques. A comparative and theoretical discussion of witchcraft will be included.

Forty dreams collected in Pinola will be analyzed in order to understand how these dreams are interpreted as a form of action and how, together with disease, they constitute the main mechanisms of social control.

From the preceding it will be seen how the forms of anxiety and the ways to alleviate them are structured in this society.

Through the intervening action of the curer and the "meiltatiles" both intra-group and intra-psychic conflicts are solved within a perfectly consistent system.

The highest status for Pinola Indians, the highest reward for conforming to Tzeltal norms, is membership in the hierarchy of supernatural control. Though the formal

institutions are absent, the mechanisms for the recruitment of leaders are clearly specified. In our material we have two cases of men who started on their way to being supernatural guardians. This information will serve to clarify the steps followed by individuals in order to obtain the required consensus of the community to serve as its protectors.

Finally, this thesis aims to contribute to our theoretical knowledge by providing an instance of an institution which, originating in one social system has survived and adapted itself to a changed social structure.

References cited.

Brinton, D.G.

Nagualism: a study in native American folk-lore and history, Proc. Amer. Phil. Soc., 1894.

Foster, George

Nagualism in México and Guatemala, Acta Americana, 1944.

Guiteras-Holmes, Calixta

Perils of the Soul, U. of Chicago Press, 1961.

Villa-Rojas, Alfonso

Kinship and Nagualism in a Tzeltal Community, S. Eastern Mexico, Am. Anthropol., 1947.

Outline of dissertation.

I. Introduction

- A. The community, the impact of western culture and the survival of traditional culture in Pinola.
- B. The problem: Natural and supernatural control.

II. Tzeltal view of supernatural power.

A. The concept of the soul.

- 1. Man and his multiple souls as co-essentials.
- 2. The roles of the different souls in the life of a Pinola Indian.
- 3. The hierarchy of souls. The power of the soul as a determinant of role.
- 4. The concept of high souls; "altitude" as the criterion of supernatural power.
- 5. Residence of the soul. The magic cosmos of the Tzeltal Indians.
- 6. Ambivalent functions of the soul (protection and punishment).
- 7. World view, myths, culture heroes, the fusion of traditional Maya and Catholic beliefs.

B. The functions of dreams in Pinola.

- 1. The Indian theory of dreams as a form of action.
- 2. Interpretation of dreams by leaders as a way of sanctioning behavior. Symbols in dreams.
- 3. Dreams as a requisite in special roles.
- 4. Dreams as conflict-solving mechanisms.

C. The Tzeltal moral code and its sanctions.

- 1. Witchcraft as sanction and as a cause of illness.
- 2. Witchcraft accusation as a sanction.
- 3. Witchcraft as a result of "envy."

III. Theoretical analysis.

A. The Indian power structure.

- 1. Most important social roles: the leaders and common man.
- 2. Supernatural powers assigned to leaders and how they are used.

3. Social mechanisms for the recruitment of supernatural leaders; the consensus of the community.
4. The supernatural guardian or "meiltatil:" the limits of his jurisdiction, powers of the guardian, dangers implied in this role.
5. The significance of illness in this social system.
6. The curer: ambivalence of his powers and functions, the crucial aspects of this role.
7. The witch: the territorial extent of his power, dangers implied in this role.

B. Correlation between the supernatural and the actual social systems.

IV. Conclusions

- A. Comparison of Pinola with other more conservative contemporary communities.
- B. The insight derived from A, above, will then be applied to a final analysis of Pinola social structure and to the functions of supernatural sanctions in a community undergoing social and cultural change.

Curriculum vitae - Esther Hermitte

Degrees

- 1940 Maestra Normal de Enseñanza primaria, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- 1950 Profesora de Enseñanza Normal, Media y Especial en Historia, Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- 1962 M.A. in Anthropology, University of Chicago.

Teaching and Research

- 1950-57 Professor of History and Geography at National High school, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- 1955-58 Principal of the American Community School in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
- 1958 Teaching assistant to Dr. Gino Germani, Department of Sociology, University of Buenos Aires.
- 1962 April-December. Research Assistant to Dr. David Schneider, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.
- 1963 January-May. Research Assistant to Dr. Julian Pitt-Rivers, Institute of Race Relations Project, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.

Field work

- 1958 January-February. Study of a mining community in Jujuy, N.W. Argentina.
- 1959 July-December. Field work in Pinola, Chiapas, as a member of the University of Chicago Chiapas Project.
- July 1960-December 1961
Field work in Pinola for the University of Chicago Chiapas Project.

Papers

- 1958 Unpublished papers delivered at the meetings of the Argentine Anthropological Society.
- 1960 Unpublished papers for the Chicago Chiapas Project.
- 1962 M.A. Thesis, "Social Mobility in a Chiapas Bicultural Town," Department of Anthropology, U. of Chicago.