Performing the community: representation, ritual and reciprocity in the Totonac Highlands of Mexico

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CHAPTER 4

THE PRESENCE OF THE PAST

The following is the history of Nanacatlán as told by villagers; as well as my own efforts to understand their stories within a context of regional history. It is not and cannot be the ‘real history’. As the present is at least partly the outcome of what happened in bygone days, and as people perceive the present differently, their stories about the past diverge. This is less so with the ancient and historically indeterminate past of which most Nanacatecos and certainly its Totonac majority share a view of: a large, rich village that fell into ruins and poverty through arrogance and epidemics. But such consensus over the narrative of the far-away past contrasts markedly with disagreements about the recent past, the historical depth of which is not the same for every villager. For the oldest villagers it goes as far back as the time when several mestizo families from Zapotitlán settled in Nanacatlán, and came to dominate the village. For the narrative of this time (roughly since the mid-nineteenth century), they rely on the memories of their parents and grandparents whose orally transmitted histories reflect that they were parties to those events. For most villagers the recent past begins much later, in the 1940s-50s; although they also know what happened before through stories from their grandparents. Nanacatecos share a common interest in and knowledge about their village and its history; the central issue I raise in this chapter is how their stories can create a feeling of belonging to Nanacatlán despite increasing agreements as the past turns into the present.

In a rather arbitrary way, I distinguish between ancient, remote, and recent past. The ancient past is that period of which no one has a living memory, directly or indirectly. It is part of the local oral tradition in which events from a highly variegated past have been lumped together. The recent past is the period of memories, and consists of stories people tell from their own experience or that of their parents and grandparents. Obviously, there is a considerable overlap between the ancient and recent past, depending on the age of the individuals. I therefore introduce an in-between category of the remote past with stories that reflect the duality of oral tradition and memory. People often hold divergent views and interpretations on that period of almost a century, although some things are agreed on. Nanacatecos share opinions on municipal and state policies in those days when outsiders and local bigwigs pocketed local taxes and funds, which were supposed to serve the community interests. In hindsight, some of the prominent families of those days are

1 There is also a ‘mythological past’ that people do not necessarily take to be true. The relevant stories will come back in the next chapter, see below and note 3.
the target of shared criticism, snide remarks, and slander – at least, those families who no longer live or never lived in Nanacatlán. But stories diverge when it comes to local politics and land issues and such contradictions increase as the past comes nearer. When mestizos and other prominent locals speak about the ways they or their families acquired land by opening up waste land or purchasing it from local peasants, their stories do not square with many among the Totonac villagers who have their own memories of how the rich appropriated land and money at the expense of the village community as a whole.

Even more contested is the recent past of which all villagers have a living memory: while ordinary villagers pride themselves in telling how they were the ones who made the communal fund, the road, and electricity supply; local authorities claim that it was they who took initiatives or intervened with the state to get development going.

Although part of the recent past, the last decade of the twentieth century deserves a separate discussion as it coincided with the years I did fieldwork. I therefore have detailed accounts of what was very much on people’s minds about their village: political competition and the introduction of opposition parties. This period shows how villagers deal with serious political conflicts and how personal experience and recent memories start evolving into new stories that reflect a common concern about Nanacatlan vis-à-vis the outside world.

A comparison of how and when villagers disagreed or shared views on common experiences shows how local issues are related to large-scale processes, how external issues are localised, and how the past works into the present. What is important is that all villagers one way or another want to recuperate the past as theirs, and that it apparently has a meaning for them that by its detailed local nature is often only for them. This is why a discussion of the local past can contribute to an understanding of why and how people feel part of a community: only people who have shared the past can make sense of the events, people, and the places of oral history, and notice how that continues to influence the present.

When villagers talk about the past they tell stories, but distinguish between the different categories of village oral history. Such stories are as they say, either historias (histories, stories), cuentos or cuentos y chistes (stories and jokes), or leyendas (legends). Stories about the past are historias (likatzin in Totonac) and are considered to be true. What characterizes all the stories is that people know about them from their ancestors; through listening, not through books. As don Miguel explains:

All these stories are true, they are not cuentos. They have become cuentos now, because it does not happen anymore today. But what the ancianos have passed on is true. Now-

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2 No Totonac words exist for cuentos and leyendas, which suggests that all stories used to be likatzin, true stories. A legend is also true. A story (cuento) is more ambivalent and can be true and not true at the same time. When stories are about very personal experiences and memories, some people call them historia de vida (life history). Nanacatecos do not distinguish between stories that relate to the ancient, remote, or recent past.
adays they are cuentos for the people, because we do not talk anymore, we do not see. (Miguel Ramos 1989)

This chapter is to a large extent based on village oral history, and thus includes historias, those stories about the village that people unambivalently hold as true and real.3 To know such local stories is to be part of the village, to know them well gives a special status of being knowledgeable about what the elderly have handed down to the next generation.

People tell each other stories when they walk to or work together in the fields, at home, or during visits. Because working the coffee fields and urban jobs are no longer performed in groups, stories nowadays are mainly told during visits and at home. People would often come up with stories during walks as these tales are often closely related to specific places that used to be important or where things have happened. Women tended to be very reluctant to tell me such general stories, and would invariably refer me to their husbands. This does not mean that they do not know them. Villagers learn stories from their parents and grandparents or from fellow-villagers, but many specifically mention their grandmother. Women are important for maintaining such knowledge within the family, but apparently not for relating them to outsiders. Men would not readily start telling me stories, only when we became used to each other and they felt at ease. As Pedro said when his father changed his mind about telling me stories: “Now my father wants to tell stories, now you are a friend of the family”. Women were however, more open than men about their personal past and experiences, and their stories provide a more intimate account of village life in the recent past.

Nanacatecos rarely mention the major topics of Mexican historiography like the great Totonac past (with its centre in El Tajín and Zempoala) and the subsequent Nahuatization and Mexican (Aztec) colonization of Totonacapan, the Spanish Conquista, the many indigenous rebellions, the struggle for independence, or the Mexican Revolution. All this certainly affected the lowland of Veracruz and the Bocasierra more, even though in those regions these events had comparatively little impact. Remote areas within the Sierra often could stay relatively aloof from the course of national history. But it would be beside the point to say that such remote areas lacked the speed of change of national processes. Regional and local histories have a dynamics of their own as historians have become well aware of, and the Totonac Sierra communities are no exception (Brewster 1998; Thomson 1990). This also goes for village oral history and it is therefore often hard to place the local stories on a historical time scale because people rarely remember dates and years. The grandfather of don Gualo and Elios, Genaro Bravo Gonzales, was born in 1869 and kept a notebook until 1935, and provides us with more precise

3 In the next chapter I present cuentos that relate to the local worldview and often also to local space. Their local spatial references make some cuentos comparable to historias, but as we will see their significance is more religious and moral than historical, though there is overlap. In this chapter I use ‘local stories’ for historias and ‘stories’ in a general sense, for all categories.
dates. Sometimes people remember important regional or national events or persons that can be linked to their stories which makes it possible to date them.

Nanacatecos remember primarily what has affected their own lives, or that of their family or the village. This does not mean that the village has not experienced the impact of regional and national processes or that local stories stand on their own. They do incorporate such processes and shocking events like the Revolution, though they often refer to them implicitly. Local historical knowledge is indispensable if one wants to understand the scope and impact of national and regional events and developments. My aim is different here; I want to understand what people tell about the village past and what this means for their sense of belonging to a community that has become more and more diverse.

The ancient past

The village and its immediate surroundings are known in detail by all villagers. Fields, plots, wells, and specific areas each have a name. They are often linked with a story which points to striking features (see map 1.3) such as an abundant well, a rock that looks like two men, the building of extremely high bridges. The Mapilco bridge across the Zempoala river below Tuxtla (map 1.3 number 6) for instance, crosses so high above the water to connect two sides of a ravine that people are amazed it could be built at all. Pedro tells, as he heard from his wife’s grandmother doña Angelina, that the people could only finish it with the help of the evil, as the devil or Satan is called. They promised him the souls of 60 men and 60 women if he would build the bridge in one night. The devil worked hard and was just about to finish the last details when something happened: and old woman took pity on the people whose soul had been promised to the devil and clapped her hands. It sounded like cockcrow announcing daybreak. Thinking that he had failed, the devil fled.

Origins and reduction of Nanacatlán

Origin histories occupy a special place in local stories and often relate to the village name. This is the case in Nanacatlan. The village name is usually interpreted as of Nahua not Tohonac origin, meaning ‘where the mushrooms grow’. Not everyone is convinced that it is really a Nahua name and explain its Tohonac roots where nana means grandmother and tlan means good. This refers to a homeless grandmother and grandson who were walking in the area. When they reached contemporary Nanacatlan they decided it was a perfect place to settle. Before, the village used to

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4 Don Gualo and Elios are cousins who differ by about 35 years in age, and whose fathers where born in Zapotitlán in 1888 and 1909. Their grandfather (born in 1869) lived in Zapotitlán after his marriage, but was born in Zacapoaxtla where his father had moved from Guanajuato as an artilleryman. He kept a notebook during his life that is now kept by his grandson Elios.

5 When doña Angelina heard Pedro’s version of her story, she did not agree and made the family laugh by explaining that the old woman did not clap her hands but her thighs.
be called Kuksquichuchutl (water of the Kuksqui stream, often translated as water of Nanacatlán) and it was situated in present-day Zapotitlán near the puente de los amores (lovers’ bridge), a stone bridge across a small stream with flowers and large plants and high shady trees, a rather idyllic place (map 1.3 number 1). At that time Zapotitlán did not exist and only after Nanacatlán was founded did people build the first Zapotitlán further up the mountain, not far from the present cuatro caminos, a crossing were the roads from Zapotitlán, Tepango, Tlapacoya, and Hueytlalpan meet (map 1.3 number 2 and 12). According to the Nanacatecos, the whole region around Nanacatlán, as far as the eyes could see and even across the mountains, belonged to the village. They still proudly point to the former village boundaries when I would walk with them. Pedro has a very detailed version.

**How large Nanacatlán used to be**

According to the ancestors the village borders stretched as far as where the church tower of Zapotitlán presently is (Zapotitlán used to be higher up the mountain, where they call it Puhuac), and from there to the church tower of Zongozotla and on to Escorial, what we call Legkhotoy and Xlitepin. From above the ravine of Escorial it continued to the other side of the churchyard of Zapotitlán until Lakapaxne, above San Miguel, the Cara de Cerdo [Pig Head], and from this mountain it descended to Mapilco. From there the boundaries mounted to Tuxtlá, and turned at where the church is now, where Nanacatlán used to border with San Martin. From the church it climbed up the road to Ixtepec until where the electricity pole now is, went further to the water of Cuerillo until the old path to Ixtepec. It then descended again until above Zitlala and continued until the other small stream, close to La Garza. It then rose to the other hills, where it passed again through the ravine of Hueytlalpan. There it came out again on the path to Hueytlalpan.

Nanacatlán is now a reduction. The ancestors have sold pieces of land and that is how the neighbouring villages were founded. We have little land left here, and the present boundary is not further than the Arenal in the west, a distance of no more than two kilometres. From the Arenal it descends only to the river, not across the river any more and neither the Cara de Cerdo nor San Miguel belong to us. In the south, in the direction of the river, we do not even reach to Mapilco any more, no further than Las Lajas. From there at less than a kilometre distance, about 800 metres, it goes up but not further than the old path to Ixtepec to the mountain Xtakayanu. There the mountain belongs to us, but not further than the ridge. Behind the path to Tuxtlá in the east, the boundary rises until the top of the mountains to the north, to the mountains of Zitlala. It further extends to the Barranca Honda, until Xlapaxnixwi, above; there it descends again to the Arenal, on the path of Zapotitlán where the road is now.

Nanacatlán was not here, but where the stream Kuksqui runs, from Kuksquichuchutl in Zapotitlán. Where it is now, Zapotitlán did not used to be, but it was where Puhuac is

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6 *Chuchuisipi* (water-hill) is a Totonac term for human settlement (*pueblo*), for which also *kachikín* is used (*chikí* means house). Chuchuisipi is a literal translation from the Nahua *altepetl* (Ellison 2004:57). Communities identify with springs both as places of beauty and hazards, as water sources and densities of supernatural potency (Smith 2005:36).
on the foot of the mountain. Tuxtla used to be below in the Arenal. Until today they call us 'Kuksqui' here as they call Tuxtla 'Kaltuchco' and Zapotitlán 'Puhuac', after the old names. (Pedro Ramos 1989)

According to Nanacatecos, their village had a glorious and wealthy past, which they lost together with the greater part of their territory. A possible explanation of the reduction theme lies in the existence of wasteland around the villages that did not belong to anybody, and the ecological constraints preventing large landholdings, one of the reasons that kept the Spanish from moving into the Sierra. Without the Spanish,7 land conflicts were mostly between neighbouring villages as a consequence of the so-called protection zones (García 1987:238-241; Kelly and Palerm 1952:40). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the colonial government began to rearrange village lands so that every community was surrounded by a zona de protección. These were originally meant to avoid the mixing of indigenous and Spanish property, but over time were understood as protection of indigenous space. The communities started seeing these protection zones as communal land, as village property that marked the limits of the village. When more and more settlements wanted to acquire the status of an independent community, they each also needed protection zones that naturally came at the expense of the established villages that saw this as an attack on their village boundaries. This explains the Nanacatlán stories about land being stolen by neighbouring communities.

This ‘enclosure’ is however not all historia from the far away past; in recent centuries the reductions have been repeated, and each time the village felt robbed of its land – while villagers of Huitzilan, Zapotitlán, and Tuxtla maintain they bought it legally, people in Nanacatlán know for sure that they just stole it. The same happened a few decades ago when the municipality of Zitlala simply took away a large parcel of don Gualo’s land, as well as other plots that were owned by Nanacatecos. In the 1970s villagers were trying hard to get the land back from Zitlala, but they gave up when political conflicts in Huitzilan started running so high that they feared the armed conflicts might spread to Nanacatlán. When I asked him in 1989, don Felix, one of the leaders of this recovery movement, said: “We do not practice politics – it is very dangerous, see what happened in Huitzilan”. Those were the last attempts, as the issue of regaining lost property was not taken up again – not even in the highly politicised 1990s, though it is a recurring theme in local conversations.

Founding the village is not only a matter of place, but of people. Some talk about a grandmother and grandson as the first ones to settle (as we have seen), others mention that they were a couple. Until several decades ago, the founders of the village were celebrated in an annual ritual and honoured as two statues (see also Ichon 1973:222-227) of a man and a woman, called xtankgaxe kachikin or el

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7 The villages were not completely free from Spaniards, as they settled at the margins of the encomienda system virtually without connections to the mountain villages.
raíz del pueblo (the root of the village) who were placed next to each other in the mountains close to the high path to Tuxtla. Don Gustavo’s father, don Miguel calls them xintillh (elderly, idols of the elderly) and says it is something from the distant past and he wonders whether the statues still exist; according to don Reyes, Pedro’s father, it is no longer the case:

We do not know where they are; they say that people from Tuxtla probably stole them with the help of the priest. You can’t move them without holding a mass, so they probably did that. When you honour the xtankgaxekga kachikin well, people will have many children and the population grows. There used to be more people who were bad. They were rich at that time, everybody went by horse, but there were also many bad people. Their animals would damage other villages but they did not acknowledge this. Then neighbouring villages deceived us, and sent someone to do evil. They laid the man on the ground and put the woman on top [instead of keeping the statues upright next to each other as they should be]. And this is the cause of all the trouble that started afterwards. (Reyes Ramos 1997)

When the Spanish arrived, they wanted to maintain the principle of native organization, using the native lords or caciques as local administrators (Kelly and Palerm 1952:33-34). Indigenous communities (altepeme, plural of altepetl) were transformed into pueblos de indios each with a specific territory, and major settlements became the region’s political centres (cabecera). These colonial administrative divisions were based on the principle of control over territory, which collided with an indigenous administration that rested primarily on personal obligations towards a lord, a process characterised by Hoekstra (1993:70) as a change from Personenverband to Territorialverband. Conflicts arose easily because of the incompatibility of the two systems. While the Spanish considered uncultivated land as property of the Crown, according to indigenous law wasteland was subject to tribute to the lords as soon as it was cultivated. The endless series of conflicts between Spaniards and Indios due to the clash of divergent legal systems were prominent in the Bocasierúa but largely bypassed the more unattractive and inaccessible regions such as the centre of the Sierra.

Building the church

The most visible domain of Spanish presence was the Catholic Church, and in Nanacatlán the big church building testifies to early Spanish influence. Pedro cherishes the stories about the church he heard from his father Reyes Ramos Figueroa, who had heard them from his mother’s father, because they are descendants of the

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8 Each altepetl (pre-Hispanic village) could only have one cacique, their natural lord by descent. Over time the term cacique changed in meaning and became more loosely applied to any men of power (García 1987:200-201).
people who built it. His grandfather, 95 at the time (who would live to be 100), told the story to then 9 year old don Reyes and had heard the story from his grandfather, whose father or grandfather (both named Esteban Figueroa) was the master builder. He could not establish the exact descent and timescale, but what is more significant is that he can relate himself to the church master builder and can thus establish a long-term relation to the village as well as to an important historical figure. According to don Reyes the church is over 400 years old, and was constructed shortly after the Spanish Conquest. In a village meeting the people decided that they wanted to have a church, and the government supported them. Don Miguel said they had to sell part of the village lands on the mountain (Cara de Cerdo, map 1.3 number 10) to San Miguel, to finance the construction. As they did not want to build on the Cara de Cerdo but preferred the other side of the river Zempoala, they decided to build the church at the present location and they moved the whole village there. That their large and old church is such a source of pride for the villagers is understandable, because its construction must have been quite an effort. Its presence secured the independence of Nanacatlan in the beginning of the eighteenth century. At that time, a village could become autonomous if it met a number of requirements: a minimum of 500 inhabitants, sufficient land, a good church, and the ability to maintain it.9

Oral history deals with startling events on the local level: huge constructions such as churches and bridges, catastrophes such as epidemics (as we will see later), livelihood threats, and local political violence. Nanacatecos recount at length what has moved them most or what explains or gives meaning to the present. Twentieth-century poverty looks different when seen from the perspective of a rich and glorious past. The present subordinate position of the village is compensated by an ancient history in which it dominated the whole region. The village has been ‘reduced’ to its present size and living standard by rich Nanacatecos who misbehaved, or by malicious outsiders who took advantage of the Nanacatecos. Typical for the region to which Nanacatlan belongs (an overlap of Totonacapan and the Sierra Norte of Puebla) is the remoteness that provides ample room for local and regional autonomy. Local history presents the village as a near self-contained world that only occasionally and to its disadvantage was touched upon by outsiders.

9 The church (in Santiago NaNucatlan, undoubtedly Nanacatlan) is mentioned in 1569 in the Doctrina a cargo de Clerigos as having 140 followers (Carrióin 1965:23). In 1646 Zapotitlán – including Nanacatlan – became independent from Hueytlapan (the cabecera to which a large part of the region belonged as we saw in chapter 2). Nanacatlan saw its population grow rapidly; as the by then 80 households needed more land, the Nanacatecos drafted a petition to the alcalde mayor in 1673 to be granted part of Ixtepec’s waste land, a claim which Ixtepec adamantly rejected. Land was not the only reason they wanted independence; they had problems with their cabecera Zapotitlán, the more so since recent migrants from Zapotitlán tried to take over local control. Nanacatecos petitioned to be part of Hueytalpan again, but when the parish of Hueytlapan rejected this they opted for status as an independent community, granted on 26 September 1714. It would have Tuxtla as subordinate (García 1987:289-305; Gerhard 1986:400-403). In 1646 Olintla also became independent (from Hueytalpan) and in the eighteenth century not only Nanacatlan but also subsequently Zongozotla, Camocuautla, Tapayula, Coatepec, Caxhuacan, Chipahuatlán, and Atlequizayan (García 1987, appendix 9).
Given its remote character in a difficult to access region, such an image of local autonomy is probably not far from the historical truth.

The remote past

What is recent and what is ancient past is not the same for all villagers and there is a period of overlap that I have set apart as the remote past. This concerns the at-times chaotic period between the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century (until well after the Mexican Revolution), when epidemics killed many villagers and the old communal land was appropriated by large landowners. For most villagers such local stories resemble the historias about the far distant past their ancestors told them about, though many people can more or less date them. For the elderly such as don Miguel, don Gualo, and don Felix, they were memories of what happened to them or their parents and grandparents. This in-between period is much more part of the family history of mestizos and their stories go back as far as the 1860s when their ancestors still lived in Zacapoaxtla or Tetela. Regional and national events such as the Mexican Revolution were more important to mestizo villagers, as they had a great impact on their personal lives – such as that of don Gualo and his family who fled from Ixtepec to Nanacatlán when revolutionaries burnt down their village. This period thus also marks a split between established Totonac villagers and mestizo newcomers, with both parties holding different versions of how mestizos rose to power and what this meant for the village.

Recurrent threats of epidemics

Repeatedly, villagers mentioned the large number of people who used to live in old Nanacatlán and the sudden decline in their number. Epidemics again hit the region in the remote past: people mention two severe episodes though they do not agree on which was first and cannot mention a date. Don Gualo says the population fell victim to cholera (which must have been sometime in the 1870s). Many people were buried near their home, because with all the consecutive deaths few could afford to pay for a decent burial at the cemetery. Don Felix mentions cramps (calambre), and Pedro and his father don Reyes mention a smallpox epidemic before the burning of Ixtepec. The lethal impact of the Spanish flu in 1918 is still remembered today even though people lost the historical details. For Pedro smallpox and flu not only killed many people, but also weakened the survivors, who now die much younger than before.

The epidemics of Nanacatlán

My deceased grandmother told me that this was a very big village, all the flat land, all the way up to Takalis, and the road of Ixtepec. The people were rich, they owned cattle, horses, lambs, and pigs, and they prospered because there were many people. The bad thing was that their animals damaged other villages, and the people did not acknowledge
the problems and the damage their animals caused. They did not remove their animals
[from the land of the other villages], and no policeman examined it; they did not care
because they rode horses. The animals went to Ixtepec, to Zitlala, to Hueytlalpan, all the
surrounding villages, and did a lot of damage. They were very, very arrogant, very, very
disregardful, and very, very bad. Perhaps God sees all that we are doing: when you do the
right thing, He pays well, when you do the wrong thing, He pays you badly. Perhaps
therefore one day many people from here, the elderly, not like the ones today, became
tired. Many people live here today, but not like before, they are not really old, not of an
advanced age; today they barely become 80, 70, or 90. Before, the people lived to be 150,
160.

And because God saw what they did, not respecting other people much, he calmed
the people here down with a disease that killed everybody, a disease called smallpox that
was the first disease that affected everybody, and most people died. But because a few
had survived, a second disease broke out, the flu, to knock down the people. And many
people died, and that is why we are with so few, not so long ago we were still with very
few, at the time when I started working, but nowadays we have come back halfway. But
before we were killed, we were with a good deal, really a good deal of people. (Pedro
Ramos 1989)

This story combines characteristics of the ancient past histories with Pedro’s own
memories. The part about the animals that damaged the land followed by the epi­
demics that diminished the population, is a merger of the epidemics and the land
problems during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first of the twentieth
century (see below). Don Gustavo’s story about the flu epidemic is situated in the
nineteenth century and may be a conflation of the date of the cholera epidemic in
the 1870s and the devastation of the Spanish flu in 1918.

The disease of 1877

When this serious disease they call flu came to the village in 1877, all the people became
ill, which means people were ill house-to-house. In every house one person stayed to
take care of his family, but when this caretaker became ill nobody took care of them. The
people died thus on a daily basis, because of this serious disease, four, five persons a day.
Some survived and they where the ones lifting the dead, digging a hole and burying
them. About four to five people were wrapped together in one petate (sleeping mat).
There wasn’t even time to make a coffin, or hold a wake; nothing. They were buried as
soon as they had died, as if they were animals. It was a very difficult time then. There
was also a doctor, he was not a real doctor; he only cured with refino and herbs, and
someone else who helped the sick. He was called Miguel Luis and the other José Ramos
Velázquez. In this period, they had many people to take care of, because they treated the
people daily.

No more than 30 of about 300 inhabitants survived, and they all deserted their land,
their sitio, where they lived, houses; at that time simple, small houses of zacate. Some
men and some women survived without parents, without siblings. They united, and they
started to take the best places, they appropriated the houses, that is to say, when there were no more owners left. And that is how they have lived, and now they have become owners of the abandoned land. And from there they slowly multiplied, and multiplied again, those 30 persons survived. And they started to multiply again, until they reached the same numbers as before. But frankly, it was all very sad, and those who stayed were the following persons: Manuel Juárez, Jacinto Velázquez, Francisco Velázquez, Ignacio Juárez, Antonio Ramos, and Aquileo Juárez. Only they were left as leaders of the village. Their sons tell how their parents were and how they lived. Well, this is how it was, it is not a story (cuento); it is reality. This story exists, we take it as a story, but it is reality. Until today we remember this. (Gustavo Ramos 1989)

One explanation for such stories about frequent epidemics may be found in the series of epidemics that have plagued the Sierra since the Conquista. Because Totonacapan was the main point of entry for the Spanish, it is likely the epidemics started there. The most devastating epidemics in Nueva España occurred in 1520-21, 1545-48, and 1576-81, and they wiped out several villages in the lower parts of the Sierra. Totonacapan was especially affected by the second (smallpox) and third (measles) epidemic. The recurrent epidemics were a demographic catastrophe (García 1987:113; Kelly and Palerm 1953:8-9). The local stories are not about the ancient past but relate to the new epidemics, which are so much closer to memory. In the lowland of Veracruz, smallpox struck in 1828, 1830, and 1841, and cholera in 1833 (Chenaux 1995:94). In the twentieth century, the devastating global Spanish flu of 1918 hit the village severely. In a country already plagued with the chaos of the Revolution the death toll was enormous.

Privatising the communal land

The fields surrounding Nanacatlan were incorporated over time as communal land that was in principle open to all residents. But towards the late nineteenth century there was a growing pressure to convert them into private property. The way this happened caused a series of tensions, conflicts and resentments. It is not easy to get the full story of how the communal land became privatised, but the process included first a kind of monopolistic usufruct by one rich villager, then a conversion by

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10 In the diocese of Hueytalpan the population diminished because they suffered sarna (itching) and pujamientos de sangre (blood loss) against which no remedies existed.

11 In his notebook don Genaro Bravo wrote that the whole family had the flu in November 1918 and suffered badly. In such circumstances natural disasters are especially devastating and he mentions four cyclones, three earthquakes, and one excessive rain. A particularly devastating cyclone (which he calls the Great Cyclone) happened in September 1888, destroying many bridges including the one in Zapotitlán, and caused many deaths. The second was September 1915, the third during two days in September 1926, and the fourth during three days in October 1930. A very serious earthquake happened January 1920, and again in January 1931 and July 1937. In 1931 it rained so excessively the whole year through that his house started to fall apart. He calls 1931 a year of misery from the beginning, as people could not earn any money while they had to buy food and clothes.

12 For a comparable process in Huehuetla see Ellison 2004:118-137; Smith 2005:71-76.
which the majority of the land came into the hands of two powerful mestizos from Zapotitlán, and finally, much later, in the 1930s, a return of the land to Nanacatecos. A large part came into the hands of two rich mestizos and the remaining was redistributed among several dozen villagers. In their stories people often do not distinguish between what happened at the end of the nineteenth century, during and after the Revolution and in the 1930s.

When I asked about the communal land issue, people would automatically refer me to don Miguel Ramos as the oldest man in the village, or to don Gualo Bravo also one of the eldest villagers and with many relatives in Zapotitlán. Both were convinced they knew the truth. Both are from a wealthy background and therefore may be biased. Don Felix proved equally well informed and he could come forward with different and often critical stories about the way the local elite took over the fields.13

Durand (1986:213-232) has reconstructed the history of conversion though not all people agree on his version. Of course, Durand had the advantage of working in 1970 when there were still many more residents who had witnessed the conversions or had heard directly about it from their relatives. But don Gualo maintains that Durand got his information wrong because he only spoke with younger ill-informed people. As far as I can conclude, Durand has the right timetable and names of the three prominent mestizos who were the first to lay their hands on the communal land: the cacique Castañeda and later two mestizos from Zapotitlán in 1909-10; he is also right about its privatisation among villagers in 1932. He curiously left out the local elite families who succeeded the landlords from Zapotitlán.

From the time Don Miguel remembers well, there have been two really rich villagers, initially the cacique Miguel Castañeda and later Idalecio Rodriguez, the grandfather of don Camilo. According to other villagers a third would be the father of don Gualo though he had less than the others. Miguel Castañeda was for many years village secretary (a salaried job in those days). He used to let his goat, sheep, pigs, and cows just wander around freely, eating everybody’s crops and even the zacate the houses were made of. It was hard to stop him, because he was powerful.14 Finally, the father of don Miguel was one of the men who started doing something about it.

13 Don Miguel should know by virtue of his 30 years of service to the community and his function as member of the village council (as regidor de hacienda, treasurer and regidor de instrucción, organiser of faena) that he held until 1953. He is a Totonac, but always supported the PRI and the local mestizo elite. The mestizo don Gualo, although his family came to Nanacatlán in 1918, knows about the history of land because his uncle Felipe Mendez was one of the Zapotecos who more or less usurped the communal fields. Don Felix is a Totonac and the son of the village treasurer during the Revolution and therefore involved in the finances of the communal land.
14 This reflects part of the origin and epidemic stories of Nanacatlán in which villagers who let their animals damage other people’s possessions are one of the causes of the decline of the village and its population. The other two rich communal land usurpers, Francisco Nieto and Felipe Mendez, were absentee landlords from Zapotitlán and are therefore never included by Nanacatecos among the rich villagers. As a son-in-law of General Juan Francisco Lucas (see chapter 2) Castañeda, who came from Zapotitlán, had high-level protection. He, or his son who was also called Miguel, owned the house where don Gualo now lives. Rodriguez and his wife came from Tetela de Ocampo.
When my father was still nothing, very poor, this man [Castañeda] profited from the whole village. He was very rich. The whole village was pasture, what is now milpa all was pasture. My father only had a place to live, and he got along with all the people. The people asked him to be mayor and my father supported them to do politics, whereupon my father started to go to Tetela. Then they said in Tetela that there would be a land distribution, with each person receiving his own part. And when they implemented this, a licenciado came to Zapotitlán to see who could distribute the land. And they found Francisco Nieto Lopez as distributor. He made an agreement with Miguel Castañeda, as he was the secretary. And when the land was divided, Castañeda had to withdraw his animals. As revenge they shot at my father, who lost his finger. The outcome of it was that this secretary [Castañeda] ended up with a quarter of the village land: what is now the property of don Camilo, about 10 hectares. Francisco Nieto Lopez also took land from higher up the mountain, about 20 hectares or more. It was an agreement between the two. They had it for many years. Who knows what year it was; my father was 30 years old. When he died he was 60, I was 14; I was born in 1904. And much later, who knows in what year, I do not remember, they took away all their land, and distributed it among the common villagers. I was already 28, 29 years, when these politics came to an end. My father also received a part, more or less half an almud. The others received the same. That is why I used to like to do politics, not now, I am old already. (Miguel Ramos 1994)

Don Gualo explains that “before the flu” his uncle Felipe Mendez and Francisco Nieto converted the land into private property with the help from the state government and authorised by the district (Tetela). But don Felix has a different version of what happened to part of the communal land.

The father of the grandfather of don Camilo was a Captain, I think in the federal army. The authorities sold land to the grandfather of don Camilo, from behind the village hall all the way to the cemetery and the pasture around it and downhill towards the river. Who knows why they did that. They say he paid in cash, but I do not know how many millions. The mayor received the money and handed it to the village treasurer; unfortunately it was my father who held that position. But my father did not want to keep it at home, so he left it in the village hall. When he was working on his land, armed soldiers arrived on horseback, and some went to the office where they were told my father was not there.

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15 It must have been around 1930, and other villagers confirm this. The agreement between Nieto and Castañeda might have been around 1888, according to the ages don Miguel mentions, but was in 1909-1910 according to Durand (1986:218), the last two years of the Porfiriato, the dictatorship of general Porfirio Díaz.

16 Felipe Mendez (who was a teacher in Zapotitlán and married to don Gualo’s father’s sister) was the grandson of General Juan “N” Mendez, from Tetela de Ocampo, after whom Zapotitlán de Mendez is named. Nieto was not only buying land in Nanacatlán, but all over the region. There was yet another powerful player in this game according to Durand. The owner of a rum distillery in Zapotitlán, Miguel Manzano, who controlled much of the regional sugarcane production – in Nanacatlán as well – and could consolidate his power by siding with General Barrios (Durand 1986:215-222, see also chapter 2.)
Then they beat the door open and took the money. He was a Captain. (Felix Ramos 1994)

During and after the revolution years, criminal activities by bandits as well as revolutionaries were not uncommon. In Zongozotla for instance, public funds were stolen by people from Zapotitlán (Brewster 2003:105). The money for the communal land in Nanacatlán was also stolen, probably by don Camilo’s father himself as the story implies. The village was never compensated for the land and don Felix still considers it to be communal. When the villagers were trying to regain land from Zitlala in the 1970s (see above) they also wanted part of the land of don Camilo which they considered to be communal. When an auditorium was built behind the village hall in the 1990s, for which don Camilo donated the necessary land, don Felix saw it as a partial return of village property and not a donation at all.

But others were also accused of having appropriated communal land. Don Miguel Ramos apparently took part of it for his son Ignacio when he was a regidor (member of the village council). The sons of Miguel Castañeda junior apparently sold land they did not own (and their house) to don Gualo’s father. Only what was left of the communal land was distributed among the villagers. It is generally considered to be of second-rate quality, unlike the top-quality land of don Camilo’s grandfather.

Land has always been an issue of great concern to Nanacatecos, not in the least because it was always a predominant source of livelihood. An important part of village history is a long story of land appropriation by neighbouring villages, absentee landowners, and fellow-villagers (and when it comes to inheriting land by relatives as well). Village membership concerns entitlement to land as a village and as a villager; this has been an ongoing struggle as long as people can remember. Because of the late arrival of mestizos in the area, the land issue never fully developed as a fight between indigenous people and outsiders, but has centred for a long time on village rivalry. Only during the late nineteenth century do mestizos come into the picture, as they successfully managed to concentrate land as private property; though as we saw in the previous chapter, it again divided in subsequent generations. While later on other villagers started buying relatively large properties, land did not become theirs in such questionable ways and this land ownership is not contested.

Nanacatecos are sometimes divided, sometimes united when it comes to land issues. Their unity is primarily against neighbouring villages, while within the village the division is largely of Totonacs against mestizos. This divide is highlighted

17 Castañeda had two sons, but only one inherited land, Miguel. The other, Elpidio, was very poor. Miguel only had daughters, who live in Tuxtla and received very little. To my amazement, Irene tells me that her grandparents used to live in the house now owned by don Gualo, and it turns out her grandfather Elpidio is a grandchild of the infamous Miguel Castañeda. But neither she nor her father can tell me about this relation. We also know now why the father of Irene owns no land. His father Elpidia, for reasons unknown, apparently received no inheritance at all.
by Totonacs working the land and mestizos never doing so.\(^{18}\) The mestizos however, differ from other Nanacatecos by more than their history of recent arrival, land appropriation, and non-participation in tilling the soil.

**Mestizo memories and the state**

As in every Mexican town and village, the streets in Nanacatlán are named after national heroes and pivotal dates in the nation’s history. The federal state has thus made its presence clear and villagers supposedly can live and walk amidst the mythology of the creation of the Estados Unidos de Mexico (see map 4.1). No less than eight streets refer to the struggle for Independence: the *Calle 16 de Septiembre* (after the date of the independence declaration in 1810),\(^ {19}\) the *Calle Hidalgo, Calle Aldama, Calle Allende, Calle Mina, Calle Matamoros, Calle Geleano*, and *Calle Morelos* (after the main leaders of the independence struggle, the *heroes de la patria*). Other streets recall major historical figures and dates: the *Avenida Juárez* (the first indigenous president of Mexico in 1861), *Calle 5 de Mayo*, and *Calle 2 de Abril* (referring to the battles against the French in Puebla in 1862-63) and finally *Calle Carranza* (the first constitutional president, in 1917, during the Mexican Revolution)\(^ {20}\) and *Calle Cuauhtémoc* (the last Aztec emperor before the Spanish Conquista).

Although children learn about these heroes and heroic dates of Mexican’s history and although some dates such as 5 May and 16 September are national holidays, few villagers know the background or care to know it. It only seems relevant for a few mestizos, especially as the nation’s history sometimes coincides with their family history. Don Gualo likes to tell about the ‘French years’ (1862-67) because his maternal [great-] uncles from Tetela had to fight at Querétaro.\(^ {21}\) To feed the soldiers all villagers were obliged to make *totopa* (hard toasted tortillas that keep for a longer time) that the soldiers would take along. Several years later, his paternal great-grandfather, who had come from Guanajuato as an *artillero*, settled in Zacapoaxtla and was killed nearby. Elios is also the great-grandson of this *artillero* and recounts the family’s version of his death: “When he was fixing something near Apulco, he didn’t notice that his comrades had already left; then his enemies

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\(^{18}\) Smith (2005) stresses the cosmological embeddedness of agricultural practices, to which I will turn to in chapter 5. He considers hills as moral and political geographies, a terrain dividing the work of Totonacs from the non-work of mestizos that turn the hills into sites of Totonac work. My emphasis will be on gendered Totonac cosmology, where working the land is male and food preparation female.

\(^{19}\) It was proclaimed by the priest Hidalgo (padre de la patria), and is knows as the Grito de Dolores. Mexican Independence was recognized in 1921, eleven years after the Grito.

\(^{20}\) When the much better-known revolutionaries Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapato finally met to agree upon military support – a short-lived alliance – the ice between them was broken with heartily shared disdain and hatred of Carranza (Meyer and Sherman 1991:537; McLynn 2001:275).

\(^{21}\) After losing the battle in Puebla, Napoleon III sent new troops and Ferdinand Maximilian of Hapsburg as emperor (in 1864). Mexican conservatives, who were against the liberal government of Benito Juárez, supported this move. In 1867 the French were defeated and Maximilian was executed in the colonial city of Querétaro (Meyer and Sherman 1991:391-398).
came and killed him”. He left behind his young widow, a daughter, and a son. His son grew up to become don Genaro, who lived in Zapotitlán and left his notebook of local historical events.22

Memories are livelier when it comes to the revolutionary years (1910-20). A very few elderly people personally experienced that period as children, but most heard about it from their parents and grandparents. What sticks most in memory are the attacks on Ixtepec. Don Genaro reports in his notebook that followers of Pancho Villa (Villistas) came to Ixtepec on 7 December 1917 and 19 July 1918 and burned it down – the second time including the house of his son Eduardo (don Gualo’s father). But people nowadays only talk about the Zapatistas (followers of Emiliano Zapato) who raided the area and forced the men to join their army – whereupon many peasants fled to Veracruz. Doña Taidita, the sister of don Gualo, also remembers Zapatistas who burned down their house.

The Zapatistas came from Huehuetla and Caxhuaca and wanted money from every village. When the mayor from Ixtepec refused to give them any, they burned down the village. They burned everything on their way and many people died. One general was good: General Medina from Tetela was also a Zapatista and helped us. He warned the people and my mother took us with her into the mountains. Many people fled into the mountains. I was a little girl.

In that war many people died, many got frightened. There was another general from Tetela, not a Zapatista, but from the other party. I do not remember his name, he was from Zacapoaxtla. He had taken a lot of orphans into his house. (Taidita Bravo 1994)

But the Revolution and its aftermath were not a protracted war that continued to haunt the Sierra. Only once and a while would the army and the guerilleros come close to Nanacatlan. Regional traffic continued; peasants and day labourers would walk through the mountains in search of seasonal labour and mestizos would cross the region on horseback, travelling as far as Puebla or Mexico City to visit relatives, trade, or contact the authorities. But modernity also came to the Sierra. Don Genaro writes how on 22 October 1921 they saw the first airplane from Zapotitlán fly over. In 1922, on April 4, an airplane crashed in San Juan (a village between Ixtepec and Caxhuacan) and two days later they went there to gape at the wreck. His sons Herminio and Genaro went to Puebla, quite a journey in those days.

After the Revolution, the instability in the Sierra (and the entire state of Puebla) continued well into the 1930s because of the opposition against the secularising policies of the post-revolutionary federal state. Tensions between the government and the Catholic Church ran high, when the federal state tried to eliminate the considerable clerical influence and the church began a major opposition movement against the state reforms (the Cristero rebellion from 1926-29). In many parts of

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22 As Genaro was born in Zacapoaxtla in 1869, his father was probably killed during the 1870s, when there were recurrent fights between conservatives and liberals in Zacapoaxtla.
the Sierra there was no significant Cristero activity because Catholic influence had already been diminished through nineteenth century liberalism (see chapter 2). In the 1930s socialist education became an issue, especially in Zacapoaxtla (Brewster 2003:50). The school system was one of the central political problems during the 1920s-1930s due to a plan to federalise primary schools; the establishment of schools and the appointment of non-religious teachers provoked violent reactions especially in the Sierra (Pansters 1990:65). Don Gualo was not in favour of the radical Cristero movement that opposed the new Constitution and sought to restore the power of the Catholic Church. He remembered how the church in Nanacatlán was closed at the time of the Obregon murder [1928], and opened again two years later. It was also, according to don Gualo, a period when Cristeros attacked the teachers appointed by the government. The teacher had to be defended at night – there was only one teacher in the village – and the female teachers stayed with the family of don Gualo.

The priests [those not involved in the Cristero movement] were saying clandestine masses and the priests who came to the region to reform the church were refused. There were no classes between 1930 and 1933. When Armando Valera came, the teacher from Tezuitlan, we helped and supported him. When he slept in the school we would guard him outside. The clergy from the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) wanted to reform Mexico just like Spain under Franco. All the priests came from Spain with legal papers, but president Lazaro Cárdenas ordered them to return. (Eduardo Bravo 1994)

The in-between period, ancient history for most villagers and remembered by the elderly, is much more part of mestizo memory. Most villagers refer to the epidemics and the land problems, and only slightly to the Mexican Revolution. They are only partially concerned with what happened outside the village. Mestizos, on the contrary, pay more attention to the highlights of Mexican history – the Revolution, the Cristero movement, and even as far back as the French period. For them this is more than national history that they were taught at school (and mestizos went to school long before the majority of Nanacatecos did so), it is part of their family history as well. This direct link to and knowledge of the outside world and Mexican history differs from the mestizos' perspective.

23 Genera Bravo wrote in his diary: the Catholic clergy was persecuted from November 1934 onwards and President Aleraldo Rodriguez ordered the churches to be closed; after Lazaro Cárdenas came into power (in 1935) the situation of the church improved, the socialists set-up schools to propagate their socialist teaching.

24 A militant Catholic killed Obregón in 1928, after his re-election. Obregón however, had not enforced the anticlerical articles of the new Constitution during his presidency (1920-24). This was done by his successor Calles. The Constitution of 1917 had just been amended to change the presidential term to six years and to enable re-election after an interval with re-election of Obregón in mind. After Obregón's death Calles (his followers are called Callistas) was the man in power behind the presidents (one was interim president Rodríguez, 1932-34) until 1934, when Cárdenas became president (Meyer and Sherman 1991:587-591). Reconciliation between state and church was formally agreed upon in 1929, but this did not immediately stop radical anti-clericalism. In Puebla, Mijares Palencia was the last governor (1933-37) with an anti-clerical policy (Pansters 1990:68).
history gives *mestizos* an air of sophistication and sets them apart – or at least did so for the elderly generation – from the others, for whom supra-local history was never that important.

**The recent past**

Obviously the past that most Nanacatecos or their parents and grandparents remember from their own experience is known in much greater detail and is at the same time very much part of the present: it is the time of reference comparing contemporary village life with that of yesteryear – for better or for worse – and when they legitimise clashes of interest or opinion in the village of today. Property rights and landownership are favourite bones of contention between heirs or between large landowners and small peasants who base their claims on past events. But people also like to talk about personal and family histories and the ordeals they went through: poverty, sickness, fights over land, and politics. Women tell about their personal experiences of a life of hard work, poor housing, the hardship of feeding the family, coping with drunken fathers or husbands, and of children who have died young. Men tend to avoid personal experiences and prefer to talk about how agriculture changed, what problems over land they were involved in, or the embezzlement of communal funds. Elderly men remember what the environment looked like and how woods, wild animals, and birds have disappeared when more and more land was brought under cultivation. Because the village had a clear social dichotomy between elite *mestizo* patrons and a majority of Totonac peasants and workers who were their clients during the greater part of the twentieth century, local oral history is built upon this difference.

*Sugarcane and rum*

When elderly villagers refer to the village of their childhood, somewhere between 1920 and 1950, they first mention its abundant nature: the mountain slopes were still woodlands, sometimes with enormous trees as one now only finds beyond Zongozotla and Hueytlalpan. The dense forest made good hunting with many wild boar, deer, weasels, badgers, rabbits, foxes, and coyotes. In the forest of Zongozotla there were snakes, monkeys, *tigrillos* (a kind of fox), and pumas. Only a few of the smaller game are left. The same goes for the Zempoala river that was full of small fish (called sardines), *charales*, and *maxaxaca*; but is nowadays nearly depleted of big fish. During the first half of the twentieth century the forests were increasingly opened up for cultivation of sugarcane.

People vividly remember the time sugarcane was grown in the fields, and most people who were older than 40 years in 1989 had worked in planting and cutting sugarcane or making *panela* (clayed brown sugar) and *melaza* (molasses). This unrefined sugar was sold to neighbouring villages such as Ixtepec where they could not grow sugarcane themselves because of elevation or cold temperatures; but also
all over the Sierra, to Tetela, Zacapoaxtla, Zacatlán, and to the rum factories in Zapotitlán. Don Camilo’s father was one of the largest cane growers on the fields that are now pastureland. January, when the cane was harvested and processed, was a busy time in the village. When he was young Pedro used to work with the tread­mill (trapiche).

Unlike in the lowland where they used a horse and three persons, we used bulls and two men to work with the trapiche here. The work was very varied. Firewood was collected before the harvest. After, the sugarcane had to be crushed in the mill. The juice was boiled over the fire, but you had to be careful not to make it too dry. You try a bit on your lips, and when it dries fast, it is ready. You let it cool off and then put it in wooden moulds, where they come out like big candles. Then you put these in the sugarcane leaves to carry them to your patron’s house.

I used to hurry on the bulls, from when I was six years old, because this was always children’s work. It was nice to work with sugarcane, because people work closely together, carrying the sugarcane and working on the mill. [This is different from what we have now:] in the coffee fields everybody works individually, and you have to stop working to be able to talk. (Pedro Ramos 1994)

Except for the sugar sold for consumption, a sizeable portion was brought to one of the many small-scale rum factories found in the region: in Hueytlalpan, Zitlala, and especially Zapotitlán. Miguel Manzano (a maternal uncle of don Camilo) owned one of the largest rum factories in Zapotitlán. Gabriel Luna also owned a rum factory in Zapotitlán when his nephew don Gualo was young. At that time the larger factories of Apulco and Zacapoaxtla did not yet exist.

To make first class rum, without chemicals as they do nowadays in Apulco and Zacapoaxtla, it takes 72 hours of distilling the sugarcane juice (miel de caña blanca) – you cannot use the molasses as they are polluted. In adjusting the heating, you can change the percentage of alcohol: less fire and slower heating gives stronger alcohol. People used to distil rum at home, in pots with a copper cover, but that was illegal after a new law in 1926. To enforce it, the state appointed a general from the army in each zone because there were still many bandits in the Sierra. Here, military control was in the hands of General Barrios. He made life difficult for people, who became afraid and did not dare to continue distilling rum. He made some tough examples: first some people were shot, and later others were convicted to hard labour. It was the same period that the clergy was trying to regain the position they used to have. (Eduardo Bravo 1994)

In his youth, Don Felix knew many rum factories. They had already stopped working when two new distilleries began operating in Nanacatlán. This was remarkable because it was as late as the 1970s, when sugarcane cultivation had almost ceased. The cane had to be bought from all over the area. The distilleries were owned by Miguel Gaona (mayor in the 1960s and later Agente del Ministerio Publico for
many years) and Berto Rodriguez (don Beto, one of the mayors in the 1990s). The distilleries were illegal, as their owners could not afford the high government registration fees and taxes. When they were found out they had to pay heavy fines and close down the factories.²⁵ During the harvest period the factories worked day and night but only produced less than 40 litres of rum per day. The work could be dangerous at times because of the heat; one supervisor became blind because his eyes completely dried out.

Traders and travellers

Before there was an all-weather road, itinerant traders crossed the Sierra with their mules and horses to buy up local produce and bring it to the market in the towns. They returned with household goods and other commodities that they had bought in the urban markets. Francisco Nieto from Zapotitlán (who, as we have seen, had been involved in the communal land problems) was one of them. The coming and going of these traders brought a lot of bustle in the village: there were always trains of mules and horses with their owners passing the main street or halting at one of the houses to do business. Elderly people complain that the occasional truck or car passing of today is nothing compared to the bustle of traders and their animals. When in the 1950s sugarcane cultivation gave way to coffee, traders no longer passed through Nanacatlán and Zapotitlán as often. Then, local mestizo landowners could fill in the gap and take over the merchants’ role (Durand 1986:201). The Rodriguez family owned horses, but no mules. They did not do the trading themselves but hired horsemen to do the job. The Bravo family owned four to five mules and would bring the local produce to the market and return with merchandise. Compared to prices in the towns, these local merchants paid a lot less for what they bought and asked a lot more of what they sold and could thus make a considerable profit. As the Bravoses and Rodriguezes held a monopoly on trade, they were able to set the prices of what they bought and sold, and at least in the eyes of the villagers, they did so at an exorbitant rate.

Don Gualo comes from and old merchant family as all his maternal and paternal relatives were involved in this type of intermediary trade. He often went to Zacapoaxtla, which would take him seven hours with mules and himself on horseback.

²⁵ According to don Camilo, his two cousins owned both factories: don Beto and his half-brother, a Rodriguez from Ixtepec; they had rented the land from Miguel Gaona.
For *mestizo* merchants owning pack animals was crucial to get a foothold in the business, as was access to networks of traders. Since only a few other villagers would have a mule or a donkey, the *mestizos* had a near monopoly on local trade. Ordinary villagers either had to sell and buy through them or make the trip to Zapotitlán or Xochitlán on foot, using a *huacal* or *mecapal* to carry the goods. They were used to walking, but trade in such small quantities was hardly profitable.

Most men would travel through the Sierra, but not to trade. When the sugarcane season was over Totonacs would walk to Huehuetla or Coxquihui where they would hire themselves out as seasonal labourers. People recall how the road through Nanacatlán was busy with men from Zapotitlán, Zongozotla, and Huitzilan who were also on their way to work in the lowlands clearing new land; sowing; weeding and harvesting oranges, maize, beans, coffee, or sugarcane; or working in the vanilla plantations of Veracruz. The *mestizos* would never walk but travelled on horseback wearing boots and carrying a rifle or pistol. Their trade and land monopoly had made them wealthy and in those days they were the people of distinction who stood out on their horses among the Totonac walking barefooted or on their *huaraches*. Nevertheless, compared to the *mestizo* merchants and the cattle- and landowners in others parts of the Sierra, the local *mestizos* were small fries. Elsewhere, these rich *mestizos* would own cars when they lived close to a road and could even afford to regularly board a plane from one of the airfields built in the Sierra in the 1950s. Don Camilo’s uncle and aunt who live in nearby Olintla were among them and nowadays they complain that travelling in the Sierra has become much more difficult.

I really miss the small airplanes we flew in through the Sierra. There were airfields in various places. Later on Olintla, Cuetzalan, Zapotitlán, and another place were the only ones that remained; but as this made flying comparatively expensive it was used less. In Olintla it started in 1955 when I was mayor, and stopped in 1987. It was not even a 15 minute flight to Poza Rica and from there an hour to Mexico City. To Cuetzalan it took no more than 5 minutes. Travelling was much more comfortable than today. After the road was built they took more and more airplanes out of service and we had to do everything again on horseback. Before, we would only go by horse to Nanacatlán or Ixtepec, where they had no airstrips. Flying was very beautiful, across the mountains and then into the lowland. Only La Ceiba was a bit scary because of the high mountains and deep ravines. (Don Paulo 1996)

On Sundays sometimes a group of women would go by plane to the cinema in Poza Rica. We would get on an airplane like in a car today. (Doña Lupe 1996)

Unlike their wealthy relatives, the *mestizo* elite families in Nanacatlán could not afford to be so fashionable and cosmopolitan.
Memories of daily life (1950-1980)

Until the 1970s, most Totonac houses were still sparsely furnished and equipped. Kitchenware consisted of a few spoons and cups made of jícara (squash shells) and some earthenware pots and pans. A big jar was used to fetch water. People were dressed in the kind of traditional Totonac style that nowadays mainly the elderly and middle-aged wear. Women and girls wore a white skirt, an embroidered blouse with a short transparent white poncho (kichkemil) on top, and a red belt with colourful motives. Their hair was in two long braids sometimes with coloured straps woven in, and even when going out, they were barefooted. Men and boys had white trousers and a white blouse made from cloth bought on the market and wore huaraches. Nobody used underwear at that time.

Life was not easy and people were always struggling to make ends meet. Those above thirty in 1989, remember a very poor and difficult past or childhood. They and their parents worked long hard hours, hardly had anything to eat, and lived in simple one-room houses of zacate with no commodities to speak of. Women remember their poverty and hardship and also their personal problems. Their life was tough, especially when they had a father or husband who would drink. These fathers would hardly ever support their families and would rather give frequent beatings. When the children grew up things might change and some women tell proudly of how their children supported them financially and protected them against their husband’s violence. Doña Marilus, whose daughter Caro works for Lupe and Elios, told how hard life used to be, because her father was very poor and did not even own a milpa. She had to work hard, replacing her deceased mother, and as there was no mill, everything had to be done on the metate, which was a lot of work.

We had nothing; we only took some tacos along to go to work. I went to pick tomatoes, but because I was hungry I was not strong enough. I was hungry, had nothing to eat. Sometimes they would give me a piece of soap where I used to go to wash. My food was just herbs such as mafafa, hierbamora, keltonile, suju, pata de gallo, gasparo [wild plants]. We ate meat once a week and this only when my father hadn’t gotten drunk; we shared a small piece between all the brothers and sisters. Because we did not have a mother or a grandmother, and because I went out on my own to heat nixtamal, we were talked about in the community here. It gave people something different to talk about, but poverty does not distinguish. (Marilus Vázquez 1989)

In 1989 she and her husband were not so young anymore, but she walked daily to Zapotitlán to sell milk, while her husband worked as a day-labourer and looked after the few coffee trees and the pepper tree they own. He sold the produce where

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26 Women used to wear a kind of poncho that they wove themselves (just like their belt) instead of the embroidered blouse and transparent kichkemil. They only embroider these days.
the price was high, even if he had to walk all the way to Caxhuaca with a bag of black peppers.

Every elderly woman mourned the loss of one or more children. Two sisters, doña Lucinda (married to don Gustavo, born in 1932) and doña Migaela (second wife of his father don Miguel, born in 1927) told about their past.

I actually had five more children than the eight I have now; four have died and I had one miscarriage. Early in my marriage we were very poor, we ate tortillas and chile, just like the poor people nowadays, for whom beans are already meat. I was not accepted as daughter-in-law at first, my parents-in-law even took away my metate. But we had to ask for it back or we would have been unable to eat. We only had one spoon and one pot to cook in and to make coffee in as well. When my husband would leave to work, I was always afraid in our small zacate house. I always went to sleep at six o'clock, to be able to sit up during the night. Very early I would go out to cut sugarcane, to make a sugar-loaf panela, what people used instead of sugar. Then I would go back to sleep again. (Lucinda Posadas 1989)

I have had twelve children and four have stayed alive. The children died when they were three, four, two years. There was no doctor in those days, and when the children were ill we could not do anything. Now many children stay alive because they are vaccinated and can be treated by a nearby doctor. I only had one girl, the youngest. When she died at only 18 months, we went to live in Mexico City for a while because my husband was afraid I would die of grief over this loss. My girl would have been 22 now. (Migaela Posadas 1989)

After so many pregnancies and such a hard life, women aged fast in Nanacatlan. Women who were in their thirties and forties during the 1990s are comparatively better off although many still struggled to make ends meet and many still have large families. Men usually want more children than their wives and tend to oppose birth control. Women are also reluctant to use contraceptives such as the pill because it makes them feel sick. Only when they have had four, five, or six children do they opt for sterilisation. Younger women tend to be better educated, know there is now better medical care for their children, and are more apt to practice family planning.

Gender relations have changed, although very gradually. Women in their twenties and thirties remember that when they were young, they had little freedom to move around the village or choose their own husband. Secondary education outside the village or finding a job in the city was out of the question for 'decent' girls. Later, in the 1980's, young girls like Susana, daughter of don Gustavo, could go to the newly founded secondary school in the village and with the new school's girl's basketball team they travelled to nearby Tuxtla, Ixtepec, and Zapotitlán. Girls are still active basketball players, meeting at four o'clock every afternoon at the playground in front of primary school though this kind of outdoor freedom remains
limited as they are supposed to behave decently – and are carefully watched by their neighbours and relatives. If they walk around too freely and unattended, people would start talking about them; the more so if they were wearing leggings, shorts, or mini-skirts.

Development comes to Nanacatlán

Major changes in the past decades are all linked to the new infrastructures; development, like success, has many fathers (and mothers). The federal state prides itself for extending this gift to the rural areas, the *mestizo* elite claims it was they who were able to secure the development works through their good connections, and the villagers are convinced that development and all that comes with it is basically the fruit of their own hard work.

Infrastructural development is what first meets the eye in Nanacatlán. Until 1952 the village hall consisted of a two-room building in which one room served as the local three-year primary school and the other as the village administrative office. A separate one-storey village hall was built in 1952, and in 1965 the school was enlarged to include four rooms; a second floor was added to the village hall in the same year, which later accommodated the new secondary school until that got its own building. As we saw in chapter 2, the 1970s and 1990s saw an acceleration of development (roads, electricity, satellite telephones) though running water supply to the houses, a sewage system, and paved roads are still lacking today.

One of the first development efforts people remember is the village community fund established in the early 1930s. A small part of the communal land was cultivated through communal labour and the yields were sold to generate a fund to cover the salaries of the local teacher and the village secretary. The fund also served as a small loan-office. Pedro, who used to be close to one of the initiators of the fund, Gregorio Ramos Luna, described how it worked:

There used to be a communal fund in the village hall of this small community. As there were few people, they had to pay a kind of tax of one peso each month, because the village had to pay the secretary and the teacher. About 50 or 60 years ago some people suggested a way to avoid taxation in money. People could instead participate in a kind of communal labour to cultivate a plot of land of two hectares near the water well above Xlac. It was organised by the community and rules were very strict: anyone who did not work the land went to jail and someone who owned cattle had to do the ploughing; if he did not want to do that he also went to jail. They had to accept whether they wanted or not, and those who did not have cattle had to work with their hoe and machete. They did so for three to four years, and because enough people cooperated, the village did not ask for taxes in cash anymore. The authorities sold the harvest and took care of the money. Part was used as a loan office with an interest of 3 percent: when someone borrowed 1 *peso*, the interest would be 3 *centavos*, when it was 100 *pesos* the interest would be 3 *pesos*. In a few years the fund grew to 500 or 600 *pesos*. In those days that was a lot of
money; because the people in Nanacatlán were much more humble, they were dressed in *calzón de manta*. The initiators of this fund were don Gregorio, don Indalecio, later on don Gualo, and Daniel Juárez, they were mayors and also worked, and they jointly did what had to be done. When there was enough money in the fund, the system of working the village land together was abolished. With the proceeds of the loans, the local expenses could be paid. The fund had a committee (consisting of the mayor, secretary, treasurer, and members) that decided what to do with the money, but it was abolished when the fund stopped. (Pedro Ramos 1989)

Though its name suggests otherwise, the communal fund was not open to everybody. Only those with sufficient collateral, which in practice meant the owners of enough land, were entitled to apply for a loan. Generally they would use the money to pay the wage labourers they employed on their land, and after the harvest they repaid the loan with interest. About half the villagers were excluded because they did not own enough land and had to seek loans from local moneylenders (who also used money they had borrowed from the fund) at a much higher interest rate of 7-8 percent. Those who had failed to repay their loans or had been very late in settling their debts were also excluded.

The records of the communal fund (as well as those of a similarly organised church fund) that I found in the village archives show that it was used a lot but also that it was predominantly the more well-to-do villagers who could draw easy and cheap loans from it. Already at the start of the community fund, the elite nearly monopolised it as three or four of them borrowed up to 60 percent of its total balance. Later the loans were a bit more equally divided and rich landowners and smallholders each drew 45 percent of the fund’s capital, using it either for paying their labourers, to invest in their merchant business, or to buy land and coffee trees. As the size of the fund grew, the money was also used to cover the increased administration costs and construction works such as the local school or the annual village feast (Durand 1972, 1986:183-205). In the 1970s the fund ceased to exist, almost depleted because several mayors abused it.

Recent development efforts impressed the villagers far more than the communal fund because they proved to be of greater practical use: electricity and the road. Former mayors don Gualo, don Camilo, and don Elios regard their role in securing such works as the most crucial. Don Gualo is the most outspoken with his view that development is an effort to ‘educate’ or ‘conscientise’ ‘our Indians’ (*nuestros indígenas*).

Problems in development are especially due to traditional customs and illiteracy. People need knowledge about practical things. Everything slowly changes, people have more knowledge, but it is difficult to change a culture. Many people still lag behind; in some villages they do not even want a road. Some people are against it and the others follow. (Eduardo Bravo 1989)
People have to learn a lot here, there are many problems because of a lack of culture and knowledge, and the level is low. They blame politics, but they do not know how to live, there is no consciousness. (Eduardo Bravo 1994)

Villagers generally credit the mayor responsible for securing a development work and judge the success or failure of a mayor according to what he managed to organise. They nevertheless see their own labour as more crucial. Villagers and mayors agree though, that they had to overcome outside resistance. Apparently the Nanacatecos had to stand up against Zapotitlán, the seat of the municipality, which tended to keep the benefits and the funds to themselves.

In Zapotitlán, though they are our brothers and have studied more, they fight against Nanacatlán and Tuxtla. The money is all for Zapotitlán, they do not give us even half. When we started with electricity [in 1976], they at first said it was not possible. We did not have electricity at first; Camilo Rodríguez was mayor at that time. He asked us whether we wanted electricity. When we would work together and organise faena, we would not have to buy oil and candles anymore. All shouted with loud voices “Yes”! The people were pleased, without realising it would be so much work. There was also no road in Zapotitlán yet, only until San Miguel, not even to where the road now bends. When the electricity poles arrived, they [the village authorities] went door to door, for faena. “These are heavy poles, what if someone dies because of the weight. I am only going to help when more people are doing so”, I thought. They collected three poles. The next Sunday I also went, we gathered our friends, 25 men per pole were needed. When we were ready, the engineers came to set them up. Then the electricians came to fasten the wires. We had to get the wires from as far as Xochitlán. And the thicker cables from across the river. We worked every week [on Sunday], for weeks. Then the transformers, and really, those are heavy. And then we had electric light. They had told us we would get it for free during a year, but after two months the first bills had already arrived, ha ha. (Felix Ramos 1989)

The bills were indeed a disappointment for the villagers, as they had hoped (and some might have thought) that it would cost them nothing to be connected to the electricity grid, at least for a while. But in the long run, people discovered that the bills were much cheaper than the oil and candles they used before, and that it could make life so much easier and agreeable.

The construction of the road from Zapotitlán to Nanacatlán (and further to Tuxtla and Ixtepec later on) was also something that had to be won in opposition to Zapotitlán. The shops and traders there were afraid they would lose customers, because Nanacatecos as well as customers from many villages in the area would easily be able to travel to the bigger towns to do their shopping. The people from Hueytlaapan, Ixtepec, San Martin, Tuxtla, and Zitzala for instance, would go shopping where the road was closest – first in Nanacatlán and after its further extension in Ixtepec – instead of walking all the way to Zapotitlán. Even after the state
government had approved, the Zapotecos tried to prevent road construction by blocking the bridge over the Zempoala river. But in the end the Nanacatecos won.

At that time don Elios was mayor, he was a boy, but he fought for the road, and went to Puebla and Mexico City [to the state and national authorities]. We went to the river to collect stones to make a platform for the machines. We also worked in faena across the river when the road was blocked. Because they did not give permission in Zapotitlán for cars to pass the bridge, they had already set up a blockade. But from all villages, from Hueytalpan, Zitlala, Ixtepec, Tuxtla, and Nanacatlan, they said: “Who made the bridge? Not only you from Zapotitlán, all the elderly from all villages”. They wrote a letter to Puebla. How could it be that a licenciado or an engineer from the governor would not be allowed to pass the bridge? On July 25 the engineers and licenciados came with soldiers. Nobody hears us complain about extending the road to Tuxtla or Ixtepec. Only in Ixtepec they do not give permission for the road to continue to San Juan or Caxhuaca. That is because of the merchants. They know that they will lose trade in Ixtepec. The merchandise is now sold in Ixtepec, but when the road continues, the trade moves further on. Now the people from the villages [where there is no road yet] have to come to Ixtepec. (Felix Ramos 1989)

Nanacatecos tell similar stories about building other facilities such as schools, water works, and the auditorium. They stress their own role and oppose and resist the “public transcript” (Scott 1990) of state development. 27

Nanacatecos oppose the claims of the state and local authorities on development, and boast of their hard work and enthusiasm that were much higher than that of neighbouring villages. It was quite a blow to them when Tuxtla won a major prize in the 1997 competition for the cleanest village. Tuxtla is clean and paved with natural stones (through faena) and when the authorities signed in for the competition the people made an additional effort to whitewash the village, repair and clean the streets, and to start garbage collection to a local dump. In return, the people from Tuxtla call the Nanacatecos lazy, because they could have done the same. Inter-village competition is thus thriving – with the cabecera Zapotitlán or with more friendly neighbours alike – and local pride is highly cherished and defended.

During the second half of the twentieth century the local elite controlled the village primarily to their own benefit, but they also used their skills and social networks for general village improvements. They could never have done so however, without the efforts and support of all villagers. It is ironic that the major development works the elite so much cherished, would be among the main

27 This also happens elsewhere. “Rather than solely continuing a ‘tradition’ of donating collective labor to road building and other public work projects, villagers are using memories of their work to construct historical narratives that confirm their own agency and the meaning of local-level participation” (Roseman 1996:850, see also Chamoux 1987:321-323).
catalysts of new socio-economic developments that would undermine their com­
fortable hold on the village. Economically, they experienced a relative decline as
new resources beyond their control became available to villagers. Politically, the
elite could uphold its position of power as long as the PRI’s dominance was a
matter of course. When political alternatives presented themselves in the Sierra
during the 1990s, many Nanacatecos took their chance and opposed the local
authorities. As I lived in the village during several periods, I could get more
detailed, personal and contradictory accounts of what was going on compared to
the views so far. Being in the village over a longer period of time gave me the
opportunity to witness how memories were created – and others forgotten – about
what happened just a few years ago. It was possible to distinguish similar concerns
and even similar opinions by political opponents, and I suggest that these are
likely to become the topics of future oral history. These especially concern the
negative influences of outside politics and higher-level authorities on the well-
being of the village.

The contestation of power

During my first stay in 1989, local politics was as far removed from everyone’s
mind as possible. Nanacatecos stressed that they did not want to get entangled in
political matters. During the national elections the year before, most people had in
fact voted for the presidential candidate from the opposition (Cárdenas) as else­
where in the Sierra, but Alibert was one of the few people to mention this in 1989.
At that time he was chairman of a newly established independent regional commit­
tee (unrelated to political parties), the Comité Regional de Desarrollo Rural Integral
for the improvement of hospitals, schools, water supply, roads, electricity, and
drainage. It took me some time to understand why Nanacatecos in general were
reluctant to talk about, let alone engage in politics while apparently they had been
actively involved during the presidential elections in the preceding year. It was
only after I had heard stories about what was going on in nearby Huitzilán that the
pieces started to fall into place. Although it has a mutual boundary with Nanacatlán,
the village is situated on the other side of the river and across the mountain, and as
one has to go through Zapotitlán it is a trip of several hours. Since the 1970s a
protracted fight has been going on in the town between landlords and poor peas­
ants, escalating into violence and murder when right- and left-wing peasant
organisations became involved. Following actions by a clandestine left-wing peas­
ant movement (Independent Peasant Union, UCI), landowners had sent in a number
of gunmen to suppress the movement. It came to shootouts in which dozens of
people were killed. In the 1980s landowners aligned themselves with a right-wing
peasant organisation (Antorcha Campesina) to fight the rebellious peasants. Its
local leaders managed to gain control of the key political positions because the
governor channelled funds through Antorcha Campesina. The conflict increased
and the army was sent in to stay in various parts of the Sierra during the 1980s. The
problems in Huitzilan lasted well into the 1990s and took the lives of more than 100 people.\textsuperscript{28}

With such an extreme case of political conflict in their immediate vicinity, Nanacatecos carefully avoided any open political discussion. They feared a similarly dangerous situation if they became politically active, and were afraid of the military sent to control the area and whose presence was invariably associated with petty crime, robbery, and murder. In the middle of the 1980s nobody dared leave his or her home after dark.

Groups of armed men would travel through, using the path above Nanacatlán. People would stay indoors in the evening. Several times these men attacked trucks, when they knew they carried money. Several years ago even some people from Tuxtla and Nanacatlán got killed. People were afraid to walk between the villages and only travelled by truck or bus. These would wait for each other and only drive together. One time some men from Zapotitlán came to warn us that another group from Huitzilan was on its way and then the village men set out and arrested some of them. Another time they were seen to go to Hueytlaapan. After killing someone from Nanacatlán, the men then set out again and accidentally killed someone from Hueytlaapan; three men were burned alive. (Susana Ramos 1989)

The reluctance of Nanacatecos to engage in politics typical for the 1980s, turned around during the 1990s. The conflict in Huitzilan had subsided (diminished, as I learned later) when I arrived in 1994; everybody talked about political tensions and disagreements and every debate was framed around the PRI-PRD controversy that dominated Mexican politics at that time and the presidential elections of that year. There is no easy way to characterise the two opposing factions. Most mestizos continued to support the PRI, although one (Genaro Bravo) was the initiator of the new PRD. Several Totonac elite and sub-elite members sided with the new opposition party. Many of the villagers who had always been critical of PRI-dominated village affairs joined the PRD, but then again, others chose to support their PRI compadres or patrons. Catholics could be found in both parties, but people active in the religious cargos where mainly in favour of the PRD. Protestants invariably supported the PRI, though they always declared to refrain from politics. Most

\textsuperscript{28}The conflict began with land occupations in the Cuetzalan area, led by the clandestine UCI, also rumoured to be involved in shootouts with landlord gunmen in Xochitlán, Huehuetla, and Huitzilan (Edelman 1980:35). Huitzilan is mentioned in Amnesty International's annual report of 1986 because of human rights violations such as executions (Amnesty International 1987).\textit{Antorcha Campesina}, linked to the PRI and its National Peasant Confederation (CNC), had become a powerful organisation in the 1980s in various parts of the state of Puebla, among them the area near Zacapoaxtla, and they were active against independent peasant organisations. When peasant organisations affiliated with the left-wing PSUM (Unified Socialist Party of Mexico) it became a bloody conflict (Panster 1990:163). For more recent information see www.antorchacampesina.org.mx. In March 2004 UCI filed a complaint against AC, whom they accused of 24 murders and five abductions in Huitzilan. UCI claims that there were more than 150 murders since the 1970s, the majority by AC members. AC accuses UCI members of killing two longstanding AC activists in Huitzilan in February and April 2004 (\textit{La Jornada}, 15 March 2004; \textit{El Sol de Puebla} 6 April 2004).
people were far from active supporters. What the more militant new PRD activists had in common was that they were young, better educated, and better informed about national issues than the generations before them. The most significant development was however, that the PRI in the course of this process eventually lost its hegemony, though not its majority. A detailed analysis of the political upheaval provides an insight into how Nanacatecos deal with internal conflicts, how they relate their local world to what is happening at the national stage, and how they found a common ground to remain locals against the outside world. Maybe for the first time in its history as a village, the local was so closely linked to the national through migration, education, and mass media that Nanacatlán seemed to have become a 'Mexican village' instead of a rural indigenous village in the Sierra Norte de Puebla. As we will see however, there was a strong similarity with the ways politics operated in the past: notwithstanding the national party rhetoric, most Nanacatecos were expressing local concerns (see also Brewster 1998, 2003:32-34).

The PRI from the Mexican into the global arena

For the PRI, 1994 was its annus horribilis: the New Year opened with the well-timed Chiapas uprising by the Zapatistas (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN), followed in March by the shooting of presidential candidate Colosio. In August the PRI did win the 1994 presidential elections with a new candidate as expected, and hope was now set on the new president, Zedillo, who would take office in December 1994. The shooting of the general secretary of the PRI (José Francisco Ruiz Massieu) in September killed the hope of political relaxation and peace after the presidential elections. The dramatic devaluation of the peso in December just after Zedillo took over cast a damper over the expectation that economic growth would be a way out of political troubles.

Like other Latin American countries, Mexico had been plagued with economic problems since the 1970s; its most salient features were a serious external state debt, rising unemployment, and inflation. Latin American governments had traditionally played the role of intermediaries between their national economies and the world market, but the crises in the 1980s had seriously undermined their position (Fitzgerald 1991). In Mexico this opened the opportunity for the so-called technocrats, especially interested in strengthening the PRI through economic and political reforms that allowed Mexico to participate in global economics, culminating in the privatisation of most state companies, state budget cuts, and participation within the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) implemented in January 1994 under president Salinas. In their global orientation the technocrats had alienated

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29 Academically trained politicians interested in a professional administration based on technical criteria for decision-making, see Silva 1996.
30 With it came the fiercest and most globalised critique by the Zapatistas, who with their use of armed force, fax and e-mail, media coverage, and indigenous practices are claimed to be a fascinating post-modern approach to indigenous autonomy (Gossen 1996; Nash 1997). Many intellectuals who had separated themselves from the state after the 1968 killing of student protesters during the Olympic
themselves from other major actors on the political stage, especially since their own networks were limited to upper and upper-middle classes, and because the budget cuts they proposed had serious consequences for hundreds of politicians and trade unionists who in the past could use these state funds to provide favours for their clients.\textsuperscript{31} This weakening of the PRI as a political machine enabled the major opposition parties PRD and PAN to mobilize so many people during the 1988 presidential elections that Salinas only won through an (even for Mexico) unprecedented fraud (Buve 1992; Kerr 1994; Silva 1996). The unpopular start of his presidency probably prompted Salinas to pay more attention to mobilizing popular support, for which he launched the ambitious programme of social aid and action: \textit{Solidaridad}, under the wings of the PRI. It was the implementation of this programme that triggered political conflicts in Nanacatlán.

\textit{The paradox of local politics}

Though local level politics may be cast in terms of global and national issues, they are still very much characterised by a local political discourse of envy and communality. Problems in Nanacatlán began in 1992 with the awarding of 24 \textit{Solidaridad} allowances for primary and secondary school pupils. Even PRI supporters like Abraham (a cousin of Alibert) acknowledged the problems.

\begin{quote}
It started with the allowances being given to relatives of the mayor and of the authorities, and not to those who were in need. The mayor should have written out a census. Around the corner here lives a sick man who needed it, or further on the man who is almost blind. The people who received the allowance did not turn up for \textit{faena}, and then the others became angry. Now people demand money for \textit{faena}, and they want the money for the presidency to be used for \textit{faena} payments. (Abraham Jiménez 1994)\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

During the elections for municipal mayor in 1992 and village mayor in 1993, the PRD came with its own candidates for the first time. PRD followers accused the (invariably PRI) authorities of pocketing village funds or distributing them among their friends and relatives instead of using them for the benefit of the village and the poorest families. PRI followers denied that they were engaged in political games and according to them it was the PRD followers who started the problems and who were only interested in money. The new mayor (elected in 1992) who had

\begin{footnotes}
\item[31] The Mexican electorate and in particular the trade unions had traditionally been controlled by local political strongmen who because of the PRI hegemony had managed to monopolize votes, although this also resulted in fossilization and unkept promises (Buve 1992:301).
\item[32] \textit{Faena} is always an easy subject for discontent. Chamoux (1987:314-315) distinguishes three main critiques against the authorities: to doubt the legitimacy of the \textit{faena}; to accuse the authorities of stealing village funds; and as opposition between village quarters (about who works and who benefits). Such critiques are often related to different social and economic interests.
\end{footnotes}
awarded the allowances had to step down after three months in power. Even PRI supporters were not content.

The last mayor [of Nanacatlán] did not even listen to PRI people, his own party. How is that possible? It means something is going on. He was elected in November and had to resign after three months. The mayor in Zapotitlán wanted him as mayor here, but he has his own interests. (Abraham Jiménez 1994)

His predecessor Elios Bravo however, had also been the target of criticism from PRD followers who accused him of embezzling money from village projects (though he never mentioned it). I had to hear it from his wife Lupe.

Elios was very disappointed about Alibert, who talked badly of him, whereas they used to get along very well before. Elios never went to any meetings, not of the PRI or the PRD. The parties would meet every Sunday in Zapotitlán. When he was mayor a window was broken by Constantino [one of the young PRD activists] who threw a brick and my son Irmin was just sleeping there, because it had been so hot that I put him to sleep during the day at the other side of the house. I wanted to go to his house to complain, but Elios did not want me to. The sons of don Gustavo fought with him [Constantino], because he had been very difficult to their father. (Lupe Ortega 1994)

Unlike in previous decades when the PRI was the only political organization at the village level, dissatisfaction with the implementation of Solidaridad projects could now be translated into political opposition. This in turn stimulated further criticism and accusations between followers of different parties, sometimes resulting in fights. The PRI still won both the 1992 municipal mayor and the 1993 village mayor elections, after which the PRD followers refused to work in communal village labour (faena). That undermined village life and was an obstacle for the implementation of the Solidaridad projects for the enlargement of the secondary school and the improvement of water supply.

In 1994 the political fissure received a new impetus because of the presidential elections. Not everyone dared be involved because there were rumours that another allowance – the Procampo subsidy for maize and coffee that almost every village household had received since its start in 1993 – would have to be returned with interest if the PRI lost the elections. In July for the first time in history, a presidential candidate visited the Sierra Norte, the well-known Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the opposition party PRD. He had been the favourite candidate in the elections of 1988, and only lost because of a suspicious computer breakdown during vote-counting. From Nanacatlán I joined a small number of mainly young people who wanted to attend the rally in Zapotitlán where Cárdenas would speak. About 900 people had turned up for the occasion and most were clearly not accustomed to their role as political activists. They merely laughed or kept silent during the moments they were expected to repeat the slogans shouted by the party campaign-
ers, except for the more active followers of the *Organización Independiente Totonaca* (Independent Totonac Organisation, OIT)\(^{33}\) from Huehuetla. Among the PRD members on the platform with Cárdenas I recognised Alibert Jiménez, who had risen to regional prominence in the party. When we walked back to the village after his rather dull presentation, everybody was in high spirits and ready to take up fighting if necessary, as my fieldnotes show.

We return home, even though there are calls to stay behind for party announcements. Why didn’t they do that in the afternoon while we were waiting? The bus drivers do not want to drive to Ixtepec, because they would have to return empty, as there are already buses there for tomorrow morning. We walk in the dark, later helped by the moon; luckily it has stopped raining. Especially the young PRD-followers in the group talk about the PRD winning the elections as long as there is no fraud; about United Nations observers that have been sent; about the southern state of Chiapas where the guerrilla leader commandante Marcos has promised twenty years of war if the PRD looses; and how stupid the people in Tuxtla are to continue supporting the PRI--they are afraid. Times ahead will be difficult in Mexico [I was thinking] as I fear the PRI will remain the biggest party because the opposition is divided among several parties; no one outside the PRI will believe that the victory could have been achieved without fraud. (Fieldnotes 21 July 1994)

The young people were convinced that the PRD could only be withheld from victory if the PRI again took everybody for a ride. However, it was generally expected in Mexico City that the PRI would win even without a major fraud. They still ruled the country but most of all what meant excitement for the young people I walked with many others feared: the prospect of trouble and chaos. Especially PRI members – but also other Nanacatecos – were afraid a situation similar to Chiapas might occur in the Sierra and they were as much afraid of rebels as the inevitable arrival of the army it would provoke. They remembered too well the problems in the 1980s and how they only increased after the army came.\(^{34}\) The PRI won in Nanacatlan with 150 votes to 100 for the PRD. Camilo Rodriguez was local observer for the PRI, and Alibert Jiménez for the PRD. There was a general consensus in the village that the actual ballot had been fair. PRI members such as Elios extended this to the whole country.

\(^{33}\) An activist parish priest, a cadre of Carmelite nuns, and some Totonac community leaders founded OIT in 1989. A coalition between OIT and PRD held the municipal presidency for nine years. In 1998 the PRI regained power and OIT dwindled through repression and internal divisions. Lately it integrated with UNITONA (*Unidad Indígena Totonaca-Nahua*), a new regional network of Totonac and Nahua organisations (Smith 2004; Ellison 2004:525-541; Wahrhaftig and Lane 1997).

\(^{34}\) The fear of chaos that I noticed in the village seems to have been a general fear, and the PRI was well aware of this. Not only did they manage to label the PRD as a party of violence, the political opposition themselves were unable to develop their own political discourse or an alternative political programme that could have reassured people. The general atmosphere of distrust could therefore easily include the PRD as well. The PRI won the 1994 presidential elections because it was at least a known and stable option (McDonald 1997; Aitken 1999:180-208).
The newspapers in California have written that these were the cleanest elections in the history of Mexico, an example for the United States. It is in the newspapers here. There were mistakes before the elections with names and the signing of results out of ignorance because it was the first time. (Elios Bravo 1994)

PRD members such as Alibert started stressing fraud before the elections, though with a lot more calm than before because they were well aware that they came in third behind the right-wing PAN:

There are many ways to commit fraud: through pressure by employers on their labourers to vote for the PRI, or on groups who work for the government to vote for the PRI; by handing out money by the government for projects; out of custom, because of voting for the PRI for many years, or as an obligation to family or compadres. Fraud is not necessarily committed on Election Day only. And then, there is the familiarity of the PRI through commercials and among people who cannot read and write. I always read the Jornada [newspaper], because it is from the PRD while the others are all from the government. The Jornada already writes a bit more truthful. In other newspapers they wrote there were only 200 people in Zapotitlán [for the visit of Cardenas], and that is definitely untrue, I would say about 1000, or to be on the safe side between 900 and 1000. (Alibert Jiménez 1994)

Paradoxically, PRI and PRD followers in Nanacatlán have a lot in common in their evaluation of the political state of affairs and especially in their shared mistrust of the PRI. When it comes to municipal, state, or national politics all Nanacatecos complain that their village is neglected and under funded. Outside the village even the highest local authority is relatively powerless as he is at the bottom of the political hierarchy. Politics may divide but can also unite Nanacatecos, as it did even during the tense 1990s. Most villagers saw the murder of presidential candidate Colosio as ordered by president Salinas whom they also heavily criticize for his corruption. Both PRI and PRD followers unite in criticizing the municipal (PRI) authorities in Zapotitlán for not consulting Nanacatlán and Tuxtla about the candidates for mayor in the municipal elections. Moreover, they accuse the municipal authorities of keeping the majority of the state funds only for Zapotitlán instead of providing the auxiliary villages with their fair share. But when it comes to the village itself, agreements are short-lived. Even people who were fierce opponents though, were reluctant to break off all ties.

In September 1994 a younger brother of Alibert died of heart problems when he was only 37 years old. When a villager dies every household sends someone to pay their respects, with some small presents, while men who know the family well stay for a while at night during the wake. Lupe went and embraced Alibert when they met. They talked about how sad it is to lose a brother. In the evening Elios left for the wake despite initial doubts, and his wife Lupe strongly encouraged him. He came back somewhat sooner than expec-
ted because he had been amidst only PRD-followers, and this had made him uncomfortable.

Lupe was no exception in trying to bridge strained relations. Women were often in favour of continuing or resuming contacts and especially so when a breach of contact would include members of their support and exchange network. On the other hand, people also were able to resume relations without losing face or feeling too awkward by simply resuming the customs expected within their networks, such as visiting for a wake or giving food.

*Reluctant PRI or PRD support*

In the mid-1990s, apart from some main activists, people were not very outspoken about their political allegiance. It seems that people favour a party for reasons other than its politics. Some supporters of parties were what one could expect: many *mestizos* who had been or at the time were village officials, sided with the PRI. The better-off Totonacs and religious specialists took their chance at political influence by supporting the PRD. But it would be a grave mistake to try and make clear-cut boundaries between *mestizos* and indigenous people in terms of politics: a former mayor (*mestizo*) had founded the local chapter of the PRD and many indigenous people voted for the PRI. Protestants would not actively campaign for politics, but in general they supported the PRI. Leobardo Jiménez, a Jehovah Witness, was the exception when he joined his family in supporting the PRD. He even went to Zapotitlán to see Cárdenas and support his brother Alibert. When I asked him about it after the elections he simply said: "I am a Jehovah Witness, we do not engage in politics". Other families were split by political disagreements though. Some people would support the party of their patron, but others would also include their own patron and *compadre* in the accusations in a very aggressive and open way. When the former PRD leader Genaro Bravo moved on to start a local branch of the left-wing Labour Party (PT) after the elections, some PRD activists did not hesitate to follow him. Esteban, the son of the religious cargos president, and Alibert were among them.

Sometimes I was surprised to find PRI supporters where I had not expected them, such as Pedro and Irene who had never voted for the PRI before. In these days of turmoil they felt it their duty to continue their communal tasks. By doing so they were seen as PRI supporters, the more so as they stood behind their PRI patron and *compadre* Elios, who was accused of corruption when he was mayor. They simply did not believe this and felt it as an insult to themselves. In their eyes Elios had done well, because when he was mayor a lot had been achieved. According to Irene they were entitled to receive a *Solidaridad* allowance for their son, but when the problems started they were glad they didn’t, as it would have implicated them in the corruption charges.
I used to vote for Cardenas, like many here. I always voted for the PRD, but not since the problems started. Many people were always pro-PRI but they aren't any more. I changed sides because I was a member of the school committee and the committee for the reconstruction of the secondary school auditorium. I always went to the presidency and therefore people said to me “You are from the PRI”. I never supported the PRD because they were so aggressive. And then they said a lot of things about my compadre, and I had to stand by his side. And furthermore, I knew that they were wrong, that they said things that were not true. I have more sympathy for the PAN now. Pedro always used to vote for the PPS, and now for the first time PRI. (Irene Castañeda 1994)

In the course of events Pedro was drawn willy-nilly into the PRI despite his reluctance, and he made it to chair of the local PRI committee. In the end Irene abstained from voting for any party. Pedro never ceased to amaze me; in 1996 he easily shifted allegiances and joined the PT for a while. His explanation was not very clear, perhaps even to himself.

When the PT representatives arrived I asked them various questions. They said they not only wanted to organise the party but would also support the marketing of regional products. But until now they have not done so. My aim was to thwart the PRD, because they insult the PRI and are unsupportive of the village with their refusal to do faena. I was foolish, because my own friends from the PRI, like the mayor from Zapotitlán, did not trust me. I did not care to win or lose, but it is better that there are more than two parties, who make trouble, but better between three parties, so that people react. But why I never explained myself to the municipal PRI is because they never invited the PRI committees of Nanacatlán and Tuxtla. Partly I did it for this reason; because I wanted a candidate from Nanacatlán and Tuxtla [for the municipal mayor elections] and not just a regidor. (Pedro Ramos 1996)

For Pedro and Irene the most important reason to stay away from the PRD was that they felt its political criticism interfered with the well-being of their village.

Nobody wants to work for the school in faena, only the people who received the grant because they have to. But only a few people show up, while before everybody came to work, like when the auditorium was built. Now people only weed a bit, because they want money. But it surely is our village that we have to take care of. (Irene Castañeda 1994)

Women would often say that they were not interested, let alone involved in politics. They would just repeat their husbands’ points of view. This is a general way women talk about issues that concern the village, but does not accurately describe their attitude or role. Women have many ways to show their opinion without speaking.

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35 PAN: National Action Part (see chapter 2); PPS: Popular Socialist Party.
Genaro introduced the PRD in the village and when shortly after he tried to distance himself when things got rough, women forced him to join the meetings because “since he had started the trouble that our husbands had joined, he was not going to get away from it”. Women also could stop greeting or visiting others and even more conspicuously could stop exchanging food with members from the other party or continue to do so even with their husbands political enemies. Irene had to be careful in dealing with her own and her husband’s relatives. She has daily contact with her aunt and especially her two cousins, but this was not always the case in the past when politics coincided with and reinforced other tensions. Irene didn’t get along with her husband’s sister Tomasa for a while either. Although Elios was also her compadre, she and her husband joined the opposition and even shouted accusations against him in public. Thereafter Elios no longer wanted to employ him as day-labourer. Irene also decided against Tomasa:

I have problems with my sister-in-law because she does not support her compadre. She talks about him and about us as well, that we are more or less well off because my compadre gave us money [from the presidency, when he was mayor] (Irene Castañeda 1994)

Similarly a family dispute over inheritance provided fuel for political divisions:

My grandmother had a sitio that she gave to her son under the condition that he would take care of her. He does not support her with anything, not even a dime, and even the mayor Genaro told Pedro that I was entitled to have the sitio. I still remember when my grandfather was dying what he told my grandmother; I was ten years old: “Do not give it to anyone, not even your son, leave it to the person who took care of you”. But my grandmother did not listen, because she loves her son very much. I do not want any problems and neither did Pedro, and therefore we did not reclaim. There was also distance between us for a while because of the politics. They went over to the PRD, because they promised them a lot, but nothing came of it. (Irene Castañeda 1994)

Despite these problems Irene tried to maintain relations even when they were at their most tense. For women the easiest way to do so is by continuing food exchanges (see chapter 7).

I do not get along well with my sister-in-law but I bring her food anyhow, otherwise she says I forget her. I do not want to have more problems. You can choose not to bring food to relatives, or to comadres, but then you increase the problems. I therefore prefer to keep doing it. (Irene Castañeda 1994)

36 Doña Marina Jiménez was an exception in openly deviating from her husband’s political stance, the wealthy don Felipe, a fervent PRI supporter until his death. She, a cousin of Alibert and Leobardo, studied in Mexico City in 1968 and never forgave the PRI for the killing of students.
The hustle of the presidential elections and the local havoc of 1994 didn’t last long and afterwards people faced the need to normalize relations with political opponents they used to be on friendly terms with. In the heat of the political clash even siblings and *compadres* had been out of touch and often didn’t visit each other anymore or refused to work together. For a small village with face-to-face contacts such general avoidance between large parts of the community is fatal. Since there is no repertoire of political discussion between opponents, the only solution is to engage in clashes or withdraw from the political domain. In Nanacatlan this meant that by 1996 many villagers avoided official politics. Slowly people took up community labour again. As we see in the next chapter, people were not reluctant to work for the community when it came to ritual life. PRD followers merely opposed village works because they saw it as part of politics and benefiting the authorities more than the villagers. Some people who saw *faena* as benefiting the village – and Pedro was among them – were actively trying to resume community labour, with success. In April 1996 about 30 men were building a wall to protect the secondary school from landslides. When I came back to village in 1997, the waterworks had been finished in most of the village, with several water taps per street.

Though the PRI won all the elections in Nanacatlan in the 1990s, this does not mean that politics continued like before. One crucial difference with the past is that, after already losing much of their socio-economic influence, the local elite’s political power has become seriously contested. The elite moreover, are no longer unanimous in their political affiliation. Instead of ruling the village as a matter of course, they had to make an effort to gain political support. When they failed to do so in the local elections of 1996, villagers did not show up for the elections. While this used to be the usual state of affairs, the elite can no longer be sure whether opposition will erupt again and how this will affect future elections. They will probably never be able to regain the political hegemony they had. Personal ambitions still find enough outlets and in 1999 yet another party, the PAN, entered the political arena on the local mayoral elections with don Camilo Rodriguez as candidate. The elite may continue their control precisely by dividing themselves across

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37 The opposition PRD-activists in the village were so involved in criticizing the PRI, not only at the village or municipal level but drawing comparisons with national problems, that they failed to see not only the local power basis of the PRI but the rejection of many villagers of their actions as too disruptive to village life. In a sense they did not recognize the power of rumours. PRD activists thought that revealing ‘the truth’ about PRI manipulations was enough to win votes. They did not understand that the general atmosphere of suspicion about any truth made it hard for many villagers to also believe them. The fraud that led to Salinas’s victory in 1988, for instance, was not always attributed to the PRI. Many villagers told me they thought it meant that Cardenas had sold his votes. Too many villagers therefore could not imagine how a new party would or could be in power, let alone in a peaceful way. This aspect of distrusting politics, in many parts of Mexico paradoxically enough favoured the ruling PRI above the opposition (Kerr 1994:30). The working of rumours is especially important when people are reluctantly drawn into party politics, as was the case in Nanacatlan. They distrust or are not familiar with official party opinions and rarely have access to independent media for information or alternative opinions. Even in more activist places like Huehuetla, no more than 50% supported the PRD or the OIT (Ellison 2004: 528; Vall Verdú 1998, though Smith (2004:407) mentions 75%, for the coffee activities of OIT.
different parties, but they will not be able to use their social network the way they could in the times of the one and only PRI. Their supra-local contacts, important to hold the villagers' support, will depend on their access to the networks of specific parties to a large extent.

Conclusions

While the social landscape has been further differentiated, the political landscape has become fragmented as well. For the community to continue to exist, the issue has become one of how to counterbalance these centrifugal forces. What can Nanacateco history mean and offer as a centripetal force? Obviously, the further back in time, the greater the consensus about what happened in the past. Nanacatecos share and cherish their historias of a rich past that vanished because of enticements in other places, encroachments from outsiders, and the devastating impact of epidemics which makes the present village land much smaller than before and reduced the number of its inhabitants. Villagers easily unite in drawing their boundaries vis-à-vis other villages and against absentee landowners who appropriated lands that rightly belonged to Nanacatlan. Even political opponents close the ranks when it comes to putting Nanacatlan first against outsiders who interfere in village affairs, like the "people from the Zapotitlan municipality", corrupt state officials from Puebla, or PRI politicians. In that respect, sharing and defending common interests against external threats is a major factor in reinforcing a sense of belonging to Nanacatlan. Often it is the local elite who represents the village in those confrontations, and in doing so live up to the claim of village leadership.

But when it comes to local internal issues, the apparent unity easily breaks down. Recent history is a contested domain on which villagers more often than not hold rather different and sometimes opposite opinions and interpretations, depending upon their personal interests and the faction they belong to. This is most obvious when it comes to the history of land ownership. Totonacs, and partially the small peasants and landless among them, tell the stories of how mestizo and some Totonac families have managed to wheedle the Nanacatecos out of their lands through mean tricks and sheer fraud – something which of course, is adamantly denied by the accused who stress that they rightfully required their land holdings. Similar differences in historical consciousness and memory exist about who were the most important to bring development to Nanacatlan: the elite stressing their initiatives against the initially reluctant villagers, or the other villagers pointing out they with their own hands connected Nanacatlan to the power supply, and constructed the road and water supply.

The mestizo-Totonac divide is visible in the representation of history, with the mestizos distinguishing themselves in their way of life and their close ties to state officials and involvement in regional and national affairs – and increasingly in international affairs as well. Even so, the divide was not absolute, as a considerable number of Totonacs had aligned themselves to the mestizo power holders by being
part of the local authority system of political cargos and reliable peones and compadres. Moreover, mestizos and Totonacs to a large extent agreed that the municipal or state authorities did not always act in the interest of the village. In the past decades, quite a few Totonacs have also become traders and landowners and started working in new urban employment, developing supra-local interests, and following urban lifestyles comparable to the mestizo families. This changed the old social stratification in that the indigenous villagers are no longer completely dependent upon the local elite for work and security. The opening up of long-time socio-economic dependency relations together with the opening up of the Sierra brought new religious and political differentiation and opposition to Nanacatlán.

It is easy to imagine that this growing heterogeneity could have created strong centrifugal tendencies leading to major splits along these fault lines. For a while this seemed to be happening during the political disagreements. It is the more remarkable that such splits have not occurred, although at times tensions ran high. In many ways, villagers in Nanacatlán were trying to live up to their ideal of a united village, though this would have been far more difficult were it not that a number of villagers actively encouraged such unity and took the lead in trying to continue to feel responsible for the community as a whole. Regular disagreements and conflicts may crop up but most people are afraid that if they last too long, they might seriously disrupt community life. When the critique of political opponents threatened to do exactly that, even people who agreed with their words, turned away from their fights. The example of nearby Huitzilan torn apart by lasting and violent conflict may have been a strong deterrent. But it is not only out of fear that people stress the maintenance of community life and the need to contain disputes. When political opposition became so strong that PRD followers refused to participate in communal labour (such as faena for secondary school enlargement and water pipe fittings) this was seen by others as dangerously trespassing the boundaries of the community. What appeared to be crucial, were the continued initiatives by some villagers to perform such duties and to try and convince others to join them. They are social brokers in the sense that they bring people together and bridge communication gaps, though not to provide personal access to resources and knowledge (see Boissevain 1974:147-148) but for the benefit of the community (which also brings personal advantages but less direct and not always immediate). Nanacatecos saw more in joining these community brokers when politics became heavy.

One of the ways to contain the tensions and accommodate conflicts in the long run is by stressing the communality of local histories as told in stories and cuentos. The distant past serves as a firm ground of villagehood, the more so as the stories of local conflicts are narratives about a past within well-known boundaries, people, places, and bones of contention. Social and cultural differentiation may have blurred some of the old dividing lines within Nanacatlán but it has not wiped out the old dichotomy of villagers and outsiders and even migrants are careful not to transgress that boundary. When they return to the village they catch up with the latest stories and rumours because only by knowing, sharing, and understanding these stories so
strongly embedded in the physical and social landscape, can they create a sense of belonging. Villagers are united in a local past and it is impossible to understand the present or disagree on local issues without such common ground. The unison around village development against outside threats depends on sharing stories to cross the obvious boundaries of social differentiation. Language is ambiguous, like rituals (Cohen 1985); different interpretations of local stories exist, but exactly this makes it interesting and relevant to continue telling them. Their local spatial and personal details ensure sufficient common ground for mutual understanding and creating a more canonised repertoire of the ancient past, where disputes are no longer important and agreement coincides with a shared glorious past. More important than having the same stories, is being prepared to tell, listen, and understand. To be Nanacateco thus means to know, to share, and to dispute the ‘real truth’ of the historias of Nanacatlán and thus continue the past into the future.

In the next chapter we see that such a shared repertoire is also noticeable in the cuentos people tell each other, though this is a more ambivalent category of stories. They explain how human beings relate to the social, natural, and supernatural world and provide villagers with a worldview based on exchange between these three domains. When relations between humans and the natural and supernatural world are at fault, people will fall ill. Illness, including its causes and healing, is therefore a pivotal part of the worldview. While the historias represent the ideological domain of what it means to live in Nanacatlan and be a Nanacateco, the cuentos provide the morality of being a Totonac villager, which to a large extent crosses denominational religious boundaries, but often specifically excludes mestizos.