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

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CHAPTER 6
CREATING COSTUMBRES

After an absence of almost five years I returned to Nanacatlán in 1994 and found to my amazement a new grocery store on the main street under the name *Tienda Totonaca* (Totonac shop). What struck me was the adjective Totonac. Though most people in Nanacatlán are of Totonac descent, they seldom refer to themselves as such but prefer to speak of ‘Nanacatecos’. I had known the shop owner, Bernadino, a single man in his early thirties, as one of the dancers of the *Voladores* (Flyers). In 1989 he and several others had begun to revive this famous Totonac dance after it had been nearly forgotten for several decades. They had learned it from a troupe in neighbouring Hueytlalpan who had been asked to come and perform it at the village feast. The dance itself is a spectacular performance: five men climb to the top of a 20-metre pole, where four tie ropes around their waists. After the leader, standing on the top, has played his flute, the men drop off backwards, spiralling downwards until their heads are just inches from the ground. No one could tell me at the time what the dance was all about, but the leader from Hueytlalpan told me that “there are books that explain it all”. In the years to follow, young people added several other dances to the village repertoire and they gained prominence in community festivities – “to keep from losing the *costumbres*”, as people would say. Bernadino had become one of the enthusiastic instigators of the new interest in ‘culture’.

When I met Bernadino again in 1994, he told me that he was now able to explain the dance because he had learned a lot about Totonac culture. His activities as a catechist in the Roman Catholic Church had taken him to a course in Huehuetla, where he had been taught about the Totonac year cycle and how the *Voladores* depicted this. The course had been organised by a group of activist priests, adherents of liberation theology\(^1\), who had initiated the OIT in Huehuetla to preserve and stimulate Totonac culture. This fit nicely with activities from Mexican state organisations such as INI and INEA, which had also become active in projects for cultural revival. In 1979, INI started the first indigenous radio station, and in 1994 *La Voz de la Sierra Norte* came on the air. By then Bernadino had become a prominent advocate of Totonac culture and had been on the radio several times to explain about the *Voladores* and the history of Nanacatlán. He had written that history based on stories he had heard from older people. He also took Totonac language

\(^1\) A progressive Catholic theology in Latin America with an emphasis on social reform to liberate the poor from oppression, termed ‘Indian Theology’ in the Sierra (Smith 2004:406).
courses given by the INEA, later become a language teacher, and in 1997 was to be appointed coordinator of the subregion around Ixtepec, which includes Nanacatlán. In the years in which he had become an activist, Bernadino was one of the young people who supported the new opposition party PRD, and directed their actions against the ruling PRI authorities. After the 1994 elections however, Bernadino like several other villagers, left the party because as he said, there was no real difference between the two parties: “People are just in it for the money”. As his interest in ‘traditional culture’ grew and as he increasingly presented himself as a spokesman of Totonac traditions, he came into conflict with other Nanacatecos over his interpretations of local customs. It was particularly his role as self-appointed ‘cultural innovator’ which was called into question, the more so when he started interfering in local Catholic rituals. He was therefore not considered of proper stature, because he did not belong to the religious cargo holders that have authority in these costumbres. The last time I visited him in 1998, Bernardino was still active for the Totonac cause as a regional coordinator of the INEA, but was no longer involved in the local community or in its public rituals. That did not mean that villagers had lost interest in customs. On the contrary, celebrations and dances in the local customary fashion were there to stay.

**The growing interest in local rituals**

When Protestantism started to spread in the Sierra in the late 1940s, it did so particularly by criticizing the lavishness of Catholic festivals and fiestas, which sometimes led to heavy debts for the leading participants. Not only were they presented as superstitious rituals but as useless time- and money-consuming performances. As the latter seemed to hit a nerve, people from the Sierra started to counter the challenge by simplifying the religious cargos (see Ichon 1973:376). Ritual performances were also scaled down in Nanacatlán, against the wishes of the clergy. People began to economize on the lavish firework displays, big parties, and the dances that used to accompany the ritual calendar (Masferrer 1984:28). Ichon (1973:376) even concluded in the sixties that the dances in the Sierra were about to disappear. At the same time, other parts of the customary domain were fading – with characteristic Totonac clothing and language the most striking examples.

The slump in rituals however, turned out to be a temporary decline. People fearing a total disappearance of local costumbres tried to turn the tide. It was especially the young people and migrants who since the late 1980s had become actively engaged in local customs and in bringing back some of the lustre and abundance of the old religious celebrations: annual rituals like those of the village patron, Christmas, and Semana Santa became much more lively and bustling. Many dances reappeared on the scene. This did not necessarily imply a return to traditional village lifestyle; the youngsters and migrants were as interested in modern ways of living.

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2 For an overview and explanation of the dances see annex 6 and Govers 1998.
with television, popular music, and urbane outfits, as they were in costumbres. These symbols of modernity also included celebrations such as the feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe (the Mexican national symbol par excellence), birthday parties (formerly only celebrated by mestizo and well-to-do Totonac villagers), and the typical Mexican piñata, the decorated clay pot full of sweets that blindfolded children take turns trying to smash with a stick at parties. Another popular modern activity had started decades ago when the basketball games became a school activity. Large crowds now gather to watch these games between school teams (from neighbouring villages) and especially the main intra-village competition during the patron feast.

Bernadino and the other active young people had contributed in their role as cultural and ethnic brokers or entrepreneurs to this mixture of old and new celebrations. Such a mobilising role is not only crucial for ethnic (Barth 1994) but also for local groups. These brokers very often draw their position from the ambiguity of living in two cultures and are thus by definition also part of the supra-local world. They are the products and vectors of change and modernity while presenting themselves as cultural spokesmen (Morin and Saladin d’Anglure 1997:185); alienated from but simultaneously conscious of tradition (Eller 1999:44). Bernadino, who had been educated in Spanish, worked in Mexico City, and later in life became literate in Totonac, is a clear example of such a broker. He is part of a new generation that actively participates in reviving local customs to preserve them; though he later increasingly met with opposition, he was quite successful to begin with.

People use the common Spanish word costumbres or sometimes tradición or cultura to describe the range of village rituals, standardised exchanges, and celebrations that are said to have been handed down by the ancestors and have therefore acquired the patina of respectability and sacredness. As in the previous chapters on historias and cuentos, people may have different interpretations of the meaning of rituals and the way in which they should be performed, but they do share a general repertoire of which costumbres have to be observed and how and when they have to be practiced.

The question I address in this chapter is how the increasing interest in local customs (and in what kinds of customs in particular) arose alongside a growing impact of a globalised and modern lifestyle (see chapter 1). At the same time, there seems to be some uncertainty or even contestation as the Bernardino case suggests, about how to define and ‘shape’ custom and who is allowed to do so. Clearly, costumbres are not static institutions: in Nanacatlán, they have also changed in the past and are changing in the present – in short: they are being created on the go. What one can now observe is a stark increase in the frequency and elaborateness of rituals from the past and rituals introduced to the village from the urban context. In this chapter I therefore also raise the question of how and when new incorporations occur and when they are rejected. I subsequently discuss costumbres related to agricultural practices, life cycle events, community celebrations, and statehood.
Agriculture and *mano vuelta*

In agriculture *costumbres* focus on the crops grown, the land, and the people working the land (table 6.1). Rituals tend to be more elaborate for maize (see chapter 5) but there are also some for coffee. People say that in the past the maize rituals were much more common, and that only a few have survived. This seems to be an overall trend in the Sierra, although in some of the Protestant villages the decline has been much steeper. Garma (1984) noticed among Protestants in the neighbouring village of Ixtepec that agricultural rituals have disappeared and that this coincided with the introduction of coffee as a cash crop in the Sierra. In his view, Protestantism separates agriculture from religion, and is therefore much more adapted to the capitalist market while popular Catholicism is more integrated into traditional subsistence agriculture. This distinction between Protestants and Catholics does not exist in Nanacatlán. In the previous chapter we saw that the Nanacateco worldview is more or less shared between people of different religious backgrounds, and that Protestants can and do practice the agricultural rituals although they cross out obvious Catholic ones such as the processions and the veneration of saints. We also find a general decline in the observation of agricultural rituals, regardless of religion.

**Table 6.1: Agricultural and mutual help costumbres**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milpa</th>
<th>Lunar calculations and rituals for planting, folding maize stems, weeding, and harvesting (especially food rituals).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coffee land</td>
<td>Lunar calculations for planting and pruning, minor food rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>House (re)building</td>
<td>Food rituals on a temporary altar, occasionally with <em>compadres</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mano vuelta</em></td>
<td>Mutual help between men for sowing and harvesting maize, (re)building a wooden house and between women for food exchanges and as care.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rituals are most common in preparing the maize for sowing. The variety used in the village is still predominantly the white Xochiteco maize (from Xochitlan), which has a broad and flat kernel. It grows relatively easily without pesticides and fertilizer, and takes only five months between sowing and harvesting (including the six weeks in which the stalks are drying on the milpa). This growing cycle is convenient as it provides a harvest just before the village feast at the end of July.

As we have seen, Totonacs use the best-dried cobs (*mazorcas*) from the previous harvest as sowing material and germinate the maize kernels before they sow. These cobs are first used in a fertilization ritual: the peasant has to bind several *mazorcas* into a bunch together with a *mazorca* of red maize and hang them from the ceiling in the house. The red cob called *jefe*, is crucial: it is said to be male and if no red *mazorca* is included, the new crop will not be successful.

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3 The Xochiteco maize has smaller kernels than the yellow maize sold for consumption in the CONASUPO store and that comes from outside the region. It has a strong taste that people do not particularly like, and is not used in local agriculture.
On the milpa itself rituals have become rare. Before sowing and harvesting maize, a few people sprinkle refino on the land, and fewer still offer food—common a few generations ago. Women have to bring the ritual food of tortillas with chicken or turkey mole to the milpa during sowing. The woman has to feed the workers (which include her husband), and after that she also has to eat on the milpa to get a good harvest and prevent the maize from being eaten by rats. When women have their menses at the time of sowing, they have to stay away from the field as her presence might cause crop failure; in this case a female relative takes over. Besides food, some peasants offer cigarettes, matches, savory, garlic, and refino on the milpa to protect the crop against badgers. After a good harvest, Catholics offer food on their house altar to God and/or the Patron of Maize, or give it to the priest by putting it on the church altar in Zapotitlán. Baptists do likewise by putting maize on their church altar where it is used for shared meals.

In coffee cultivation, there are only a few minor rituals and they mainly consist of a cup of coffee and bread for the workers before they start and after they end their workday, occasionally with a glass of refino in the afternoon. Over the year, there are not many labourers in the coffee fields as most men do the weeding, pruning, planting, and fertilizing themselves or with their sons. At harvest time, there are many people picking the coffee, and the owner has to provide large quantities of bread and drinks.

While standard agricultural rituals are on the decline, this is not the case with mano vuelta (mutual help) and its food rituals. In the years that Durand did his research in Nanacatlán (1970-1971), he found a concentration of land among a few landowners, who employed the landless as paid labourers. Exchange labour (as he calls mano vuelta) that can be found in relatively egalitarian traditional communities is hard to combine with a community of large landowners and a majority of landless workers. It was therefore no surprise for Durand that mano vuelta was completely absent. According to some of his informants the system of mutual help between small peasants had disappeared “many years ago”. In the late 1980s and during the 1990s however, mano vuelta was not only practiced but was definitely increasing. While there were only a few cases in 1989 because, as the people said, they could ill afford to provide the customary food to their partners in this exchange system; in later years more and more people turned to mano vuelta with relatives, compadres, neighbours, and/or friends. People used it for sowing and harvesting maize, but also occasionally for building or reconstructing wooden houses. In this system a group of men and their sons together work the milpa of one of them (the patron) without payment in cash or otherwise, but they are provided with special food. The patron and his sons will work the field of each of them at another occasion in return.

How is it that mano vuelta seems to be returning? One explanation can be found in the changes in land tenure since the early 1970s. We saw in chapter 3 that since the years of Durand’s research the number of landowning households has grown considerably. They consist of formerly poor or landless households who could
either buy or rent some land with the money they earned from migrant labour. When they cultivate a cash crop like coffee, they have to spend money on seedlings and often on harvesters; but when they grow maize on rented land, these small peasants avoid spending cash money whenever possible as they need that for other purposes. Especially for the kind of work that has to be finished in one day or a few days at the most (like sowing and harvesting) they either use only family labour or practice mano vuelta. For them it is a practical and cheap solution. But mano vuelta is more than just an efficient system of recruiting labour: it is an expression and confirmation of village and neighbourhood sociability and solidarity, and there are quite a few cases where this expressive dimension turned out to be more important than the instrumental one. Even when it was not necessary from an economic point of view, several peasants preferred to work their land in mano vuelta as it is much more pleasant to work together.

Women and their daughters also work together\(^4\) to prepare the ritual food for the men, though this is not called mano vuelta. Women (usually the wives or other female relatives of the workers) come together in the house of the patron to prepare it. The wife of the patron not only feeds the workers and eats on the milpa; if a milpa is rented she also gives a part of the food to the landowner’s wife. Catholics also make an offering on the house altar. Both husband and wife and often the children participate in the mano vuelta system; though people refer to it as help between men, the exchange is actually between households.

**Life cycle customs**

Contrary to the decline in agricultural rituals, life cycle rituals (see table 6.2) have become more elaborate and more costly in recent years. Their character is also changing in that some are becoming more ‘traditional’ and others are taking on an overall-Mexican style. Though these rituals directly focus on the major stages in the life cycle of an individual, they invariably involve a range of other persons; be they household members, relatives, neighbours, or compadres (and often all of them). Because the rites de passage highlight a change of status of a particular person (or persons) as Van Gennep (1965) has shown, the presence of others is a matter of course or rather a *conditio sine qua non* for the moment that people become in-laws, ritual kin, or just ‘members of society’.

In Nanacatlán, participation in life cycle rituals doesn’t stop at religious boundaries. Catholics and Protestants perform them in more or less the same manner and

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\(^4\) Women participated in social support networks when they had to prepare large quantities of food at weddings or funerals, or when one of them was ill or in childbed and other women sent her food or help her out. The most important characteristic of mano vuelta is that reciprocity between the people involved is direct: the same help (hours of help) that one received, has to be returned at another occasion – and for maize cultivation in the same season. This implies that the men involved in mano vuelta live and work under similar circumstances: they grow maize, often live in a wooden house, are able-bodied, and lack cash or are unwilling to spend it on paid labour. Between women the situation can be different: giver and receiver are not necessarily from the same social background.
Table 6.2: Life cycle costumbres

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tacahuele</th>
<th>Asking for a girl’s hand, with specific food.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wedding</td>
<td>Wedding ceremony, compadres, feast and food rituals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy and birth</td>
<td>Food rituals (mother, baby, village midwife).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After birth</td>
<td>Herbal washing of newborn and mother, steambath in temazcal, burying the placenta, seclusion from household members, taboo on sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lavar los manos</td>
<td>Ritual cleansing of hands with refino between midwife and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptism</td>
<td>Name-giving, compadres, and (small) feast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thanking compadres</td>
<td>Ritual cleansing of hands, giving food to compadres, and gift to godchild.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saint’s Day</td>
<td>Related to a person’s name (offering on altar).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthday</td>
<td>Extra sweets or cake and soft drinks, possibly a (small) party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quincena</td>
<td>Fifteenth birthday party of girl, increasingly celebrated mestizo custom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death</td>
<td>Wake, funeral, food rituals, and leaving home the night after the funeral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novena</td>
<td>Praying during nine days and on ninth day a cross is carried to the grave.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dying day</td>
<td>Food offerings for four years following death.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

take part in each other’s rituals, except for the ecclesiastical services involved. *Mestizos* generally have their own way of celebrating these life cycle events but they usually participate in those of the Totonac villagers as compadres or guests of honour. Nowadays, migrants tend to return to the village to stage a life cycle ritual for themselves or their children; this provides them with an opportunity to show off their position as urbanites, but also reinforces long-distance ties of belonging (Napolitano 1997:289). In this section I discuss major rituals and the changes they have undergone.

**Marriage proposals and engagements**

In present-day Nanacatlán, young people have many occasions to meet and they are definitely committed to the ideal of ‘romantic love’. Compared to the years when their mothers were young, the situation has changed most for the girls who can now meet with boys casually: at school or work, when fetching water or running errands, at the shops or markets, during visits or feasts, at the end of the day strolling through the village or going to watch the basketball competition. Nevertheless, an adolescent girl is closely watched: she is hardly ever allowed to move around on her own unless for a specific reason which takes little time, such as walking to school or work, to a shop or the house of a relative. At other outings, there is always a sister, neighbour, cousin, or friend to accompany her, and it is quite common to see a group of giggling girls roaming the village. After dark however, they have to stay inside unless a trusted adult is there to accompany them. There are obvious differences in body language and appearance between the shy village girls in their skirts and blouses who stay mostly at home, and the more streetwise girls in jeans or short skirts who go to secondary school or stay in the
city for study or work. But the parents of both categories – as well as most adult
villagers – carefully watch them when they are on the street. Even so, girls and
boys find ways to meet and to fall in love, which in the normative system of the
village means the first step towards marriage.

The rising popularity of the ‘romantic marriage’ however, has not drastically
changed the role of the parents. Sometimes they can force a boy who is seeing a girl
too often to “become serious” and go for the marriage vows. But their main role is
now in taking care of the marriage proposal, called tacahuele, and preparations if
they agree with the marriage. Don Felix went all the way to Mexico City to the
girl’s parents when his son wanted to get married. The parents of the prospective
groom have to ask for the girl’s hand in a series of four visits. They go to the house
of the girl preferably after dark hoping that other people will not notice them.
During the first visit the parents mention the qualities of the boy, and the parents of
the girl either refuse or agree to consult her. On the second visit, the parents of the
girl mention the qualities of the girl and ask for understanding if she does not know
everything. The boy’s mother will answer that she will teach her. The third time the
parents have to either refuse – upon which there is no further visit – or say that they
might be willing to agree. The fourth time the parents of the boy come with the
expensive tacahuele gifts – drinks, a live turkey and the ingredients for mole – and
the engagement is agreed upon but not yet official, because first the boy visits the
baptismal godparents and both grandparents of the girl, who still can object to the
engagement: they tell him how good the girl is and ask him to treat her well. When
everybody has agreed, they are officially engaged and the parents of the girl pre­
pare a meal for the parents of the boy using the tacahuele gifts.

The boy now visits his novia (fiancée) regularly and brings along small inex­
pensive gifts such as a bar of soap, some sugar, maize, or when he has more money
or for a special occasion, cosmetics or cheap jewellery. She is supposed to stop
working and stay at home until the wedding, and not leave without permission of
her novio. When the boy breaks an engagement, he cannot ask for the food and the
presents back. But when a girl breaks the engagement, or when the boy does so
because of her behaviour, her parents have to return everything. It is very embar­
rassing for the family when this happens and the whole village once (in 1997) dis­
cussed a girl when her fiancé left her because she had a second boyfriend. Her
mother shed bitter tears.

This is the proper course of events if everything goes smoothly. But if parents
do not agree with the marriage, the couple can elope for a few days after which
there is no viable option but marriage. This is also expected when a girl gets preg­
nant. The parents of the girl are generally very angry and ask the village authorities,
mainly the Justice of the Peace, to force the boy and his parents to consent to a
marriage. Also, if people are unable to pay for the costly tacahuele, a couple can
use elopement to avoid the expenses – either out of their own will or because the
parents suggest they do so.
In January 1998, Santiago, the youngest son of Magdalena and Lorenzo, was secretly married to Josepha who had come back to the village after working in Mexico City for a while. They were very much in love, and it showed. He was 19 but she was only 15 and had started living with Santiago and his family several weeks before they got married. They went to see her father who was in jail in Puebla, to ask his permission. Magdalena said they would send him food when he returns from jail, which can still take years, but not the *tacahuale* food because that is too expensive. Lorenzo barely had the money to arrange the civil marriage, for which they had to make a trip to Zacapoaxtla. Josepha’s mother did not agree and an uncle came on her behalf to the house to complain and demanded her to return to her mother. She was especially angry that her daughter started living with Santiago before the church wedding. When a couple has the civil papers the parents can’t do anything anymore, according to Magdalena, though the parents still have to sign the marriage contract. At their daughter’s age their consent is necessary and the mother agreed to do so. They plan to have a church wedding during the village feast in July.

Migration has influenced courtship and engagement. When one of the couple works in the city, they can hardly meet, as urban-rural visits are rare. When both live in the city, the parents have little chance to control them. When the girl’s parents are from Nanacatlán but now live in the city, the boy’s parents have to go to the trouble of paying them costly visits to discuss *tacahuale*. Usually only the last visit is made while the first agreements are made during a stay in the village. Only when the family is from a different region, the *tacahuale* is dropped – a situation that occurs more often today. After an agreement has been reached between the parents and the couple is officially engaged, the girl sometimes returns to the village to live with her parents until the wedding.

In the 1990s it was only the Baptists that continued the tradition of arranged marriages negotiated between the parents of a boy and a girl who often hardly know each other. Betty, whose parents belong to the old and less orthodox Baptist church, had not really met her fiancé when they were about to marry (he was 21 and she was 17).

When the parents of Daniel came to my parents, I did not know about it. He had asked his parents to visit mine. Afterwards my parents asked me whether I wanted him or not. I knew him from the temple. When we were engaged he came to visit me at home once a week. I never went to his house. (Betty Juárez 1997)

That marriages are arranged in Baptist circles is understandable given the strong need to keep them within the same religious community, and given the relatively small size of the Protestant churches, there is not much choice.
Weddings and newlyweds

The logical step after engagement is the wedding party itself. This is organised by the parents of the groom. It can vary from a simple small party at which only the wedding compadres, the parents, the parents-in-law, siblings, and grandparents are present to a slightly bigger one which also includes close friends. Occasionally, there is a huge party with music to which many from in and outside the village are invited.

Whether simple or elaborate, a wedding party starts with the civil ceremony at the municipality of Zapotitlán. For religious people, this is followed by a celebration in church. The two need not to be held on the same day, but many people, especially migrants, prefer to combine the civil and religious ceremonies. Many Catholics marry during the annual feast of the village patron-saint as that is practical and advantageous: the priest is already present (which saves the cost of having a priest come over) and relatives from the city are also gathered for the feast. Baptists also have to send for someone to come from their headquarters in La Unión to celebrate the wedding, but the local attendant of the new independent Baptist church performs the ceremony himself. Catholics and Protestants have compadres for the wedding; for Catholics there is usually one couple, sometimes up to four (though the number can and usually is much higher in urban Mexico), for Baptists their number can be up to four couples. The Baptist compadres provide a bible, the rings, the lasso (two circles of beads to surround the couple), and a bouquet of white silk flowers (ramo) used by the bride. The Catholic compadres pay for the mass and provide a set of new clothes; when there are more couples of compadres they provide the rings, the lasso, and the ramo. The baptismal godparents of the girl also give her a set of clothes, and the ones of the boy give him a pick spade. It is not uncommon to ask the compadres of baptism again as godparents for the wedding of their godchild.

For a church wedding the bride dresses in a white wedding dress with white shoes and the groom in black trousers, black shoes and a white shirt; a really complete wedding includes dressed-up bridesmaids. After the wedding there is a party at the house of the bride’s parents. Again, this can be a simple party of a meal or a big one with many guests and sometimes live music, like when don Félix’s grandson married and had a band play for the whole village at night. It also happens, however, that people do not celebrate at all or have a tacahuele, but just go to the municipality to get married: when they are very poor or when there are disagreements about the wedding.

Although a wedding marks the transition to adulthood, this does not always immediately result in supporting an independent household. After the wedding a couple usually moves in with the parents of the boy until they have a house of their own. This may take weeks or up to a year. During this period the girl has to make tortillas for her in-laws. When the groom’s parents have enough space on their sitio, they may build a house next to theirs. When they own some land elsewhere in
the village it may also be built there. In other cases, the bride's parents sometimes give them a piece of land to build on. In the separate household the young couple starts living their own life, where adulthood is ultimately affirmed with the first-born child.

While girls move out of their parental home upon marriage and boys do so after a certain period after the wedding, the rule of ultimogeniture has it that the youngest son after his marriage comes to live with his parents: he and his wife are expected to take care of them in old age; in return he will inherit the house. This is quite common. In cases where the 'Benjamin' son does not live with his parents, for instance when he has moved to Mexico City or elsewhere, there is strong pressure on him to return when his father and mother get too old and need a helping hand. If he is unable or unwilling to return or if his wife objects to it, he might either ask his parents to come live with him, or pay his siblings in the village to take care of them.

Notwithstanding these rules and regulations, there are many exceptions. Not everybody has a 'clean' marriage; sometimes the girl is already pregnant. The woman and the man are held responsible. Even his close relatives who continue to pressure him talk badly about a boy who refuses to marry a girl he made pregnant. Not all couples get married; about 10 percent of the couples in the village, mestizo and Totonac, live in unión libre which is much less than a few decades ago. They are usually considered a regular couple, especially after they have children. There are also some single mothers who live with their parents, as well as some widows who became pregnant. The girls are considered 'loose' and are pointed out as a bad example for youngsters, but a young girl and her baby also arouse sympathy. A widow with a child is not talked about as much. A girl who becomes pregnant by a married man is thought to have been stupid. On the whole single mothers and their children are accepted.

The secularised house

In the village a young couple starts building a house of their own. House building has also become part of the whole life cycle, because today many people try to improve their house over time, not just maintain it. Several rituals accompany the building of a house. The trees for building a wooden house (or any other use) will be cut by a full or waning moon; otherwise the wood will turn bad. Before cutting some refino is sprinkled to favour the Patron of the trees. Before the first pile-work refino should be sprinkled on the earth, to prevent something going wrong, but not every-

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5 Compared to the low number of mestizo men, a high number of the illegitimate children are theirs, though not always in their own village. Such men have a bad reputation, especially when they do not provide for their children.

6 It may well be that motherhood is so valued that it redeems a woman's unmarried pregnancy (Melhuus 1996:248). Martin (1990:486) even sees it as redemption of the community, because the power of giving birth and caring for children balances out male political self-interest and corruption.
body believes this any more. Catholics offer food on the house altar when a house is ready and ask the priest to consecrate the house. Every year the woman of the house repeats this blessing with the Holy Water and palm branches of Palm Sunday. For new cement or brick houses they also perform a ceremony which involves 'godparents of the house' and this type of compadrazgo has thus increased.

Today there are less sacred places in the house. The fireplace was the most sacred in a house, for which cleaning rituals and offerings were necessary (Ichon 1973:293-295). The Patron of the fireplace is not honoured anymore except for some sprinkling of refino (on the fireplace). The temazcal, also related to the Patron of fire, is another sacred place (Ichon 1973:295-298) that has fallen into abeyance. Only elderly people have one, and though many people still take a steam bath occasionally, temazcal offerings are no longer part of household rituals. Nowadays the house altar is the only sacred place for Catholics; Protestants do not have a sacred place at all at home.

Pregnancy and childbed

Having children was always more important for a couple than getting married and this has not changed. Young people in Nanacatlán rarely practice birth control, except for the well educated and the mestizos who prefer to improve their new housing, level of education, or job situation first. A first-time pregnancy is greatly welcomed by a young couple. Upon the first signs, their parents and siblings visit and the expectant mother is loaded with advice on what to do and avoid. Advice is very much a mother-daughter-in-law affair (though a mother is often consulted as well) but after two to four months, a woman will go and see one of the traditional village midwives every fortnight for a check-up. Sometimes women have to follow a special diet for medical reasons but there are no particular rules of what a pregnant woman should or should not eat: only that she eats enough, especially beans and meat, and drinks milk.

Most women will give birth at home with the help of the midwife (called comadre though formally she is not) and generally also that of the husband, mother, aunt, or sister. The midwife Maria Rosa Ramos, sister of don Felix, has delivered many babies in Nanacatlán and Zapotitlán.

I first wash myself with water, and afterwards with refino, my feet and legs, arms and face, to disinfect my body. When she is already in pain, the woman drinks a special herbal tea of cinnamon, cocoa and basil, to smoothen the delivery. I give massages to help, on the hips, and I move the hips around. When the baby comes, the woman should be on her knees, but nowadays some prefer to lie down. I grab the baby and do not look

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7 The Patron of fire lives in the fireplace, which itself also has a Patron; the Patron of the fireplace lives in the three stones on which the cooking pots or the comal rest. Because the stones are heated daily by women, using them to cook, the Patron of the fireplace may provoke many diseases.
too closely, because it makes them feel ashamed. As there are old cloths on the floor, the baby does not land hard. The husband meanwhile continues the massages; he takes over when I have to deliver the baby. I cut the umbilical cord, wash the baby in pure water and swaddle it. I wash myself with the same water as the baby and later with clean water and refino, and change clothes. The next day I come to wash the woman, but some women do not want it, only after a week. I wash them every three days in water with omekelite; one woman wanted it every day. It is harmful not to wash. (Rosa Ramos 1994)

After the delivery the father buries the placenta in the earth somewhere in the garden deep enough not to be eaten by animals. Not so long ago people used to put the placenta in a bag before burying it: a girl’s in a tenate (the bag used by women, see figure 6.1) and a boy’s placenta in a morral (the bag used by men, see figure 6.2). To have a child of the other sex next time, a girl’s placenta was put in a morral, the boy’s in a tenate. This custom is slowly disappearing. The umbilical cord is safely stored away, because it can be used as medicine for children. After a few days most women and their babies take a bath in the warm temazcal. After a month, when the midwife stops washing a woman, the ritual cleaning of hands with refino takes place (lavar los manos) between parents and midwife, a purification rite to take away the impurities related to sexuality, delivery, and disease (Ichon 1973:248-249). The father goes to Zapotitlán to register the baby.

Not all women deliver a baby at home. Particularly mestizo women and Totonacs who have lived in the city have gotten into the habit of seeing a doctor in Zapotitlán or going to a hospital in Zacapoaxtla or – depending where their relatives live – in a city outside the Sierra. But when complications are expected, nowadays other village women also turn to medical assistance – and do without the midwife’s herbal teas and bathing water.

After the delivery mother and child remain separated from the rest of the household; for a period of two to six weeks the mother stays day and night with her baby separately in a newly-made bed or on the floor and only slowly resumes her household chores. During at least 40 days, the woman has to abstain from sexual intercourse and eat special dishes with beef and chicken meat which she is not allowed to cook herself. Instead, a female relative will take care of preparing the tortillas and meals, while other women she knows well take turns in sending meals – emphasising the fact that the mother of a newly-born child belongs to a separate domain and is not part of everyday life. This separation is also visible in the food she consumes which is distinctly different from the food served during other life cycle rituals (see chapter 7).

Baptism and name giving

Most babies, except for those from Baptist and Jehovah Witness families, are baptised during the first year after their birth between two and twelve months old. For Catholics, baptism is an elaborate ritual which signifies the incorporation of the
child into the family, the religious community, and its wider social network. The Totonac practice of name-giving has by now been merged with baptism: before that the child is still anonymous and referred to as *chindil*. Baptism is a social affair not only because of the incorporation of the newly-born into the family but, often mainly, because it involves a wider range of relatives and ritual kin: the couple and its relatives as well as the new *compadre* and *comadre*. These baptismal godparents are the most important *compadres* of the parents. They are carefully selected, as their role will be crucial in the lives of both parents and child. The couple approaches another couple (very rarely a single person is asked) with whom they want to establish a ritual kin bond. Sometimes it happens the other way around and are they offered a *compadrazgo* by another couple. Either way the parents of the child ask permission during a series of four visits – just like when asking for the hand of a girl in marriage- and set a date for the baptism. This can either be a special occasion for which they ask the priest to come to the village or – if this proves to be too costly – they may wait until the priest comes anyway, for the village feast for instance.

The godparents are present at the baptism and provide the child with the white cloth. They promise the priest to look after a good moral and Catholic education. After the service they join the dinner which the parents have prepared for them and other close relations at the baby’s home, and will stay when there is a larger party with other guests who come for a drink and piece of pie or a meal. When leaving, the godparents and other guests nowadays occasionally receive a small memento from the parents.

After a year or two, the father – accompanied by his wife – will give a live turkey to his *compadre*, together with the ingredients for *mole*, again just like when asking for a girl’s hand. The parents thank their *compadre* and *comadre* for carrying the baby and wash their hands with *refino* (*lavar los manos*), while the godparents give advice to the child for a good life. The godparents may in turn send clothes or a present to their godchild. After this the baptism is considered to be concluded.

In the following years exchange between parents and godparents will be renewed regularly. Several times a year food is exchanged (see the next chapter) and on special occasions in the family the godparents are invited. Though *compadrazgo* is focused on the strengthening of social relations between the *compadres* and their next of kin, there is also a special and even affectionate relation between godparents and their godchild. When the child enters a new school or job, is in trouble, and especially when it gets married, the godchild or its parents may seek the advice of the godparents. On other occasions the godparents may send a present to their godchild, and the parents in turn will send their son or daughter to visit and help his godfather or her godmother. Though the same godparents in the past were often asked again for other children and on other special occasions such as a wedding, in recent years people have begun asking different people for each child and on different occasions, thus extending their *compadrazgo* network (see chapter 3).

For the Protestant Nanacatecos the highly-ritualised baptism of the Catholics is out-of-the-question: they do not involve *compadres*. The Pentecostals have a sober
ceremony including the parents and the church attendant or minister, while Baptists only present the baby to church because baptism is performed when their members are grown up, just like among Jehovah Witnesses.

*Birthdays*

Birthday celebrations are a relatively new phenomenon in the village. Only *mestizos* and the more well-to-do Totonacs used to invite guests to join a meal or party to which they also invite their workers. In other families mothers buy refreshments and sweets or prepare a special meal when finances permit or at least *atole* for the occasion. Young couples increasingly buy a birthday cake (in Zapotitlán or Zacapoaxtla) and refreshments for a small party. Since the early 1990s, a popular national anniversary tradition has reached the village: the originally urban ceremony of the *quincena* (celebrating a girl’s fifteenth birthday) is now held in Nanacatlán, and occurred about ten times up to and including 1997. This has slowly gained popularity particularly among families with migrants and Herman (son of don Gustavo) and his wife even brought their daughter back to the village to have her *quincena* there. Lupe and Elios were asked as one of the *compadres*.

We were asked as madrina and padrino for el ultimo jugete (the last toy) as a memory, a last piece of toy before she turns into a señorita. For a *quincena* there is a whole row of padrinos who contribute to the party. That is why Elios did not want to celebrate it for our daughter Ydalid, because he did not want to oblige so many people. The *compadres* one asks have to oblige and people ask many of them to spread the costs. My husband does not want other people to pay for us and as we are unable to pay for such a party ourselves, he did not want to do it. Some people have more padrinos than others, but mostly they have separate ones for the dress, the bouquet, cake, drinks, photos, album, mementos, and music. And some even more, for things like a diadem, the hassock for the church, church adornments, home decorations, bible, and rosary. The parents only have to take care of the food. (Lupe Ortega 1998)

The families who throw such large parties say that they want to make the village livelier as there are too few parties for the people. Although many young people would agree, other villagers consider such behaviour excessive or even outrageous—particularly when one of the wealthier families in Zapotitlán ordered a 15-tiered cake that cost a fortune. Young girls however, start begging for their *quincena* and this celebration therefore becomes more widespread, though on a much more modest scale than the urban and *mestizo* examples.

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8 Celebrating a girl’s fifteenth birthday is widespread in *mestizo* Mexico and has filtered down to lower sectors of the population to such an extent that it is going out of fashion among upper and upper-middle classes. The symbolism resembles European culture (such as waltzes, maids of honour, and pages (Napolitano 1997:281)). It was so rarely celebrated (yet) in Nanacatlán that I was unable to attend one.
Death and funerals

The church bell tolls three times when an adult has died in Nanacatlán – for Catholics and Protestants alike (if the deceased was once married in the church). Since the early 1990s a death has to be certificated by a medical doctor and registered at the municipality. Death is a serious matter to all villagers, especially when the deceased is young or when people die shortly after one another, and every household will send someone to pay its respect. A wake and funeral are the most widely and well attended of all life cycle events and can be considered a communal celebration.

The deceased lies in state at home on a wooden board covered with sheets, in the front room. While the coffin is being made by one of the local carpenters, villagers visit the house and relatives and compadres from elsewhere travel to Nanacatlán. The room fills up with flowers, candles, and gifts of food. All sorts of people come in for a while during the day and close relatives and friends continue the wake all night long. All visitors are served coffee and bread, the men often also refino. Usually the Catholic men waking all night get drunk from the generously served refino. There is a mixed atmosphere of sadness, particularly when parents have lost a child or when two relatives have died shortly after one another; and of bustle, with all the people chatting, cooking, preparing the funeral, or staying over night. Whatever conflicts there may have been between families are forgotten for the moment and even adamant political and religious opponents pay their respect to the deceased. Tension within families, on the other hand, can easily rise if there are disagreements about the inheritance.

The funeral usually is the next day, or after two days. If they wish to and can afford it, a Catholic family will ask the priest to come and say mass in church on the day of the funeral. Otherwise (and mostly) the burial starts from the house. Four men carry the coffin to the cemetery, followed by many villagers and at the end of the line the relatives of the deceased follow suit. The coffin bearers do not come from among first and second degree relatives: their relation with the deceased should be more distant and may include in-laws and compadres but not sons or grandsons. The grave itself has been dug by a group of volunteers who also line it with cement. There is usually no ceremony other then lowering the coffin in the grave, unless there is a priest present who prays and blesses the deceased.

Most people walk away after the coffin has been lowered; only the helpers and volunteers stay to fill up the grave and cover it with the flowers brought by the participants. Immediately afterwards they bathe at a well below the cemetery or go home to take a quick bath. If they don’t do that and visit their milpa afterwards, the maize would rot. The members of the deceased household also need to abide by strict rules: they have to give food to the deceased in the coffin (for Catholics also on the house altar), and serve food to those who helped at the cemetery and in the kitchen, and then leave home. They are not allowed to spend that first night after

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9 Five to eight people died yearly in Nanacatlán between 1989 and 1998.
the funeral at home as the deceased will visit it for the last time and it would bring ill-fortune to the deceased to meet somebody there. After that the spirit-soul (listakna) will go to heaven, to return once a year at Todos Santos.

When Catholics are more well-to-do or when a deceased has asked for it, the ritual is continued with a novena: during nine evenings prayers will be said at the house with the village reciter Lorenzo as the officiant. To conclude the novena, on the ninth day a newly-made cross which has been taken to Zapotitlán to receive the priest’s blessing, will be taken to the cemetery by the padrinos de la cruz and put on the grave. Upon returning from the cemetery, the new compadres and other participants will eat together. All Catholics will continue to give the deceased a meal on the house altar on each anniversary of the dying day for four years. After that they will each year light a candle and maybe add some flowers or burn incense. Novenas rarely occur, not even once a year.

**Annual communal or public celebrations**

Although a large part of the population in Nanacatlán joins the annual celebrations and feasts, these predominantly Catholic occasions are, strictly speaking, not completely communal anymore. First of all, not all Catholics celebrate the church-centred ceremonies and only some of the major village celebrations attract large crowds. Every Catholic male however, is supposed to be actively involved in church celebrations at least during some time in his life. Second, and more drastic, the non-Catholics are not involved in church affairs (anymore), which makes some active Catholics regard the introduction of the various Protestant churches and the subsequent religious heterogeneity as a disruption of village unity. Nevertheless, the annual communal rituals (see table 6.3) are definitely the central public celebrations and have gained in importance over the last years. Young men perform in the dances, while girls join the singing, praying, and decorating the church. For migrants these occasions are the principal reason for returning to visit their village and relatives. They actively engage in the occasions by taking part in the dances, processions, and the basketball competition of the fiesta, or they donate money. Protestants are not complete outsiders. They watch the dances, processions, and the basketball competition; visit the market and migrant relatives and friends or receive them at home for a customary meal. The Protestant celebrations during the feasts - if any - are hardly ever public but limited to a service in their church, mainly at Easter and Christmas.

The indigenous people in Mesoamerica have highly localized religious traditions that belong neither to pre-Columbian nor Christian moral universes. “Each community represents an ever-evolving present that derives from particular pre-Columbian roots and particular experiences with Hispanic missionization” (Gossen 1999:55). Notwithstanding their Catholic connotation, the public rituals in Nanacatlán have a strong focus on local customs and usually are more or less independent of the presence of the priest and Catholic liturgy. They are examples of the
Table 6.3: Annual ritual calendar in Nanacatlán (main village rituals in bold)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 January</td>
<td>Twelfthnight (Santos Reyes)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 January</td>
<td>San Sebastián, Patron of Tuxtla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 February</td>
<td>Candlemas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March/April</td>
<td><strong>Semana Santa</strong> (Holy Week – Easter)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>Month of Virgin Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 May</td>
<td>San Isidro, Patron of bulls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May/June</td>
<td>God’s Day (Corpus Christi)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 June</td>
<td>San Antonio, Patron of animals around the house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 June</td>
<td>San Juan (the Baptist), Patron of Sea and Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 July</td>
<td>Santa Carmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 July</td>
<td><strong>Santiago</strong>, Patron of Nanacatlán and Huitzilán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 August</td>
<td>Virgen de Asunción, Patron of Ixtepec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 August</td>
<td>San Bartolo, Patron Saint of Xochitlán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 August</td>
<td>San Augustín, Patron Saint of Zitlala</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 September</td>
<td>Birthday of Holy Mary, Patron of Zapotitlán</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 September</td>
<td><strong>San Miguel</strong>, Patron of Thunder and Rain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 October</td>
<td>San Francisco (of Assisi), Patron of Caxhuaca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,2 November</td>
<td><strong>Todos Santos</strong> (All Saints and All Souls Day), also on October 31 and November 8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 December</td>
<td>Virgen de Concepción, Patron Saint of Concepción (Ignacio Allende) and Zongozotla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 December</td>
<td>Virgen de Guadalupe, Patron Saint of Mexico and Nanacatecos in Mexico City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-25 December</td>
<td><strong>Posadas</strong> (Hostel processions) and <strong>Christmas</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 December</td>
<td>New Year’s Eve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The pluralistic nature of Mexican Catholicism (Masferrer 1998) and “the popular use of popular religion” (Rostas and Droogers 1993). This is reflected in the large number of participants; though only some of them have a special role, almost every villager is actively involved at some stage.

The cargo holders or fiscals, *comisiones* or organisers of a particular feast, and *collectores* who are responsible for collecting money in the village are the organisers of the public feasts. The overall organisational and financial responsibility of all the feasts is in the hands of the cargo holders. As we saw in chapter 2 this does not mean that they do all the work and certainly do not bear all the costs. The cargo holders organise *Semana Santa* and Christmas. The *comisiones* do their share of the work in organising the village feast and San Miguel, for which they are responsible. The collectors for a specific occasion make house-calls several times to collect money. The *mayordomo* or steward, the dancers, the elderly women active in the church, and household members of organisers and performers (women as well as children) are the main performers of a feast. Many of them have to bear specific costs: the *mayordomo* for the rituals in his house, the captain and his troupe for the dancing clothes and attributes, the basketball players for their uniforms. Because the most active
among them – the fiscals, *comisones* and collectors – have to spend a lot of time in these rituals, they have to forfeit their usual income. The children of the organisers are often present to do all kinds of odd jobs, while the wives or mothers of performers face extra cooking duties, for dancers from other villages for example.

Though most villagers are bystanders during the publicly performed celebrations they nevertheless are or have been quite busy. Before the celebrations the village men are supposed to work *faena* when summoned by the mayor and the women have a lot of work, beginning days before a feast preparing extra food. Permanent migrants are a special category. They collect money in Mexico City and have their own basketball team and two dance troupes. They take leave from work, consider a feast a holiday to visit relatives, drink and eat, and participate in what they like. They arrive when all the hard work is done and are invited for meals during their stay. The presence, participation, and financial help of migrants is however, greatly welcomed just as the help of youngsters. This does not extend to starting activities or making decisions on their own. Villagers and ritual specialists, with the cargo holders at the top, do not accept interference in ‘their’ business.

*Semana Santa*

The six weeks of the Catholic fasting period before Easter begin rather unobtrusively. There is no Carnival before the fasting starts on Ash Wednesday, but on that day a mass is said in church, generally only attended by elderly women who receive the ashes. It is the last week of fasting which is a major period in the annual religious calendar given the amount of days it lasts, the bustle of village life further increased by the large-scale return of migrants, the pomp and circumstance with which the solemn processions are held on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, and the amount of typical meals being prepared. During the Holy Week, *Semana Santa*, religious cargo holders are busy organising celebrations and rituals with the help of a small number of people, mostly women. During the daily processions female helpers carry the statue of *Virgen Dolores* (Our Lady of Sorrow or *Nuestra Señora de los Dolores*), while girls sing and pray with the elderly female reciter, who leads prayers.

Although *Semana Santa* officially starts on Palm Sunday, the Friday before that a procession begins with the Virgin Dolores and *Jesus el Nazareno*. Both statues are carried to a central place in church: the image of Jesus in front of the altar and the Virgin Dolores in the right aisle, where they will remain for a whole week. On Palm Sunday a mass is said and a procession is held with Jesus the Nazarene and *Santo Domingo Ramos* (a statue of Jesus on his donkey). The latter statue is placed outside the church all day near the entrance of the churchyard, whereupon the church doors are closed until the evening procession. The priest blesses the huge sugarcane sticks and branches used as decoration outside the church with holy

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10 The usual place for images during the days they are celebrated is in front or to the right of the altar facing the church-goers except for images of the Virgin and the Infant Jesus, who have their place in front of the right aisle and to the right of the altar respectively.
water, as well as the palm leaves and flowers carried by women. These blessed palm leaves are brought home and saved, to be burned in front of the house altar during heavy thunderstorms, to ask for the protection of San Miguel.

The Holy Week itself gains momentum on Wednesday with the preparation of the decorations. The cargo holders make an effigy of the apostle Judas and build a prison next to the altar for the statue of Jesus the Nazarene. The dancing group Judios (Jews, oddly dressed and wearing masks, some as women and others as men waving their guns) start dancing four times from the church through the streets passing the four village corners, but do not enter the church. An imposing structure several stories high representing Jesus’ tomb is built inside the church next to the entrance and is abundantly decorated with branches and flowers. Santo Entierro (the image of a dead Jesus in a coffin of glass) is carried by the Judios to his tomb in the main procession of Thursday evening. On Friday morning the Way of the Cross is commemorated, from church to cemetery. In the early 1990s villagers also staged the Passion of Christ, in which the suffering of Jesus was performed, with Bernadino (the owner of the Tienda Totonaca) as Jesus. This Jesus would walk the Way of the Cross with a crucifix on his shoulders while being ridiculed by the Judios, and was crucified with two other men at the cemetery. Bernadino told me that many people became very emotional and even wanted to attack the aggressively and wildly dancing Judios, because they did not understand that “we are just actors”. On Friday evening a procession takes place and on Saturday the meals are cooked to celebrate the resurrection of Christ, followed by a mass and the morning procession; final processions are held on Saturday evening and Sunday morning.

As explained in the first chapter, in 1996 the presidente fiscal (leading fiscal) don Beto complained about the many changes introduced by the priest, who altered the days and practices of several processions saying they were not performed properly. The fiscals thus built the prison on Thursday, not on Wednesday as they used to, and were asked by the priest to cover the images on the walls behind the altar with long white cloth, something that had never been done before. That day the

11 It consists of 14 Stations, usually marked by paintings arranged at intervals in a church, depicting the main scenes of Christ’s suffering and death. The Way of the Cross is a pilgrimage from station to station with a special prayer for each. In Nanacatlán there are no images and the Way of the Cross is a procession from church to cemetery, with 14 stops to pray a Station.

12 To summarise the initial sequence of events: Ash Wednesday at the beginning of fasting, the Friday before Palm Sunday, Palm Sunday, Wednesday evening procession with imprisonment of Jesus, the main procession on Maundy Thursday, the Way of the Cross on Good Friday and a smaller procession in the evening, the burning of Judas Saturday morning, celebrating resurrection on Saturday afternoon (Sábado de Gloria) and closing procession on Easter Sunday morning. The priest especially objected to the procession on Thursday evening and to the central role of the Virgin Dolores. He therefore ordered the statue of Dolores returned to her place immediately after the Friday (before Palm Sunday) procession. On Palm Sunday the priest ordered replacement of the large sugarcanes by huge palm leaves and did not allow the closing of the church doors. The day was however, more significant because the village mayor elections took place in the morning. On Thursday Jesus the Nazarene was taken to prison, and at midnight taken out again, while the huge procession of Thursday was moved to Friday evening. Semana Santa is a sensitive issue because a prohibition to celebrate it gave rise to a Totonac rebellion from 1836 to 1838 led by Olarte (Masferrer 1984). See Masferrer (1986a) for a detailed description of Semana Santa in the 1980s.
Judios started dancing in the village, a day later than normal and only two small processions were held not a large one as used to be the case, though as usual almost the whole night rattles were used. Friday morning the Way of the Cross was made which took about 1½ hours, with a seminarian who performed the Stations and told the story of the Holy Week upon arrival at the cemetery. During this time the cargo holders and their helpers were building the three-story tomb, heavily decorated with palms and flowers. With the help of Don Felix they tried to add some of the older decorations of woven flowers and stars (from palm leaves and straw) that had not been made for years. But the priest had banned the Passion of Christ with its ‘live’ crucifixion. As usual on Wednesday, the fiscals had made Judas represented as a man made of cardboard with jeans, shirt and shoes, a cigar in his mouth, one leg bent backwards and fastened, and a hand in his pocket. “Like someone from Mexico”, one of the fiscals explained, amongst the giggling and laughter that accompanied the job. Judas – who used to be on his own, made of zacate, covered with banana leaves – is joined by his son and the two of them are mounted to the church tower. Judas reminds one of the one legged Hojs-Kaxi who with his son has become an urban threat and pointedly marks the urban-rural divide.

In 1996, until Friday afternoon the Holy Week seemed less elaborate than I had been told and I was disappointed by the unobtrusiveness of the rituals. While normally many people go fishing in the river for the meals on Thursday and Friday, few people had done so because the water was exceptionally high and cold. The fiscals would hurry home to eat instead of having a meal together (because Semana Santa has no mayordomo). The procession on Friday evening (which used to be performed on Thursday) however, turned out to be the memorable occasion I had come to expect. The priest and seminarian were not in the village and it seemed as if people had been waiting for this. More than 200 villagers were present in the church during a procession with Santo Entierro, Virgin Dolores, and the Apostles Peter and John. It lasted more than 1½ hours, although it never left the church. At the start the atmosphere was gay because of the increasing number of oddly behaving Judios, especially the ones dressed up as women, caused a lot of laughter. This changed during the procession itself, when the continuing noise of wooden rattles and a flute, the aggressive dancing of the Judios, the suffocating smell of incense, the burning candles, all so in contrast with the solemn and quiet crowd, made it into an impressive display. The cargo holders had obeyed most of the priest’s requests for changes but they refused to alter the crucial ritual. The priest had wanted Santo Entierro to be carried to his tomb by the fiscals rather than by the Judios, but during the procession the Judios performed their role as usual. The cargo holders had refused to take their place, because as don Beto said indignantly: “As if we killed Jesus!” If one also realizes that two of the main saints Santo Domingo de Ramos and Santo Entierro do not exist within Catholic liturgy (Masferrer 1986a),13 it

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13 Masferrer erroneously also claims Virgen Dolores is not part of Catholic liturgy. The Virgin Mary is however, also named Our Lady of Sorrows after her suffering, the Seven Sorrows or the Seven Dolours. In the annual Gregorian liturgical calendar September 15 is noted as Our Lady of Sorrows (Nuestra Señora de Dolores).
becomes apparent that the priest has a long way to go before Nanacatecos celebrate the Holy Week according to liturgical guidelines.

On Saturday morning meat was sold in various places, which only happens during the public celebrations. At noon the cargo holders burned Judas and his son outside the church. Previously, the young people used to drag him through the village into the cemetery while beating him up, but this does not happen anymore. In the afternoon the *Huehues*\(^{14}\) started dancing, teenage and young villagers who although they look a lot like the *Judios* with their masks and clothes, dance wildly and gaily. They were the sign that mourning has ended. Their performance was satirical and witty and the opposite of the serious and aggressive *Judios* who captured Jesus. At six in the afternoon the priest said mass where he blessed fire (made in the courtyard) and water. About fifty women had appeared with a bucket of water that they use for blessing their house and house altar. Some will keep what is left for medicinal use. At home people ate their feast meal and those with a television watched old black and white movies about the life of Jesus or other religious themes broadcast this week. At night a procession returned *Santo Entierro* to his place. On Easter Sunday morning the last procession was held within the church, with the Virgin Dolores and the Apostles Peter and John.\(^{15}\) After this the festivities were over and the migrants returned home. The church was cleaned, and after a few days the statues were dressed in their old clothes. The new ones are kept until the next *Semana Santa*. The white cloth remained on the wall for another 40 days.

For more than a week *Semana Santa* had been mainly a Catholic affair. The Jehovah Witnesses did not celebrate, but only paid attention to the Lord’s Supper on Thursday; not with bread and wine, but just by shaking hands between those present. They ate fish on Thursday and Friday, because it is *costumbre*. The Baptists did not pay attention to *Semana Santa*. On Sunday they performed their weekly service. In 1997 Baptists from La Unión came with a film about the life of Jesus. The family of Betty, like other Baptists, ate fish on Thursday and Friday, which the boys prefer to catch themselves. The resurrection of Jesus was celebrated at home on Saturday when many villagers – including Protestants – make sufficient food for the household as well as visitors. With the exception of Saturday, it had been a week that was more (almost primarily) centred on the church than any of the other public celebrations. Masferrer (1986a) suggests that *Semana Santa* is a metaphor for a solar eclipse, resulting from a battle between the Sun (Christ) and the Moon, and this would mean Catholicism is far less important than the church-centred performances seem to imply.

\(^{14}\) The dance originates from an episode in the life of Jesus, when Herodes sent his men to find the baby Jesus. They are dressed up as *Huehues* (elderly in Nahuatl) to be able to enter the houses. The dance is related to death and is also called *danza de los viejos* (dance of the elderly) and used to be danced during Todos Santos, and still is in several places during Carnival (Ichon 1973:97, 431-435). In Nanacatlan they appear on *Sabado de Gloria*, and as part of the dance *los Tejoneros* (see annex 4).

\(^{15}\) After mass on Saturday the statues had been returned to their usual place in church already, instead of being kept to the right of the altar, because the priest liked it better that way. But the *presidente* of the cargo holders, don Beto, had assured me there would be a procession on Sunday anyway.
The feast of the village patron (Santiago)

As the patron of the Spanish monarchy, Santiago or Saint James successfully made the transfer to the colonies and in the process of hispanization the indigenous population came to see him as a powerful protector. He also became prominent among the Totonacs, who praise his power to win battles in the dance Santiagueros, a Sierra de Norte variety of the dance Moros y Christianos, spread by the missionaries to christianise the indigenous war dances (Ichon 1973:407, 392; Mompradé & Gutiérrez 1976:127-28).16

Each year, on 25, 26, and 27 July – the most important days of the village feast – everybody is out on the streets and the village is crowded with migrants, relatives, and compadres and comadres living elsewhere, as well as people from nearby villages. The village is buzzing with life and no other days attract such large crowds to the centre. Preparations have started months ahead but culminate in a frenzy shortly before and during the feast.17

The ritual period of the village feast starts with a procession on the day of Santa Carmen (July 16) to the house of the mayordomo to honour Santiago in his nicho who has been there on his altar since the end of his previous feast. After this the house of the mayordomo is crowded for days, when the altar and the house entrance are decorated and the colourful ceras are made, until during the main procession of the 24th when Santiago is carried to church.18 The dancers rehearse their dances and borrow, repair, or buy their costumes. The pole for the Voladores and the turning wheel for the Quetzales are erected and used for practice.

The civil authorities are also busy. They see to it that the village centre and whenever possible even the streets are cleaned of garbage and weeds, and public buildings are whitewashed. They organise communal labour to tidy up the village, and set up committees to prepare the basketball competition and ideally also a dance party with modern live music. They keep in touch with the district authorities for police assistance in case fights break out when people get drunk on refino, brandy, and beer that this time of the year is widely sold in most shops.

The official start of the feast is on July 24 (vispera) when the nicho with San-

16 Nahuas in the Sierra of Puebla relate Santiago to Thunder and from his role in the dance Ichon (1973, especially 166, 405) suggests he incarnates the Aztec gods Tlāloc (Rain) and maybe Huitzilopochtli (War).

17 The comisiones – responsible for the feast – recruit collectors (for door-to-door money collections and gathering of fresh flowers and leaves just before the feast), start organising church decorations, and do the necessary shopping. The religious cargo holders supervise the comisiones and the mayordomía (the ceremonial, financial and practical duties of the mayordomo). They walk in the processions and also stay in touch with the priest and assist him during the church services held during the three days of the feast (see also chapter 2).

18 The mayordomo pays and feeds a father and his son from Concepción who stay in his house during three days to make ceras, large adornments of moulded beeswax figures and flowers on a bamboo structure, and covered with brightly coloured foil. He also assists during the adorning, of the altar on which the nicho with Santiago has been kept the past year, the room and the door. The ceras are carried around in the processions and placed next to the statues of Santiago, San Miguel, and the Virgin in church.
Tiago is carried in procession from the house of the *mayordomo* to the church where he will stay for two weeks. The procession includes dancers led by the *Santiagueros* who are halfway joined by a procession from the church with the statues of Santiago, San Miguel (as the second important village saint), and the Holy Virgin. The *nicho* is put in its place on the altar; the three statues take up the usual central place in front of the altar. During the three main days of the fiesta the priest says mass, and also performs weddings, baptisms, and communions. At the end of each mass the church bell is rung and firecrackers are lit, amidst the noise of the dancers with their music who start leaving the church. Every evening during the entire week the fiscals hold a procession within the churchyard with the *nicho* and the three statues and they also have their meetings during which they elect a new *mayordomo* from one of the more well-to-do households. The *mayordomo* takes office on 6 August, by receiving the *nicho* in his house where it is ceremonially carried to stay there for the rest of the year.

Though the ritual dances in Nanacatlan were on the decline during the second half of the twentieth century, this trend has reversed since the 1990s. During my first visit in 1989 I witnessed the usual battles by the colourful *Santiagueros* and *Migueles* (who fight with the devil, the last day with the help of *Huehues*), but for the first time in many years the renowned Totonac dance of the *Voladores* was also performed again. In 1994 several additional dances were performed during the fiesta. Some of these new dances like the *Quetzales* and *Españoles* consisted of Nanacatecos but also groups from neighbouring villages like the *Negritos* (from Zongozotla) and *Tejoneros* (from Zitlala) adding to the bustle of the feast (see annex 4 and Govers 1998). During the three main days of the village feast all the dance troupes perform simultaneously; the village is filled with their colours, music, and movements, their tapping feet, battles, and jokes. Dancers from the region are actively engaged in helping establish new dance troupes. For instance, the *Voladores* from Hueytlalpan taught young people in Nanacatlan, while the *Santiagueros* went to Hueytlalpan in return for the performances and teachings of the *Voladores*.

With this system of reciprocal teaching and dancing, young dancers do not need to pay for their lessons but do have to buy their costumes and instruments, which can be rather costly. While many people are happy to invest their time, not all can easily afford to buy their costume. When their son registered with a dance troupe without asking his parents, Pedro and Irene were angry because they already paid for his school and that of his siblings and they would rather have done without the extra burden. In the end, they agreed to pay because they didn’t want to embarrass their son who had already committed himself. Other parents readily pay for their children’s outfit, like the sons of don Felix, because like their father they have been dancers themselves and like to maintain the family tradition. Others with even less to spend like Lorenzo and Magdalena still have a keen interest in involving their children in the village customs. Even though it remains an expensive affair to be a dancer, apparently this has not been a barrier to a proliferation of dance troupes.
With their number (nearly) doubled during the 1990s, the village feast has become far livelier than a decade before. Nowadays, not only villagers and migrants flock to watch, but more and more people from neighbouring villages as well.

While the original fiesta is clearly based on religious celebrations, for decades it has had a double face: religious festivities and dances that concentrate on the church and a more secular or mundane feast that centres around the basketball court and the small market where food and drinks are sold. Up to 20 teams from villages and towns all over the Sierra and as far as Mexico City participate in a basketball tournament that attracts a large, predominantly young, male crowd. During the past four years the sons of don Gustavo who live in Mexico City chartered a bus to bring other Nanacateco migrants, but also a few basketball teams (including their family team) of migrants from elsewhere in the Sierra. In the village remarkably tall young men with large sport shoes and oversized shirts come to roam the village centre and their huge bodies contrast sharply with those of the much shorter elderly villagers, a feature even further emphasized by the traditional clothes and simple sandals they wear.

After the first two days when the mass in church, the dances, and the basketball games attract large crowds, the village splits in two: the now more modest church celebrations are mainly attended by elderly and the women, while the young and the men go to the exciting final games of the basketball tournament. The coincidence of a religious and secular fiesta not only bridges the gap between generations and gender, but also between mestizo and Indio's, and between Catholics and Protestants, allowing it to remain an all-village affair (Vaughan 1994:224-25).

San Miguel

For Nanacatecos San Miguel is the Patron of Thunder and Rain whose powers are feared in the mountainous region and therefore deserves special attention. His feast on 29 September is a small replica of Santiago's celebration and marks the end of the ritual period of the village feast, which began on 16 July. Preparations start weeks ahead of time with a meeting of comisiones and collectors who then start collecting money, shopping, preparing decorations, and gathering flowers and leaves all aimed at decorating the church as well as the house of the mayordomo which holds the nicho with San Miguel on a special altar. The days before the feast ceras are made in the house of the mayordomo. Some helpers carry the nicho with San Miguel from the mayordomo's house to the church, while dance groups accompany them. On this occasion the Migueles are on the lead. Halfway, the procession meets another group with the usual statues but this time in sequence of San Miguel, Santiago, and the Virgin. Just as at the village patron feast, the nicho is brought to church where it remains on the altar for a week, and the statues remain in their special place. Church celebrations start on the 29th of September with a mass in

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19 Elsewhere, Saint John the Baptist is often mentioned as Rain God (Ichon 1973:393), see also note 16.
church; for the rest of the week there are nightly processions and performances of the *Migueles*, *Santiagueros*, and *Voladores*. Although the structure of the ritual is similar, the celebration of San Miguel is much smaller in scale with fewer participants and hardly any onlookers. It is also much more a religious feast in which no Protestants participate and for which hardly any migrants return. Like other saints’ days, the celebration is mainly at the homes of the Catholics who light a candle on the house altar and burn incense and prepare the customary dishes. The end of the celebration of San Miguel marks the end of a long ritual that started on 16 July, but that is most visible for the raising of the *Voladores* pole on 23 July, the *ante-vispera* of the patron’s feast. When the pole is removed on 9 October and the *nicho* with San Miguel is in the house of the new *mayordomo*, the ritual period has come to an end. Since 1997 however, the Voladores pole has remained in its place on the church square until after the day of the Virgen de Guadalupe (12 December) that has become a more popular celebration.

*Todos Santos*

Although in the Catholic calendar it is officially All Saints’ Day, the dead are at the centre of *Todos Santos*. Honouring the dead is of special importance in Mesoamerica (Brandes 1997; Nutini 1988). The dead are remembered and honoured, but the ritual is not only about those who have passed on. It is equally important for expressing alliances with the living, in particular *compadres* and close relatives, who receive the same food as the dead. It is therefore also a celebration of social relations (Ichon 1973:195; Lok 1991). As we saw in chapter 5, when a dead person returns home during *Todos Santos*, it is actually one of his two human souls – the spirit or *listakna* – that returns. *Todos Santos* consists of an elaborate series of rituals and ritual exchanges during various days, in which many different kinds of food are involved. Most exchanges take place within and between households, and on the cemetery. It is the least public of the communal rituals, with the exception of a communal effort to remove weeds and to clean the graveyard through *faena*. All stages of the ritual are a household affair. Most people – including Protestants – go to the graveyard to visit the graves of their relatives to clean or whitewash and decorate the grave and to burn candles. All other parts of the ritual take place inside the individual houses.

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20 All Saints’ Day is 1 November and All Souls’ Day on 2 November according to the official Catholic calendar. In Mesoamerica that last day stretches over the whole period from 31 October to 8 November in commemoration of the dead. This reflects older and quite elaborate celebrations of the dead in Mesoamerica and the importance of All Saints Day in fourteenth century Spain (see Nutini 1988:38-76; Callejo 1999:241-257).

21 At the Day of the Dead Mexicans share humorous representations of skulls and skeletons (of all kinds of material, or as food) and satirical verses (known as ‘skulls’). Such representations have become a national Mexican symbol and have given Mexicans a name of being obsessed by death. They are secular, designed for the living and urban, often shared among Mexico’s cultural elite (Brandes 1998). Such iconography is absent in Nanacatlán.
6.1 The *madrina* carrying the Infant Jesus at Christmas

6.2 A *piñata* for schoolchildren on Twelfthnight
The female or male head of a Catholic household offers food on the house altar, invites the dead by calling their names, and burns incense that is moved across the altar. On 31 October the names of dead children who are close relatives are called and they are invited to bring their dead friends who have nowhere else to go i.e., whose relatives are not alive or do not celebrate Todos Santos. This category of children includes all people who never married. There are few households who have not lost a baby or child and this is therefore a sad day for the parents and grandparents. When Pedro and Irene commemorate the early death of their first-born and offer food Pedro invites him: “My son, I offer you this small gift from the earth, may you bless it, and invite those children who have nobody to offer for them, so that they can share with you”.

1 November is the day for adult relatives who have died and each is called by name and invited to eat from the dishes on the altar. The next day, the proper Day of the Dead (All Souls) according to the liturgical calendar, all dead relatives (children and adults) are offered a meal – on this day people also urge them to bring their dead friends along. In the afternoon, the female head of the household sends dishes taken from the house altar to her parents, parents-in-law, and her comadres (with the godmothers as first receivers) who in turn give her the same kind of dish from their house altar in the bowl that she came with. On 8 November, a special category of dead are commemorated in their households: those who had an 'unnatural death', by drowning, being killed, or by dying in an accident. A few strict Catholics stretch the period of commemoration until Saint Andrew's day that marks the end of the month of November.

Over the years I spent in Nanacatlán people started to speak of Todos Santos in a different way as if they had come to feel a bit uneasy about the special veneration of death. It may have been through the influence of strict Protestants in the village who proudly say that they only believe in God and don’t need Saints, the dead, or two souls to be their mediators to God; some Catholics as well state that Todos Santos does not mean they directly relate to the dead, but that it is a way to honour God and through him to venerate the deceased.

Christmas and New Year

Christmas is still predominantly a religious affair and the public celebrations centre around the Catholic church. From there a series of processions makes their way through the village. These processions, the nine Posadas, take place every evening during nine subsequent days, each day to a different village house. These nine hostels or posadas stand for each month of the Virgin’s pregnancy. Every Catholic household wants, at least once in their lifetime, to act as a posada. The central house is that of the mayordomo, which holds the Infant Jesus during his four years

22 Curiously enough he speaks Spanish, while many others use Totonac.
23 Posadas were first celebrated in churches and convents and became popular at the end of the eighteenth century. They coincide with the Aztec celebration of the birth of Huitzilopochtli. For various interpretations on the origins of the Posadas see Salles 2000.
in office. Because of the many expenses a *mayordomo* is supposed to have, he generally is selected from among the wealthy families and has to be a good Catholic, dutifully married in church. It is his small daughter who acts as the *madrina* of the Infant Jesus (or simply *El Niño*) and who plays a crucial role in the Christmas ritual. She carries the Infant Jesus (not to be confused with the *nicho* holding the little Jesus together with Mary and Joseph that is carried in the *Posadas*) on the most ceremonial occasions. Nine days before Christmas, on 16 December, a procession starts from the church to the first hostel. The fiscals decorate the entrance and construct a large altar inside the house where the *nicho* will stay that night.

As during other church rituals, the *mayordomo* household is the busiest. On the 24th, the last hostel only keeps the *nicho* for a few hours, after which it is accompanied to the *mayordomo*. Later that night the most important procession takes place, leading from the house of the *mayordomo* to the church amidst a large crowd. At midnight the *madrina* brings the Infant Jesus in her arms from her house to church, where he will stay in a crib in a decorated stable in front of the church altar. At home, many people – including Protestants – celebrate Christmas and New Year with a customary meal, though some only do so when their children or relatives come over. *Mestizo* and some Totonac families have a Christmas tree in or just outside their house for which flashing coloured lights with music have become popular as decoration. These families often also celebrate Christmas Eve with presents.

At midnight on the start of the New Year, the *madrina* again carries Jesus during a procession that stays inside the church. Every following night there is a small procession at the church, until 6 January (Twelfthnight) when she carries him back home upright (and not as a baby anymore) where he will lay in a small bed. On 2 February (Candlemas) Jesus is dressed in new white clothes by an elderly woman, and the *madrina* carries him back to church in the morning where he is blessed and the priest says a mass. That evening she carries him home again for the last time and returns him to his *nicho* until 24 December.

During Christmas and New Year, many migrants return to the village and the streets are again more crowded than usual. Only a few stay for a longer period, generally to start the coffee harvest and do some work in the fields. They usually arrive just before Christmas and with the exception of the last *Posada* and the church celebrations, spend most of their time at home or with relatives and friends celebrating Christmas Eve and New Years Eve.

The number of active participants in the festivities is limited. In 1997 I counted, apart from the ten fiscals, in total about 25 women, teenage girls, and children who performed the prayers and songs during the hour of the first *Posada*. During the following eight evenings their number gradually grew to about 50. Only during the main procession after the last *Posada* did a large crowd gather. On Christmas Eve the *madrina* of the Infant Jesus is washed, her hair carefully plaited, and dressed – in 1997 for the first time in what is considered a traditional Totonac outfit instead of in a long white gown like before. In that year also for the first time, the fiscals
organised a *piñata* outside the church, in which about 40 children took part trying
to break the decorated clay pot so the sweets spray around.

... and many more

In addition to the calendrical highlights of *Semana Santa*, *Santiago*, *Todos Santos*
and Christmas, the annual cycle has a range of other saints’ holidays that receive
special attention though the public pomp and display is far more moderate. These
include the procession at *Corpus Christi* that is held on the 60th day after Easter, the
blessing of the bulls in the churchyard and the mass said at the day of *San Isidro* on
the 15th of May, and the mass of *San Antonio* on the 13th of July. But Nanacatecos
also share in the patron feasts of neighbouring villages (see table 6.3) and honour
them by putting candles, flowers, and incense on their house altars. They also
actively take part in the *fiestas* of Zapotitlán (*Santa Maria* on 8 September) and
Tuxtla (*San Sebastian* on 20 January) when the village basketball team enters the
*fiesta* competition. The elderly say that they never used to work on those days out
of respect for their neighbours’ patron saints and they regret that young people do
not seem to bother anymore.

Less obtrusive but equally important to Catholic women are the rituals during
the entire month of May when the Virgin Mary is venerated daily with prayers in
church and a procession. Catholic initiation rites such as the *Presentación*, First
Communion, and Confirmation are only performed by a number of villagers. The
*Presentación* is a recent rite to ‘present’ three-year olds to the church on any chosen
Sunday, while the administering of First Communion has been joined with the
annual village *fiesta* when the priest is present in any case. On that occasion, the
young first grade children are allowed to fully participate in the Eucharist for the
first time. During the days of the *fiesta*, other children receive their Confirmation,
which establishes them as full members of the church. The celebrations are rela-
tively expensive as children are dressed up in special new clothes and their parents
invite a new *padrino* and *madrina* to have an elaborate meal. Many children there-
fore never receive their First Communion or Confirmation.

A relatively new celebration is that of the *Virgen de Guadalupe* on 12 December.
There used to be a small procession where her statue was accompanied to the
church altar and adorned with the Mexican national flag. In the morning, people
would sing the *Mañanitas* and other songs before and during the procession and
the hoisting of the flag while girls would dance Mexican folk dances (*Mexicanitas*)
in the afternoon. Since 1996, the celebration has become more elaborate. Earlier,

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24 To a lesser extent Nanacatecos go to the village *fiestas* of Ixtepec (*Virgen Asunción*, 15 August)
and Zitlala (*San Augustin*, 28 August); even fewer go to Xochitlan (*San Bartolo*, 24 August), Caxhuaca
(*San Francisco*, 4 October) or Hueytalpan (*San Andrés*, 30 November).

25 An early morning celebration song and birthday serenade sung all over Mexico on December 12
honour Our Lady of Guadalupe, and commemorate the apparition of the Virgin Mary to the Indian Juan
Diego in 1521.
girls went from door to door selling *tamales* and *atole* to raise money to pay for the decorations and young Catholic activists started to adorn the statue of the *Virgen*. The *Voladores* and *Migueles* also joined the procession turning it into a much more festive occasion.

**Local rituals of statehood**

The presence of the Mexican flag at the celebration of Mexico's national symbol, the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, already shows that religious rituals sometimes touch upon or coincide with public rituals related to the state (see table 6.4). While the centre of government and national politics might seem far away for the villagers, the presence of a state in Nanacatlán cannot be denied. In daily routine, it is manifested by the local authorities and their actions, by the civil cargo system for local administration and communal work, but also by federal and state (of Puebla) institutions such as the village schools and the national programmes for development projects and crop subsidies. The reach of the state affects everyday life of the village households in a direct way.

**Table 6.4: State rituals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 January</td>
<td>Twelfthnight (Santos Reyes) celebration at school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 May</td>
<td>Commemoration of the Battle of Puebla (1863) against the French</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>Diploma presentation (<em>clausura</em>) kindergarten, primary, and secondary school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 September</td>
<td>Independence Day (declared in 1810)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 November</td>
<td>Revolution Day (commemorating the Mexican Revolution, 1910-1920)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>Christmas celebration at school (last school day before Christmas holiday)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The material presence of the state is quite visible in the traditional layout of the village with its typical rectangular grid of streets and gravity point in the central plaza with the church, village hall, and school buildings. This material presence is occasionally accompanied by local varieties of national rituals expressing nationhood and ‘modernity’. Such secular rituals are designed to arouse popular involvement in and loyalty to the national state and the development it advocates. Nevertheless, with the exception of the *mestizos* and some faithful PRI supporters, Nanacatecos predominantly are only interested in the state as far as it affects local society and do not care much for what happens beyond the boundaries of their village. State rituals however, are obligatory and even though they mirror religious rituals to a high degree, they are not particularly liked. Whereas Nanacatecos participate in great numbers and with strong emotional attachment in the main public religious feasts, they largely consider state-related rituals to be the affair of the local authorities and the schoolteachers, and only reluctantly join them when they can’t avoid them (cf. Sekimoto 1990).

Paradoxically, even though they do not feel part of the state, villagers know
quite well how one should behave and what the local authorities should do as representatives of the village vis-à-vis official visitors. When Genaro Bravo, village mayor at the time, refused to attend the meeting the INI organised with local healers to inventory the most pressing health related problems (i.e., water, sanitation, medical care) and instead continued to play basketball, people were upset and criticized him because his conduct was detrimental to the village. It seems that in Nanacatlán proper procedures and behaviour in official matters are as important as elsewhere in Mexico.

Of course, among the local elite there are politically articulate villagers who even started ‘seeing like a state’ (Scott 1998) in the sense that they have taken over the objectives and mission statements of government programmes and the formalized procedures of official meetings with its bureaucratised jargon, but that stands far apart from everyday experience of most villagers. With the younger generation the attitude is changing. Since more schools have been set up in Nanacatlán and the region, educational enrolment has increased and levels of schooling have steadily gone up. Because it is mainly schoolteachers who play an active role as initiators and instructors of state celebrations, more and more young people have become accustomed to them. Moreover, the prolonged presence of migrants in cities has made villagers aware of being part of a wider world and the fact that what happens there directly affects their own lives. The growing number of TVs clearly adds to this awareness: even entertainment programmes turn into a form of national consciousness-raising because they expose their audience to a whole range of new urban experiences; even more so they convey the message of ‘Mexican-ness’ itself. Thus villagers have become interested in and started identifying with the latest popular music bands and the exciting characters of soap operas, but also with the national soccer team and the fate of Mexican immigrants being ill-treated in the USA.

State rituals are everywhere. On Monday mornings, a small group of primary school children in their uniforms (boys and girls taking weekly turns) raise the Mexican flag in a ceremony attended by the whole school. School is also the place for commemorations of the three major national holidays: Independence Day (on 16 September), the defeat of (though not victory over) the French invasion army in Puebla (on 5 May) and Revolution Day (20 November). The children have a day

26 The village authorities remarkably often act as host. Official visits may include state or municipal officials, medical doctors and nurses, representatives from INI, INEA, INMECAFE, CONASUPO, or other organisations that have an ongoing programme in the village or try to start one. Their meals are paid from the village budget and may take up a considerable amount of the available funding. There are no facilities available for overnight stays and visitors leave again at the end of a day. Such visits are mostly related to meetings, either with villagers or regional officials from state organisations. The most remarkable visit was the arrival by helicopter of the state governor, who had chosen Nanacatlán as host for the regional INEA meeting. When he was at a different meeting in Zapotitlán somewhere in 1996, also arriving by helicopter, Irene had the nerve to speak up. When the regional education coordinator told the governor that all schools were 100% covered by teachers, she stood up to say that there were 2 teachers short in Nanacatlán. She never mentioned it herself, but other villagers marvelled at her daring.
off but on the day before or the day after they have to attend the ceremony when the flag is hoisted in the presence of the mayor. In class, these major events of Mexican history also receive a lot of attention. The declaration of independence from Spain in 1810 made by Hidalgo is the most important of these events (which shows from the fact that the president of the Republic and all governors and mayors repeat it every year) and everybody knows el grito de Hidalgo. Even so, rarely are many ordinary villagers present at these ceremonies.

Like religious instruction, religious holidays are not part of the school curriculum. Schools do pay attention to the secular aspects of Christmas and the 6th of January when presents and sweets are exchanged among the children. In a similar vein other mundane occasions like Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Teachers’ Day, and Children’s Day are celebrated with gifts or poems.

A specific school event that has gained in importance over the years is graduation day or clausura. When children finish kindergarten, primary school, or secondary school, a special ceremony is staged in which they are handed their diploma. This clausura is quite an occasion: the school committee and the mayor sit in front, the teachers have prepared a performance, the children are neatly dressed up, and their parents and other relatives are proudly present. For this occasion there are also new compadres who join their graduation godchildren. After a flag hoisting ceremony, the children receive their diplomas whereupon they give a performance: those from kindergarten show some folkloristic dances and the secondary school graduates — the boys in black trousers and white shirts, the girls in sumptuous graduation dresses — perform a waltz. From among the secular rituals this is by far the most important and migrants come all the way back from Mexico City to attend their children’s graduation.

The tension of (re)creating rituals

Looking back over the years between 1989 and 1998, it is clear that rituals became of major importance in Nanacatlán and ritual life and costumbres have actually expanded. This does not mean that community rituals have remained the same. On the contrary, even in such a relatively short period change has nearly been the order of the day. Some old customs, especially those related to agriculture, house building and personal behaviour, have simply disappeared. Others have been changed,

27 Though many more children are educated than ever, numbers drop drastically in each grade of primary school, as well as with each higher level of education. In 1994 for instance a total of 178 children enrolled in primary school according to grade with the following numbers: first 40, second 38, third 32, fourth 23, fifth 23, and sixth 22. The higher numbers in the lower grades was not due to a rise in the number of village children. This means that only about 50% finished primary school. Sadly enough, only a little persuasion is necessary to increase school participation. Maestra Lupe for instance, had the third grade with 32 pupils, when three years earlier in first grade they had been 49. She managed to have the same number pass to second grade with another teacher, because she used to visit each family whenever a child failed and stimulate the parents to send their child to school. Other teachers do not always do this.
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and still others have been (re)created. But what has been recreated and how has been a matter of debate. There were disagreements: among Catholics, between Catholics and Protestants, and between Catholics and their priest, as to how rituals should be lived and performed. The more rituals became popular, the more they became a matter of concern, and the more tensions grew as to what they were all about.

The fiesta of the village patron Santiago is a case in point. It is nowadays by far the most important community ritual for all Nanacatecos and attracts a growing number of visitors from outside the village. The fact that the fiesta in principle includes all villagers, does of course, not guarantee village unity. Alvarez (1991), for instance, describes the situation in the Totonac highland village of Filomena Mata where the local basketball team and the dance troupes got involved in a political conflict when the dance square next to the church was turned into a basketball court – furthering a political split in the community. In Nanacatlan, several problems also popped up in the politically turbulent year of 1994. At the start of the fiesta it was unclear whether the Santiaguero dancers would show up because there had been some internal accusations that not all of the subsidy the troupe had received from INI (through a programme aimed at cultural revival) had been spent properly. Other dance groups in the village had similar problems with the INI subsidy. Under the already tense political disagreements in that presidential election year, accusations of fraud and embezzlement of government money easily added to the envy and mutual accusations among supporters of the competing political parties. Similar tensions broke out when urban migrants returned to the village with their own group of Migueles. When they assumed that they would perform in the fiesta, the newcomers clashed with the local Migueles group that had been active for decades in Nanacatlan. Many villagers were indignant that the migrants had dared start a group of their own and claimed a right to perform during the village feast. “They know that we have older rights but as soon as they have left the village they think they can do it their way”. The son of don Felix who was the captain of the local group, called in the help of the fiscals who banned the newcomers from performing during the feast. But all these tensions and competition had no impact on the fiesta itself, which remarkably turned into the most communal and crowded of all public feasts bridging even the division between Catholics and Protestants.

As we have seen, in 1996 there were also many disagreements during Semana Santa between the new priest and the fiscals, and between the priest and the catechists led by Bernadino. The disagreements centred around the scenario of what to do during each of the days of the Holy Week and the new Passion Play that was being prepared – the priest severely objected against a number of ‘theologically unsound’ practices. In the end the organising committee had to give in to the orders of the priest, but carefully maintained or revived local customs when he was not around.

A year later, during the preparations for the Christmas celebrations of 1997, new tensions arose. This time it was not between villagers and the priest, but among the
local Catholics themselves. A group of young people had become active in church affairs and had their own ideas of how Christmas should be celebrated. They collided with the established religious functionaries from among the cargo holders who had always been in charge. The year before, a potential conflict between one of the catechists, Bernadino, and the cargo holders was settled before it became a problem. Although Bernadino had withdrawn from the scene, in 1997 the two groups clashed head-on. Young girls overruled the elderly woman who for years had been leading the evening prayers in the church and forced her to leave the praying to them. But when the girls couldn’t cope with the praying and singing during the Christmas Posadas, they asked the old woman to come back – which she reluctantly did after consulting with fiscales. There was a lot going on simultaneously between young and old, between the Catholics and their priest and everyone seemed to have run into disagreements with everybody else. In the end, the Posadas and the procession on Christmas Eve were far less sumptuous and crowded than preceding years.

Bernadino had not only been locally active, but had followed courses for catechists in Huehuetla in the early 1990s inspired by liberation theology and ethnic revival. The religious congregation there was among the supporters of the OIT. Bernadino and his group had from then on wanted to spend more time in practicing how to sing, in teaching about religion, and ‘the true meaning of Christmas’ as well in decorating the church. They asked for innovations, ‘modernization’, and Totonnacization at the same time. They received permission from the priest to introduce at least one lasting alteration to the Christmas ritual: instead of being dressed in a long white semi-bridal gown with a crown in her hair, the madrina who carried the infant Jesus had to wear the ‘traditional Totonac’ outfit. Not everyone was pleased with this innovation and several churchgoers were outraged that the young were allowed to deviate from custom and take over from the well-respected fiscales. When earlier that year they had tried to expand their innovative drive by changing the white gown of the Virgin Mary into the traditional Totonac outfit as well, with a small tenate and flowers, the elderly women were dismayed and complained to the priest. Then he was on their side and became angry at the young innovators because they had not consulted him about this change. At Christmas the priest sided with the young people who by then had carefully asked his permission, but this turned out to only exacerbate the tension with their co-villagers.

This was a major setback for Bernadino and his followers. Initially, he had enjoyed broad support in his efforts to what he called ‘reviving the customs’. When he and several others instigated the Voladores in 1989, people had been proud and excited. The same happened when he succeeded in incorporating the feast of the Virgen de Guadalupe into the annual ritual cycle. His proposal in 1993 to stage a Passion play was also greeted with enthusiasm and emotion. Since then, many more people had become active as dancers, performers, and organisers and large crowds showed up to attend the ceremonies. But it didn’t turn out to be a linear development; in 1994 the first problems occurred between the ‘modernizing tradi-
tionalists' and the established religious cargo holders who felt threatened by the unorthodox innovators – but Bernadino could still count on general sympathy from among the villagers.

That changed when Bernadino overplayed his hand by interfering with the ritual responsibilities of the cargo holders and the elderly women who had been the pillars of religious rituals for such a long time. He particularly ran into trouble when he tried to put too much emphasis on Totonac revival and the need to ‘awaken’ the people for the Totonac cause. He politicised tradition and that made him lose touch with the people who didn’t want ‘Totonac tradition’ but ‘costumbres’; to follow the ways as they had been ever since they began participating. Bernadino’s group increasingly had to face criticism until many women no longer wanted to take part in the 1997 Christmas processions. The young people had not only offended the one among them who had always taken care of leading the prayers but all older women felt insulted by their interfering with the church decorations and trying to replace ritual costumes (considered costumbre) for Totonac dresses. Bernadino had also tread on the toes of the fiscals by accusing them of not working hard enough. He had wanted them to clean and repaint the whole church and make more sumptuous decorations. The cargo holders who had already put in a lot of effort, were angry, and complained that they also had families to support and couldn’t leave work more often than they already did. Being attacked by the priest and now offended by Bernadino, they found themselves treated ungratefully.

Conclusions

Nanacatecos show a flexible and inventive way of dealing with customs. Their recreation of a ritual repertoire was a strong feature during the 1990s and contrasts sharply with the ritual decline of the decades before. In this chapter I argue that this can only be understood in relation to the increased embeddedness of local life within a larger world and the constant rural-urban flow of people, goods, and ideas. The more a community becomes imagined the more it needs symbolic expressions of belonging (cf. Cohen 1985). The wish of villagers to revive tradition is obviously just one part of the process. It can be juxtaposed with the gradual erosion of local customs and the impact of urban (mestizo) influences on ritual and community life. Though the customary form of rituals is crucial, they are far removed from being a re-enactment, as Connerton (1989:57) would have it; they have become recreated, they were revived, certain new additions were incorporated, and others rejected while existing details disappeared. Novelties are incorporated into existing rituals and completely new customs are accepted into the ritual repertoire as long as they are performed according to costumbre, or at least do not interfere with it. It is the customary form that enables change, and form and content are thus not only different issues over time (Barabas and Bartholomé 1984) but also at the same time (Cohen 1985).

The most visible expansion has been among those rituals attractive to migrants
and young people: for them large festivities are reasons to return home and for them new influences in local rituals bridge the urban-rural divide. A large number of local customs are also open to Protestants, such as the village *fiesta*, many life cycle celebrations, and the *clausura*. But they are by no means the only ones. Several *costumbres* related to livelihood and daily life may have disappeared while others such as marriage and childbirth customs, *mano vuelta* and food habits, and the healing practices mentioned in the previous chapter continue to exist or have even increased. Such more common customs may be less spectacular, but by including seemingly private and instrumental actions into the local customary repertoire, they reinforce the timeless and communal connotation of *costumbres* beyond the exceptional and the public.

It is no coincidence that migrants and young people in particular, have taken initiatives to revive local customs, either with the help and knowledge of, or in opposition to, older religious experts and state support schemes. They most of all face the uncertainties of dealing with two worlds and their local ritual activities keep them firmly ‘where they belong’. This of course, precisely sets them apart when they invade the conventions of ritual responsibilities and habits. As the case of Bernadino shows in detail, local particularities and details proved to be crucial in defining what is local and who is entitled to organise local rituals – issues that have become serious bones of contention.

This is also reflected in the tensions arising between migrants and resident villagers and between young and older people – or more specifically, between the new cultural brokers and the traditional ritual specialists. The latter moreover, had to face the increasing pressure of the Catholic priest who tried to push his own ideas about ritual orthodoxy. Don Felix, the informal leader, and his followers may have lost their bid for political power but because of that they are less willing than ever to relinquish their central role in ritual life. They were supported by many villagers who agreed that the religious cargo holders and not the priest or the migrants and young were the ones entitled to organise church rituals. In general however, the new groups have had a good deal of success in their efforts to change the ritual landscape. Having added to the grandeur of the annual celebrations by bringing in some spectacular innovations, they became popular as long as they did not encroach on existing rituals or the local religious establishment.

Especially when some tried to bring in new ideas about Totonac traditions, it emerged that the idea of a distinctive ethnic identity did not appeal to most Nacatecos. They accused Bernadino: “Inventas cosas” (You’re just inventing things). While villagers did participate in state programmes they considered worthwhile, they kept these at bay. The INI and the INEA are valued for their grants, health care, language courses, and radio programmes; not for their ethnic and cultural objectives even when these are propagated by some of their own people. Paradoxically, reinventing an imagined Totonac past is more out of tune with custom than incorporating new urban rituals, as long as this is done the customary way.

The whole process of ritual recreation defies an easy classification of rituals as
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a continuation from the past or a new urban introduction; of being lost or revived. Many—most notably Semana Santa and Christmas—carry several of these characteristics simultaneously: some elements have disappeared, new ones like the clothes of Judas and of the madrina of Jesus have been added, while certain old decorations have reappeared. Other costumbres such as agricultural and house rituals have disappeared without much concern. New features such as the celebration of the Virgen de Guadalupe or birthdays closely follow the pattern of existing rituals. It is therefore more apt to look at the globalisation paradox as not so much the simultaneousness of tradition and modernity—whether conceived in terms of homogeneity and heterogeneity (Geschiere and Meyer 1998) or of loss and revival (Clifford 1988)—but to look at the interaction and even mutuality of the two, because this is what makes present-day rituals in Nanacatlán so appealing. While the recreated rituals imply a more splendid honouring of the saints, the Virgin, and Jesus for the active Catholics; for young people they are above all splendid excitement. And while new rituals are interesting for the village youth and migrants because they resemble celebrations in Mexico City, for most other villagers—and in many cases the Protestants—they are acceptable because they are celebrated as part of costumbre, even though older ones may be more important to them. What all people share is their local chauvinism of Nanacatlán outdoing neighbouring villages with their more grandiose celebrations. Without the active role of the new cultural brokers however, costumbres in Nanacatlán would not have received nearly so much support nor would migrants, young people, and Protestants have been as interested in the village as a ritual community as they are now.

Performing in or at least attending customary rituals to maintain the balance between humans and nature and between humans and supernature in the healing rituals for restoring that balance (discussed in the previous chapter), has come to determine the villagers' sense of belonging to the community. Ritual specialists are not just organisers and villagers are not mere participants; they share a common responsibility for the prosperity of the community and it is no wonder that tensions arise when it is unclear how and by whom rituals should be performed. The precarious balance of costumbres and change is reason for concern even at the best of times. Nanacatecos realise that it is in everybody's interest to incorporate everyone into the symbolic community, even though this is not always easy. They follow the pattern of performing costumbres and incorporating people not only through the rituals presented thus far, but also through extensive food exchanges, the central theme of the next chapter. Food preparations and meals usually take place within the household and it is therefore easy to overlook the significance of food for bridging the private and the public as well as the social, the natural, and the supernatural. As we will see, exchanging food as a material affirmation of local belonging has gained importance because ritual life has expanded on the one hand—and therefore the role of food exchanges—and on the other hand rural-urban migration has created an awareness of food as local, just like those who eat and share it.