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

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Since Tönnies (2001 [1887]) and Durkheim (1997 [1893]), village communities have been presented as bulwarks of traditionalism – or conservatism – that in a modernising world are succumbing to the strong pressures originating from capitalist economies and centralist nation-states. They are classified as on the brink of their demise as the unifying force of history will replace these small-scale worlds of social harmony, solidarity, and communality with anonymous societies. Twentieth-century social scientists from Redfield (1964) to Lévi-Strauss (1981) and Stavenhagen (1968) to Cancian (1992) have often repeated these views of the eroding external forces that undermine the internal cohesion of communities and eventually lead to their disintegration. But in the actual world communities did not disappear – at least, the majority of them haven’t – and new studies have reached the paradoxical conclusion (paradoxical for those who prophesied their doom) that communities not only show much more resilience in the face of modernity but that they may actually thrive amidst the waves of global change as they acquire new forms and meanings.

I began this study with the question of how Nanacatecos managed to maintain and create a viable and at times lively community against the odds of strong pressures toward economic, political, and cultural incorporation; so that far from disintegrating in a period of major transformations it gained in prominence. I first approached that central issue by mapping the far-reaching processes of change that took place in this mountain village during the past thirty years.

Economically, the village saw a marked diversification of income sources through smallholder cash crop cultivation and through temporary and permanent migration. This diversification upset the former social class structure in that the old *mestizo* elite of landowners and merchants lost their central position as well as their wealth. The Totonac population as a whole now has a greater share in the village lands and in total income and has improved its living conditions and educational level. New forms of social differentiation have emerged but don’t know longer follow the strict ethnic lines from the past.

Diversification also made itself felt in the fields of religion and politics. A village where Catholicism and Totonac worldviews have merged into a monoreligious whole saw a substantial number of inhabitants convert to Protestantism. Besides a radical break with the past when ‘Catholic’ and ‘indigenous’ were coterminous, this religious pluriformity also meant that the new converts withdrew from community rituals, because many of these concentrated on the local Catholic church.
This restructuring of the religious scene was attended by a remarkable, albeit relatively modest, form of political polarization as the protracted monopoly of the PRI over village affairs was challenged by a growing number of villagers.

In spite of these divisive and even centrifugal tendencies, the village is still a place full of meaning to those who live there and are proud to be Nanacatecos rather than Totonacs, but also to those who temporarily or permanently have left the village to work elsewhere and remain strongly attached to Nanacatlán, returning regularly. This points to the fact that in opposition to these tendencies towards fragmentation, there are other processes at work that are of a centripetal nature. In this study I located them in a number of social fields: a shared, but not uncontested perception of local history as well as a generally shared worldview; a system of social networks based on ties of kinship, *compadrazgo*, neighbourhood, and friendship adapted to cope with the changing social world of the villagers; and an elaborate pattern of regular and frequent rituals as well as exchanges between households in which women play a prominent role. Apparently, the village has acquired new meanings for its inhabitants and for the migrants and is being reconstituted by new patterns of relationships and new cultural practices (J. Cohen 2000; Watanabe 1992). In the remainder of this chapter I will describe the ways this has happened and their relevance for community studies in general.

The new developments in Nanacatlán which increased socio-economic, religious, and political diversity in the village and brought an urban and sometimes global orientation of village life, have made people aware that they are different as Nanacatecos – but also that to survive as Nanacatecos they need to reaffirm those fields of social life that up to recently had been self-evident and familiar. If people living in the village and the city, or moving in-between, all claim to be Nanacateco, ‘belonging’ is no longer a matter of course. In the past, male roles as peasants and cargo holders and female roles in managing the household and its social networks provided clear guidelines for villagers to find their place in the community. Now that the religious cargo system is no longer all-encompassing and a part of the population works and lives in the city, other ways need to be emphasized for incorporating men and women in the community. Without such an effort, villagers unable to migrate would become marginalized rurals in a hollow village and the migrants at the bottom of the urban economy would become marginalized urbans. They both need one another to escape such a fate and found it in a rediscovery of their community through a number of recreations discussed in the previous chapters. The gist of my argument can be summarized as follows.

Dealing with an increasingly pluriform and differentiated local society with many people working outside the village, a changed social landscape in which more people than in the past own land, youngsters who see their future somewhere in the wider world, and a quarter of the population having turned away from the dominant religious denomination; the social structure in which the traditional divide between
well-off Mestizo families and poor Totonacs has been replaced by a much more complex social stratification. This also had its impact on the social networks that bind people. In the past they mainly consisted of horizontal ties with relatives living in or near the village and with neighbours of ritual kin, and predominantly vertical ties with strategically placed compadres usually from among the mestizo elite. These networks still exist in the village, but new forms have emerged alongside them. In these new networks kinfolk in the cities play a central role: nowadays they are within relatively easy reach and are often well placed to act as mediators in providing access to the urban world. That has made them eminently suited to become compadres of their relatives in the village – the more so as these ties provide the migrants with prestige and stronger ties to Nanacatlán. In fact, a new type of community has emerged increasingly based on networks of rural-urban kin ties and compadrazgo relations instead of solely geographical proximity. The social boundaries of Nanacatlán now extend to a much wider area than before; to such an extent that we may speak of a network community instead of a village community.

Nevertheless, the village is still there and as people do not meet in an abstract space or an imagined community, geographical place remains important as the framework for and the embodiment of a common past and an internalised history. ‘Being a local’ means to share a common past and a common present based upon an intimate knowledge of the locality and its inhabitants. This kind of knowledge is incorporated into and transferred through narratives about the history of the community and is often framed in meaningful references to the locality and its environment (Basso 2002). One has to be a local to truly understand and reproduce the stories and memories as well as the local gossip. Oral history ties people to the place and involves all Nanacatecos: Totonacs and mestizos, Catholics and Protestants, and those living outside the village. This does not imply that social and religious differences do not play a part; on the contrary, people from different groups can hold widely divergent views and interpretations of the village past – particularly when it comes to more recent political history. But even in their disagreements about intravillage affairs, villagers share a common frame of mind that gives meaning to contemporary persons and affairs and sets them off against outsiders. In times of change this historical community provides a handhold in connecting events and people to local places.

Remarkably, differences along religious and political lines are overruled by a worldview shared by the majority of Nanacatecos: they interpret their way of living as handed down by their ancestors and expressed in myths (cuentos y chistes) and costumbres. This worldview is based upon a basic tripartite reciprocity between people, natural beings, and supernatural beings. It boils down to the premise that well-being can only exist when relations between these three are in harmony. In a practical sense, the local worldview provides the fundamental outline of a morality that maps crucial issues like sickness, death, and the sources of evil. The ways to
cope with such issues may be formally part of the domain of the denominational religions in the village, but with their emphasis on the hereafter and the next world, these provide less practical guidelines for everyday life and the here and now. That makes healers and especially *brujos* (shamans or sorcerers) locally influential specialists as they communicate between people and supernatural powers before whom ordinary villagers stand in awe. This worldview is the basis of the village as a *moral community* as the workings of the natural and supernatural world give directions for personal well-being and that of the community.

For the resident villagers, the central community and life-cycle rituals have remained the basic cultural system for, as Turner (1974) puts it, “experiencing communitas”. For the migrants and their families, these rituals have become the beacons and bearings of their ties to the village. They return to take part in these embodiments of communal life, and through their presence the village which may seem dull and deserted in everyday life, experiences a bustle during major rituals and the agricultural peak seasons. For the migrants, this does not just mean a nostalgic return to their past as most of them actively engage in organizing such events. Even though villagers present these rituals as fixed expressions of community solidarity and cohesion, they are constantly being reshaped by their participants who tend more and more to have differing perceptions of how these rituals should be performed and how the ancestors might have wanted them to be performed. At times this leads to clashes between established ritual specialists and performers in the village and newcomers to the ritual arena such as young people, migrants, and other cultural innovators; between, as we might say, ‘traditionalists’ and ‘neo-traditionalists’. These clashes indicate that rituals are not on the decline but are thriving and constitute a cause of major concern to all involved. As they are intended to express and symbolise the community and have become an important reason for scattered people to meet, participants want to recognize themselves in the way they are being performed: therefore in addition to ‘experiencing communitas’ rituals also are ‘experiments with communitas’. Nanacatlán then is a *ritual community* precisely because rituals are crucial for providing a sense of continuity in times of change, while at the same time provide a space to integrate new experiences by linking them to their memories of a common past.

As Massey (1993:66) has put it: “…what gives place its specificity is not [only, CG] some long internalised history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of relations, articulated together at a particular locus”. Bonds are created and maintained through concrete actions between villagers who are part of reciprocal networks in which they are involved in a series of frequent exchanges (J. Cohen 2000). Among them, the exchange of food is the most obvious and most common way to express belonging and sharing; therefore these exchanges are a good point of entry to study social networks and the ways these are embedded in ritual life. Public rituals may centre on the role of men, but as all rituals involve
extensive food exchanges, women play a crucial role in this system of reciprocity and community building. The extension of social networks over greater distances involving more people with whom ties are of a different (weaker nature) has replaced an exchange pattern primarily based on generalised reciprocity, characteristic for tight networks and strong ties, with one in which balanced reciprocity takes priority. It is these food exchanges among members of the wider networks that bring the social, historic, moral, and ritual community together in social action as an exchange community.

I have shown how globalisation works in practice: how through socio-economic and political restructuring old ties lost their self-evidence while simultaneously a framework of new ties was created through networks. The central significance of the community itself did not disappear, but a different type of community has come into being, not so much tied to location but inspired by it. In addition to face-to-face contacts the time-space compression offers new unmediated communication to keep the community alive in between and as an extension of actual encounters. To escape the abstract proliferation of globalisation as an external homogenising force upon localities that makes locals into passive recipients – much like the steamroller of modernization would flatten communities – it is crucial to link globalisation to agency. I have attempted to show that global processes work through the local by people who rather than being will-les victims of globalising forces, actively create and emphasize their community. The metaphors that express globalisation as a paradoxical process – summarised as homogenising and diversifying or as flow and closure – mirror concerns about how history works. In contrast to the linear model of modernization replacing tradition, it offers the advantage of providing a view on the apparent contradictions and simultaneousness of processes of modernity.

Geertz – one of the most influential early anthropologists to keep positivist presuppositions at bay – analyses culture as meaning making from the actor’s point of view. To paraphrase his metaphor “webs of meaning” (1973:5) that create a coherent world, I want to emphasize how Nanacatecos create webs of practices that give meaning to their lives as a community. Because people have different interpretations of the forms that local practices should take, this is always a process full of contestation. In Nanacatlán this often focused on who is entitled to take the lead in organising, performing, and thus shaping costumbres. This was claimed by traditional specialists as well as the young and migrants and two kinds of ownership started competing: that defined by origin as place of birth (as had always been the case) and as place of residence. Migrants felt entitled to define rituals because they were from Nanactlan. Resident locals readily agree that migrants can participate, but claim superior ownership through both birth and residence – because the latter implies the day-to-day duties. Not only access to the local was at stake; access to the global was also an issue. The active residents had been unable to escape village labour, the better educated young did not find suitable jobs, and the migrants were pushed in and out of the urban economy. Unlike autochthonous struggles in Africa
where the defence of a return to the local is actually about the global in the sense of excluding others from new avenues to riches and power (Ceupens and Geschiere 2005), the fierce political clashes and cultural disagreements were hard to address because different competitions were going on at the same time. Nanatecos were afraid to lose or miss access to the global as well as the local. The global is in a sense also a local issue, because it concerns what is accessible and at stake among locals. One could thus conclude that struggles about the global are invariably about local power issues.

Nanacatecos have found a way to create a community in fast-changing times and amidst contestations by linking urban and rural practices under the aegis of community. Rather than paradoxical, flow and closure of global processes are two sides of the same coin. Local customary repertoires would not have risen in prominence if it were not for new experiences and circumstances that boosted the creation of community practices and enabled the quite divergent locals to give their own meaning to the local community. In Cohen’s words, a community does not need shared meanings but exists by the shared practices that leave room for different interpretations. It is, as Cohen states, an official form that allows for different meaning and experience and offers the individual and idiosyncratic possibility of assimilation. What makes the community so compelling and attractive among locals who live in a pluriform world, precisely lies in the range of practices and not only interpretations. It is performance rather than form that matters; the enactment of form that allows for interpretation, criticism and participation (cf. Tedlock 1983:236). Performing in the historical, moral, ritual, network, and exchange community leaves room for Nanacatecos to express their belonging in different ways and at different times, yet share in the customary repertoire.