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

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Alibert (1953) is from the Totonac Jiménez family, who are relatively well educated and politically outspoken, and several relatives of his generation have become teachers, like himself. He married Mercedez, whom he divorced ten years later, and they have three children. Though he left the village after my first stay to become a teacher near Zacatlán, he regularly returns to meet his relatives. Alibert has always been interested in the development of the Sierra and before joining the PT was an activist in the PRD, where he moved up to the regional party organisation. He was Elio Masferrer’s assistant during his research. Alibert and especially his brother Leobardo (1950) also grow coffee and employ day-labourers to work their land. Leobardo, his wife Florencia Velázquez (1959) and their children are among the few Jehovah Witnesses in the village.

Doña Angelina Cristobal, see Irene.

Bernadino Vázquez (1960) is a single man who used to work in Mexico City; upon his return to the village he opened a shop. He has taken part in the Voladores dance since this started in the village in 1989, and has been a Catholic catechist and a teacher of Totonac. He became more and more interested and active in village costumbres, and was also interested in the PRD. Since the mid-1990s he has been regional coordinator in Ixtepec of a language and culture programme for Totonacs for that part of the Sierra Norte of Puebla.

Don Beto Vázquez (1943) works as a day-labourer for his compadre Elios and during two of my stays was the presidente of the religious cargos. His son Esteban (1971) is among the first Totonacs to have secondary education in the village school though by the time he finished, this proved insufficient for becoming a teacher, as he wanted. Esteban now works as a day labourer in Nanacatlán and as a temporary migrant in Mexico City. He married Anita Ramos (1973), a granddaughter of don Miguel, and they have two children. Don Beto is a quiet follower of the PRD but Esteban became an outspoken activist of the PRD and later the PT.

Camilo Rodríguez, see doña Celia.

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1 Year of birth (and if applicable, year of death) is added in parenthesis. People with similar surnames are not relatives, unless mentioned. People whose names appear in italics have their own biography.
Caro Ramos (1967) is the help and godchild of Lupe and Elios and has lived with them since she was a teenager and continued to do so after she became a single mother. The father of her son is from Nanacatlán but did not want to recognise him. Her parents were very poor and worked for don Camilo and his parents, he as day labourer and she daily selling their cows’ milk to Zapotitlán. They both died in the 1990s. Caro did not inherit anything because her brother died shortly thereafter, and the village authorities pressured her to leave everything to her widowed sister-in-law and children. She then built a small house not far from Elios and Lupe, to have a home when her son grows up.

Doña Celia Manzano (1917-1990) and her son Camilo (1945) are from the mestizo Rodriguez family. She was widely known for her healing abilities and especially her home-made ointments and medicines. She was highly appreciated because she asked little money and used to help the poor and sick before her own health deteriorated. Her husband’s family used to be influential landowners and traders who like many mestizos in this part of the Sierra came from Tetela de Ocampo. After the monopoly of the local mestizo trade collapsed Camilo no longer pursues other economic activities and gradually has sold his cattle and land. Camilo divorced his first wife, who left with the children, and now has two children with his second wife, who is from Zacapoaxtla. She runs the only telephone in the village that people increasingly use to contact their relatives outside the village.

Elios (1953) is from the mestizo Bravo family whose great-grandfather came to the Sierra in the nineteenth century and whose educated members have moved out again. Most of his siblings are professionals in Mexico City; he had to give up his study to return home when his father fell ill and died. He is a coffee producer and works for the state government whenever there is a job available. His wife Lupe is a local teacher. Their cash income is among the highest in the village, but they have to diversify their income to keep up their living conditions and to educate the children outside the Sierra. He has twice been village mayor. His two much elderly cousins (sons of his father’s brother) also live in Nanacatlán and of them, don Gualo, has also been mayor. Elios is from a Pentecostal family, but is no longer practicing.

Esteban Vázquez, see don Beto.

Feliciano Francisco, see Tomasa.

Don Felix Ramos (1920) comes from a family of shamans and is the informal leader of the village. He owns some coffee land but earns most of his income as a carpenter and carver of ritual wooden objects such as masks and religious statues for the whole region. He is also a widely known healer. The majority of his children live in Mexico City. His family has always been active in the religious and civil cargos and have led of some of the village dances; his sons and grandsons continue
to do so. Especially those living in the village are taking over his many roles. He is an expert on local cosmology and healing practices. Though he is very much respected he also faces accusations of brujería.

Genaro Bravo, see don Gualo.

Don Gualo, Eduardo Bravo (1919), whose father is the brother of Elios’s father, came as a young child to Nanacatlán from Ixtepec when that village was burned down during the Revolution. His father was one of the traders who controlled the local trade with his mules, and both his paternal and maternal relatives were traders living all over the Sierra. He is single and lives with his single sister Taidita (1911) in the same house. His brother and family live next-door. Both brothers own considerable coffee and maize land. Don Gualo has been a Baptist for many years. Apart from having been mayor he was active in other civil cargos and a faithful supporter of the PRI. His nephew Genaro Bravo (1956), who with his wife teaches in a neighbouring village, was also mayor (during my first stay in the village) and later on the founder of the local PRI and afterwards PT.

Don Gustavo Ramos (1926-1993) and and his wife doña Lucinda owned considerable coffee land and a shop in the centre of the village next to the church. He was the first Totonac to open a shop in the 1970s and gradually became one of the well-to-do Totonac Nanacatecos. Don Gustavo has always been active in the civil cargos and the PRI. He knew many village stories. Their sons were among the first to move to Mexico City and now that their daughters have also left, Odilia (1964) is the only remaining daughter who lives in the village with her family. Since her parents died, Odilia and her husband take care of the property that she and her siblings inherited, while the husband also works in Mexico City. Odilia is one of the village women who became active in community work through health promotion and food distribution.

Irene Castañeda (1958) and her husband Pedro have put a lot of effort into their lives and that of their children. She took secondary school evening classes and courses in Totonac, sewing, health promotion, and courses for teaching adult literacy. Irene used this for an income by making clothes, working as health promotor, language teacher, and later coordinator of the literacy programme. She also started selling sweet bread during the coffee harvest period, picks coffee like most women, and became active in a village committee for food distribution. Her maternal family is from nearby Huitzilan and her mother divorced her father don Silvino (1933), who remarried with doña Juana Figueroa (1942) in 1964, a healer who specializes in reproductive and sexual problems. He is an impoverished mestizo, but is considered Totonac in the village. Irene’s Nahua grandmother doña Angelina Cristobal (1921) who came from Huitzilan with her husband many decades ago raised Irene and since she is a widow, lives in with them.
Doña Juana Figueroa, see Irene.

Lorenzo Velázquez (1944) is a self-made healer who combines all kinds of practices he picked up, mostly in surrounding villages where he goes to heal, and is often accused of brujería. With his wife Magdalena and their three sons they live off income from his healing, her small-scale trading and after they left school, the work of their sons. They own a milpa and a very small piece of coffee land. Their sons finished secondary school after which they started working as day-labourer for all kinds of jobs in the village. They are clearly village people and with their small income they have a hard time making ends meet. The sons enjoy performing in the Santiagoiros village dance and Lorenzo used to be active in the religious cargos. Most of his siblings live in the village but he hardly has any contact with them. As a healer he is often asked as a godfather and thus has many compadres especially in neighbouring villages.

Lourdes Francisco, see Tomasa.

Doña Lucinda Posadas (1932-1995) and her sister Migaela are Nahuas. They lived in poor conditions and lost many of their young children. With their husbands don Gustavo and his father don Miguel they have been able to improve their living conditions considerably. Almost all the children left for Mexico City, among them Susana (1967) who as one of the youngest could go to a private school, to become a secretary. Only one daughter stayed in the village (Odilia), while another married a teacher from Ixtepec, where she lives now. The children always come back to village celebrations, and her sons have organised a basketball team to play in Mexico City and during village feasts in the Sierra. Doña Lucinda converted to Pentecostalism because she favours their strong objections to drinking and misbehaviour.

Lupe Ortega (1958) is the only local schoolteacher who lives in the village. She comes from another state (San Luis Potosi) but stayed when she and Elios fell in love. They have four children whom they raise as Catholics, although their father is from a Pentecostalist background. With her job she needs the help from Caro who has lived with them from the time she was a young girl. Their income was not sufficient to pay for the education of their children so in addition to her job Lupe started trading in Avon and Fuller cosmetics, Tupperware utensils, and a variety of good quality bed-clothes, linen, and ladies underwear that she buys in Zacapoaxtla. She is successful because she can afford to sell on credit.

Magdalena Ramos (1950) is married to Lorenzo, and a housewife who does some small-scale trade and barter, mostly with her many comadres. Her husband does not want her to go out working. During the day she often accompanies her husband when he goes out healing. Her siblings moved to Puebla decades ago and sometimes they or some of their children come to visit her. She is glad of the company
of her new daughter-in-law, who married her youngest son and then moved in with them. She is a cousin of don Reyes, the father of Pedro, but did not know this anymore, because her father had died about the time she was born.

Don Miguel Ramos (1904), the father of don Gustavo, used to be an itinerant butcher who travelled through the Sierra with some small cattle. He still is a healer. He knows a lot about village history and as the oldest villager has memories all the way back to the beginning of the twentieth century. He is one of the first Protestant converts in the village and a faithful reader of the bible, though he has never been a member of any church. In his younger days he was very active in the civil cargos and the PRI. He and his son Gustavo married two sisters, because when don Miguel became a widower he married the sister of doña Lucinda, doña Migaela (1927).

Odilia Ramos, see don Gustavo and doña Lucinda.

Don Pedro Francisco, see Tomasa

Pedro Ramos (1953) and his wife Irene come from a modest background and started off with barely an education and living in a small house of zacate. His family has lived in Nanacatlán as long as they remember. Through income diversification – Pedro growing coffee, working in Mexico City, and as wage labourer in the village for Elios, and Irene working as well – and education in evening classes and courses, they gradually climbed socially. Pedro bought his coffee land in the early 1980s and by the end of the 1990s was finishing a brick house with running water. The children are in senior high schools and training colleges elsewhere in the Sierra. Pedro knows many village stories, mostly learned from his father don Reyes (1931). He is always active in communal labour and politics, where he moved from supporting leftwing parties to the majority party PRI. His sister Tomasa is the only one of his siblings who did not move to Mexico City.

Don Reyes Ramos, see Pedro.

Susana Ramos, see doña Lucinda.

Tomasa Ramos (1957) and her husband Sebastian Francisco (1951) have six children. The eldest three migrated, of whom Feliciano (1975) and Lourdes (1981) appear in the book. He worked as day labourer for his compadre Elios, until he joined the PRD and started accusing Elios of corruption. He then found a job with another landowner. Tomasa is a housewife, doing some small-scale trade and coffee picking, but her husband does not want her to go out working. She is the sister of Pedro, and for a while their relation was tense because of the political clashes. As son of the master of the Santiagueros, don Pedro Francisco (1923), Sebastian became the captain of this dance. He is active in the religious cargos.