

Rituals of Reversal as a Means of Rewiring Social Structure

EVON Z. VOGT

The frequent occurrence in human societies of rituals of reversal or inversion, in which sexual identity or other behavior patterns are reversed or inverted (e.g. men impersonate animals; ritual actors change their identity by means of masks or special costumes) has long been a topic of inquiry and commentary by anthropologists. What are the symbolic meanings of these rites of reversal? Why have they so universally emerged as key features of ritual systems, and why do they persist?

Field data from the contemporary culture of the Highland Maya community of Zinacantan in southeastern Mexico support the hypothesis that the rituals of reversal that occur at the end of each year serve not only to express the society's concept of calendar time, but to "rewire" the crucial connections in the social structure by providing symbolic statements of traditional social imperatives and basic categories of the Zinacanteco world view.¹

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¹ Zinacantan is a Tzotzil-speaking *municipio* of some 11,500 Highland Maya Indians located just to the west of San Cristóbal Las Casas in the central Highlands of Chiapas in Mexico. The Zinacantecos live in the Ceremonial Center and in fifteen outlying hamlets. They cultivate maize, beans, and squash which provide the basis for their subsistence; they are patrilineal and patrilocal in social organization. The Ceremonial Center is noted for its religious hierarchy, with four levels arranged in a ladder: Mayordomos on the first level; Alféreces on the second; Regidores on the third; and

END-OF-THE-YEAR AND NEW YEAR RITUALS IN ZINACANTAN

The period extending from December 15 to the last day of the Fiesta of San Sebastián on January 25 is the richest segment of the annual ceremonial calendar of Zinacantan. The complicated rituals that characterize this period dramatize the end of the ceremonial year, and the initiation of a new one. During this time, the religious *cargo* positions of most of the past year's important officials expire and are transferred to the succeeding hierarchies. This crucial transition is characterized by rites of inversion, parody and farce: men impersonate women; Indians impersonate Ladinos; people impersonate animals; and the most solemn ceremonies become the subject of mime and ridicule. It is a liminal period of "betwixt and between" (Turner 1964) when, in Leach's (1961) terms, normal time is "played front to back" as the year ends and the social structure is unwired, then rewired, in a six-week development of ritual activity.

The rites in the first phase (December 15 to January 6) begin with a "flower renewal" by the Mayordomos (the first rung on the ladder of religious hierarchy in Zinacantan), who remove the old pine trees and flowers from their house altars and from the churches and replace them with freshly cut pines and flowers. There follows a period of nine days (December 16 to 24) during which the Mayordomos gather daily in front of the church of San Lorenzo (the patron saint of Zinacantan) to eat sweetened squash in commemoration of the nine months of the Virgin's pregnancy. In this squash-eating ceremony, the symbols of sex and fertility — one of the two most important categories of symbols utilized in the end-of-the-year rites — become prominent for the first time. During the same period, the Mayordomos and sacristans of the church perform the *posada* [inn] ceremony to commemorate Joseph and Mary's search for lodging at various inns before the birth of the Christ Child. Although

Alcaldes on the fourth, or top level. These *cargo* positions must be requested in advance and are held for one year each, with rest periods in between the years of service. The officials occupying the positions are referred to as *cargo* holders. The descendants of the Spanish Conquerors, interbred with Indians over the centuries, became the local "Ladinos." They speak Spanish, live mainly in towns and cities, control the economic and political system of Chiapas, are generally strong Catholics, and consider themselves citizens of the Republic of Mexico. The Indians, on the other hand, speak Tzotzil, live mainly in scattered hamlets, are only nominally Catholic, and define themselves primarily in terms of their own tribal groups. Each tribal group lives in a single *municipio*, speaks a unique dialect, and dresses in distinctive clothes. For detailed ethnographic data see Vogt (1969, 1970, n.d.), Cancian (1965), and Bricker (i.p.).

this *posada* ceremony, like the squash-eating rite, is obviously modeled on Catholic rituals performed prior to Christmas, some distinctive Zinacanteco elements are apparent: turtle-shell drums played with corn cobs to produce more maize; and Mary bowing to Joseph. Another striking difference from orthodox Catholicism is the conception of the Virgin Mary as a “loose woman who slept with many different men, but did not have a husband.” Because of her bad reputation, no one would provide lodging for her forthcoming child. Only an older brother, Joseph, would consent to give her shelter in his animal stable. Mary bowing to her older brother expressed gratitude for his thoughtfulness and sympathy.

On December 23 the Mayordomos and their assistants construct an enormous and beautiful crèche in the church of San Lorenzo. The corners of the crèche are of large, freshly cut white pine boughs; the walls are of sugar cane, banana leaves, cypress branches, and pine needles; and the roof of bromelias and crab apples. There are additional fertility symbols in the form of lowland squash, resembling the female breast in shape, which are tied on the four white pines. The cribs are placed inside.

On December 24 a reed-mat “bull,” which will become the focus of a dance drama, is constructed. The “bull” is carried over the head and shoulders of a man, and it performs with two “married couples” (the males are masked and ride stick horses, while their “spouses” wear women’s clothing and are unmasked) impersonated by the Mayordomos. During the next twelve days the drama is repeated over and over: the “bull” attacks the husbands, while their wives lift their skirts to expose their genitalia in an attempt to “tame” the “bull.” Finally, the “bull” gores and kills the husbands who are revived when their wives take them to a high official who, in turn, rubs their bodies, especially their genitals, with the rattles they have been using in the dance (Bricker i.p.). The performance is watched by two young boys (older and younger brother) dressed as “angels.”

At midnight on Christmas Eve, the birth of the Christ Children (there are two in Zinacanteco belief: one older brother and one younger brother) is reenacted in the church of San Sebastián. The two infants are carried by their godparents — the Alcaldes and Regidores, the highest ranking religious officials and the top civil officials from the town hall — to the church of San Lorenzo where they are placed in the crèche. Zinacantecos come to place seed corn and seed beans beside the cribs for fertility, and pray to the resonant sound of the turtle-shell drums.

On January 6 there occurs the chasing, capture, and killing of the “bull.” The boy “angels” (symbolic extensions of the older-younger brother Christ Children) have passively watched the drama up to this

point. Now they lasso the “bull” who is then killed by wooden knives plunged into his body. His “blood,” (consisting of cane liquor with onions and chili to make it red) is passed around and drunk. Bulls are considered by Zinacantecos to be very “hot,” and are always served as ritual meat to high-ranking *cargo* holders. Heat is traditionally associated with sacred power; the sun, being the “hottest” thing in the universe, is, at the same time, the most sacred and most powerful. But an excess of heat, and its related conferment of sacred power, spells danger and destruction: an overly powerful sun can wither the maize crop; an overly powerful shaman, believed to have great sacred insight, can perform witchcraft and bring sickness and death to fellow Zinacantecos. From native exegesis it is clear that the “hot” bull represents an evil power. During the dance drama of the bull, the musicians play “bad” music until the moment of the bull’s “death,” when they change and begin to play “good” music. Above all, the bull appears to symbolize disorder in the form of uncontrolled power and unruly social behavior; he repeatedly gores the performers who are, at the same time, members of the official religious hierarchy. After each incident, the victims are “cured” by symbolic representatives of social order — the various officials and musicians acting as “shamans.” Lasting order is established only when the bull is “killed” and his “blood” drunk.

The second major phase in the ritual sequence is the Fiesta of San Sebastián. (Note that the Christ Children were “born” in the church of San Sebastián before being taken to the church of San Lorenzo.) Now the action returns to the church of San Sebastián whose saint’s day in the Catholic calendar is January 20. The rites continue for nine days, from January 17, when the Mayordomos again perform the “flower renewal,” until January 25 when the Grand Alcalde (the top official on the religious ladder) transfers the sacred symbols of his authority to his successor. It is, by all odds, the most complex ceremony performed in Zinacantan, and exhibits some unusual features. Perhaps the most remarkable element is that the principal costumed performers are the outgoing *cargo* holders who have “officially” finished their year in service, but who must perform throughout this ceremony in order to fulfill the final responsibilities of their office. The Alcaldes of the previous year become “Spanish Gentlemen” dressed in gold-embroidered red coats and knickers; the two most senior *Alféreces* become “Spanish Ladies” wearing white-embroidered blouses and carrying combs in small bowls; the *Regidores* become “White Heads” and other ritual characters; two other *Alféreces* become “Jaguars”; others become “Spanish Moss Wearers” symbolizing “savages”; still others paint their faces black becoming “Black-men” (Blaffer 1972)

— in all, a most extraordinary collection of ritual performers.

Sacred objects are brought into the Ceremonial Center from various hamlets: a *t'ent'en* [small slit drum], carried on a tumpline and played for the dancing of the junior actors; a “jousting target” which symbolizes the heart of San Sebastián; and so on. The sequence of events includes: the running of horses along the path of the sun; the arrival of the Spanish Gentlemen and Ladies on horseback; the “Black-men” dancing with stuffed squirrels with which they engage in comic play, including simulating intercourse between the squirrels; the climbing of a “Jaguar Tree” and the ritual burning of a “Jaguar House”; two enormous ritual meals in which the entire hierarchy of the incoming *cargo* holders sits down to servings of whole chickens; the Jaguars’ performance of a mock-curing ceremony with one Jaguar impersonating a shaman and the other playing the role of his patient.

The ceremony finally ends on January 25, when the past year’s *cargo* holders escort the outgoing Grand Alcalde with his articles of office to the house of the incoming Grand Alcalde. A solemn and elaborate ritual follows in which he hands over the sacred picture of San Sebastián, two candleholders, a box containing a stamp, a seal, some papers, and the branding iron for Zinacantan.

Even after years of field research (begun in 1957), many of the ritual episodes of this complex Fiesta of San Sebastián are still obscure. A number of strands of considerable symbolic import, however, are beginning to emerge from this rich corpus of data. One interesting and promising line of interpretation suggests that the ritual dramas of San Sebastián recapitulate the cultural history of Zinacantan as interpreted by the Zinacantecos — that the dramas provide a ritual reenactment of historical fact and legend. For example, before the time of the Conquest, Zinacantan was in contact with Aztec traders who especially sought quetzal feathers and amber from Chiapas Highland tribes. The Aztec merchants not only gave a Nahuatl name to the place — Tzinacantlán [Place of the Bats] (Vogt 1969:vii) — but may have also introduced such concepts as the *K'uk'ulcon*, the *Quetzalcoatl* [plumed serpent] who is still impersonated in the Fiesta. It is significant that the “White Head” performers are sometimes referred to as Aztecs.

There are other examples. It is well known that the Indians of the Chiapas Highlands resisted the Spanish Conquest furiously; the period of struggle against the Conquistadores was a long and bitter one in their history. Thus, it becomes highly significant that the saint of this fiesta — San Sebastián — and the original myths related to him were introduced into Zinacantan by the Spaniards. Recall the Spanish Gentlemen and

Spanish Ladies on horseback accompanied by their retinues, and the Spanish Gentleman who assumes the ritual task of “leading off” the “jousting” performance. In addition, some Zinacantecos were forcibly conscripted by the Spanish Conquerors to help fight the “Lacandones” (whether the term refers specifically to antecedents of the present-day Lacandones who live in eastern Chiapas, or, more generally, to various Maya tribes in the lowlands to the north and east who were fighting against the Spanish, is unclear). Two of the ritual actors are frequently referred to as “Lacandones” by Zinacanteco informants.

Elements of a Mayan heritage persist in the ritual of San Sebastián, playing a part at least as important as some celebrated aspects of the Colonial experience. The use of the highly sacred *t'ent'en* drum provides a significant substantiation of this point.

But even if the ritual dramas do portray some version of Zinacanteco cultural history, an even stronger argument for their continued importance in the ritual system of the society is that they serve as crucial symbolic models of the social and natural structures of modern Chiapas. For the members of this *municipio*, the cultural world is still fundamentally divided into Indian and Ladino sectors. The Ladinos, being superior in political and economic power, are impersonated by the Senior Impersonators, while Indian cultural elements are impersonated by the Junior Impersonators, comprised of officials of lesser rank in the *cargo* system. At the same time, the world is distinctly subdivided into Men and Animals of various types, used both as props and impersonated by the Junior Impersonators. The dramas not only restate these social and natural divisions in the universe with ritual force each year, but, more significantly, make Zinacantecan “judgments” upon them. For example, while the Spanish-speaking Ladinos are “honored” by having their roles filled by high-ranking Senior Actors, their behavior and attitudes are mercilessly ridiculed by the performers. The Spanish Gentlemen are portrayed as licentious old men who wish to marry very young Spanish Ladies who are vain — always looking at themselves in mirrors and combing their hair — and promiscuous. A commentary on the overlap of human and animal realms, and the reprehensible but inescapable “animalism” in all Zinacantecos, is made by the Junior Actors who engage in a wide range of obscene and licentious behavior using their animal props.

What of the *t'ent'en*? Why is this small sacred drum carried on a tump-line, continuously played and carefully tended throughout the Fiesta period?

This type of drum, a *teponaztle*, was called *tunkel* in Yucatan and *tun* in Highland Guatemala (Saville 1925). *Tun* was also the Yucatec Maya

word for the 360-day year. As the calendrical deities of the ancient Maya are often depicted carrying the burden of the year on a tumpline on their backs, it seems evident that the *t'ent'en* embodies, above all, the symbol of the arrival of the New Year. In addition, the *t'ent'en* appears in the Ceremonial Center only at this fiesta — the time of the ending of an old year and the beginning of the new, the time of “rising heat.”

In the rites of San Sebastián, a significant contrast is created between the miming, mocking, obscene, and licentious behavior of the outgoing *cargo* holders (both Senior and Junior Actors), and the solemn, proper, “correct” ritual behavior of the incoming officials. The outgoing *cargo* holders appear to symbolize “disorder” — the last ritual act in “unwiring” the system — whereas the incoming *cargo* holders symbolize “order” — the first ritual act of the year which “wires up” the system again.

Now, for an overview of the distinctive ritual symbols being utilized in the extraordinary series of events extending from December 16 to January 25. What kind of symbolism can be seen in this ceremonial that occupies so much time and energy and absorbs so many resources of the Zinacantecos?

THE CEREMONIAL SCHEDULE: CHRISTMAS TO SAN SEBASTIÁN

Why is it that the richest ritual segment of the annual ceremonial calendar occurs in December and January? There is an economic factor involved, for this period corresponds to the end of the maize cycle. The maize has been harvested, and, for the first time in months, Zinacantecos have their granaries full and money in their pockets (Cancian 1965, 1972). This explains how the Zinacantecos can afford to pause at this time of the year and put their energy and material resources into intensive ritual activity. Yet, it does not explain why they choose to do so.

All of the Maya cultures with which we are familiar, both past and present, appear to be preoccupied with the passage of time. Witness the extraordinary accomplishments of the ancient Maya in the development of a calendar system. Witness the behavior of contemporary Zinacantecos who are as conscious of time, and the precise planning for and scheduling of events in their lives, as any tribal culture known to anthropologists (Vogt 1969:613). Witness also León-Portilla's conclusion (1968) that “space” in the Maya world view is merely a stage for the conjunction of various cycles of time.

An important aspect of this preoccupation with time is the marking out

of the solar year, and, more significantly, emphasis upon the end of one year and the beginning of the next. The period from Christmas to San Sebastián, from the point of view of either the Catholic saints' calendar, or the movements of the sun, is the time of transition from the old to the new year. The events begin just before the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its lowest point, and carry on through what is appropriately called "the rising heat fiesta" as the sun moves higher into the sky again. The danger of frost is passing, and the prospect of a new maize-growing season is taking shape in the minds of Zinacantecos.

The ceremonial schedule is divided into two major phases: (1) Christmas to New Year's to Day of Kings; then, following a lull of equal time, (2) a phase of intense activity during the Fiesta of San Sebastián. The two phases are like the two lines of a couplet in a Zinacanteco prayer: the second part restates and intensifies the ritual symbols and themes found in the first. In the first phase, the low-ranking Mayordomos introduce certain symbolic themes as they eat sweetened squash, perform *posadas*, build the crèche, direct the birth of the Christ Children, and perform the mimes and parodies as the two married couples in the ritual drama of the "bull." In the second phase, many of the same themes are stated in a different form, and their meanings are intensified through the use of many additional, as well as higher-ranking, *cargo* holders in the ritual dramas of San Sebastián.

THE BIPOLARITY OF THE SYMBOLISM

To a greater degree than at any other time of the annual ceremonial round, this Year-End/New Year period utilizes ritual symbolism, which is characterized by two crucial bipolarities:

1. In Victor Turner's terms (1967), there is a marked contrast between the stress on sexual, aggressive, antisocial symbolism, much of it flagrantly physiological (the sensory pole), and the stress upon the norms and values of Zinacanteco society (the ideological pole).
2. There is a marked contrast between formal and solemn ritual behavior ("...formality is increased: men adopt formal uniform, differences in status are precisely demarcated by dress and etiquette, moral rules are rigorously and ostentatiously obeyed" [Leach 1961]) and masquerading and revelry in behavior (inversions and reversals for almost all the *cargo* holders, beginning with the Mayordomos at the Christmas celebrations and adding most of the rest of the hierarchy in San Sebastián).

Why all this bipolarity, especially at this season of the year? What messages are being conveyed? What is the effect on the social system?

UNWIRING AND REWIRING THE ZINACANTECO SYSTEM OF ORDER

The Zinacantecos may be said to be first unwiring, or unstructuring, the system of order, and then rewiring, or restructuring it, as the *cargo* holders, who have spent a year in “sacred time” in office, are finally and definitively removed from their *cargos* and returned to normal time and everyday life. This process serves to make them (as representatives of all Zinacantecos) reflect about the essence of their way of life, the contrasts or paired opposites and contradictions: between husbands and wives; between “older brother” and “younger brother” (or “Senior” and “Junior”), in their system of rank order; between men and women as apparent in the patrilineal system and division of labor; between Indians and Ladinos (in their bicultural world); between men and animals (culture versus nature). The ceremonies are essentially a “liminal period,” “betwixt and between” (Turner 1964) the old year and the new year, between being in-office and out-of-office in the *cargo* system.

It is in these terms that we are able to understand the astonishing number of inversions in behavior, of role reversals: boys become “angels”; men impersonate women, bulls, and other animals; *cargo* officials and musicians serve as shamans; Indians play Ladinos; and men impersonating Jaguars become shamans who “cure” stuffed squirrels of “soul-loss.” Men dance and march backward — the only time this occurs during the entire year. Normal life is being played “front to back” as the ritualists move into a veritable orgy of inversions and reversals.

Edmund Leach (1961) suggests that “formality” and “masquerade” are paired opposites and, as such, modes for moving in and out of “sacred time.” He suggests that, “A rite which starts with formality [e.g. a wedding] is likely to end in masquerade; a rite which starts with masquerade [e.g. New Year’s Eve; Carnival] is likely to end in formality.”

With respect to these Zinacanteco rituals, Leach’s hypothesis is applicable in two senses:

1. Taking each of the two phases as a unit, one sees the Mayordomos behaving with rigorous formality in the building of the crèche, the *posada* rites, and the Birth of the Christ Children. Then, they end this ritual phase by masquerading as the married couples in the drama of the “bull.” With the outgoing *cargo* holders in San Sebastián, the sequence appears to be reversed: they begin by masquerading (as women, Ladinos, animals, etc.) and end with intense formality on January 25 after the stuffed animals have been burned and as the sacred articles of office are turned over to the new Grand Alcalde.

2. Taking the ceremonial year as a unit, the new *cargo* holders behave with great formality, from the time of the Fiesta of San Sebastián throughout an entire year; they end their year's *cargo* service at the following San Sebastián celebration in ludicrous masquerade and farce.

But there is an additional and interesting process going on WITHIN each phase of this Year-End/New Year ceremony. Here, the two modes of formality and masquerade seem to form a kind of dialogue between, on the one hand, the married couples and their "bull" and the outgoing *cargo* holders representing the masquerade, and, on the other, the incumbent and new *cargo* holders representing the formality mode. It is as if two programs were being played simultaneously on a ritual tape that emits messages about the cultural code — its gaps, contradictions, and attempted resolutions — in this complex interaction of formal, "proper" behavior and reveling, ridiculous, farcical behavior.

Finally, it is evident that the fantastic and skillful miming of social conflicts through various inversions, role reversals, and parodies of solemn ritual — in many cases, utilizing flagrantly physiological symbols of sex — are ways of divesting the powerful drives and emotions associated with human physiology, especially reproduction, of their antisocial quality and of attaching them to the normative order, thereby energizing the latter "with a borrowed vitality" (Turner 1969: 52–53). In the copulating behavior of the stuffed squirrels is presented a sequence that in mime contains prototypical condensed symbolism: *Kol ?Arias'* having sexual intercourse with his wife at the foot of a mango tree instead of attending to his *cargo* duties, is symbolically representing the sexuality, the animality, in ALL *cargo* holders, in ALL Zinacantecos, who are being punished as the squirrel is thrown to the ground and soundly whipped.

By the 25th of January, the bull has been killed; the Mayordomos have relinquished their stick-horses; the stuffed animals have been burned; the Jaguars, Plumed Serpents, and Spanish Moss Wearers have put away their costumes; and the Spanish Gentlemen and Ladies have become normal *cargo* holders again. By the time the transfer of sacred articles of office to the new highest-ranking *cargo* holder has unfolded with great formality, the system of order has been rewired for the year which is being born.

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