

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-8  
Making It in Chenalhó

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

I did not see much aggressive behavior between individual Pedranos, nor hear of "bad Indians" exploiting the "good Indians" as I have on visits to U. S. reservations. As an outsider, I attracted more hostility from Pedranos than they seem to elicit from one another. And the ones that gave me a hard time, mostly by hounding me for money, looked like the least well integrated members of the community. The only Pedrano who did not leave me alone when I changed the tone of my refusal from polite to angry was dressed in western clothes, lived in the cabecera, worked as assistant to a ladino pork butcher, and had just returned to Chenalhó after a year working at a coffee finca.

I assume Pedranos harbor their share of rage against the world. Until a Pedrano child is weaned, he has practically constant access to his mother's milk. She carries him with her to guard his soul, and ordinarily lets him suckle rather than cry. When the next child is born, sometimes not until the first child is four or five years old, the older one is abruptly weaned. It must be unsettling later, too, when a Pedrano boy is pushed out of the house at age eight and expected to operate in a man's world, to handle a hoe alongside his father and older brothers after so long a time protected by his mother.

It seems that primitive societies characteristically channel aggressive and self-aggrandizing impulses into forms of behavior beneficial to the community as a whole. When the Sioux lived as primitives, a man expressed himself violently and distinguished himself from other men as a hunter, but he shared his kill with his community. In Chenalhó, aggressive striving for wealth and esteem is sanctioned insofar as its proven object is to enable a man to serve his people by holding office. There are about 6,000 Pedranos, about 1,000 families. Even a Pedrano father with few children and bad luck can hope to hold one of the 50-odd offices (cargos) one year in his life. Whatever economic surplus a family



Miguel Lopez Comate, who helped me settle in Chenalhó, helps current officeholders by teaching them the rituals appropriate to their cargos, organizing the ceremonies central to each fiesta, and lending money to strapped cargoholders.

manages to accumulate in a season it stores or lends, in either case deferring its use until it is needed to tide them through the year that the father will spend not in his fields but as an official in the municipal center. A man blessed with a large family and good luck is expected to hold office more than once.

The old man Comate, for example, is a rich man by Pedrano criteria. He has five sons by two successive wives. With their help he works milpas in four different parts of the municipio, has parlayed yearly surpluses of corn and bananas into modest kerosene and aguardiente concessions, which in turn enable him to lend to his compañeros, fellow Pedranos, when they ask. (Aguardiente, like corn and Mexican currency, is the preferred medium of exchange in certain transactions.) When the trans-

portation cooperative was formed to finance a truck run to and from San Cristóbal, most of the money came from ladinos. Comate was one of a handful of inditos that supplied capital and became founding members. He makes trips to San Cristóbal almost weekly. He has leisure time enough to attend the major festivals in neighboring municipios, and real estate enough to be able to offer me my choice of huts. Except for the ones who have gone ladino, Pedrano men and boys invariably wear tunics and short pants of unbleached muslin. The only exception I saw was Comate, who sometimes dresses for a fiesta in a white satin tunic and green velvet pedalpushers. He is no healer or prayer-maker, yet people come to his house in large numbers every day with presents of aguardiente and cigarettes. Comate and part of his family-- his second wife, one married son with daughter-in-law, two grandchildren, and one old female relative-- live in a dark, crudely furnished, two-room house without electricity, running water, windows, or chimney. But he is rich, for a Pedrano, ostentatiously rich.

What makes it all right is that he devotes most of his time and wealth to serving the community through the cargosystem. Twice in his life he served in office: as mayordomo, a minor post in which he acted as lieutenant to the three highest-ranking officials, and as alcalde, a major position in which he was entrusted with the responsibility for protection of the Pedrano



Inocencio, Comate's grandson, played with a friend in the yard behind the second house I rented, next to the house where Comate and his family live.

people against physical injury. Now he acts as ritual advisor to officeholders, a position that has no formal place in the nine-level hierarchy of civil and religious cargos, but nonetheless qualifies as a sanctioned object of expenditure. It brings him prestige and divine power (called "heat"), in addition to financial burden and some risk to his soul.

It is estimated that the most expensive office costs 12,000 pesos (about \$1,000 U.S.), most of which the cargoholder pays out for aguardiente, candles, fireworks, and food. I cannot convert that figure into bushels of corn or man-days in a milpa, but when a Pedrano works on government-sponsored public works programs like the drainage system now being installed in the village of Chenalhó, he earns 15 pesos per day. The most expensive cargo, then, costs as much as a Pedrano could earn in 800 days of wage work, if he could get it. Other offices cost less, of course, but even the cheapest carry an opportunity cost, a year diverted from the cultivation of the family's milpas.

In the year preceding the year of service, the current regidores (who among them know the economic position and borrowing power of most of the men in Chenalhó) leave the municipal center and go up into the parajes to inform selected men that they will be serving in offices in the coming year. It is etiquette that the nominee refuse, pleading that he is unworthy and that his family could not survive a year without him. The



The expenses a cargoholder pays include aguardiente and chicha, being served and drunk at left, and musicians like the fiddler and harpist below. The chicha and music in this case accompanied the work of decorating the Chapel of Santa Cruz.



strain that serving in office places on a family's resources justifies the etiquette and drives some men to flee the municipio rather than refuse. Most men submit, despite the hardship, since service fulfills their ambition and to refuse would be impious.

The regidores know that a man's capability to hold office, his effective resources, amounts to more than the corn he has stored or the cash he has hidden away. The institution of cargo-holding, motivating every Pedrano to take a costly year off from his fields, has probably fostered the growth of another important institution among the Pedranos-- compadrazgo, a system of ritual kinship that interrelates genealogically distinct families through the artificial tie between godparent and godchild, and between godparent and the parents of the godchild. Throughout the Republic, Mexican parents greet the godfather or godmother of a child as "compadre" or "comadre," and look to godparents for help not only with the task of raising the godchild but also in meeting other obligations of the family as a whole. Godparents are chosen with an eye to the esteem and financial clout they will bring to the family. Prospective godparents weigh the status of the asking family, too, since the obligation to help when asked is reciprocal. Mexicans use any excuse to extend the family through compadrazgo: besides regular godparents (padrinos and madrinas), the well-appointed Mexican child is fitted out with baptism godparents, confirmation godparents, first-communion godparents, fifteenth-birthday godparents, and wedding-day godparents. In Chenalhó, the ritual kinsmen a man collects for his family through extensive compadrazgo customarily supply him the manpower, corn, or money he needs to undertake a cargo. Since every family with children can legitimately cultivate a group of such kinsmen, and since the obligation to extend credit and lend labor is reciprocal, everyone profits. What they gain is protection against extreme hardship in the year of officeholding. In a society where cash is only beginning to circulate and most other forms of wealth are perishable, compadrazgo facilitates the distribution of once- or twice-in-a-lifetime expenses over a longer period, usually all of a man's productive years. It also means that one Pedrano family's financial good fortune can be viewed without envy by their neighbors, since the neighbors very likely have a ritual kinsman's right to a share of it.

Comate is not ostracized for his prosperity, then, because he shares his resources through cargoholding, service as ritual advisor, and his readiness to fulfill his obligations as compadre and padrino. On most of those round trips to San Cristóbal he buys some of the paraphernalia that through continuing contact with ladino merchants and the Catholic Church Pedranos have come to regard as indispensable to their rituals, pagan and Christian: candles, fireworks, etc. For the fiesta of Santa Cruz, it was Comate who supplied the streamers, sheets of pastel polyethylene, and plastic angels for decorating the cross.



He also shares his bounty through hospitality. When most of the men who had helped decorate followed Comate back to his house in the village, he responded to their visit by asking his son to pour posh (aguardiente). The second house I lived in was another of Comate's, a windowless brick rectangle contiguous to Comate's own. Living so close to him I witnessed the heavy flow of Pedranos in and out of his house. They would rarely visit for just a few minutes. Younger men park their wives and children outside his door, enter alone, and stay an hour or so. After a long farewell involving much bowing and releasing, the visitor walks out and down the road without a glance at his family. The wife slings the baby onto her back and calls the children to quit playing in the drainage ditch and come along. They all half-run to catch up, taking up their positions a few paces behind the father. Older men bring their families in with them and stay longer.

Some weekdays and every weekend Comate's house fills up with Pedranos. They stop talking and listen when Comate and I talk in Spanish. Then they start up again, everyone at once, in Tzotzil. The posh never runs out. By midnight the crowd has thinned out. Many of those who remain are asleep on the dirt floor. A few sit propped against the mud walls black with years of woodsmoke. They look out between barely open eyelids at the embers of the fire in the center of the room, and chant a prayer in Tzotzil again and again and again until they too fall asleep.



Comate and some of the decorations committee carry flowers and palm leaves up the western ridge to the Chapel of Santa Cruz.

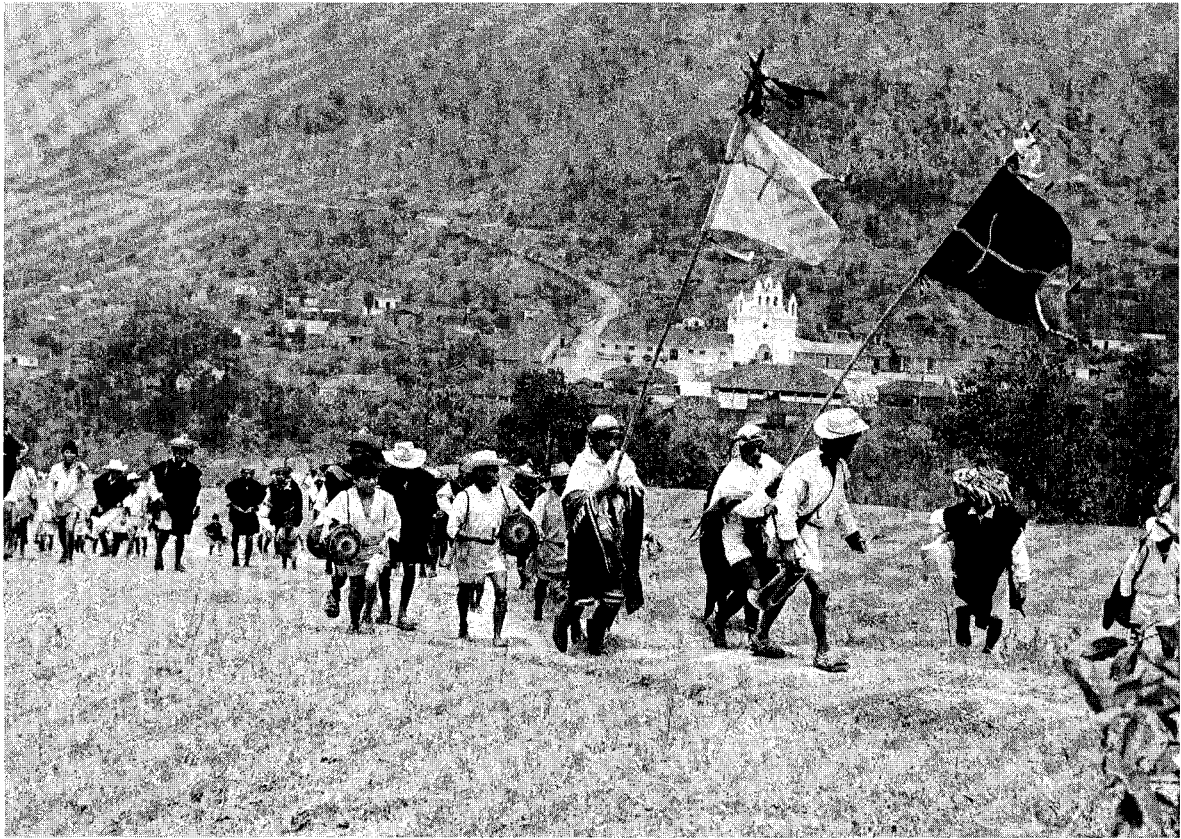
Right: A cargoholder accepts aguardiente during the fiesta of Santa Cruz.



Left: An official pours off some aguardiente given him as melwo. Because of the ritual significance of it, he does not refuse even when he has drunk all he can. Sons often hold their fathers' pour-off bottles for them.

As a pasado (official emeritus), ritual advisor, and father of a large family of real and ritual kin, Comate finds himself drinking with Pedranos not only because he is well liked, creditor to many, and enmeshed in compadrazgo, but also because sharing a drink of posh helps dispel the danger that comes with success in Chenalhó. With the responsibility of office comes power, and with power comes risk to a man's soul.

An official who holds one of the religious positions in the hierarchy is assigned a particular Catholic saint to propitiate. His duties include praying and burning incense on Wednesdays and Sundays before an altar maintained in his own house, caring for the plaster santo in the Church of San Pedro, and taking a leading role in the fiesta of that saint. As a result of his service, the cargoholder may expect to gain the special favor of the saint, and the people may expect the saint to side with them in times of difficulty. The Catholic saints are said to be valuable allies in the human struggle, but the pagan gods served by the political officeholders are more important. An



Above, the two Alfereces (cargoholders assigned to saints) of Santa Cruz carry the banners at the head of the procession up the western ridge to the chapel overlooking the municipal center, in the background. Below the white banner, the Church of San Pedro. Two drums and a horn accompany the Alfereces.

official expects special grace from a Catholic saint only during the year he holds office.

Political cargoholders are personally responsible for the good will of the crucial gods of the world toward the people of Chenalhó. When a man undertakes the propitiation of such gods (the Holy Earth and the Rain God, for example, as opposed to the Catholic saints, who are of the Church and not of the world), he becomes the embodiment of all those who have held that office before him, and the sacred personification of the god himself. He is thought to approach so near to direct contact with the divinities that at year's end he must undergo special rites to separate his soul from the gods so that it may return with him to the ordinary world. A man retains what he gained from the year in office-- a mixture of power and esteem called "heat." That heat, in turn, because it may be used for good or evil, heartens and frightens the man himself and those around him. A pasado who by his service has gained heat may be accused by



an injured party of having used god-given heat in the perpetration of evil. If a pasado's crop fails or family suffers, he may be said to be undergoing punishment for abuse of his power.

Another liability of holding office is the envy it may incite in others. Envious men may direct harmful wishes at the object of their envy. Illness is often supposed to be caused by spells cast by someone envious of the victim. A cargoholder has to be on his guard against such tactics.

Melwo breaks spells and dispels guilt. Melwo is aguardiente offered and accepted by two Pedranos to erase anger between them. When the presidente or other official settles a dispute, the two parties share melwo to indicate that they retain no ill will. To allow ill will to fester is to invite disease and death. Pedranos use melwo in their relations with the gods of the earth as well. Certain cargoholders represent the divinities. By



Standing in foreground,  
the Alfereces of Santa Cruz  
in ceremonial dress  
during the fiesta.  
Sitting, other officials.  
Standing before the doorway  
of the chapel, the wives  
of the cargoholders  
involved in the rituals.  
They are chanting and  
crossing themselves.

doing obeisance and sharing melwo with the appropriate cargo-holder, a man can clear himself of past offenses against that god and his sphere of influence, and curry his favor in the ensuing year.

At the fiesta of Santa Cruz, for instance, after brief prayers by the principal officials inside the chapel, the cargo-holders and roughly 200 other Pedranos present performed a long ritual of bowing and melwo in the plaza before the chapel steps. It ended with dancing by the men and distribution of atole (finely ground corn cooked with water and sugar) to everyone. I do not know the purview of Santa Cruz. I did learn that it is a male divinity, rules water sources, and is both indigenous and Catholic. As such he is more powerful and deserving of more elaborate service than any other Catholic saint except San Pedro, the patron saint. Comate could not explain to me the reason for the drinking of atole at that fiesta. As far as I know, atole is not drunk ritually at any other. In view of Santa Cruz's association with water, I suggest it symbolizes the desire for rain to give a strong start to the corn planted during the weeks just before and after the fiesta of Santa Cruz. Comate's explanation of the drinking of atole was like his explanation of most of the ceremonies he invited me to: they do it that way because that is the costumbre, the custom.

In newspaper stories, monographs, and books on Indian problems by Mexican liberals, costumbre comes in for a lot of abuse. They say it is costumbre that explains the enormous amounts of alcohol Indians drink and die from. It is costumbre that requires Indians to spend scant economic surpluses on ritual items necessary for the honoring of gods, consecration of marriages, burial of the dead, and so on. Costumbre drives families into lifelong debt by forcing men to hold office. That alcohol weakens and kills Pedranos I do not deny, but who knows what realm of consciousness they enter with alcohol, or what that experience means to them? It is worth noting that drunk Pedranos rarely fight, and fall asleep praying. Pedranos do live in crude physical conditions; costumbre imposes on Pedrano life a



Left, a cargoholder "releases" a fellow Pedrano. In greeting a man of greater age or higher rank, a Pedrano bows and touches his fingertips. Then the senior man ends the exchange by touching the other man's head.



Above, the wives of the principal cargoholders involved in the fiesta of Santa Cruz for the current year exchange prayers with the wives of the cargoholders for the coming year. The outgoing wives are sitting facing the incoming wives, who are kneeling. Pedrano women weave and embroider (in reds, pinks, and yellow, mostly) their own shawls and, in some cases, their own blouses.

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logic of resource distribution that fosters the survival of the community as a whole while it necessarily limits the comfort of the individual.

If a man drinks to stupor to expiate sins against his neighbors, and to banish ill will, the society is then cleansed of irritations that might otherwise be inflamed into feuds and schisms. If by devoting accumulated wealth to ritual expenses apparently beneficial to the spiritual health of the community a man defuses anger and resentment, the society gains some stability. If in order to hold office men entangle themselves in a network of lending relationships, the community profits by the sharing of resources. As long as everyone is both debtor and creditor, no one and no class is exploited.

Costumbre-- ways of living that are followed not because they symbolize something, although they may, but because they are the custom-- provides a sense of continuity to illiterate, ahistoric people like the Pedranos. If they could read the



history of their Mayan ancestors in the jungle lowlands to the east, they might enforce sanctions against accumulated wealth and social stratification out of a conscious fear that an idle elite might emerge and enslave the rest, like the priest class that apparently came to rule the Classic Mayans during their decline. But Pedranos do not study history. The lessons of the past are embedded in costumbre.

Up in the parajes that dot the peaks of Chenalhó, the cooperative effort to survive goes on in the pattern I have tried to describe. Down in the cabecera, where non-Indian influences are first felt, there is evidence of infiltration: anti-malaria sprays and sanitation systems, basketball courts and Pepsi-Cola trucks, a telephone, a gas-powered corn mill, and, as of last Christmas, electricity. The next newsletter will deal with the modernization of Chenalhó.

Sincerely,

*Woodward A. Wickham*

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