

P R E F A C E

It was quite by accident that I first became aware of the genre of humor which I call "ritual humor." In August 1965 I went to highland Chiapas to carry out the research for my doctoral dissertation on the humor of the Zinacanteco Indians. In early December of that year, one of my informants informed me that my knowledge of Zinacanteco humor would not be complete unless I attended the fiestas of Christmas, New Year's, and the Sixth of January (Epiphany). He said that he would try to obtain permission for me to stay in the house of his future father-in-law, who would be a religious official during the coming year and would be sworn into office on New Year's Day. He urged me to tape-record portions of these fiestas and assured me that it would be feasible to do so if I stayed in the house of his fiancée's father. Thus, according to plan, on the day before New Year's I went with my tape recorder to the house of my informant's prospective father-in-law. When I arrived, some members of his household instructed me to hang the tape recorder on a hook near the door of the house. About an hour later we began to hear music in the distance and I was told that in about ten minutes I should turn on the tape recorder. About ten minutes later a group of costumed people arrived and put on a performance in the courtyard in front of the house. There was a great deal of laughter, but there were so many conversations going on at once that I did not know what people were laughing at. The tape recorder, of course, recorded all the conversations faithfully; the data are presented in chapter 2.

It was not until several weeks later, when an informant had transcribed the tape for me, that I realized the significance of what had occurred on that occasion. Although anthropologists had been working in Zinacantan for more than five years at that time, the performance in question had remained a puzzle because no one understood the verbal behavior. Without a transcription of the utterances of the performers, the fiesta seemed like a confused jumble of figures drawn from several historical periods. The tape revealed that, although historically unrelated elements were present, these elements had been "syncretized" and organized into coherent themes. Furthermore, the tape indicated that the costumed figures were humorists with the license to make obscene and sacrilegious remarks in the context of religious ritual. I discovered from follow-up interviews that these humorists were the only people in the community permitted such license. My task during the next few months was to find out more about these humorists, whom I dubbed "ritual humorists" because their humorous performances took place only in ritual contexts.

The operational definition of humor which guided my field work was inspired by Edmonson's characterization of humor as a cultural tradition—"an assemblage of observed regularities in behavioral sequences leading to laughter" (1952:6). In terms of this definition, humorous behavior must be interaction behavior, because it is the audience's response which determines whether an action may be defined as humorous or not. I found it useful to phrase my definition of humor in terms of Goffman's dramaturgical model of interaction (1959:15-16): humor is a cultural tradition which characterizes a class of social interactions in which actors behave in ways which stimulate laughing responses from audiences.

Zinacantecos make a fundamental distinction between humor that occurs in everyday contexts and humor that takes place during fiestas (Bricker 1968:40). Fiestas are one of the contexts for religious ritual; they are therefore ritual settings. I discovered that in fiesta settings there are performers in distinctive costumes who stimulate laughing responses from audiences. Their costumes bear no resemblance to clothing worn in everyday contexts. It is the humor of these costumed performers that Zinacantecos call "fiesta" humor. I call the performers

"ritual humorists" and their performances "ritual humor" because the fiesta setting in which they are found is a ritual setting.

I learned that humor of this type also occurs at the fiesta of San Sebastián, which takes place in late January. I made arrangements similar to those I had made for New Year's Day to tape-record ritual humor at that fiesta. The tapes revealed that, at this fiesta too, the ritual humor was based on a limited number of themes which developed as the fiesta ran its course. I began to wonder, then, if there were not fiestas in other Mayan communities at which ritual humorists put on dramatic performances which might be compared with those of Zinacantan.

The best opportunities to tape-record ritual humor occurred during the visits of the ritual humorists to the homes of religious officials because recording could be done less conspicuously in a house than outside in a large crowd. Furthermore, the acoustics were better in the houses than outdoors; informants transcribed tapes which had been recorded indoors with ease.

There are three fiestas in Zinacantan at which ritual humorists perform, and during all three they visit the homes of religious officials. It occurred to me that this might be true in other Mayan communities—that if I wished to make a comparative study of ritual humor, I should make arrangements to stay in the homes of religious officials during the fiestas which interested me. My hunch was confirmed by the following statement made by the Spanish priest, Fray Diego de Landa, in describing the Maya of Yucatán: "On the evening of that day they went forth with a great procession of people, and with a large number of their comedians from the house of the lord . . . The comedians went during these five days among the principal houses, playing their pieces and collected the gifts which were given to them, and they carried the whole of them to the temple where, when the five days were ended and past, they divided the gifts among the lords, priests and dancers" (Tozzer 1941:158).

Before 1969 the only communities of highland Chiapas for which ethnographies had been published were Chamula (Pozas 1959) and Chenalhó (Guiteras-Holmes 1961). Both Pozas and Guiteras-Holmes

mention performances of costumed figures during the fiesta of Carnaval. There, as in Zinacantan, the costumed figures blacken their faces: they are called Blackmen in Zinacantan and Chenalhó and Monkeys in Chamula. Neither Pozas nor Guiteras-Holmes indicates whether the performances of these Blackmen or Monkeys are humorous. However, Guiteras-Holmes does mention entertainers who "mock the serious ceremonies, the races, and the ruling political and religious functionaries" (1961:101). I suspected that the Blackmen of Chenalhó and the Monkeys of Chamula were ritual humorists. Fortunately Pozas and Guiteras-Holmes do say that these costumed figures visit the homes of religious officials during the course of the fiesta of Carnaval (Pozas 1959:178; Guiteras-Holmes 1961:101). Armed with this knowledge, I prepared to return to highland Chiapas to conduct an investigation of ritual humor in Chamula and Chenalhó. I returned at the beginning of December 1967, with the intention of staying until the end of March 1968. I allowed myself two and one-half months (from December 1, 1967, until February 16, 1968) to obtain permission from the authorities in Chamula and Chenalhó to perform this research and to make arrangements to stay in the homes of religious officials during the fiesta of Carnaval.

Due to a series of fortunate circumstances the task of obtaining permission proved to be less difficult than I had anticipated. My friend Dr. Gary H. Gossen was at that time engaged in field work in Chamula, and he very kindly offered to introduce me to that town's civil and religious authorities, whose assistance I needed. It was also through Dr. Gossen that I made the acquaintance of several Chamulas who later worked for me as informants. By the beginning of January 1968 all the necessary arrangements had been completed for me to stay at the home of one of the religious officials who would sponsor the fiesta of Carnaval in Chamula. In the meantime I worked with informants, learning from them what the fiesta of Carnaval was all about.

Through Dr. Gossen I also made the acquaintance of Jacinto Arias, the son of Manuel Arias Sohóm, who had been Guiteras-Holmes's chief source of information when she made her study of Chenalhó. Jacinto Arias offered to introduce me to his father, who

he thought might be willing to give me some data on the fiesta of Carnaval in Chenalhó. We arranged for me to go to Chenalhó at the end of January 1968 to meet Manuel Arias and to make arrangements to stay in the house of a religious official during the fiesta. Those arrangements were made without difficulty.

I originally thought that it would be possible for me to attend the fiesta of Carnaval in both communities, since the fiesta is usually celebrated on different days in Chamula and Chenalhó. Carnaval always occurs exactly four weeks after the fiesta of San Sebastián in Chenalhó (Guiteras-Holmes 1961:101), while the dates for the same fiesta in Chamula are determined by the Easter calendar. But for the first time in many years, although they were calculated on the basis of different calendars, the dates for the fiesta of Carnaval in the two communities coincided. Thus it was not possible for me to take advantage of the arrangements I had made in one of the two communities, and I elected to forego being present at the fiesta in Chenalhó. My data on the fiesta in Chenalhó are therefore less complete than the data I obtained for Zinacantan and Chamula. The chapter on the fiesta of Carnaval in Chenalhó is based on interviews with three informants, supplemented by Guiteras-Holmes's field observations from 1944 (Guiteras-Holmes 1946). I am grateful to Gertrude Duby de Blom who took photographs for me in Chenalhó.

In all, I spent four months in Chiapas that winter, collecting data on ritual humor in Chamula and Chenalhó, in addition to the eight months I had spent in Zinacantan during the 1965–1966 field season. I also returned to Zinacantan in 1968 to retape ritual humor on the Sixth of January and during the fiesta of San Sebastián. The object of retaping the humor was to determine to what extent it changes from year to year. The results of this investigation are presented in chapter 7.

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V. R. B.