

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Pathogenic Emotions: Sentiment, Sociality, and Sickness Among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula, Chiapas, Mexico

by

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In this dissertation, I address the constitutive role of emotional ideologies in personal experience, social control, and the cultural production of illness among the Tzotzil Maya of San Juan Chamula. Among the highland Maya, a broad swath of everyday negative emotion has been pathologized. Several “complexes” of related emotions (including anger, fear, sadness, embarrassment/shame, and envy) are thought to be physically dangerous to self and/or others, and both their experience and expression are closely managed at the individual and social levels. These “pathogenic emotions” are the natural and inevitable consequences of everyday social life in small-scale communities, and are managed almost exclusively within the folk medical system, usually through household therapies or shamanic curing.

Four questions serve to orient the dissertation: 1) What are the emotional concomitants of social life in small-scale, rapidly modernizing, “post-peasant” agrarian communities, and how is emotional experience theorized at the local level?; 2) How do individuals and society manage the intense, negative (and often disruptive) emotions that are a direct and inevitable consequence of everyday life in such communities, while simultaneously maintaining deep commitments to an idealized socio-moral order which disvalues these negative emotions in favor of a marked sociocentric ethos of cooperation and harmony?; 3) How do “pathogenic emotions” articulate with the local ethnomedical system, and what is the significance of the resulting “medicalization” of negative emotion? and 4) What are the social functions of these cultural ideologies of sickening social experience and dangerous emotions?

This project blends the methods and research goals of medical and psychological anthropology, situating analysis at the fluid juncture between social life, psychological experience, and physical sickness. In doing so, it challenges simple assumptions regarding the clear segregation of mind from body, self from society, and thought from emotion. Indeed, highland Maya “pathogenic emotions” serve to mediate between these dialectic contrasts, yielding an ethnotheory of the dangers of strong emotion that is at once familiar and strangely foreign—a reshuffling of familiar categories in which organs can wander, the heart can think and talk, the emotional states of others can penetrate bodily boundaries, and unreconciled anger can kill.

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