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PALANTLA POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

William R. Merrifield

O. Background. The village of Palantla is a political entity with its own community government which forms the basic unit in a hierarchy of Mexican governmental institutions. In addition to the community government, there are three other governmental institutions which impinge upon the life of the Palantla community: the army, the ejido, and the school. These four institutions will be discussed in the above order.

Before describing in detail the community government in Palantla, it may be helpful to outline governmental structure in the State of Oaxaca. At the lowest level in the hierarchy, there are two types of local institutions: the Police Agency and the Municipal Agency. These institutions come under the direct jurisdiction of a Municipality, and differ ideally by population--the Police Agency being the smaller of the two.

Palantla is a Municipal Agency with c. 350 inhabitants, and is located within the jurisdiction of the Municipality of Valle Nacional. There are nine such Municipal Agencies and fifteen Police Agencies within the jurisdiction of Valle Nacional. Valle Nacional is one of seventeen Municipalities within the domain of the ex-District of Tuxtepec. The State of Oaxaca is divided into several such Districts.

1. Community Government. The local community government is described under the following headings: citizenship, office, election and installation, the town meeting, and town work.

1.1 Citizenship. The individuals who function in the activities of the community government include all adult male residents of the village from ages fourteen to sixty. These are the citizens or the citizenry (Sp. vecino, contribuyente; Ch. za² huŷy²) of the community. Citizens are obligated to attend town meetings, participate in town work, pay assessments set by the citizenry at town meetings for town projects, and serve in town government when elected. The privileges of citizenship include residence within the village, cultivation of village land, and a voice in village government. Resident women and children participate in all the rights and privileges of the village community and are subject to the community government, but do not attend town meetings, pay assessments, or serve in the community government. A possible exception is a widow, who as the head of a household is required to pay assessments (check). It would be considered inappropriate, however, for her to attend a town meeting other than for purposes of litigation.

At the beginning of each year, the village officials (Sp. autoridades; Ch. za² ta³) decide after consulting the census, which boys having reached the age of 14 will be required to take on the responsibilities and attending privileges of citizenship. These boys are required to perform

one-half the adult quota of work and pay one-half the amount assessed adults ^during the first year of their citizenship, after which they must perform and be assessed as adults.

Upon reaching age sixty, the individual is relieved of all responsibility as regards community government and citizenship, but retains the privileges thereof. Such individuals are referred to as elders (Sp. ancianos; Ch. za^a ka⁹13). They may attend any town meetings they wish, or do any of the town work they have an inclination to do (e.g. work relating to the local church), but are only officially invited to those town meetings of special importance in which their experienced counsel as peers of the community is desired.

An adult male who enters the community from the outside may attain citizenship with the agreement of the community as reached in the town meeting after petition, and by paying a fee set by the citizenry. This may be illustrated by the following example.

San Lucas Arroyo Paloma^o is a village located about three miles from Palantla, but whose lands reach to within one hundred yards of the actual village of Palantla. Citizen X of Palantla recently petitioned the citizens of San Lucas to be allowed to farm San Lucas lands while retaining his residence in Palantla. His petition was granted and he was assessed a 100 peso entrance fee. He now has access to San Lucas land as well as Palantla land, but must contribute to both villages in cash and labor, and must attend the town meetings of both.

On the other hand, if a citizen of Palantla leaves the village to live elsewhere, and he does not keep up on his town work and assessments, he forfeits his citizenship which can then be regained only with the consent of the citizens and by paying an assessment set by them. It is important to note that with the loss of his citizenship he loses the right to farm the land he has inherited from his forebears or has developed himself and maintained through usufruct.

1.2 Office. The two most important offices in the local government are those of the municipal agent (Sp. agente municipal; Ch. za² ze¹³) and the justice of the peace (Sp. ~~alcalde~~ ^{no es juez de paz?}; Ch. zi²ma⁷²). The agent has a subordinate (Sp. suplente) and the justice has two (Sp. segundo alcalde and tercer alcalde). There is a chief of police (Sp. jefe de policía) who may have several policemen at his disposal; and finally, there may be as many as eight bailiffs (Sp. topil; Ch. ci² w³).

Another important office which ranks with those of agent and justice, but which is in a somewhat separate category, is the office of secretary (Sp. secretario; Ch. tiw¹²-sf¹). It is in a separate category in that special skills are required (viz. relative fluency in Spanish and the ability to read and write) which results in disqualifying most Palantleños from filling this office as present conditions of literacy and bilingualism stand. This office is currently being passed around between less than half a dozen persons from year to year.

The office of secretary is the only one in the community government which does not fit into a hierarchy based on seniority. All other offices have a rank value in that succession may proceed only upward. Once an individual has filled a certain office he may not be expected to fill an office of lower rank even though he has never filled that office. A person may be asked, however, to serve in the same office a second time, if by reason of inability he is incapable of succeeding on to higher posts. This is only true of lower ranking posts. No individual may serve more than once as subordinate to the agent, agent, second justice, or justice. The term of office for all community officials coincides with the calendrical year. No one may be required to serve in the community government for two consecutive years though an individual may so serve if he wishes.

After his first year of citizenship, a young man may be sure that he will soon be asked to serve as a bailiff. He may serve in this capacity several times. The bailiff is a messenger. He is asked to carry messages of various types. He carries communications to and from Valle Nacional or other nearby villages; he announces town meetings and town work to the citizenry by going throughout the village to each house early in the morning before the citizens have left for their fields or late the preceding evening; he calls individuals of the village to appear before the officials in judicial proceedings or for collection of fines; he helps in the collection of assessments; and is of general assistance to the authorities.

The chief of police and his policemen are responsible for keeping order, and for apprehending and jailing criminals. Their services are required mostly at fiesta time when drunkenness and brawling are more common than usual, but there is an occasional complaint of wife beating or adultery with accompanying complaints and arrests, or it is necessary to confiscate a chicken or two in lieu of payment of a fine or a debt. These positions are held by the younger citizens, but by no means do all citizens serve in this capacity before they are elected for higher posts.

The subordinate to the agent takes on the functions of the office of agent in the absence of the agent himself. Having served in this office, an individual is in line to be elected agent at a future time, though serving as subordinate is not necessary to be elected agent.

The agent is both the executive and judicial head of the local government. He is the representative of the village to the municipality. In turn, he is responsible to the municipal government for carrying out in the village the wishes of municipal and higher level government agencies. He is subject to fine and/or imprisonment by the municipal authorities for failure to meet their expectations of him.

He is responsible for the safety and care of officials of the government who visit Palantla. For example, if a government doctor, anti-mosquito team, or team of surveyors arrive in the village, he must supply them a place to sleep and board at his own expense. He may be required to furnish

animals or carriers to or from a nearby village. This last responsibility may be borne by the village as a whole, but the agent is required to make the immediate arrangements.

In village business, he calls town meetings and directs the discussion as much as possible, it being his responsibility to see that the business at hand is taken care of. He must decide when town work will be done regarding such routine jobs as keeping the trails to the village cut down, any necessary bridges in repair before the rainy season; and which days any special town projects will be handled which have been decided upon by the citizens in the town meeting such as, repairing the school building, church, or jail. In some instances, when they have the opportunity in a town meeting, the citizens themselves may decide when certain work will be undertaken, but again the agent must initiate the actual confirmation on the preceding evening through his bailiffs who spread the announcement through the village. He hears complaints in local disputes and levies fines against malefactors.

None of the town authorities receive^s any fixed salary except the secretary. Fines collected for misdemeanors or non-attendance at town work become the property of the administration to pay for liquor and entertainment of government officials as mentioned above. The liquor is consumed by the officials themselves during their planning sessions which last late into the night, and the citizens also expect the authorities to supply liquor once in a while after town work. Over a period of a year, an administration usually comes out ahead

financially, but not to the degree that it is thought to be a profitable financial venture.

The agent is also responsible for collecting assessments decided upon by the citizens (e.g. to cover musician and priest fees of an impending fiesta), and making arrangements for fiestas, though special committees are at times formed to carry out this last duty.

Another financial responsibility of the administration is the annual collection of church funds. These funds are lent out to citizens during the year at ^{annual} 25 per cent interest, and then collected and redistributed the first week in February of each year. The administration supervises the collection of this money along with the accrued interest, and then is responsible for the redistribution of the new capital to those desiring to use it.

25% per year?
yes!

Some of these last mentioned duties may be thought of as duties of the administration as a whole, but the agent as head of the local government is the one ultimately responsible for their execution, and so they have been mentioned here.

The agent is also responsible to see that everyone works well during town work. He must keep up the morale and urge the men to work. He acts as foreman directing individuals to do specific tasks if necessary, a prerogative made inoffensive by his office. After serving as agent, the individual is in line to serve at some future time as a justice.

The office of justice of ~~the peace~~ is the highest ranking office in the community government, and as such is the

last official post required of a citizen to fill. First, second, and third justice are ranked according to authority, but there is no succession from one office to another among them. Individuals who have served as second or third justices are never asked to serve later as higher ranking justices, but are considered to have fulfilled their official responsibilities to the community. The exception that proves the rule is that an individual may be asked to serve in the capacity of third justice for two different years. This post would tend to be given someone who was considered incapable of holding down a higher post. The office of first justice is probably always filled by someone who has already served as agent (check).

The job of the justice is to add authority to the voice of the agent and to back him up before the citizenry. Beyond this, it is very difficult to distinguish the tasks of the justice from those of the agent. Their strategy is worked out together and the actual power roles probably depend more on the personalities involved than on the title of office of either.

The office of secretary is as important in the community government as the individual who fills it. In many cases, he has more years of experience in office than either the agent or the justice. Since 1946, one man served in this office five times, one man four times, one man three times, one man two times, and two men once each. Of the two who only served once during this period, one has died and probably had served previous to 1946 as well. The other is a young man who served for the first time in 1961. He will no doubt

serve again in the future. The man who served twice has moved to another village. The remaining three are among the most prominent individuals in the local community.

A secretary^{his}, by definition, a citizen of certain prestige because of the skills he has attained prerequisite to filling his office. His duties include responsibility for all documents and correspondence destined for or originating from the community government. Any document of importance requiring community action is read to the citizens at a town meeting by the secretary. He must then write up any action taken by the village. He is responsible for such matters as issuing certificates of birth and death, and compiling a yearly census of the village indicating names, ages, sex, occupation, and civil status of all residents. He participates with the agent and justice in planning community work and administration strategy. As has been mentioned, the secretary receives a salary for his services.

1.3 Election and Installation. It has been mentioned that the term of office for all community officials is one year and that it coincides with the calendrical year. All of them must receive the approval of the citizenry before taking office, but only the two top officials, the agent and justice, are elected ahead of time at a special town meeting held for that purpose on All Saints Day, November 2nd.

Four other individuals who have previously served in these offices, and who have thus completed their official service to the village, are chosen as well at this time. It

is the task of these four to serve in the installment service on January 1st, transferring governmental powers from the members of the previous administration to those of the new.

During the period from November 2nd to January 1st, the new agent and the new justice formulate a list of individuals who agree to fill the other offices in their administration. On January 1st, or shortly thereafter, the new officials are installed in office by the citizenry. The detailed procedures of election and installation are described below.

Within a few days of installation, the new officials travel to Valle Nacional to receive the approval of the municipal authorities. If these authorities are not satisfied with one of the new officials, he is not approved and it is necessary for the village to make a new choice. A few years ago, a village choice for agent was unacceptable to the municipal authorities on the grounds that he was illiterate and did not speak enough Spanish. In this case a new man was chosen and the original choice served as his subordinate. The following year a completely monolingual and illiterate agent was accepted and did serve.

If an individual is chosen to serve as agent or justice, but does not wish to do so, both local and municipal pressures are applied until he consents. Except for special circumstances, it is virtually impossible to avoid serving once the citizens agree to elect an individual. He may even be jailed and/or fined in Valle Nacional.

1.4. The Town Meeting. The town meeting (ch. tiow'³ za² huŷy²) is held in the village school building. There are only three community buildings in Palantla: the school, the school-teacher's house, and the church (the jail is currently due to be rebuilt). The school building is divided into two rooms. A small room serves as the headquarters of the community government (Ch. ni³ta³), and a larger room serves both as a class^{room} and as a general meeting room.

The town meeting is pre-announced throughout the village by the bailiffs as described above. A horn is blown when it is time to meet. After some delay, the citizens gradually gather to the school for the meeting.

Such meetings are required to handle all but extremely routine business and personal litigations. The citizens themselves are the governing body in the village, and the will of the ^{Citizens} ~~majority~~ prevails as long as it does not flagrantly violate limits set by Mexican governmental institutions external to Palantla.

The elected officials are responsible for calling meetings and town work, and for directing the discussions. In this respect they hold a kind of veto power over the will of the assembly which can at least be used as a delaying action, but the will of the assembly eventually prevails. It is the responsibility of the administration to carry out the desires of this body.

Robert's Rules of Order are unknown to the Chinantecs. When a matter of business has been introduced and the floor is

opened for discussion, anyone speaks who has a mind to, and in a debate which generates any heat at all there are times when most everyone is talking at once.

As might be expected, the voice of prestige carries a good deal of weight in the town meeting. Much more valuable a tool than public office in community affairs, is local prestige. The most important factors in this regard are bilingualism, ~~personal prowess~~ literacy, and age. Wealth and experience might also be mentioned, but in Palantla they seem merely to be functions of these first three factors.

Except for special town meetings held on Sundays or Holidays, they are held just after dark and last well into the night. A typical election and installation are described below to give an idea of the goings on of a town meeting while at the same time giving the details of these two activities.

Late in the morning or in the early afternoon of November 2nd, the horn is blown to call the election meeting. There is a good deal of delay before all of the citizens have assembled (though none of them live more than 500 yards from the school building). This meeting and the January first installation above all others, require full attendance, and so the bailiffs are sent out to round up latecomers.

The school benches are lined up against the walls around the room and a table is placed at one end where the officials are to sit. The elders of the village have been invited, and those who attend are seated together on one side of the room near the front.

When everyone has arrived and has found his place, the agent and the justice both arise together, and standing behind the table facing the citizenry begin to speak simultaneously. They express in a somewhat specialized oratorical speech-style that during the past year they had been asked by the citizens to serve, that it was not something they themselves had sought after, but that they had heard the will of the people and obeyed; that they had to the best of their ability performed their duties throughout the year, and now request the indulgence of the citizenry to be relieved of their jobs, and that others be chosen to carry on in their offices in the approaching new year.

After several minutes of simultaneous speech making, they call for three of their administration to step forward, to whom they give three small crosses made of marigolds. These three move slowly around the room, pausing and speaking to small segments of the citizens as they go, first to the elders and then around the room, for three full tours around the room, requesting the indulgence of the citizens that they indicate their choices for agent and justice in the coming year. While the three are making their tour, the agent and justice themselves continue to urge the citizens to speak out in response. With continued urging the citizens do respond, usually saying that they have no suggestion, or that they will go along with the others.

After the citizens have been given an opportunity to nominate a new slate and have generally stated that they are willing to cooperate in the will of the ^{assembly} majority, the agent

directs the secretary to read a list of nominations which have previously been prepared by the administration. These nominations have been made in secret and are not known until this reading takes place. The names read include two for the offices of agent and justice, and four who will serve in the transfer of office from the old administration to the new in the January 1st meeting.

An alternative method for nominating candidates was used in 1961. (I don't know if this alternative was arranged previously by the individuals involved or not, but I don't think so.) Rather than the administration itself suggesting the new slate, it was suggested that certain named citizens of respect in the community be asked to make suggestions. These named individuals had already served in the highest posts themselves and were no longer eligible for office. The citizens urged the named individuals to make suggestions which they did.

Once individuals have been named, they are urged by all to accept the posts. Without fail, the named individuals decline to serve with genuine unwillingness. The out-going administration urges the citizenry to speak to the nominations signifying their willingness to support the two candidates during their term in office.

Any opposition to the choice, whether voiced openly or not, if perceived by the candidates would stand in the way of their acceptance of the offices. If those present do not respond whole-heartedly protesting their support in the coming year, or if some segment of the community is not represented

in the meeting, no matter how legitimate the reason for non-attendance, these facts are brought to the attention of the body by the named individuals as evidence that they cannot be sure they will have the necessary backing and therefore must decline office.

The protestations of the citizenry are directed first to the man named to fill the office of agent. Representatives of the current administration stand directly in front of him with a flask of ^{Rum} ~~whiskey~~ offering it to him as the body urges him to accept. Acceptance of the flask and the taking of a short draught of its contents, signify willingness to serve. After a good deal of procrastination and obvious reticence, the candidate usually accepts. The attention of the body is then turned to the candidate for the office of justice, and a similar period of urging and decline is finally consummated by acceptance. As mentioned above, the individual eventually faces the fact that he has no alternative and submits to the will of the assembly.

*Are you sure
to drink?*

When both candidates have thus sealed their acceptance by taking a draught of ^{Rum} ~~whiskey~~, the flask is returned to the front of the room where its contents is poured into bottles which in turn are passed among the citizens. Everyone is required to drink signifying thereby his agreement with the choice of new officers.

Many of the citizens avoid the drinking as much as possible and take the first opportunity to slip out and home. The gathering quickly degenerates into a drinking party which

hum

lasts as long as the aguardiente at which time it typically splits up into small drinking parties who seek out other sources of alcohol.

The installation of officers takes place on January 1st. The background of the meeting is the same with the exception that all village equipment such as lanterns, typewriter, shovels and other tools, etc. are displayed on or near the table at the end of the room. This equipment has been cared for by the out-going officers and is to be turned over to the new officers along with the offices.

The agent and justice again initiate the meeting by a reiteration of their November 2nd speeches. The four previously named citizens (and/or elders) step forward and take from the table the two beribboned batons (Sp. vara; Ch. 'ma² 'ig²3) which represent the authority of office of the agent and justice. They then call for the new agent and justice to step forward and accept the batons. There is again a period of reticence and urging after which the new officers step forward, sniff the end of the batons, and take them from those holding them.

The newly installed agent and justice give short speeches simultaneously, pointing out their own personal reluctance to serve in these posts, and adjuring the citizens to keep their word in cooperating through the coming year since it has been their persistent intention to place them in office.

The names of the rest of the new administration are

read to the citizens who agree without further ado. The named individuals are urged to step forward which they do with relatively little reluctance. Stepping forward, they sniff the ends of the two batons signifying their acceptance of office and submission to the agent and justice as superiors.

Finally, the new administration places the name of an individual before the citizens, or the citizens are asked to suggest someone, to serve in the coming year as secretary. An individual is chosen within a few minutes, followed by the appropriate reluctance, urging, and acceptance which, as in the November 2nd meeting, is sealed by the secretary of a swallow of ^{rum} aguardiente from a flask offered him. Again the ^{rum} aguardiente is passed about with a resultant disintegration of the meeting.

1.5. Town Work. Community projects are accomplished through town work (Sp. ^{trava} fatiga; Ch. ta³hu¹ly²). Such projects include construction and maintenance of town buildings such as church, school, and civil government buildings; maintenance of the trails leading through the village and to other villages; maintenance of certain fences to keep local hogs out of nearby fields; planting, harvesting, and disposal of maize for the benefit of the school; and so forth.

In most cases, all the citizens are called out for the work, though at times they may be called out in small groups for a construction job where all are not needed at once. Occasionally, town work quotas are announced which may be accomplished individually before a stated date, such as carrying school maize from the field to the village, or boards from the

do they
ever use
the town
"public
no

mountain where they have been cut for community use.

Absence from town work, except for sickness or injury (injured or sore feet are especially valid excuses since care of the feet is regarded by all the citizens as very important to their livelihood), subjects the individual to a fine of from 3.00 to 3.50 pesos per half day of absenteeism. This money is collected by the administration and is not accounted for to the citizens.

The agent or his representative is in charge of town work and takes the initiative in getting things started. The citizens, however, must be consulted frequently in such matters to assure their cooperation. Failure to do so would result in a good deal of frustration and general dissatisfaction with resulting lack of cooperation.

2. The Army. In recent years, the federal Mexican army has had some incidental influence on the local scene. Mexican law requires that all young men at eighteen years of age spend each Sunday for one year in military training. The training seems to consist mainly in marching and general discipline with some introduction to the use of military firearms. At the end of the year's training, each young man received his identification card which is necessary in the more progressive areas of the nation for securing employment, and must be carried at all times.

Such a training program is carried on to a limited degree in Valle Nacional. All the eighteen year old boys who live in the villages under the municipal jurisdiction of Valle Nacional are required to go there each Sunday for

training over a one year period. It often happens that through inclement weather the boys find it convenient not to attend, but the more recently maturing boys are beginning to comply more regularly.

The influence of the army in the village is relatively insignificant having to do mostly with the conflicting calls upon the time of the young men currently in training. Since town work is often done on Sunday, it is necessary to excuse them from participating when it conflicts with his army training.

A somewhat more critical conflict came in 1961 when the town secretary, who has evidently shown some aptitude for military training, was required to be away from the village for several weeks by his commanding officer to assist in the training program. It was necessary to find a substitute to serve as secretary in his absence.

3. The Ejido. The lands upon which the village of Palantla are located, and the lands around it which are farmed by its inhabitants, pertain to the ejido of San Isidro Laguna y Anexos. This ejido includes three other villages in addition to Palantla: San Antonio Ocote, Cerro Pita, and San Isidro Laguna. This land was formerly the property of an ex-Archbishop of Oaxaca and was nationalized by the government some time after 1910 as a part of its revolutionary land reform program.

The present town of Palantla was founded in 1928. The inhabitants were former residents of San Pedro Tlatepusco, located a long day's journey by foot from the present town, which was destroyed by a cloud burst on June 6th of that year.

The survivors fled the old village site and petitioned the government for the use of the land which now pertains to Palantla. The petition was granted and the village was founded.

Ejidos are lands held in perpetuity as the property of the national government and placed at the collective disposal of a body of named individuals. They are administered at the local level (at least in the case of San Isidro Laguna y Anexos) by a comisariado ejidal appointed by Federal ejido administrators. The comisariado has an assistant whom he chooses himself (check) and a vigilante who seems to function as an inspector of some sort. Each year the comisariado collects a small tax from each farmer for the use of ejido lands. He must be advised if any new lands are opened and cannot allow lumber to be taken from the area for commercial use. He charges a fee for permission to cut down cedar trees to be cut up into boards for local use.

Since the village of San Isidro is located nearest to Valle Nacional and communication with the rest of the nation, it has been the local headquarters for the ejido of which Palantla is a part, and a citizen of San Isidro has always been chosen as the comisariado. Palantla, however, is a larger village than San Isidro and there has been recent agitation on the part of the Palantleños to change this situation. Especially as there have been some difficulties with the comisariado and differences between the villages concerning division of the land.

The farmers feel a need for more land of better quality and commissions have been sent from Palantla and Ocote to Mexico City, but to date they have found it very difficult

to communicate their need in a way which might result in an effective response from the government. The land situation seems to be pretty much outside the power of the local communities and in the hands of the officials in Mexico City.

4. The School. Palantla has enjoyed from time to time the services of Federal school teachers. The presence of a school teacher in the village requires conformity to certain requirements established by the school inspector in Tuxtepec including an organizational institution through which the teacher can foster interest and cooperation with the school in the local community. The institution set up for this purpose is called el comité padres de familias. It consists of a treasurer and a chairman who is known in the limited Spanish of the Community as the "comité." The chairman is at the disposal of the teacher as an advisor and go-between with the villagers. When the teacher desires some particular action on the part of the citizens the chairman consults with the agent who calls a town meeting to consider the matter.

5. Summary. Serving the community government in an official capacity is not so much thought to be a privilege as it is a responsibility and a necessary evil. The system of passing from office to office in hierarchical fashion serves to counteract this feeling by eventually freeing the individual who serves from further such responsibility.

Individual prestige roles based on bilingualism, literacy, and age (not necessarily in that order) are more important than official roles though the combination of these can prove important especially in the office of secretary since it can be

filled with some continuity.

Outside power elements such as the army, the ejido, and the school impose certain requirements and limitations of action on the local community, but their influence intrudes very little into village government. The local assembly of citizens remains the body to be dealt with in the last instance.

Ultimate power in Palantla rests in the hands of the citizens themselves. In some senses, it is as democratic a form of government as you could find anywhere. Power is widely shared in the assembly, but is conceived in such a fashion as to narrowly confine the individual to limited freedom through a strong desire for total conformity.

One point needs
comment. What
codes are these officials
responsible for enforcing
and what sanctions are
applied? A very good
beginning!

A