

## Chapter 1

### *A Community "In Crisis"*

SATAHOL: *Good night* my friend!

CHEQUEREQUE: ¿Qué dice señor?, no le entiendo.

SATAHOL: Dije "buenas noches", huiro. ¿Ya no te acuerdas de mi?, tu gran amigo Satahol, peón del monte, médico naturista, graduado en la Universidad de hechicería de Yobain, experto de pesca-pesca y busca-busca, cantante exclusivo de Tixcocab y puntos intermedios y probable picher de refuerzo de los Leones de Yucatán.

CHEQUEREQUE: Maare, Lotería y no borren. ¿Y qué tanta cosa eh?

SATAHOL: Pues ya lo viste, Chequereque, estoy llegando directamente de los Estados Unidos y con muchos dólares en la bolsa.

CHEQUEREQUE: ¡Maare! Cuando eras chico te creías un pan de peso, pero ahora te crees un pan de a dolar. ¿Masinó?

SATAHOL: ¡Cállate!. ¡Cómo se ve que eres un ignorante!

SATAHOL: *Good evening* (in English), my friend!

CHEQUEREQUE: (in Spanish) What do you say, sir?

I do not understand you!

SATAHOL: I said "Good evening." Don't you remember me? I am your great friend Satahol, peon from the forest, naturalist doctor, graduate of the school of witchcraft at Yobain, and expert in fishing-fishing and seeking-seeking (meaning looking for survival), the chic and popular singer from Tixcocab and the auxiliary pitcher for *los Leones de Yucatan* (the Major League Baseball team in the region).

CHEQUEREQUE: My God, you are really something, aren't you?

SATAHOL: You see, Chequereque, I just now came from the United States with a lot of dollars in my pocket.

CHEQUEREQUE: My God, when you were little you were content to be a one-peso (the national currency) piece of bread, but now you believe that you are a one-dollar loaf of bread. Isn't that so?

SATAHOL: Shut up! You are obviously ignorant!

It is June 27, the end of the 1988–89 academic year for the students of *la primaria* (elementary school) and *la secundaria* (secondary school) in Chan Kom, a Maya<sup>1</sup> community in the Yucatán peninsula. Those who graduate face new decisions in their lives: to join the migrant group in Cancún, the tourist emporium on the eastern coast of the peninsula, or to stay in the village. A few will have the opportunity to pursue their education, particularly those whose families have enough resources to sponsor them. To celebrate the end of school, teachers and students have been engaged in the preparation of a program called *la Velada* (evening function), consisting of songs, poetry recitations, dances, and skits to show off the students' abilities as actors and performers. The preparations for the event start at 7:30 P.M., right after the celebration of the Catholic mass, which is attended by the female and male students, their families and the *padrinos* (godfathers) and *madrinas* (godmothers) that they chose. The female students, ranging from fifteen to nineteen years old, all are dressed up. Probably it is the first time they wear heels and panties; all of them wear a blue dress, tied at the waist with a ribbon that falls down the back. The style and other details contributing to the embellishment of the design depend upon the money the family could gather to invest in *el vestido de graduación* (the graduation dress). The male students wear dark suits and ties. A square has been arranged at the plaza, with chairs for the public and a big table for the authorities. The square is flanked by the Catholic church and the municipal palace. Women with children start sitting down, while the men wander around the plaza or stand a short distance away, until the event takes place. The west side is occupied by women and children. Once the seating is filled on the east side, people prefer to stand rather than to move to the vacant chairs on the west side. The graduation is celebrated on a week day; most of the migrants are working in the city, Cancún, and will not return until the weekend. That may explain the empty areas on the west side. Since it is a community celebration, I am wearing a colorful *huipil matizado*<sup>2</sup> that Raimundo finished embroidering that afternoon, with a dark *rebozo* displayed as a bandana from my waist to my shoulder. Raimundo, a dear friend, is showing me everyday the art of initiating an outsider woman into the knowledge and work in the fields. He is the only man in the village who embroiders *huipiles*. Raimundo somehow forgot that my height is considerably different from the norm among Maya women and cut the white cotton cloth too much; I am feeling very uncomfortable because the skirt is very tight and short, and when I am sitting, I have to pull the *pik* down constantly. When it is almost 8:30 P.M., the authorities gather at the table; the president, treasurer and secretary, who are either temporary or permanent migrants in Cancún, extend their hands towards the president of the school board and the main professor in the *secunda-*

*ria*, both of them recognized as leaders of the traditional peasant group in Chan Kom. Living in the community for two months, observing the frictions between the migrant and the traditional groups, has made me aware of how cautious I need to be in building my social network in the village. This is the first event that allows me to observe the interaction between the two groups, their members and their leaders. I can see perplexed faces, as well as fixed looks at the shaking of hands among these five men. It seems that the ceremonial context encourages the cordial encounter between the two groups. As such, the president, microphone in hand, addresses the audience with a short speech, in which he exhorts the collaboration of everyone in creating a spirit of unity and cooperation for the welfare of the community. Meanwhile, I surrender to the sudden need to explain why these five men in front of me, obviously the heart of the initiation of the event, strike me so much. I abandon myself with pleasure to my mental machine, which was shaped and developed during my years of apprenticeship in anthropology, which deals with symbolic malabarisms of past and present associations. Digging into my knowledge of and experience with Maya culture, I find that number five is present in those contexts that imply completion and order. Number five encapsulates the four directions plus the center, which makes five or completion. The *Popol Vuh*, the ancient account of the Maya origins, along with other sources of the Mesoamerica epistemological knowledge, narrates the four experiments of world creation previous to the current fifth, the world of corn people. Previous field experience, during the summer of 1986 and '87, allowed me to understand the Maya conceptualization of the cosmos, *milpa*, and the human body as three structural alter egos, divided into four sectors, balanced by the center (Re Cruz, in prep.). This spontaneous and unrefined symbolic digression transforms the setting for me into a scenario where the actors, taking advantage of the ceremonial and festivity aspect of the event, interact and agree to bring social order back to the community.

The various acts presented at *la Velada* include the play *No Hay Novedad* (There is No News), which attracts public attention.<sup>3</sup> *No Hay Novedad* is a short play performed by the senior students in secondary school. The first act introduces two characters, Satahol and Chequereque, who meet at the village. Satahol, a Maya migrant, born and raised in Chan Kom, returns to the village affecting the cultural values of the "civilized" urban world, puffed up with conceit over his new monetary wealth. Although most of the migrants in Chan Kom go to Cancún, Satahol is coming from the United States in the play; this helps me to understand how the Maya peasant envisions Cancún as a kind of United States. This is an encounter between two Maya who were born in the same village and who share the same ethnic background. The characters' decision

whether to migrate or to stay makes them representatives of two different worlds. In other words, *No Hay Novedad* is a scenographic representation of Chan Kom. Enjoying the performance of *No Hay Novedad* leads me to observe three different social scenarios all at once: the community scenario that I share with the Maya everyday, placed in a context of clashes and frictions between two groups, social scenario of the festivity improvised to celebrate *la Velada*, and finally, the theatrical scenario in *No Hay Novedad*, created to portray the social schism.

Although the theatrical scenario takes place in Chan Kom, a majority of peasant communities in the world could have used the expressive device of the performance to denounce migration as the commonly accepted social and economic catalyst of transformation. This Maya community exhibits the emblem of "the peasant community in transformation" with which Robert Redfield and Alfonso Villa Rojas initiated its ethnographic record during the early 1930s. Maya teachers and students rehearse and perform this emblem at the time when the young Mayas are ready to face the job market, the work world. The complex articulation of different systems of production that characterizes Chan Kom in the 1990's promotes, for the young Maya, the existence of a broader range of professional activities and roles other than being a *milpero* (peasant who cultivates the *milpa*<sup>4</sup>, the corn field also called *col* in Maya language), or mothers and wives devoted to domestic affairs, as their elders were.

The two characters who introduce *No Hay Novedad* represent the social and productive composition of the community, the peasant Chan Kom and the migrant Chan Kom, and the world views of Chan Kom's social actors. Current transformations in community life are encapsulated in the people's general perception of being in crisis.

¡Dios sabe cuántos años tocan de crisis! Cuando llega la hora, pues eso sucede. Esos más antiguos, en tiempos de los antiguos hubo buen elote. Pero los señores trabajaban con los *Yuntziles*, que traen las lluvias; ellos les piden su bendición con el *saca'*. Como se están llevando bien con los *Yuntziles*, por eso tienen comida en sus milpas, hasta hacen el *ch'a chaac*, y cumplen con sus ofrendas. Pero hoy ya hay muchos que no lo hacen: es falta de nosotros. Sólo comer queremos, y no cumplen. Los grandes lo saben; los grandes dicen que dice el Señor Dios: "Y a los Cristianos se les dio la tierra pa' que la trabajan, y pa' que recuerden al Señor Dios." Pero ahorita toca el tiempo de crisis. Este tiempo duele. Estamos de crisis. (Narrator: Don Juan, Chan Kom)

Only God knows how many years there are for crisis! When it comes, it comes. In the times of the oldest elders there was good harvest of corn. But these people work with the *Yuntziles* (Maya spirits of the skies and forests), who bring the rains. They ask the gods for a benediction with

*saca'* (ceremonial drink made with maize). As they are getting along well with the *Yuntziles* that is why they have a good harvest in their *milpas* (the fields to grow maize); they even perform the *ch'a chaac* (ceremony to bring the rain). They pay tribute to the gods with their offerings. But today, many do not make the offerings; it is our fault. We want only to eat and not to do our duty. The elders know it; the elders say that God says: "The Christians were given the land to till, and to remember God, the Father." But now, the time of crisis is at hand. This time hurts. We are in crisis. (Narrator: Don Juan, Chan Kom)

*No Hay Novedad* expresses the current clash of Maya worldviews, mainly via migration to Cancún. The "time that hurts" emerges from the change in the current Maya attitude toward the Maya supernatural forces and God, via *milpa* work<sup>5</sup>. It seems that there is a direct link between migration and people's perception of crisis, and changes in the way Maya deal with the *milpa*.

This book unravels the social intricacies and the symbolic complexities embedded in this Maya perception of crisis that affects both ethnic representation and changes in socioeconomic practices. Although it is written from the perspective of a Maya community in Yucatán, the book addresses the worldwide phenomenon of migration, socioeconomic transformation, and changes in representations of identity.

The demands and rewards of rapid industrialization stimulate massive migration from rural areas to the urban centers. Peasant societies are immersed in a process of change that exposes them to intercultural conflicts, class stratification, and other phenomena generated by the dominant political and cultural system; for these reasons, pressing contemporary issues figure prominently in my analysis. Among the more salient issues are inflation, monetarization of commercial transactions, changing moral standards, interethnic relations, accelerated internal migration, and an increasing role of government in local affairs. All of these factors are encoded in the Maya social construction of reality and in the new symbolic formula they use to identify themselves within the national system of ideology.

The point of departure in this study is the Maya perception of crisis, which becomes the key ideological character through which the actors, the Maya, express their current transformations. Via migration, Chan Kom connects, in particular ways, with the broader system of state and national politics and economics. As such, it can be argued that the broader system's socioeconomic, political, and cultural dimensions are active forces in the revision of world views and in the recreation of an ethnic identity that is neither homogeneous nor static. The economic and political experiences of different social groups, whether they exist within the community or within the dominant system's social arenas,

motivate the elaboration of different signals of identity. A key figure, *milpa* work, helps shape the complexity of interrelations between the community's socioeconomic composition and the different Maya identity representations. Today, people use *milpa* as the insight and guide for their ideological legitimacy as *verdaderos Mayas* (true Maya). It means that the essence of "Mayaness" comes from people's involvement in *milpa* work. That is, they (Mayas) are what they work on (*milpas*). If being *milpero* is a major force in identifying "Mayaness", how does *milpa* become the economic and ethnic symbol for other groups that are not economically centered on *milpa* production? And, in Chan Kom today, what are the underlying dynamics of the competition between migrants and peasants, both involved in a sometimes passionate ideological battle to possess *milpa* as their representation of ethnic identity?

It is the purpose of this book to provide explanations for such questions, which address the interpretive and socioeconomic analyses enmeshed in the articulation of peasant, capitalist, and tourist economic systems. Therefore, the approach that guides this ethnography on Chan Kom in crisis integrates interpretive theory and methodology with a political economic orientation. In developing this particular means to conduct this study, I draw from other ethnographers who have attempted to combine socioeconomic analysis with symbolic interpretation in order to grasp the intricacies of any group's social experience (Bloch 1986; Comaroff 1985; Good 1988; Greenberg 1987; Nash 1979; Taussig 1986; Warren 1989; Rosenbaum 1992; Roseberry 1991, among others). The key point here is to show that the Mayas' various exegetical readings of their social reality oversimplify the situation and hide an intriguing social complexity embedded in rural-urban transformations. The key political element within this set of mutual relationships is *power*, which forms the core of social relations and identity elaborations. I use the term *interactive* to describe the approach that uses this set of mutual relationships between meanings and action as an operative principle.

This interactive approach becomes a theoretical and methodological device to study interrelations at three levels of inquiry: a) the relations between the local system and the regional and national contexts, b) the constant interplay between socioeconomic and political transformations and cultural redefinitions, and c) the intimate relationship between what is spoken openly and what remains unsaid, but is implied in ideological elaborations.

Recognizing that migration is a social process that emerges from the interaction with a broader world system, I address two basic questions: First, what motivates the migration process? This question requires an analysis of the Mexican government's political strategies for development and its intervention in native community affairs. Second, how is the na-

tive community facing the pressures to migrate? To examine these questions, I consider the effects and manifestations of the larger socioeconomic and political system upon the community, and, in turn, the cultural strategies operating to resist or adjust to these macro forces. Then, the main task of this study is to identify the real-world events, phenomena, and processes that are contributing to the Maya's present sense of crisis.

As a community study, this analysis falls into a broad and productive body of research on peasant societies, initiated by one of the giants on Mesoamerican ethnography, Robert Redfield (1934, 1941, 1950, 1960). Redfield arrived in 1930 at Chichen Itza, the archaeological site that the Carnegie Institution of Washington was exploring. Sylvanus Morely encouraged Redfield to study Chan Kom as a peasant community. Morley had already met Alfonso Villa Rojas, who at that time was the school teacher in the village. Morley recommended Alfonso Villa Rojas as assistant, and with that he created one of the most productive and inspiring research marriages of Mesoamerican ethnography. Certainly, Redfield laid the foundation for the community study approach that for four decades has guided most of the ethnographic research on Mesoamerica (Hawkins 1983). Although he started conceptualizing the community as an idyllic folk society (1941), Redfield moved (1960) towards the formulation of the "little community" that comes into regular contact with the city or wider civilization, and, as such, becomes part of it.

The Maya Lowlands, which became a research laboratory for the study of the past civilization and the present culture of the Indians and peasants, were increasingly being exposed to a world that was beginning to impinge upon them. Likewise, the Pan American highway and the INI's (Instituto Nacional Indigenista) programs, aimed at facilitating the adaptation of the Tzotzil and Tzeltal Indians to the "modern" world, established the seeds for the creation of another ethnographic research laboratory on community studies in Mesoamerica. It was the Harvard Chiapas project, directed by Evon Vogt, that took the lead in studying continuity and change in Chiapas (Vogt 1992). Eric Wolf's work, the other masterpiece in Mesoamerican community studies, was initiated with the formulation of closed corporate communities (1957). As it happened in the Redfieldian production, Wolf also moved from the emphasis on the autonomous, hermetically sealed character of certain peasant villages into a more global and national focus on the level of integration with larger entities (Wolf 1982).

The seminal work that the Carnegie Institution and the Chiapas Project provided for the creation of the two Mesoamerican research areas has been a continuing inspiration for the ethnographic productions of the Maya Lowlands (Burns 1973, 1977, 1980, 1983; Bricker 1977, 1981;

Elmendorf 1970, 1972; Hanks 1990; Kintz 1990; Press 1968, 1975, 1977; Sullivan 1985, 1989; Thompson 1974, among many others), as well as of the Maya Highlands (Cancian 1965, 1989; Carmack 1973, 1976, 1981; Earl 1990; Eber 1991; Gossen 1974, 1986a, 1986b, 1989; Nash 1970; Rossembaun 1993, among many others)

Here, I explore the interweaving of the interactive approach and the understanding of the position and role of the Maya peasants and migrants of Chan Kom as an example case of community in modern Latin America. The notion of "community" in this study is taken to mean a social space that extends beyond the rural dimension to encompass the urban arena. Although people in a community share a cultural tradition, the native symbolic system is open; consequently, it may represent and, at the same time, distort the reality it is intended to reflect. Thus, this ethnographic analysis builds upon the idea that the symbolic components identifying any community are subject to constant manipulation and competing interpretations. Central to this argument is the consideration of community as a cumulative association of socioeconomic, political, and cultural processes that are recreated and reimagined through generations of contexts of meanings.

My purpose is to present an anthropological, interpretive view of the Maya's own accounts of Chan Kom in crisis, and also to portray the Chan Kom Maya as active members in, and products of what is often called "postmodernity" (Knauff 1994; Harvey 1990; Jameson 1984). This is a current trend in socioeconomic and cultural development of late capitalism, which compresses a world of broad politico-economic changes, being these correlated with the creation of new images and representations to cope with these transformations. How do power and representation relate with each other? How do people assert meanings? are a few contemporary issues of the "postmodern condition" (Harvey 1990). The experimental postmodern mood characterizing some ethnographies is criticized because they are solipsistic or hard to read, which becomes detrimental in getting their theoretical, political, or human messages through (in Knauff 1994:28). This ethnography on Chan Kom is a post-modern product because it focuses on the interplay between local and broader politico-economic changes, which are transformed into inspiring sources of cultural and ideological representations. Certainly, in dealing with issues of the postmodern condition, this ethnography on Chan Kom is written in a mood that embraces a reflexive critique in the examination of history, politics, and the voice of the author conversing with other voices and with the texts they produce through action. To avoid the criticism of the difficulty of conveying the messages in experimental post-modern exercises, I state clearly the theoretical, political, and human messages that I convey through this ethnographic writing. Once the in-



teractive approach is in action, the theoretical message deals with the enriching holistic results of the ethnographic analysis. The political message pinpoints the dialectical relationship between meaning and power. The human message alludes to my efforts "to render reality as if it was lived while being observed" (Condominas 1977:xix). The human message pervades the other two via ethnographic writing, since the goal is to present the reader with a "living" ethnography. In sum, this ethnographic account advocates a form of writing that presents the social crisis of Chan Kom in process, through the reconstruction of every actor's voice, including the voice of my authorship, "because ethnography is both a product and a process, our lives as ethnographers are embedded within field experience." (Tedlock 1991). The enriching experimental perspective of the postmodern mood in this ethnographic writing has forced me to grapple with disconcerting juxtapositions of diverse identities, voices, and versions of events. The resulting intertextuality, encapsulated in the "we-talk," belongs neither to the realm of objectivity nor to that of subjectivity, but rather to human intersubjectivity (Tedlock 1991:71).

Therefore, this ethnographic presentation of Chan Kom as both part and a product of the postmodernity that we all share, along with the postmodern style of the ethnographic writing, is this book's contribution to community studies and to the anthropological knowledge in general. From this perspective, this ethnographic analysis and conclusions are far removed from what Redfield encapsulated in the *ethos* of the community, that is, the comforting model of a coherent society with a consistent and shared identity (see 1960:63–65).

*Chan Kom, a Maya Village* (1934) and *Chan Kom Revisited* (1950) are the Redfieldian ethnographic products of a particular sociocultural milieu that nurtured anthropology more than half a century ago. *The Two Milpas of Chan Kom* is the product of a much different sociocultural context. The European migration waves that the United States received during the first quarter of the century represented the sociocultural phenomenon of that time. Will all these migrants lose their traditions as they accommodate to the dominant North American culture? What does happen when so many different cultures come into contact and conflict? Through the intellectual-anthropological effervescence motivated by such an important phenomenon, the idea of the "melting pot," conceptualized by the theorists led by Park at the University of Chicago, emerged as the predominant answer for that social inquiry (see Steinberg 1981). Redfield, as a product of this intellectual milieu, transferred this explanation of sociocultural change into the Maya sociocultural context. Ultimately he conceptualized the so-called "folk-urban continuum" as a device to explain change through different levels of contact with the dominant culture. Today, migration within and outside nations provokes

an intricate map of borderlines. This confusing postmodern world of sociopolitical transformations, embroidered with reformulations of cultural identity, is the context for this new approach to the study of the Maya experience of change. Thus, I focus on the words and symbols that the Maya use to channel their perception, experience, and practice of change. Sometimes cultural symbols are brought from the past to explain present circumstances, or to foretell the future; at other times, the present inspires symbolic tools to revise the past. I strongly emphasize the process-oriented nature of this analysis, which looks at how the people of Chan Kom reimagine the past and interpret the present in accordance with current socioeconomic, political, and religious contexts in order to define what it means to be Maya in our contemporary world. Commonly, the Maya respond, react to, and act upon their contextualized social reality in public arenas such as ritual performances, elaboration of oral tradition, and the conversations found in everyday life.<sup>6</sup>

### *Book Outline*

The Maya of Chan Kom used the performance of *No Hay Novedad* as an expressive device to show the social clash tangled with the current changes in Maya representations. Accordingly, this book is formatted as a theatrical performance. The title of the drama pinpoints the analytical purpose of this ethnography: Chan Kom in crisis. The drama metaphor also allows us to integrate the ethnographer's experience in the field into the discussion and analysis. The role of ethnographer has many aspects—that of the descriptive narrator, that of the active participant as a character in the community under study, and that of the critic who analyzes and explains. This drama metaphor is developed and elaborated through the various chapters of the book, which is organized into three parts. The first part is aimed at getting the reader acquainted with both the sociocultural landscape of contemporary Chan Kom and the theoretical framework used to understand the community (chapters 1 and 2). Because my orientation is toward process, I use the succession of field experiences intertwined with their theoretical formulations in order to show the combination of data and theoretical concerns in the final elaboration of the interactive approach that I apply throughout this research.

The next section comprises two parts. The first part (chapters 3, 4, and 5) is intended to show Chan Kom as depicted by the various factions within the Maya community. Chapter 3 is an introduction to the village and the current situation of crisis, as described and interpreted by the inhabitants. Chapter 4 addresses the division of the community in both its social and ideological aspects. Oral tradition, rumor, gossip, and other forms of symbolic expression are employed to describe a leader from each

of the two social groups. This analysis shows that the character traits attributed to these men by their supporters and opponents mirror people's perspectives of the groups as a whole. The two leaders are symbols of the larger groups they represent. The goal here is to present the opposition of two worlds: *los Antiguos* and *los de Cancún*. Chapter 5 traces the history of these two groups back to the founding of the village. A Maya narration on the history of Chan Kom since its origin to the present is the guide for the analysis of the socioeconomic development in the village. This review of recent village history provides a basis for understanding the social complexity of Chan Kom and the analysis that follows.

The second part within the second section (Chapters 6 and 7) is the heart of the interactive analysis. Chapter 6 uncovers a dimension of the crisis that is not expressed in the self-representation of Chan Kom as divided into two sectors. The interaction of interpretive and economic analyses discloses a social inequality hidden in the bifurcated social reality presented in the preceding chapters. I also explore the socioeconomic repercussions for the village of the community's expansion into Cancún, including the effects of the urban class structure on social positions in the village. Simple statistical comparisons analyze the mutual relations of urban and rural socioeconomic structures. In order to define the meaning of "Mayaness," chapter 7 returns to the social complexity of the urban-rural community in our postmodern world. The social complexity analysed in Chapter 6 propels Chapter 7's discussion of the incongruities embedded in a "meta-Maya" identity. Finally, Chapter 7 emphasizes the distinctive urban-rural Maya identities as they are perceived within the Maya "community" and by nonMaya people. Chan Kom is viewed as a microcosm of the postmodern world, with a multifaceted identity. Although very short, the last section (Chapter 8) recaptures the ethnographic analysis and frames it in a theatrical fashion in order to encompass the main scenarios presented within the book. These different theater settings embrace the community everyday social scenario, Chan Kom's interpretation of its social reality expressed in *No Hay Novedad*, and the author's *Two Milpas of Chan Kom: Scenarios of a Maya Village Life*.