

**LIVING WITH SAINTS.  
Women's Relationships and Experience in Daily Life  
in Lake Pátzcuaro (México).**

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Declaration:

I declare that the present thesis has been composed by myself. It is the result of my own work, and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration.

Signed,

Susana Carro-Ripalda



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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Modesto Carro Belmonte (1938-1989).

# ABSTRACT OF THESIS

## LIVING WITH SAINTS

### Women's Relationships and Experience in Daily Life in Lake Pátzcuaro (Mexico).

This thesis deals with the relationships and interactions of Purhépecha women with significant others, including holy beings (saints, Virgins and Christs, all of which are called *santitos*), in quotidian contexts and life-cycle situations. The research for the thesis took place in the island of Jarácuaro in the lake Pátzcuaro, Central-West Mexico. This tiny island is inhabited almost exclusively by Purhépecha people, the indigenous population of the region. Daily life in Jarácuaro is significantly organised by gender and focused, in many respects, on domestic groups.

The main argument of this thesis is that women interact and have meaningful relationships with the *santitos* much in the same way they do with relatives and neighbours. Saints, Virgins and Christs are present in houses, and women communicate and interact with them frequently about a variety of quotidian, domestic and personal concerns. These interactions include specific forms of physical contact, exchange and contextual perceptions (of gender, of position, of relationship, of capacity) and, due to their continuity, constitute relationships between the women and the *santitos* as personal as those taking place between the women and their relatives and neighbours. The capacity of *santitos* as significant social agents and the perceptual reality of their reciprocal intercourse make it possible for the women to dynamise processes of personal experience, as it happens in the interactions between people. These personal experiences are, in form and content, understood and shared by others, but they are also intensely personal and allow for changes in perceptions, actions and realities.

Theoretically, my work touches upon several issues: it takes a critical look at the conceptualisations of the figure of Saints in the anthropological literature of Latin America, particularly focusing on the representation of saints as "symbols", and at the consequences of interpreting saints as objects and not as agents. In general, it examines the relevance of certain anthropological concepts ( "religious

experience", "sacred", "profane, "symbol", "belief") in the context of a particular ethnographic setting , and takes a critical approach to the theories and models which produce and reify representations from a perspective removed from the actors' experience. Methodologically, I defend the relevance of using the personal experiences of people as a legitimate means of understanding their own worlds, and I argue the necessity of focusing on the point of view of people themselves, not only as a valid epistemological position, but also as a sound ethical choice for giving voice in ethnography to the actors themselves.

## GLOSSARY

Alabanzas	Church songs
Aviso	Reunion between two families after a couple's elopement
Bilis	Bile
Bultito	Three-dimensional image
Ca'	Short for <i>casa</i> , house
Calor	Heat, a health complaint
Cargo	Festival sponsorship
Celador	Guardian of a visiting <i>santito</i>
Cempasúchitl	Orange flower
Chicharrón	Charred pork skins
Churipo	Beef soup
Círculo Bíblico	Bible Circle
Comadre, comari	Co-mother
Combi	Public transport van
Compadre	Co-parent
Concuña	Co-sister-in-law, husband's brother's wife
Cristito	Affectionate term for a Christ
Cuartel	Village quarter
Curato	Priest's house
Danza de los Viejitos	Traditional Purhépecha dance
Difunto	Deceased, dead
Diosito	Affectionate term for God
Doctrina	Catholic Doctrine school
Empacho	Children's illness
Encargado/a del templo	Keeper of the church
Frijolito	Bean
Gringo/a	Foreigner
INI	Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Institute of Indigenous Affairs
Hombrecito	Young man or boy
Jaripeo	Mexican rodeo
Madrecita	Affectionate term for mother
Madrina	Godmother
Mamá	Mum

Manto	Cloak
Mañanitas	Happy Birthday song
Mayordomía	Festival sponsorship
Metate	Grinder made of volcanic stone
Mollera	Children's illness
Mujercita	Young woman or girl
Nana Purfísima	Purhépecha name for the Virgin
Nixtamal	Boiled maize paste
Ojito, mal de ojo	Evil eye
Padrino	Godfather
Pan dulce	Sweet bread
Particular	Private
Pasadita	Informal call
Petate	Grass mat
Piloncillo	Syrup
Pirecua	Traditional Purhépecha song
Pireri	Traditional Purhépecha singers
Ponche	Hot fruit drink
Porras	Cheers
Pozole	Meat and maize stew
Rebozo	Mexican shawl
Santito	Affectionate term for saints in general
Sobada	Massage
Taco	Meat or beans inside a rolled <i>tortilla</i>
Tamal	Maize dumpling
Tortilla	Maize pancake
Tortilla de Harina	Wheat pancake
Tres Cañas	Sugar Cane Alcohol
Velación	Wake
Virgencita	Affectionate term for Virgins or female saints
Visita	Visitor
Yácata	Pre-hispanic temples
Zapote	Local tree



## LIST OF JARÁCUARO PEOPLE WHO APPEAR IN THIS THESIS

### **Doña Lupe's house**

Doña Lupe,

Don Alfredo, her husband

This author

### **Feyo's house (at the backyard)**

Feyo, Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe's eldest son

Machí, his wife

Their children: Tzan (Agustín), Kikí, Calí, Cayincito (all boys)<sup>1</sup>

### **Doña Cecilia's house**

Doña Cecilia, Doña Lupe's mother<sup>2</sup>

Don Joaquín, Doña Cecilia's second husband

Reyna, Doña Cecilia and Don Joaquín's first daughter, married to Don Esteban, no children

Joel, Doña Cecilia and Don Joaquín's son

Glafira, Joel's wife

Joel and Glafira's children: Irene, Noé, Xochitl Cecilia

### **Doña Amelia's house**

Doña Amelia, Doña Cecilia and Don Joaquín's second daughter (married; separated from husband)

Chabe, Doña Amelia's eldest daughter (married during my fieldwork)<sup>3</sup>

Lupita, Doña Amelia's second daughter<sup>4</sup>

Paco, Doña Amelia's eldest son

Elbia, Paco's wife<sup>5</sup>

Paco and Elbia's son Josué

Huguito, Doña Amelia's youngest son, unmarried

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<sup>1</sup> Since my departure, they have had a fifth son.

<sup>2</sup> Doña Lupe was Doña Cecilia's daughter by her first husband, who died before Doña Lupe was born.

<sup>3</sup> Chabe has had two children in my absence, a girl and a boy.

<sup>4</sup> Married after my departure, and had a girl.

<sup>5</sup> After I left, she moved back with her parents.

**Doña Yola's house**

Doña Yola, widowed

Héctor, Doña Yola's eldest son

Marta, Héctor's wife and Doña Lupe's first daughter

Marta and Héctor's children: Berenice, Angelo, Joanna<sup>6</sup>

Doña Yola's other sons (two, one married)

Doña Yola's unmarried daughter

**Marielena's house**

Marielena, a friend of mine

Tacho, her husband, also a friend

Their children: Mayito, Lupita, Ulises

Tacho's elderly grandparents

**Doña Hermila's house**

Doña Hermila, Doña Amelia's *comadre*

Don Baldomiano, her husband

The youngest married son and his wife, with their two little girls

**Doña Carlota's house**

Don Marcos, Don Alfredo's brother

Doña Carlota, his wife

Youngest married son and his wife

**Dionila's house**

Filiberto, Don Marcos and Doña Carlota's eldest son

Dionila, his wife

Their five children: Betty, the eldest, two boys and two girls.

**Cheli's house**

Cheli, Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo's youngest daughter

Jaime, her husband

Jaime's parents

Jaime's youngest brother with his wife

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<sup>6</sup>Since my departure, Marta and Héctor moved to their ownhouse and had another girl.

Jaime's unmarried two sisters

**Doña Felicitas' house**

Doña Felicitas, the healer and Doña Cecilia's friend

Her husband

**Doña Libia's house**

Doña Libia, Doña Carlota's sister, her husband, and their married youngest son with his wife.

## INTRODUCTION

“Move about without delay,  
for the meaning is concealed in movement”

(Naguib Mahfouz)

The research that forms the basis of this thesis took place in the island of Jarácuaro, from January to August 1994, and from October 1995 to June 1996<sup>1</sup>. The island of Jarácuaro is situated in the Lake Pátzcuaro, West-Central Mexico and is occupied by a village of the same name. Most of its 1,871 inhabitants (Castilleja 1995: 1) are Puhépecha<sup>2</sup>, the indigenous people of the northern part of Michoacán, and the descendants of the group who formed the Tarascan Empire in Prehispanic times<sup>3</sup>.

Many of the people in Jarácuaro speak Puhépecha or Puhé, the autochthonous language<sup>4</sup>, and also Spanish, although most of the elderly inhabitants speak only their mother tongue, whilst the younger generations are Spanish monolinguals. Many of the older people on the island are illiterate, but nowadays, there is a state primary school in the village, and most children attend for at least a few years.

The islanders subsist from a combination of farming activities and the production and commercialisation of handicrafts, mainly palm hats (see Castilleja González 1995). Jarácuaro people sell their products in the nearby markets of Pátzcuaro and Erongarícuaro, and, on specific occasions, such as festivals, they also travel to more distant towns and cities. Fishing used to be the main source of income for islanders in the past, but nowadays, the poor ecological conditions of the lake have all but extinguished this occupation. The heavy deforestation of the area

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<sup>1</sup> My fieldwork had to be divided in two periods, due to a very serious illness occurred in 1994 whilst in Mexico, which forced me to return to Europe for medical attention.

<sup>2</sup> The Puhépechas are also known as Tarascans. The name Tarascans was given to them by the Spanish conquerors, whilst the term Puhépecha, which means “commoner” or “one of the people”, is their own denomination for themselves. For this reason, I choose to use the latter word throughout the thesis. Other spellings of Puhépecha can be found in the literature: most common are P’urhépecha (Jacinto Zavala 1995), Purépecha (de la Peña 1987; Zárate Hernández 1993; Tapia Santamaría 1986). I follow the spelling proposed by Jacinto Zavala (1988).

<sup>3</sup> For more information about the Tarascan Empire and its formation, see Beltrán (1995, 1986); Warren 1977; Zárate Hernández 1993.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about this language, see Franco Mendoza (1995).

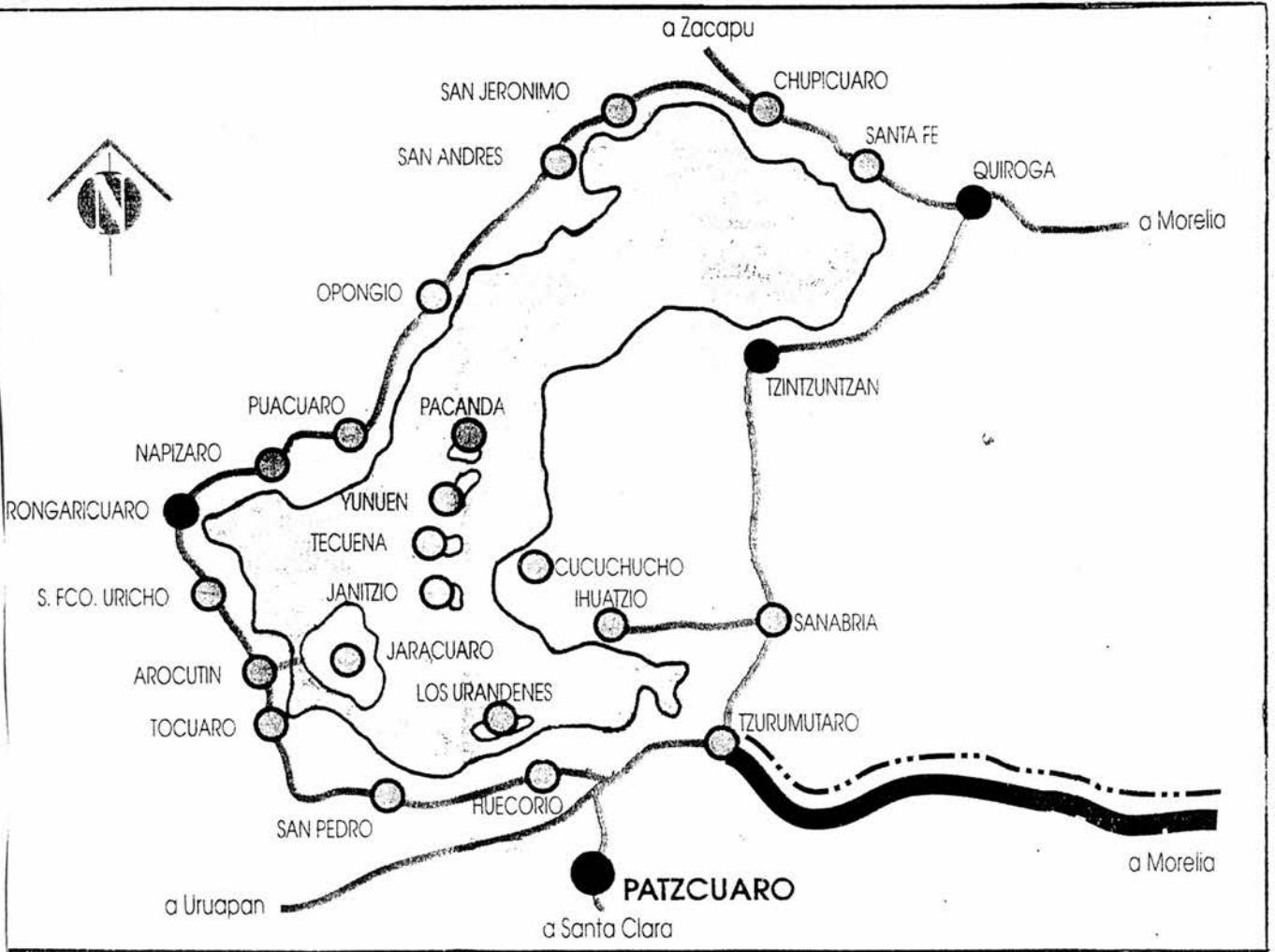
has caused great erosion, and as a consequence, the lake is rapidly losing depth and water volume. Jarácuaro has thus become, since 1996, a peninsula, joined to the village of Arócutin by a new road (see Photograph 1). In addition to this, most of the young men migrate to the United States for limited periods of time, to work as agricultural labourers. Labour, as many other areas of life on the island, is divided by gender, although both men and women contribute to the house economy.

Most Jarácuaro people are officially Catholic, although their relationships with the local Church officials are not always smooth. The island belongs to the parish in Erongarícuaro, and there is not a resident priest at the local church. Nevertheless, ecclesiastical celebrations, saints' festivals, rosaries, masses, visits to distant shrines, and other such events are very frequent, marking the rhythm of the daily life on the island.

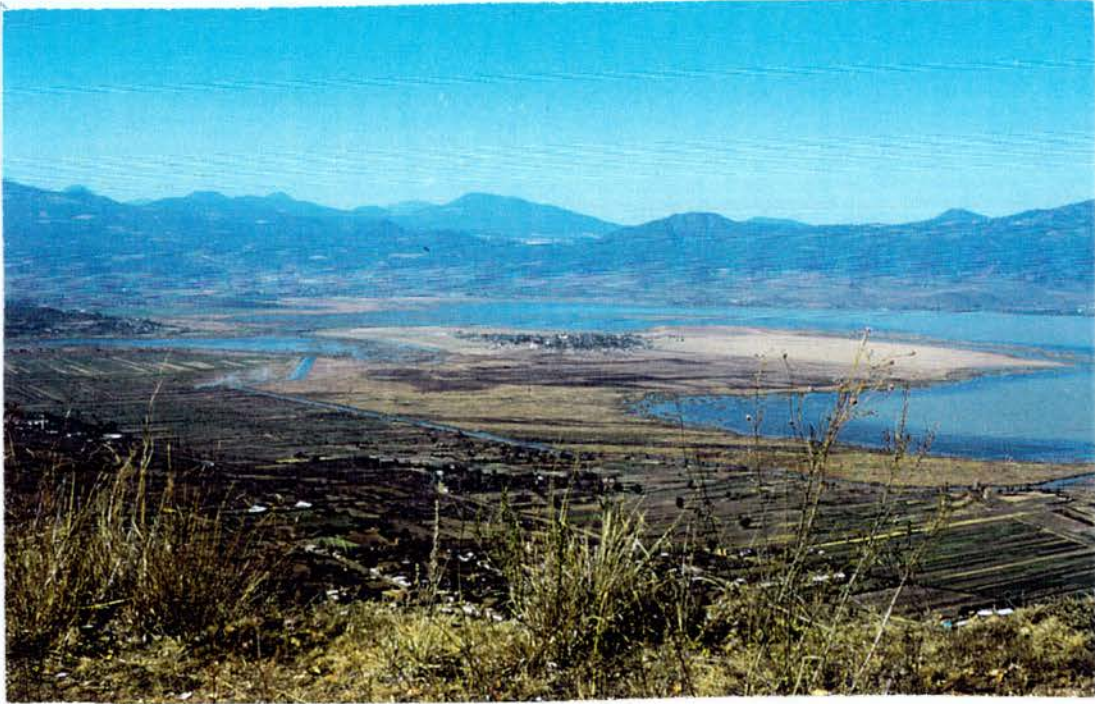
I will discuss most aspects of daily life in Jarácuaro throughout this thesis. Now, let me turn my attention to the theoretical, methodological, epistemological, and ethical aspects which were at the origin of my research and which have informed the present text.

### **A theoretical dissatisfaction: religion and experience**

My interest in the issue of religion in Mexico began during the four years I lived in that country with my family, as a young girl. I remember one particular incident very vividly, which impressed me deeply. During one of my many visits as a tourist to the Basilica of Guadalupe, in Mexico City, I looked at the dozens of pilgrims crossing the esplanade towards the doors of the church. There were men, women and children, alone or in little groups. I noticed many of the adults were advancing on their knees; judging by the state of their clothes, they had been doing it for quite some distance. The kneeling pilgrims moved very slowly, and their expressions were concentrated and serious, fixed on the church doors and on the lights coming from inside the nave. Some of them were silent, others were whispering words. Some, men and women, were crying quietly. I was torn between curiosity and concern. Still, I did not want to intrude in what, to me, looked like a very personal, emotionally intense moment. Then, as I turned round to go, I saw a young woman, an adolescent like myself, dressed in tattered garments, moving on her knees towards the church. On her back, a tiny baby slept, wrapped inside her *rebozo* (Mexican shawl). Her



Map of the Lake Pátzcuaro Area



Photograph 1: The island of Jarácuaro, seen from a nearby hill. All the uncultivated land around the village has emerged in recent years, as a result of the progressive lowering of the water level.



face conveyed pain and worry, and tears run down it, washing the dust collected on her cheeks. She was carrying a candle, and as she passed by me, oblivious of my staring, and of the hot wax dripping on her hand, I wondered what had happened to her in her life, what had moved her to go to the Basilica, why she was doing those actions. Above all, I wondered what she was feeling and thinking at that precise moment. Years later, influenced by that vivid image, by many conversations with Mexican friends on the matter, and by the sight of similar episodes, I decided to do my doctoral research on people's personal experiences of pilgrimage in Mexico.

When I started consulting the anthropological literature on the subject, however, I became very dissatisfied with what I found, for my questions were not being answered. Most ethnographic writing about Latin America portrayed "religion", "religious beliefs and practices", and "religious phenomena", as autonomous analytical objects; that is, as objectified entities for the anthropologists to analyse, existing entirely independently from actors' experiences. Thus, there was much reference to "functions" and "meanings", and to "symbolic systems", "ideological models", "structures", "processes", and so on. Pilgrim's voices, actor's accounts of their experiences, were largely ignored in the explanations, and were either missing altogether from the texts, or making an appearance as colourful "ethnographic data"<sup>5</sup>. These anthropological perspectives on religious issues were very disconcerting to me, for they were ignoring altogether something I thought fundamental, something that I had heard and seen in Mexico, and that could be read clearly in the "ethnographic descriptions" of texts. Namely, that for many Mexican (and Latin American) people, "religion" was mainly about experience: about feeling, and thinking, and sensing, and doing.

I am not going to discuss here the possible reasons why this perspective seemed to have taken hold of much of the anthropological literature<sup>6</sup>. It is probably

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<sup>5</sup> For examples of this in Mexican ethnographies, see Turner and Turner (1978), Gimenez (1978) Van Zantwijk (1974), Carrasco (1952) Ortiz Echániz (1990), Norget (1993), Myerhoff (1974); in Latin American ethnographies, see Morinis (1991), Gross (1971), Sallnow (1981, 1987), Gudeman (1976). The list is not exhaustive, but merely indicative.

For approaches to the study of religion in Mexico from a further sociological point of view, see Sepúlveda (1974), Padilla Pineda (1995), Tapia Santamaría (1986, 1987), Juárez Cerdi (1995); in Central America, see Cancian (1967) and Wolf (1967). Again, this list is only a small sample.

<sup>6</sup> It is, however, relevant to note the hypotheses of various authors which could throw some light in this respect. Asad (1993), discussing Geertz's definition of religion (1993 [1973]), suggests that the latter's assumption of the existence of two separate levels, the



more relevant to point out the implications that I saw emerging from them. The first implication was of an epistemological order, for a conceptualisation of “religion” and “religious phenomena” as autonomous from the actors allowed the anthropologist to look at them without dealing with people’s experiences at all. This, in my opinion, would obscure greatly the understanding of the real, lived impacts, significances and meanings that these issues held for the actors themselves (cf. Campbell 1989; Wikan 1990). What use would it be to produce “theories” and “models” which did not have any resonance with the women and men concerned? The second implication was of an ethical order, since looking at “beliefs and practices” without engaging with the people they concerned was effectively denying them a rightful voice. Not only that, but by attributing “functions” and “meanings” to their words and actions, anthropologists were representing others as passive objects, and not agents, of their own cultures and societies, merely “enacting” rules and codes, and ultimately unaware of the “truths” behind their thoughts and behaviours, which were, of course, available to the scholarly analysts<sup>7</sup>.

Thus, all the above considerations strengthened my determination to persevere with my focus on personal experience related to religious issues. First, because experience is a valid area for anthropological exploration, something that has been argued convincingly by several anthropologists (see Wikan 1990: xxiv; Scheper-Hughes 1992: 4, 25-26). It could be said that the process of experience (in its broader sense, that is, the existential level at which people live their own lives) dynamically articulates perceptions, feelings, thoughts, actions, and meanings in context and in interaction with others. Thus, concentrating on people’s experiences would be fundamental to understanding how people constitute their own culturally and socially informed realities (Wikan 1990). Secondly, and quite importantly, looking at people’s experiences would imply a particular, more ethically-sound

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cultural on the one hand, and the social and psychological on the other, “creates a logical space for defining the essence of religion [which is] external to social conditions and states of the self” (1993: 32). Similarly, in an unpublished MSc dissertation (Carro-Ripalda 1991), I argued that the theoretical distinctions made between “individual” and “social” dimensions, adopted by many anthropologists, create an artificial analytical divide. In it, “experience” is relegated to psychology, whilst “social phenomena” is abstracted from actors, objectified, analysed, and reified through methodology and representation. Yet, according to Hallowell (1955) and other authors, a distinction between individual and social levels in a person is completely unsound. For other ideas, see Campbell (1989), who links anthropological vocabularies to issues of power, and Bourdieu (1977), who suggests that the external position of anthropologists “objectify” practice.

<sup>7</sup> For useful and enlightening discussions on matters of ethnographic representation, authority, and power relations, refer to Clifford (1986), Rosaldo (1986), Asad (1986), Campbell (1989, 1995), Scheper-Hughes (1992: 23-26), Favret-Saada (1980: 3-5).

perspective, in which previous theoretical assumptions are problematised *vis-à-vis* people's own voices, attitudes and actions, and a higher level of personal participation is demanded from the anthropologist. In other words, it would require that the anthropologist engages with others less as "objects of investigation", and more as human beings, subjects of their own lives (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992: 23-24; Asad 1986: 155; Campbell 1995: 88).

### **Encounters in fieldwork: gender and everyday life**

As explained above, some of the reasons why I originally decided to focus on the phenomenon of pilgrimage in particular were tied to my own personal experiences and memories. However, my choice had also been influenced by some readings on religious issues in Mexico and Latin America. Many of these texts were dedicated specifically to "religious festivities", or had entire sections dealing with them (for instance, in Mexico, Beals 1992 [1945]; Brandes 1988; Ingham 1986; Chiñas 1973; Gimenez, 1978; Norget 1993; Tapia Santamaría 1995; Van Zantwijk 1974; Vogt 1990 [1970]; to name but a few). In these texts, the authors were presenting "religious festivities" in Mexico, and in other Latin American countries, as bounded contexts, separated and distinct from daily life, and the locus of religious activity and religiosity. Their perspective implied that not only were there different times and spaces for all things religious, but also special behaviours and attitudes attached to those festive times and spaces. Above all, their position hinted at, or made explicit, the existence of a special religious experience, clearly identifiable, facilitated by celebrations, and separated from the rest of the ordinary experiences of a person. The literature on pilgrimage was particularly insistent on this separation between religious experience and other kinds of experience, following the ideas on ritual liminality proposed by Turner (1974, 1978)<sup>8</sup>. My impression was that this distinction came more or less directly from that pervasive division between sacred and profane (or sacred and secular) domains, as conceived by Eliade (Pals 1996), and also from the identification of religion, and religious activities and experiences, with the sacred. I will return to this point later on.

Furnished with these ideas and notions, I arrived on the island of Jarácuaro, in the Pátzcuaro Lake area of the Michoacán highlands. This setting was chosen due to the abundance of pilgrimage sites in the region, to counteract the scarcity of texts

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<sup>8</sup> For other examples see Crumrine and Morinis 1991; Gross 1971; Sallnow 1987; Myerhoff 1974.

in English devoted to its Purhépecha inhabitants, and as a result of the traditional lure felt by anthropologists towards supposedly “bounded”, self-contained islands. However, as often happens in ethnographic endeavours, a series of circumstances and realisations changed completely the perspective, form and purpose of my research. First of all, two serious illnesses (typhoid fever and appendicitis) prevented me from attending the main pilgrimage festivals in the region, which take place in the same month. Then, my living arrangements within an island household<sup>9</sup> brought into light some things I had not considered before: the issue of gender and the issue of everyday life.

Let me start with gender. Before I went to Mexico, I had not given this matter much methodological consideration, although I had noticed that women’s voices were even less present in ethnographies than those of men (see Moore 1988). However, I had decided not to have a gendered focus, since I thought the picture might be partial or incomplete without both male and female contributions. It then came as a surprise to find myself, right from the beginning of fieldwork, drafted into an almost exclusively female environment, in a heavily gender-divided world. My new female friends and acquaintances took it for granted that I, as a “married” woman like themselves<sup>10</sup>, would naturally want to spend all my time in their company. I suspected that they would see it as strange if I talked to men a lot, or devoted much attention to them; perhaps they could even misinterpret my interest as sexual advances. Thus, I settled for a fieldwork encounter in which I was going to lose the possibility of hearing much about men’s own perceptions, feelings, and interpretations<sup>11</sup>. However, this was more than compensated by the wholehearted way in which some Jarácuaro women took me to their lives, by the warm, open relationships which I developed with them, and by the privileged, intense access I had to female experiences and self-accounted realities.

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<sup>9</sup> During my first period of fieldwork, I stayed for a while with my friends Marielena and Tacho, (whom I met through a Pátzcuaro NGO), at Tacho’s grandparents house. However, their intra-familial conflicts and my own illnesses made my work difficult. Thus, during the second period on the island, I lived at Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo’s house. They were introduced to me by another anthropologist who had done research on the island (see Castilleja González 1995)

<sup>10</sup> In order to be able to share the lives of married women, I decided to say that my partner Colin, who stayed at a nearby town during my research, and I, were married. To my relief, my statement turned out to be acceptably accurate, since marriage and cohabitation are very much the same thing for Jarácuaro people.

<sup>11</sup> This is something that becomes apparent in the title and the content of my thesis, and which accounts for my relatively vague portrayals of men. I have incorporated relevant information whenever I have felt it was necessary, although at no point I have attempted to make this a comparative study of genders.

Once I had started participating in the women's lives, a second important matter soon became apparent. As I mentioned above, one of the main focal points of my research was to be "religious festivities". Having missed the opportunity to participate in that year's pilgrimages, I concentrated on other festivals, as experienced from the women's perspective. There were plenty of them, for the Mexican Catholic Church calendar is rich in celebrations; and the women of Jarácuaro awaited them eagerly. Yet, I realised that, during festivals, my female friends' attitudes, actions, and gestures were not different, nor more "religious" than those I had come to know in their everyday existences. There were no special "moods and dispositions", no change to a "religious experience"; they did not even use the words "religious" or "religion". Furthermore, there was an overwhelming feeling of quotidianity in women's activities and behaviours during what we would call "religious" festivities. For them, the focus was not on so called "rituals", or on presupposed "sacred" objects (two words they did not use either), but on work, conversations, worries, encounters and interactions with others, which happened in much the same way as on any other day. Quotidian life had, by then, started to interest me greatly, for it seemed to be the object of women's interest, the context of their most compelling predicaments, and the locus of the mode of behaviour and experience within which women operated at all times. Most intriguingly, I also noticed something of paramount importance: that Jarácuaro women did not wait for "special", "festive", "ritual", or "religious" occasions to interact with holy beings (Virgins, Christs or saints, collectively called *santitos*), for they had relationships with them all throughout their daily lives.

The above realisations had major implications on my work, at theoretical, methodological and epistemological levels. First of all, my new interest in the daily experiences and relationships of Jarácuaro women with others, including the *santitos*, born from my encounter with the women and in interaction with them, highlighted a new gap in the anthropological literature. Daily life, and particularly women's daily lives, have hardly been portrayed in ethnographies of Mexico and Latin America (with a handful of exceptions, such as Allen 1988; Bourque 1993a). This is despite the fact that many contemporary anthropologists have been advocating for a "phenomenologically grounded anthropology" (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 4) based on people's experiences in everyday life (Scheper-Hughes 1992; Wikan 1990; Campbell 1989: 141). Moreover, so called "religious" issues as they appear in the everyday lives of people, and especially of women, have been confined in most texts to one or



two lines in the realm of the picturesque ethnographic details, for religion has been looked at, as noted before, on the greater festive occasions outside “ordinary” reality. Again, there are many reasons as to why this has been the case<sup>12</sup>, but I cannot discuss them here.

The fundamental outcome of my bibliographic revision was the conviction that, as far as my research was concerned, I had to take a critical approach at preconceived categories and widespread models and theories of “religion”, “religious experience”, “religious events”, “sacred”, “rituals”, and so on, since they did not help me to understand what I was seeing, experiencing, and being told on the ground. I had, instead, to concentrate in the new realities that were emerging as a result of my encounter with the women of Jarácuaro, and thus I had to look for inspiration and interpretations elsewhere. This explains why I have consciously avoided the use of big categorical words throughout my thesis (words like the ones cited above), particularly when these academic categories were not used by the women, and had no resonance in their lives. It also explains why, in my readings, I have resorted to various subjects, and have sought comparisons with other parts of the world, instead of being confined to the “area literature”.

Lastly, a focus on experience in quotidian contexts made it necessary for me to immerse myself completely in the household’s daily life. Through my daily interactions and shared experience, I developed close, intimate relationships with a handful of women. I engaged with them at a personal level, and this put me in a much better position to understand, empathise with, and respect, their feelings, thoughts and actions. I also used the process of my own experience to try to comprehend how events, activities, and interactions might have been felt and interpreted by my female friends. This is not because I believe that experience is “universal” and thus automatically translatable, but because I do not have any pretension of objectivity, and I necessarily had to understand others from my own self (Cohen 1992). I knew some of my approaches were limiting in some ways. For instance, much of my information was based on small groups of people, and my participation in the island’s life was conditioned by the politics of personal relationships. Yet, what I lost in terms of numbers of “informants” and “structured

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<sup>12</sup>For instance, the aforementioned identification of “religion” with “the sacred”, and its separation from the “secular”; the undervaluation of mundane domestic activities, combined with an association of women to the latter (Ortner 1974; Rosaldo, 1974; cited in Moore 1988); the prevalence of texts which, based on male opinions, interpretations, or models, claim to represent both men and women (Clifford 1986: 17-18; also Ardener 1975).

fieldwork techniques", I gained in insight as to how others might perceive, organise, think of, feel, act upon, and experience their own realities. My knowledge was, as Scheper-Hughes has suggested, "produced in human interaction, not 'merely' extracted from native informants" (1992: 25). All those issues are reflected in the way I have chosen to write up my work. Thus this is a person-centred, chronologically situated ethnographic text<sup>13</sup>, in which I describe and interpret how particular women perceived things, interacted with others, reacted to issues, and understood situations, in specific contexts. Through these descriptions and interpretations, I try to convey how Jarácuaro women might have experienced, viewed, and acted within their own existence, and how they might have constituted their own realities from a dynamic, lived-in perspective (for similar perspectives, see Scheper-Hughes, 1992; Wikan, 1990; Campbell 1989, 1995).

### **The process of interpretation: domains, categories or interactions?**

Through sharing daily life with the women inside one particular household, and spending time with many others; through seeing, but also smelling, touching, hearing and tasting<sup>14</sup> with them; through interacting with them, and doing things in their company, gently coached into the ways of Jarácuaro women, I became aware of important aspects of how they perceived, felt, and conceived their own existence, and the events within it. First of all, I realised that my female friends lived life as a dynamic, fluid continuum. They did not make distinctions about the nature of their experience in different contexts, but traversed time and space feeling as, thinking as, and being, themselves<sup>15</sup>. This was made evident through their words and expressions, since they were, in general, very aware of their own selves, quite articulate at introspection, and often spoke about their concerns in the idioms of emotion and states of being. Thus, for them there was not an experiential division between hypothetical "sacred" and "profane" spheres, no "Kierkegaardian leaps" (Geertz 1993 [1973]: 120) "between the religious perspective and the common sense perspective" (1993 [1973]: 119), no notional separations between "religious"

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<sup>13</sup> Because, in Clifford's words "Cultures' do not hold still for their portraits" (1988:10)

<sup>14</sup> Many anthropologists have agreed that Western modes of cognition, and particularly those of anthropologists, have been dominated by visuality. This, according to some, had the effect of moulding "reality" into a particular, visually informed, shape, and then giving this "reality" the clout of "truth". See Clifford 1988: 11; Scheper-Hughes 1992: 27-28; Classen 1993; Stoller 1989; Bourdieu 1977.

<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Wikan notes that "it is in the essence of life experience that it cannot be compartmentalised into neat and orderly sections to be dealt with sequentially one by one" (1990: 27)

experiences and “ordinary” ones. Jarácuaro women’s perceptions, actions, thoughts, and feelings flowed through daily life. Supposedly “sacred spaces”, such as churches, did not elicit *per se* special dispositions from them, whilst so called “sacred occasions”, such as saint’s festivals, meant, as mentioned before, work, rest, and interactions in the usual modes, and “sacred rituals” consisted of customary, stereotyped behaviours delivered hastily.

Moreover, it soon became clear that the women’s understanding and experience of their own daily lives was not organised around spaces: for instance, there were not gendered spatial divisions inside houses, little importance was attached to the landscape, and elaborate behaviours associated with boundaries were absent. Neither were their perceptions and interpretations expressed in terms of abstract categories: they did not use a complex kinship terminology, and did not define things through strict conceptual classifications. In their lives, the main focus of attention, the greater sources of joy and concern, what occupied much of their efforts and deliberations, the substance and motor of their quotidian existence, were their relationships with others. My female friends spent their days in continuous interaction with others, particularly other women, talking to them, working together, speculating, gossiping, acting, reacting and pondering. Not only that, but their interactions and relationships informed, and were informed, by many areas of their experience: their perceptions and self-perceptions, their feelings, their interpretations, their self-esteems. In short, relationships and interactions were at the core of the dynamic processes through which Jarácuaro women constituted their personal, “socially and culturally mediated ‘reality’” (Wikan 1990: 20).

It was precisely in this context of relationships that I became aware of the importance of *santitos* in the women’s daily lives: for *santitos* were amongst those others with whom the women interacted. *Santitos* were present in the women’s quotidian worlds, and they were seemingly an integral part of their perceptual and experiential realities. The women interacted with them in much the same modes they interacted with relatives, friends, and neighbours. Their relationships were deep and complex, and their connections intermingled with all the other connections women had, and with their personal histories and circumstances. Thus it was easy to speculate that relationships with *santitos* might not be so much about what has been traditionally defined in the literature as “religion” or “the sacred”. Instead, it appeared that the contacts between women and the *santitos* were more about relationships and relatedness, about experiential dynamic interaction, and about a



person's social milieu, than about "rituals" or "religious dispositions". But, what exactly was the impact of such relationships on the women's lives? What were their interactions with *santitos*? How did those relationships fit within the webs of bonds that women had? How did they compare? How were my female friend's perceptions of the holy beings? How did they see them, think about them? Were all those perceptions and experiences informed by categorical indoctrination? What was the place of the *santitos* in the women's existential continuum?

All the above questions, in the context of the discussed notions and themes (women and *santitos*; experience and relationships; interactions and realities) form the basis of my thesis, and will be explored and interpreted for the reader throughout its chapters. I will not continue to develop them here any further, since, as I noted before, I think they can only be fully explained, comprehended, and understood through the full ethnographic text; a text which attempts to portray persons and their fluid experiential realities as expressed by them, and their feelings, opinions, predicaments, and actions, in the dynamic contexts in which they occur.

For this purpose, I have divided the thesis in two parts. Part One, "Experience and Relationships in Daily Life", concentrates on the perceptions, experiences, interactions, and relationships of women with all others, including the *santitos*, from a general point of view, and in quotidian contexts. Chapter 1 examines women's lives inside their houses, particularly their interactions and relationships with other close females, with men, and with co-resident *santitos*. I look specifically at the ways in which women constitute relationships of intimacy with certain others, including the *santitos* who live with them. Chapter 2 explores experiences and interactions of women with others in the streets. I describe the women's perceptions of themselves and others outside their houses, and how their modes of relatedness create relationships of distance with the majority of co-villagers. I then turn to look at the behaviours and experiences of women inside the local church, and at the manners in which they develop close relationships with the *santitos* who stay there. Chapter 3 is focused on relationships with a variety of relatives, friends and neighbours, seen through the context of visits, and on *santitos* who visit. I specifically concentrate in how women constitute shared realities through their exchanges with others, and how long-term relationships of trust are built from intermittent encounters.



In Part Two, "Experience and Relationships in Context", I use particular, person-centred, situated episodes, to discuss empirically how women might perceive, feel, interpret, and act upon certain predicaments in their existences, and how they dynamically articulate such perceptions, emotions, understandings, and behaviours in context and in interaction with specific others. Chapter 4 looks at how Marta, a young mother, experiences and deals with her child's threatening illness. It explores her relationships with her mother, mother-in-law, and, most particularly, a certain holy being with whom she communicates and exchanges, and whose responsive intervention is thought to have made the child recover. Finally, Chapter 5 portrays the concerns, pains, and sorrows of an older woman, Doña Lupe, who is experiencing grief and frustration about personal circumstances related to her age, and who attempts to come to terms with her perceived reality through her emotional contact with the *santitos* in the church.

A final Conclusion summarises the main suggestions made throughout this thesis about the quotidian lives of Jarácuaro women, their relationships and interactions with significant others, including the *santitos*, and the dynamic processes of their experiential realities. It also discusses briefly some important questions which have emerged throughout the work, such as the portrayal of holy beings as "categories" or "symbols" in the anthropological literature, the denial of their agency, and the issue of "belief".

### Theoretical perspectives

An investigation of women's relationships with saintly figures in rural Mexico has to have regard to the literature on religious issues, both about Mexico in particular, and about Latin America in general. Many ethnographies about Mexico approach the subject of religion and religiosity from diverse positions, but are all inscribed within a structural-functionalist perspective (see, for example, Brandes 1988; Carrasco 1952; Chiñas 1973; Crumrine 1991; Foster 1972; Gimenez 1978; Ingham 1986; Myerhoff 1974; Ortiz Echaniz 1990; Sepúlveda 1974; Tapia Santamaría 1986, 1987, 1995; Turner 1978; Van Zantwijk 1974; Vogt 1990 [1970]; Wolf 1979<sup>16</sup>). It seems that structural-functionalism is the dominant paradigm in

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<sup>16</sup> The references in this section are not intended to be exhaustive, but merely indicative. The idea is to provide examples which best illustrate the points made.

much of the ethnographic production of Mexican anthropologists, and also of some other Mexicanists, even to the present day<sup>17</sup>.

Obviously, these various scholarly accounts reflect the diversity of the many different matters which can be described as “religious”. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a series of recurrent themes, ideas, interpretations, and representations, that appear repeatedly, though in diverse guises. Some of these studies proved to be enlightening at the beginning of my research, and have influenced my own understanding of my data. For instance, some ethnographies agree in seeing religion, and particularly what is categorised as “popular religion”, as something “lived and experienced” (Norget 1993: 39); as part of daily existence (Norget 1993; Foster 1972; Van Zantwijk 1974); or as intricately connected to, or even inseparable from, social life (Norget 1993; Foster 1972; Van Zantwijk 1974; Carrasco 1952; Brandes 1988; Ingham 1986; Chiñas 1973; Tapia Santamaría 1995; among others<sup>18</sup>). However, some of the other recurrent themes in the Mexicanist and some Latin Americanist accounts within the structural-functionalist tradition could be seen as problematic, not only because they did not clarify the queries that rose from my own ethnographic material, but most importantly because they offered representations and reifications which obscured my attempts to understand religion as lived and experienced by people. Let me explain this point in more depth.

First of all, many authors deal with “religion” as an autonomous object. As an autonomous entity, religion is sometimes treated as a self-existing, self-contained object, which is separated from agents, and can be conceptualised in terms of a dislocated, external “ideology” (Carrasco 1952), or “system of meanings” (Turner 1978; Ingham 1986; Van Zantwijk 1974; also Gudeman 1976), or even as an incorporated, unconscious “system of values” (“deeply submerged” as Foster puts it, 1972: 20). This ideology, or body of meanings, is sometimes seen as contained in, or conveyed by, religious symbols (Turner 1978; Wolf 1979; Ingham 1986; Gudeman 1976), or expressed through rituals and religious performances (Brandes 1988; Gimenez 1978; Gross 1971). This ideology, system of values, or corpus of meanings, has, according to some authors, an intrinsic capacity to impel or prescribe conduct (Gimenez 1978; Norget 1993; Foster 1972; Tapia Santamaría 1986). Religious symbols and rituals, as the depositories and carriers of meaning, may have a

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<sup>17</sup> With a few notable exceptions, such as Melhuus (1996) and Ruz (1995).

<sup>18</sup> It is necessary to note that many other Mexican and Latin American ethnographies, which have adopted a different theoretical perspective, also share these points of view. See, for example, Bourque (1993b), Allen (1988), or Ruz (1995).

performative character, and thus serve as models for human behaviour (Brandes 1988; Gross 1971; Gudeman 1976; Ingham 1986), consciously or unconsciously followed, even "imprinted" (Turner 1978: 11). Some authors are less interested in unveiling the structure and content of a religious system of meanings, than in observing the force of religion and religious performance to move people to act in particular ways, and in assessing the social impact of people's actions. According to this view, religious practice can, for instance, function as the orchestrator of social relations and social life in Mexican communities (Chiñas 1973; Beals 1992 [1945]), or rituals can serve as "mechanisms of social control", which maintain and reinforce the *status quo* of groups within the society, and thus can help to perpetuate the existing social structure (Brandes 1988: 4; Tapia Santamaría 1995; Gross 1971).

In all the above cases, in varying degrees, religion is seen as a distinct and separate entity, which is self-sustaining and driven by its own internal logic (Norget 1993: 35). Most importantly, many of these accounts suggest that the "true" religious meaning and/or functions might not be known to the actors themselves. From this perspective, actors are oblivious of the "real" meanings behind their beliefs and practices, unaware of the enforcing character of their religion which propels their activity, and of the ultimate, hidden purpose and finality of their actions. It follows, then, that social actors are condemned to merely "enact" meanings of which they are not aware, to automatically follow prescriptions which they do not fully apprehend, or to unwittingly perform functions within their own society, which might even be detrimental to them. As Foster (1972: 21) puts it, their conduct, their practices and understandings, are a mere function of the (religious) ideology. However, whilst Mexican and Latin American people might act out meanings, and perform practices with social functions, in a more or less mechanical and oblivious way, those ultimate "truths" about religion are available to the Mexicanist and Latin Americanist scholar. Some ethnographers, armed with materialist theories have represented people as victims of their own anachronistic and inflexible religious systems, holding on to false "superstitious" beliefs, and blindly obeying absurd prescriptions, which they are unable to reflect on, comprehend, or even notice, much to the annoyance and pity of the anthropologist (see, for example, Foster 1972; Gimenez 1978; Tapia Santamaría 1986). Slaves of their own cultural predicaments, people are portrayed as mechanically performing the very religious practices which, according to these authors, reinforce the social

structures that keep them marginalised and “backward”, unable to alter them, and thus condemned, perhaps, to extinction (Carrasco 1952: 8, Foster 1972: 16, 19) <sup>19</sup>.

The limitations of this structural-functionalist vision of religion, one which informs much of the anthropological literature about Mexico, have consequences at both epistemological and ethical levels. At the epistemological level, it could be speculated that these approaches, by constructing and reifying religion as an object of analysis, divorced and existing independently from actors’ “subjectivities”, reject the relevance for anthropological analysis of people’s agencies, of people’s experiences, perceptions, actions, and understandings, and qualify actor’s thought and practice as mere products, directly elicited by an over-ruling, over-powering autonomous system. People end up being represented as mere automatons, mechanical vessels for self-sustaining, self-preserving religious meanings and functions. Yet, agent’s experience, consciousness, interpretations, perception, and behaviour cannot just be dismissed as “expressive” items, or “products” determined by the religious system, because, as it has been argued in recent anthropological theory, they are central and fundamental to our understanding of the nature of religion.

At the ethical level, and intimately related to the epistemological level, an understanding and portrayal of Mexican and Latin American people as automatons<sup>20</sup>, subjected to the expressive and functional demands of their religious system, reproduces and reifies a relationship of inequality between the “studied” peoples and the scholars who “study” them, and justifies the ethnographic authority of the researcher<sup>21</sup>. The discerning position allocated to the anthropologist, who can actually “see” and “comprehend” what they merely “enact”, is denied to the people, thus reproducing the cleft between “us” and “them”, between our scholarly access to their truth, and their ignorance of it, between our positions as agents in our own lives, and their position as passive victims of their own cultural predicaments. These representations of Mexican and Latin American people, particularly of rural people, contribute to the reification of perceptions of them as passive, unwitting, unknowing, and ultimately primitive, human beings.

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<sup>19</sup> This position is clearly exemplified by Foster (1972). Yet, it is also representative of a type of Mexicanist anthropology, which focuses on the “marginality” of Mexican peasants, and on the “dependency” of the “peasant culture” with respect to the urban or national “culture” (see also Tapia Santamaría 1986; Carrasco 1952). See also Fardon (1990: 4-13) for a general discussion of these issues in the context of a study of religion in West Africa.

<sup>20</sup> Although this, of course happens in varying degrees in the different texts.

<sup>21</sup> For an extensive discussion on this matter, refer to Clifford and Marcus (1986).



Finally, although it must be noted that some recent approaches to religious phenomena in this region tend to distance themselves from the orthodox structural-functional paradigm, other ethnographies are still informed by it in many ways (for instance, Ortiz Echániz 1990; Juárez Cerdi 1995). Influenced by new outlooks in anthropological theory<sup>22</sup>, some authors have shifted their focus to the people, to their views, actions, understandings and predicaments, and to the more personal, cognitive and emotional, aspects of religious practice (Ruz 1995; Norget 1993). In doing so, they highlight the agency of social actors, and the relevance of actor s' experiential perspective for anthropological knowledge. For instance, in certain contemporary ethnographies, religion in general, or religious practices in particular, may be portrayed as "used" by people as tools or instruments for different purposes, such as understanding or manipulating their own world (Bourque 1993b), defining identity (Sallnow 1987), or attaining goals (Norget 1993). Thus agency is partially relocated from an autonomous, detached, impersonal object called "religion" to the social actors through which religious reality is actualised and activated. Yet, there persists in these approaches a tendency to understand "religion" as a separate entity with intrinsic powers to motivate social behaviour. It is, in many cases, still conceived to be a corpus of meaning, flexible and subject to varied interpretations, but nevertheless existing autonomously and subtly orientating action (Norget 1993; Bourque 1993b). Or it is seen as an almost material object, that can be deliberately "brandished" by people as an instrument with which to "do" things. In this last case, the agents are often represented as deliberately and consciously using religious practice to obtain personal benefits or advantages, often of a material nature (Bourque 1993b; see also Rostas and Droogers 1993). The problematic aspect of this last view is that it moves from an understanding of people as automatons, to that of people as utilitarian individuals. It interprets and represents agents as capable of articulating social, cultural and personal aspects of religion, but only so that they can consciously utilise them as means to an end, thus prioritising the cognitive and instrumental dimensions of their agency. Again, and as will be discussed later, it could be suggested that this position still offers a limited interpretation of religion and religious practice, for it fails to explain action which is not done for an instrumental purpose. It also fails to account for the more existential, experiential, emotional aspects of religion which are not related to obvious and explicit personal ends.

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<sup>22</sup>For instance, see Bourdieu 1977, 1990; Foucault 1980; or the phenomenological approaches as exemplified in Csordas 1994a; Jackson 1989, 1996; which will be discussed below.

My criticism of some of the aspects of the structural-functionalist paradigm, as it appears in the Mexicanist literature about religion, has been inspired and made possible by the wave of change in social and cultural anthropology in the last decades. Anthropologists' awareness of the limitations of the functional and objectivist approaches has resulted in the emergence of other theoretical and methodological alternatives. One of the most influential contributions to changes in recent years has been the ground-breaking work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990), whose critique of what he calls "objectivism" in the social sciences, and particularly of the structuralist paradigm, together with his innovative ideas about structure and practice, have informed many of the contemporary anthropological analyses<sup>23</sup>.

Bourdieu's approach, as presented in his volume *The Logic of Practice* (1990), starts from an examination of the theories of practice proposed within the structuralist paradigm, theories which he sees as fundamentally flawed. He argues that there are two perspectives to consider about practice: the theoretical perspective, of the scholarly observer, who seeks to understand social action through intellect; and the practical one, of the social actor, who experiences and acts in a self-evident social world of implicit meanings. Those two perspectives correspond to conflicting modes of knowledge. According to Bourdieu, the problem with the "objectivist", or, more precisely, structuralist interpretation of practice, begins with the failure of the objectivist anthropologist to examine the conditions of production of her own theoretical mode of knowledge. She fails to acknowledge her position as external observer and intellectual practitioner, that is, her exclusion from practice, and her social distance from the actors. Failing to recognise those fundamental conditions, she neglects to include them in, and make them part of, her analysis. By ignoring the epistemological and social break intrinsic to her perspective, she "[introduces] into the object the intellectual relation to the object, [...] substituting the observer's relation to practice for the practical relation to practice" (1990: 34). In other words, the objectivist anthropologist does not reflect upon her objectifying relationship with the object she has constructed, with the "objectified model" that she has had to fabricate as a "substitute for practical mastery" (1990: 34). By missing this fundamental difference between objectified model and practical sense, the scholar then presents her constructed object as the "objective principle of practice", a reality which exists and has the power to

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<sup>23</sup> This includes some of the research conducted in Mexico, of which Melhuus (1996) is a good example.

determine social action. Since the principle is thought to impel practice, it is then assumed that the former (a "model", or "structure") pre-exists and precedes the latter (social action) in time. Logically, it follows that actions are perceived as expressive of that principle, a performance, and thus are there to be "deciphered". In this temporal sequence that she has built, the practical sense of practice, or the representations done in practical knowledge, end up being no more than "rationalisations", "pre-notions" (1990: 26), *ex-post-facto* utterances with no analytical value. In Bourdieu's own words,

"Objectivist discourse tends to constitute the model constructed to account for practices as a power really capable of determining them. Reifying abstractions [...], it treats its constructions -'culture', 'structures', 'social classes' or 'modes of production' - as realities endowed with a social efficacy" (1990: 37).

Having recognised what he calls the "forgetfulness of the social conditions of scientific production" (1990:33), Bourdieu has opened the door for our understanding of the epistemological and social reasons behind the limitations of objectivist paradigms. He identifies the main problem inherent in such approaches, which lies in the fact that they objectify social practice, and then confuse their intellectual, fabricated object, with the principle of production of social practice, ignoring the existence of a practical sense of practice which cannot be objectified. This failure to incorporate the conditions of academic practice into the making of a theory of social practice results in a series of interpretative anomalies, many of which are evident in the Mexicanist structural-functionalist literature reviewed above. For instance, the reification of "objective structures" as independent realities, with motivational powers over social actors, leads to the construction of mechanistic models of practice. According to those models, the regularities that occur in social conduct can be explained in terms of "rules", "consciously laid down and consciously respected", or "regulations", "unconscious [...] mysterious cerebral or social mechanism[s]" (Bourdieu 1990: 39). In short, those mechanistic models propose a vision of social actors as consciously, or unconsciously, following the dictates of external, or internal, objective structures, which are intrinsically different from their own subjectivity, or their own practical sense of the social world. Deriving from this perceived discontinuity between objectified structure and the sense of practice, and the devaluation of the second, is the concomitant understanding of the social world as "representation or performance", a "spectacle for the observer". Practice is then portrayed as the "acting out of roles", and social interaction as consisting of "purely symbolic exchanges" (1990: 52), another

common assumption of the structuralist paradigm seen in the Mexicanist ethnographies.

Bourdieu disagrees with this vision of social action as motivated directly by objective structures, where practice is either a result of “legalism” (i.e. social actors consciously following rules) or “finalism” (i.e. social actors’ behaviour governed by unconscious mechanisms). Yet, how then can one account for the regularities that occur in social practice? How can one explain the relative homogeneity of cultural behaviour, the consistency and coincidence of actors’ views within a society? Bourdieu suggests that the scholar should situate herself “within real activity as such”, “escape the realism of the structure”, and also escape “subjectivism”<sup>24</sup> and its rejection of the social, and view practice as the site of a dialectic between the *modus operandum* and the *modus operandi* (1990: 52). In order to do that, he proposes the notion of the *habitus*, which he defines as

“systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them” (1990: 53).

*Habitus*, then, is a complex, sophisticated concept, a tool for thinking about the dynamics of social practice. It is an enlightening notion, because it opens up the possibility of thinking in a different way about questions in many previously dark (or darkened) areas of our understanding of culture. First of all, Bourdieu suggests that practice is not motivated directly by objective structures, which might even have their locus outside the social agent, but is compelled by an embodied *habitus*. It is, in part, this embodiment, the fact that *habitus* acts in its capacity of incorporated system of generative schemes of perception and appreciation, which allows agents to experience a sense of immediacy and familiarity towards the social world they inhabit; in short, to recognise what they have already perceived, interpreted and thus somehow constituted through and by their *habitus* (1990: 53).

Secondly, although Bourdieu rejects a direct “social efficacy” of “objectified structures”, he does not ignore the power of the conditions of the existence of social agents. On the contrary, the *habitus* is, in itself, a product of the objective

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<sup>24</sup> Bourdieu also criticises subjectivism in his work, although perhaps in a less extensive manner, arguing that subjectivism ignores the “necessity of the social world” (1990: 52).



conditions of life which exist at any given point, and “generate[s] dispositions objectively compatible with these conditions and in a sense pre-adapted to their demands” (1990: 54). Since the *habitus* is produced by “inculcation and appropriation” in socialisation (1990: 57-58), “deposited” in the person as “schemes of perception, thought and action” (190: 54), it follows that actors make sense of their own world in the present in terms of an incorporated *habitus* that has been produced as a result of past conditions, and which thus reflects past experiences. Perceiving and interpreting the social world in terms of past conditions, the *habitus* then produces practices that are in accordance with those perceived conditions, thus ensuring their “correctness” and their “constancy over time, more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms”. In short, “the habitus, a product of history, produces individual and collective practice - more history - in accordance with the schemes generated by history.” (1990: 54)

Finally, since the *habitus* is produced in socialisation, and is inculcated and reinforced by others, in particular moments of history, this guarantees that the practices that are produced by social agents are “mutually intelligible” (1990: 58); that actors, in their shared common-sensical world, have a sense of shared meanings and of harmonised experiences. Not only that, but the habitus as “immanent law” (1990: 59) generates practices that provoke an illusion of finality, because they are, as mentioned above, pre-adapted to the conditions of their production, and thus fit those conditions as if they had been consciously planned in advance.

The fundamental contribution, then, of Bourdieu’s theories is to be found in his conception of the interplay between structure and practice, which previous theoretical paradigms in anthropology had resolved by investing “objective structures” with a direct power to elicit social action from actors. Bourdieu understands the determining effect of objective conditions of existence, but he also recognises the existence and persistence of what he calls the “practical sense of practice”, the sense of immediacy and familiarity of the world as experienced by the actors, and the common-sensical approach to action. He then suggests that agents’ motivation for social practice must be a more complex, profound process, and not simply a matter of calculation or obedience, as some previous theories have proposed. Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* -an embodied system of dispositions, adapted to objective conditions and inculcated by others, which generates practice-accounts for that process, thus liberating anthropology, and other social sciences, from the corseting of a mechanistic understanding of social behaviour, without

having to resort to an extreme subjectivism. Furthermore, it offers tentative epistemological answers to the question of the meaningfulness, regularity, coherency, communality, continuity, and shared familiarity of the actions of social agents within the same "culture". Those answers find themselves pivoted around his idea of "internalised externality" (1990:55), or, in other words, "incorporation", or "embodiment".

Within the particular area of religion and religious experience, Bourdieu's critique of the structural-functionalist paradigm, and his theories about structure and practice, offer an alternative to the views which predominate in the Mexicanist literature. It opens up the possibility of thinking about religion not as an "objective structure" with direct powers over social actors, but as conditions inscribed in the body of social agents in the form of durable dispositions which are the real generative source behind religious practices. Such religious practices are, thus, not mechanically performed, but are born from a profound sense of familiarity with the social world: in other words, they "make sense". Neither are they merely expressive of a higher order, nor just symbolic of something else, but perfectly commonsensical actions. It could be said that agents' experience of familiarity with their world enables them to have meaningful religious experiences without having to formulate them in "rational" or "objectified" terms. This sense of familiarity with the social world would allow them to act upon it, and others within it, without having instrumental intentions attached to their actions. Their religious behaviours and experiences are, in this view, necessarily social, consensual, and immediately recognised by others, without having to orchestrate them explicitly or explain themselves, because the *habitus* from which they are born concerns agents who have been conditioned by similar conditions of existence. Finally, the regularity and persistence of religious practices does not exist because social actors are automatons following the dictates of invariable, permanent religious structures, but because actions are generated by similar dispositions which were the product of past conditions of existence.

Much of this is close to the idea of embodiment, as this has been theorised in anthropology. Deriving from phenomenology and especially the work of Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1965), the concept of embodiment has been deployed by, for example, Csordas (1994a) and Jackson (1989, 1996) to defend the cultural character of the body and to propose "experience" as the starting points for anthropological enquiry.

In his introduction to the edited volume *Embodiment and Experience*, Thomas Csordas offers a critique of the dominance of representation as the “epistemological modality” in anthropology (1994a: 9). He thinks that this predominance results from the legacy of Cartesianism, which establishes a dichotomy between mind and body, qualifying mind as the subject of culture, and body as the object of biology. The superior epistemological value conferred on the mind is thus reflected in the overwhelming significance endowed to representations as reflecting culture. Csordas defends a different position with respect to the body, stating that it is not “pre-cultural”, nor the “biological raw material” onto which culture is inscribed (1990a: 9). Following Merleau-Ponty, Csordas suggests that the body, or more precisely “embodiment”, is the “existential ground of culture and self”, and thus a “valuable starting point for rethinking the nature of culture and our existential situation as cultural beings” (1994a: 6). This phenomenological approach, according to this author, offers a valid “methodological opportunity to reformulate theories of culture, self and experience with the body at the centre of analysis” (1994a: 4).

The phenomenological approach offers the notion of “being-in-the-world” as an alternative to “representation”, since it captures the immediacy of existence as lived. However, this existential immediacy is not some kind of primeval, atemporal sense of being, but temporally and historically informed, and, rather than pre-cultural, a “preobjective reservoir of meaning”. In Csordas’ own words,

“The distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy. Representation is fundamentally nominal, and hence we can speak of ‘a representation’. Being-in-the-world is fundamentally conditional, and hence we must speak of ‘existence’ and ‘lived experience’” (1994a: 10).

However, the epistemological and methodological shift from representation to embodiment does not need to imply a total rejection of other paradigmatic positions, such as that of “textuality”, which is, according to this author, widely present in contemporary theories of culture. Csordas sees the paradigm of embodiment as (an “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world”), as a “dialectical partner” (1994a: 12) to the paradigm of textuality.

Finally, Csordas recapitulates in the more concrete terms of this phenomenological approach, which he sees as necessarily grounded in embodiment, based on concrete empirical data, and on the ethnographer's own experience, as an exercise in ethnographic reflexivity. The final aim of this perspective would thus be to contribute "to a theory of culture self grounded in embodiment" (1994:13).

In the context of research into religion, it could be said that phenomenology provides an epistemological and methodological basis which is radically different from that implicit in most Mexicanist ethnographies. In fact, a phenomenological perspective, as defended by Csordas and the other contributors to his volume (1994a), suggests the necessity of reorienting our whole approach to a study of religion, by arguing the necessity of shifting our focus of attention from "belief system" or "religious ideology", from "representations", to embodiment and experience. Representations, and thus also religious representations, are, according to those authors, the product of a process of objectification. Yet the pre-objective meaning of religious perceptions or actions are already there, embodied, and intrinsic to experience. Therefore, experience, the embodied sense of being-in-the-world, is a perfectly valid standpoint to commence an investigation of religion, not as objects of analysis in themselves, but in their capacity of "existential ground of both self and culture." Csordas himself demonstrates this approach in his ethnographic accounts of religiosity and neurological illness (1994b) and charismatic healing (1994c).

The contributors to the volume *Embodiment and Experience* (1994a) take a diversity of approaches to the paradigm of embodiment, yet still retain some kind of discursive balance between representation and experience (as exemplified by the chapter by Jenkins and Valiente 1994). However, other anthropologists go a step further and put experience both epistemologically and methodologically centre-stage. One of these anthropologists is Michael Jackson, who, adopting a phrase of William James (James, 1976; cited in Jackson 1996: 7), calls his phenomenological approach "radical empiricism" (1989, 1996).

Jackson's approach departs from the phenomenological understanding that lived experience is intrinsically irreducible to the conceptual constructs that might be used to represent it (1989: 2, 1996), an idea that also echoes the views of Bourdieu about practice (1977, 1990). Jackson argues that the way we experience and live in the world cannot be explained in terms of rules or theorems, and is irreducible to



laws of causality. However, traditional intellectualist anthropological approaches tend to address the issue of cultural behaviour in these forms, thus implicitly prioritising theoretical knowledge over experiential knowledge (1996: 4). To Jackson, abstract models in general, or conceptual constructions of objectivist anthropology described in terms of “systems” or “structures”, are actually not “mirror images of social reality”, as the academics think of them. They are, according to him, no more than “defences we build against the unsystematic, unstructured nature of our experiences within that reality” (1989: 3). Thus he suggests that anthropology should move from this exclusively rational mode of knowledge to the acceptance of an equally valid experiential mode of knowledge. The exclusive use of theoretical, conceptual models to account for social reality only contributes to hiding the fluidity and immediacy of the life-worlds of people and to accentuating the difference between “us” and “others” (1996: 2, 1989). In short, “in prioritising the knowledge with which people live [...] ethnography helps us place practical and social imperatives on a par with scholastic rules and abstract understanding” (1996: 4).

From the perspective of radical empiricism, anthropology should aim to apprehend and describe the lifeworlds of people in their existential immediacy, and to understand the meanings and intentions not “behind” experience and action, but embedded in them. In order to do this, according to Jackson, there are several considerations about experience that we should take into account. First of all, it is important to understand experience not as something “passively received”, but as something “actively made” (1989: 5). This author stresses the dynamic and processual character of experience, which is not, in the phenomenological view, a stable, constant entity, but a flow that continuously oscillates between objective and subjective planes; that is, between a perception of ourselves as acted upon by, or acting on, the world (1989: 2). Moreover, our experience is constantly changed in our interactions with others, and it changes the experiences of others as well. Thus the emphasis of any anthropological enterprise should be on interactions and intersubjectivity, as the important modes in which we constitute our lived-in worlds, highlighting the constructed, social character of reality.

A significant point which Jackson makes in this respect is that interaction does not occur only among people within the same society, but also between the people observed, and the anthropologist as observer. This fact should highlight the necessity for a critical examination of “the ways in which our knowledge is grounded in our practical, personal, and participatory experience in the field as

much as our detached observations" (1989: 3). That is, it should bring to light the fact that anthropologists also live at the existential level of experience, and that much of our knowledge, including that secured in the fieldwork site, is also grounded at that level. Pretending otherwise would be an epistemological fallacy. Jackson's approach, then, emphasises intersubjectivity and the inclusion of the ethnographer's experience as part of the anthropological work. Following Deveraux (1967: 18-31), he defends the position that "anthropology involves *reciprocal activity and interexperience*" (1989: 3; italics in original).

Jackson, reflecting on previous theoretical approaches, suggests that

"the task for anthropology is to recover the sense in which experience is situated *within* relationships and *between* persons if the lifeworld is to be explored as a field of intersubjectivity and not reduced to objective structures or subjective intentions. [...] Reality is not to be sought beneath the empirical -in unconscious forms, instinctual drives, or antecedent cause- but in the constructive and deconstructive dialectic of the lived interpersonal world." (1996: 26; italics in original)

Finally, Jackson cautions against a reductive interpretation of the given nature of the life-worlds we inhabit. Radical empiricism, as has been shown, argues that experience is "active and outgoing" and that lived-in worlds are constituted "through collective or individual praxis". However, the world that is constructed in this way might turn out to be "objectively identical to the world which existed before" (1996: 29). Jackson maintains that this should not be understood in terms of a paramount determination of objective conditions of existence, as Bourdieu might have suggested (1977, 1990), but has to be seen in the context of the mediation of subjective life. In other words, although the end result, the lifeworld, might remain constant, the passage of the person through it is not merely passive, but is an active, intentional, purposeful task. By the simple fact of existing in the world, we make it ours, and thus contribute to the world that others will inherit. That is, we apprehend given meanings, but we may actively accept them, or re-interpret them, or contest them, or use them in a different way, thus somehow changing them. Thereby, Jackson argues, what he calls "a principle of intentionality" has to be taken into account in "any epistemological analysis" (1996: 29).

In short, Jackson's radical empiricism proposes an approach that goes beyond those of Bourdieu and of the phenomenological paradigm of embodiment. He agrees with Bourdieu's critique of objectivism, but states that this author's fear



of “subjectivism” causes him to detach himself too much from the experiential mode of knowledge, and to end up with a model of *habitus* which, in many ways, reproduces the mechanicism of the models he tries to avoid. Jackson, on the contrary, defends the value of subjectivity in anthropological knowledge, since, together with objectivity, it is part of the dynamic process of experience. With reference to embodiment, he also subscribes to this perspective, but reminds us that being-in-the-world is the existential position of the anthropologist as well as of others, and argues that experience is not a given, motionless state, but an intersubjective, interactive, changing, and intentional mode of actively apprehending the lifeworld.

Radical empiricism allows us to approach the study of religion, then, from a point of view that does not prioritise the models and concepts of a theoretical mode of knowledge. That is, it does not intend to look at the content of beliefs or the meanings of practices as intrinsic qualities of “belief” or “practice”. Instead, it urges us to realise the epistemological value of experience, and to consider the “existential uses and consequences” of beliefs and practices, what they are “made to mean, and what they accomplish for those who invoke and use them” (1996: 6). Radical empiricism also opens up the possibility for exploration of the interactive and intersubjective side of religious experience and practice, and its interconnection with all other areas of lived experience as a continuum (1996: 21). This form of phenomenological investigation invites the anthropologist to bodily participation, also in terms of religious activities, and gives equal epistemological value to this form of knowledge. It suggests that we should look at the ways in which lifeworlds are reproduced, but also changed through the purposeful, active use of religious experience and action. Finally, it reminds the anthropologist that religious experiences are also “integrally part of empirical reality”, and thus have to be seen as dimensions of the lifeworld, albeit perhaps less ordinary than others (1996: 15). Finally, Jackson’s radical empiricism suggests a particular discursive form for the ethnographic text, the narrative, which can be used not only in selected topics, but for describing the existential realities of people, which include religious realities as well.

## Research methods

My fieldwork took place in two different periods of time, due to serious illness. The first period took place between January and August 1994. The second, between October 1995 and June 1996.

Upon my arrival at the Pátzcuaro Lake area in 1994, I based myself in Pátzcuaro town for a few weeks. I commenced work as a volunteer with a local NGO (Non-governmental organisation), collaborating in a project which worked with groups of women in different *mestizo* and indigenous communities around the lake. I went out with the NGO workers, and also participated in the daily clinic that was run in the Pátzcuaro premises. My brief stay at this NGO proved to be very useful, since I came into contact with a variety of women of all ages from most of the villages around the lake. My daily informal conversations with the women started throwing light upon issues such as gender divisions, the provision of health care in families, household arrangements of people, marriage, childbirth, and economic issues, in addition to religious information such as pilgrimages, religious festivals, and saintly beings in the area. My visits to the villages allowed me to acquire a first-hand general comparative overview of the whole region. During that period, I also conducted formal structured interviews with several people: women from the project (specifically about their religious practices); doctors who worked in Jarácuaro; NGO workers; and with local priests at the main pilgrimage shrine of the town (through which I compiled an ecclesiastical calendar, among other things). In addition to this, I established contact with locally-based anthropologists who had conducted research on the island, whose information, suggestions and contacts helped me put my project into practice. I also participated in workshops with groups of women from the project, about domestic violence. All the information collected during this period was written down as fieldnotes, or in my diary. Some of the interviews were tape-recorded. A dossier of bibliographic material was put together. This period was very useful for gaining general information about the area, and for providing a sort of "mental map" of the region.

I also took the opportunity to consult the bibliographic and archive resources of CREFAL (*Centro Regional para la Educación Fundamental en América Latina*, an educational institution based in Pátzcuaro, funded by United Nations), where I had access to local census and other statistical information, as well as historical documents, about the island of Jarácuaro. Throughout my whole stay, I paid regular

visits to the Colegio de Michoacán, a post-graduate and research institute in the nearby city of Zamora, to which I became associated as a visiting researcher, and which holds the largest collection of ethnographic materials about the region. The anthropologists and historians there offered great help and advice regarding my research.

My involvement with the NGO, and my frequent visits to Jarácuaro, meant that I established relationships with some of the women who participated in the project, and this facilitated my passage into the community. After a few weeks, I moved to the island, to stay with a local family. At the time, my research project was still about the personal experiences of pilgrims, so I commenced my enquiries about this and other religious issues with the people of the house. I also tried to expand my web of acquaintances by participating in all religious events in the island, and in some of the activities of the group in charge of the church's upkeep. I conducted interviews with the local priests as well. I attended two pilgrimage festivals at two of the most important shrines of the region, and visited a third one, although on all these occasions I went on my own, which meant that I missed the shared element of personal experience. Nevertheless, my visits allowed me to interview the priests at the shrines, and to collect information about the place and the pilgrims from the church officials' perspective. Again, all this information was compiled in the traditional ways of the anthropological enterprise: fieldnotes, diaries, audio recordings, and a collection of bibliographical material.

However, the most important aspects of this period were the consequences for the research of staying with a local family, and which would eventually lead me to rethink the whole project and its methods. First of all, it became clear that the reality of the gender division in the daily life of the island would necessarily impact on the way in which I could conduct my research. Men and women were mostly separated by perceptions and by their daily activities; women spent their time with other women, occupied with housework inside houses. Women were not expected to come into contact with men who were not related to the household, and that applied to me as a woman and a household guest. In my inexperience, I often offended my elderly hosts by going out to talk to unrelated men, whilst at other times I tried to please them by staying inside the house helping Marielena, the young granddaughter-in-law, which isolated me from other people. My contact with unrelated men was also problematic since I noticed that it made their wives

uncomfortable. It was clear that most of my work on the island would necessarily have to take place with and among women.

Secondly, my communication with people outside the household proved to be quite difficult in other ways, as villagers were quite suspicious of the motivations of strangers<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, many people I wished to talk to were not on good terms with the family I was staying with, and so avoided my approaches altogether. Thus personal and familial politics of relationships, and people's social networks, had to be taken into consideration. Also, it was important to note that, despite my professional zeal, wanting to talk to people did not mean that they saw a reason to talk to me. In a small island, where everyone knew everyone else, those considerations became significant.

Thirdly, and most importantly, my "enforced" time inside the house in the company of Marielena, and the closeness and intimacy that ensued between us, brought to light a fundamental issue. I realised that the way she talked about her experiences, feelings, and thoughts, about all sorts of personal things, including her dealings with saints; the way she let me accompany in her visits to the church, and explained to me her actions; the way she instructed me about how to do things, and what was right and wrong; in short, the way she carefully and caringly tried to train me in the local ways, was a result of our close and personal relationship. There was no such a thing as "access" to the personal experiences of people; my knowledge of the experience of people, religious or otherwise, had to be born out of a particular connectedness with people, within the context of an interactive, reciprocal relationship<sup>26</sup>. There was further confirmation of this when I considered the kind of commonplace, impersonal answers of people in general when I questioned them about their "religious" experiences and practices. It was at this time that I became very ill and had to abandon my fieldwork abruptly, in order to get treatment in Europe.

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<sup>25</sup> It could be argued that this was both related to their former isolation as an island, and also to the historical experience of external intrusion (from colonial times to present day) which was perceived as having been mostly negative for the local people. The appearance of many development workers and governmental officials with patronising attitudes and badly managed projects had done little to dispel this suspicion.

<sup>26</sup> This is precisely what anthropologists like Jackson (1989, 1996), Scheper-Hughes (1992), Campbell (1989, 1995), and Asad (1986) suggest should be an important part of the ethnographic method.



The limitations and problems encountered during my first fieldwork experience made me reflect upon the ways in which I could approach the subsequent period on the field, and also about the changes that I had to introduce in my project as a whole, if it was to be viable on the ground. First of all, I adapted my project to account for the limits imposed by the gender division in Jarácuaro.

In terms of practical arrangements, it had become clear to me that I had to live within one of Jarácuaro's households since, as a woman on my own, it was out of the question and dangerous for me to live alone. I chose not to return to the first house, since the family dynamics there had been quite tense, but instead arranged to be a paying guest with a different family, known to another anthropologist. Then, I chose an approach to collecting data which would not alienate my hosts in any way, since I knew that having a serious conflict with them would mean *having* to abandon the island altogether, and thus my whole research would be jeopardised. This careful approach had to be in terms both of my position as a married woman, and with respect to their own social networks.

This meant that, instead of taking an approach that prioritised survey methods, which treated the settlement as a community, I let myself be guided by my female (and occasionally, male) hosts through their own networks of relatives and friends. This way, I got to meet personally many of the women, and to a lesser extent men, on the island, through the personal introductions and recommendations of others. My presence in gatherings and reunions was thus accepted, and my relationships with women were less shrouded in suspicion, as I was my hosts' guest, and not just a prying outsider or *gringa* (white foreigner). Not only that, but I could then visit people in the same ways they visited each other, and be received as a friendly acquaintance, and not as a strange intruder with obscure intentions<sup>27</sup>. Towards the end of my stay, I had actually come into contact, at different levels, with the majority of the inhabitants of Jarácuaro, for most people were related to each other. Therefore, it was towards the end of my fieldwork that an actual profile of the general and objective circumstances of the community (economic parameters, language distribution, political organisation, composition of households and groups, agricultural patterns) became more evident, as this information had been gradually

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<sup>27</sup>It would have been quite difficult to attempt to enter houses on the island without being introduced by another islander. Moreover, when this happened, as in the case of development agents or government officials, people used to lie to them or withhold information, as they later confessed to me. My approach to them differentiated me from those other kinds of "outsiders".

built up. To obtain statistical information of a more systematic nature, I consulted the data gathered recently by another anthropologist (Castilleja Gonzalez, 1995), and the census of the island from 1990 (*Censo de Población y Vivienda* 1990).

I collected the information which forms the basis of this thesis in two different ways. The first approach was methodologically more traditional. In order to observe the daily lives of people, I participated with other women in collective festivals, celebrations, and smaller meetings to which I was invited. I attended most events which took place on the island, particularly religious ones (weekly mass, rosaries, processions, Bible Circle encounters). I also travelled occasionally with some friends outside it, to other festivities, or to markets. Of those more collective events, I took notes, photographs, and audio recordings, and talked with people about them, both during and after. I did a daily round of visits, spending many hours a day in informal conversations, and usually noted down comments and answers during or shortly after them. I held formal conversations and interviews in a variety of contexts with various people, usually by arrangement, which I either recorded or wrote down on the spot. In this way, I collected information from: the parish priests, elders of the village, people in charge of the church upkeep, catechists, members of the Bible Circle and of youth groups, various children who volunteered, and, by the end of my stay, most friends and acquaintances who had become used to my writing down their answers and to my tape recorder. I also made a series of recordings of the life histories of three generations of women from the same family.

The second approach responded more to the kind of ethnographic method advocated by phenomenology (Jackson 1989, 1996); that is, it was based on participation, interaction, shared experience, and the examination of own experience. First of all, I became more or less a surrogate member of the household where I lived, and thus my relationship with some of its members was very close and intimate. I was involved, in daily life, and in some of the conflicts and occasions for celebration that occurred during my stay, and my concern went beyond mere "scientific observation". In many ways, that intense involvement was a form of "apprenticeship" (Jackson 1989: 10), and I learned a great deal of things not by observing them or being told about them, but by feeling them, experiencing them, and doing them. In addition to this, I was not a mere "observer-outsider", but also a young married woman, a paying guest, and a surrogate daughter, and that provided me with a platform for understanding things from within a relational, positioned



level. Words and actions were carefully noted down on the spot at all times in a small notebook I carried with me, being careful to find the right moment not to offend sensibilities, and subsequently elaborated at length in my daily entries in my field diary. Verbatim quotations throughout the thesis have been reconstructed from these notes.

Besides my intimate and close relationship with my hosts, I also developed close, friendly, and trustful relationships with several other women. My relationship with them allowed me to participate in and experience things in their company. For instance, towards the end of my stay, I travelled with two members of a family as a pilgrim to a distant shrine. Moreover, my friends and I trusted each other enough to talk openly about intimate, painful, or difficult experiences of our lives, and they would make me party to their worries, concerns, desires or fears. Those confessions happened sometimes in the context of a recording (when the presence of the tape recorded was forgotten); at other times I noted things down as soon as possible, whilst they were still fresh in my memory, and being careful not to offend my friends. They were then elaborated in my diary. Ethically speaking, I felt uneasy about using some of the information I was given. I told my friends that I might write some of their words in my thesis, and most of them agreed to it, but nevertheless I have excluded the more delicate and sensitive confidences from the thesis.

In short, I consider this second approach to have been the source of very valuable ethnographic knowledge. What it might have lost in terms of representativeness of the "sample" is compensated for by the depth, the relevance, and the situated, relational, and interactive character of the information obtained (see Wikan 1990 for a similar position). To me, it is not still clear whether the more general information I collected at the same time deepened this type of knowledge, or whether it was actually this experiential, involved, embodied, and contextualised mode of apprehension which made possible the understanding of the broader picture. It is in order to reflect the relevance of this kind of experiential knowledge that I have made a deliberate choice of writing style for this dissertation.

Finally, the research was almost always conducted in Spanish, although by the end of my stay I was able to understand most conversations in the vernacular Purhé. Only quite old people of the community were monolingual in Purhé, whilst most middle aged people were bilingual Spanish-Purhé, and young people were

monolingual in Spanish. For this reason, Spanish was the most widely used language in houses, and my monolingualism was appropriate to my generation.

### The place and the people: a brief ethnographic description

The island of Jarácuaro is situated in the Pátzcuaro Lake region. There are twenty six villages, and a number of other smaller settlements, around the shores of the lake. The six largest islands are also inhabited, although only two of them, Jarácuaro and Janitzio, contain sizeable populations. Some of the villages around the lake are settled by *mestizos*<sup>28</sup>. Others are almost exclusively inhabited by Purhépechas, the indigenous inhabitants of the area. The mestizo settlements are usually called *pueblos* (villages), and the Purhépecha settlements tend to be referred to as *comunidades indígenas* (Indian communities), reflecting certain differences between them as regards origin and forms of land ownership (Zárate Hernández 1993). However, intermarriage and regional migration have resulted in mixed populations in many of the villages and communities, and the distinctions are, on the ground, quite blurred. In addition to this, there exists, from before the times of the Tarascan Empire, an active network of exchange and communication between all the settlements, which was sustained and developed further during the Spanish colony (Zárate Hernández 1993; Warren 1977). It, nevertheless, does not entail that indigenous communities like Jarácuaro do not retain a sense of difference and separateness. Yet those differences are articulated and elaborated in forms more complex than simple "ethnic divisions" or forms of land tenure. I will return to this point later.

Jarácuaro belongs to the municipality of Erongarícuaro, in terms of the territorial division of the Mexican state, and islanders can vote to elect the municipal authorities. In addition to this, Jarácuaro is officially classified as a *pueblo*<sup>29</sup>, and thus has its own administrative organ within the structure of the municipality called *Jefatura de Tenencia*, an elected local council which deals with specific matters concerning the island. The issues related to the communal property -a form of land ownership characteristic of indigenous settlements-, are arbitrated

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<sup>28</sup> This is the Spanish word used in many parts of Latin America to refer to people of mixed Indian and Spanish origin. The term *ladino* is also used in Southern Mexico, and other Latin American countries.

<sup>29</sup> The rank of *pueblo* is an administrative classification of the Mexican state. The distinction between *pueblo* and *comunidad* mentioned above does not have an official character, but is one made in local speech.

by the *Representante de Bienes Comunales*, a locally elected representative (Castilleja González 1995). This is obviously the official structure, but the reality of the situation seems to be, somehow, different. Jarácuaro people, like most other people in rural areas of Mexico, have serious misgivings about politics in general. They are aware of the serious corruption that occurs at all levels of political life in Mexico, and mistrust the intentions and honesty of municipal candidates. In the end, most islanders do not feel they are represented in the municipal organs, which are felt to be remote. This is not, as far as I could see, a totally subjective perception, since the islanders do not seem to benefit from the services of the modern state. There is a nursery school, and a primary school in Jarácuaro, but their resources are minimal. There is no health worker or clinic on the island, and people travel to Eronga<sup>30</sup> to see private doctors for which they have to pay. There is a public charitable hospital in Pátzcuaro, but people complain that they are badly treated. There is no public provision of water, but only a locally organised minimal service. Several projects have been started in Jarácuaro, either by NGOs or, more rarely, by the government, such as literacy and vaccination campaigns, a local clinic. Yet they have tended to be badly implemented, and are usually abandoned before completion, leaving the inhabitants feeling cheated. The authorities, of course, tend to attribute failures to the locals' apathy and their attachments to their traditions.

In short, the institutions of the Mexican state are experienced as being remote and unconcerned, if not simply antagonistic, and the island's daily life revolves around the *Tenencia* and the *Representante*. They are locally elected from among men in the village, since politics is a male sphere; the voting, directly done in the main square, usually expresses the internal factionalism of the village<sup>31</sup>. Nevertheless, there is a generalised feeling that things have to be resolved this way, among the islanders, without the intrusion of external authorities. Cases of criminal activity are resolved within the island, usually among the parties concerned, since people do not want to get unsympathetic outside authorities involved.

In addition to the rejection and abandonment that Jarácuaro people experience with respect to the Mexican authorities, which could be attributed in part to the working of a heavily centralised and highly corrupt political system<sup>32</sup>, there

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<sup>30</sup> The short name given to Erongarícuaro.

<sup>31</sup> For ethnographies about specific aspects of local politics in Michoacán, see Gledhill (1993) and Friedrich (1986).

<sup>32</sup> This kind of experience is not exclusive to Jarácuaro, nor to indigenous communities in general, but to rural settlements in Michoacán.

exist other feelings of difference and separateness. Jarácuaro people in general do not think much about “identity” in their quotidian existences, nor do they feel themselves to be so different from, for instance, the people from the neighbouring *mestizo* village of Arócutin. In fact, young islanders marry people from other villages without regard to matters of ethnic origin or “cultural” difference, and their children are integrated in the settlements they live. Jarácuaro people travel regularly to other local markets, attend festivities, and visit relatives and friends in the other villages. This is not a recent development, but is a recurring theme in the history of the region (Zárate Hernández 1993). There are many things common to all indigenous and *mestizo* settlements in the area, and, according to Zárate Hernández, because of the system of communication and exchange prevalent around the lake, identities are not clearly defined, but dynamic and adaptable (1993: 55, 62). In general, patterns of interaction involving Jarácuaro people can not be defined by ethnicity.

However, when the islanders come into contact with wider contexts, as when they travel to the town of Pátzcuaro, or the city of Morelia, their differences with the urban *mestizo* middle classes become very apparent. In many ways, these differences are more a matter of class, between the “rural poor” and the “urban middle class”. Yet there is also an element of ethnic discrimination, for the people in towns and cities tend to refer to all villagers as “*indios*”, “Indians”, whether they are ethnically Purhépecha or not. This element of ethnic discrimination seems to be pervasive in all parts of Mexico<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, *mestizo* doctors, lawyers, commerce traders, and government officials in towns do not show a great deal of respect for their Purhépecha patients or customers, as I could observe and record in my interviews. Jarácuaro people are, at the same time, very guarded and suspicious in their dealings with urban professionals and authorities, and try to minimise their contacts with them, sensing that they are not perceived as equals or treated with respect. In fact, the islanders complain often of being deceived (charged more, not attended to properly), “because we are poor, and we don’t know any better”<sup>34</sup>.

Despite their constant contact with other inhabitants of the Pátzcuaro Lake area, and their integration in the regional exchange system, some people from Jarácuaro, particularly older, have a distinct sense of identity as islanders. Although the communication with the neighbouring villages has been always fluid, and

<sup>33</sup> For a study on issues of ethnicity and discrimination at a national level, see Bonfill Batalla (1994).

<sup>34</sup> This complaint, however, was also voiced by *mestizos* from the villages around the lake.

intermarriage has been common between them, many people are nevertheless very conscious of their belonging to the island. Elderly men and women still speak Purhé among themselves (although not necessarily with the younger generations), the women dress using some of the garments of the traditional attire, and they justify many of their behaviours with the proudly enunciated sentence “this is the way we do things here” (“*así hacemos las cosas aquí*”). Young people, perhaps because of the loss of their native language, and the increasing alternatives for their lifestyle (migration, higher education, wider possibilities for finding partners from distant places) have embraced some aspects of the global culture as this is realised in metropolitan Mexico. Nevertheless the inhabitants of the village do not feel that their community is in decline sociologically, that they somehow constitute a residual population. On the contrary, the island is perceived by its inhabitants as a haven, where they understand the behaviours and expectations of others, where they find themselves among similar people, where they have their social networks (indeed, many people in Jarácuaro are related to each other), and where they can feel comfortable and secure. I know women who migrated, or married outside the community, and returned with or without their partners because they did not settle in their new localities.

Within the territorial structure of the Catholic Church of Mexico, Jarácuaro belongs to the parish of Erongarícuaro, where there are three permanent priests, some nuns, and occasional visiting clergy from another areas, who are also expected to attend to the community. There is a church on the island, but it does not have a resident priest; the church is considered by the villagers to belong to them rather than to the Church, and its daily maintenance and custody is the responsibility of two different associations of villagers (the “*encargados del templo*”, “Keepers of the Church”, and the “*Damas de la Vela*”, “Ladies of the Candle”). The Catholic ecclesiastical Calendar of festivities<sup>35</sup> is followed on the island, although there are some festivals that are more specially commemorated there than others: the *Levantada*<sup>36</sup> (2nd of February), Easter (a movable celebration<sup>37</sup>), the Holy Cross (3rd of May), Saint Peter (the patron saint of the island, 29th of June), Corpus Christi (a movable celebration), Day of the Dead (2nd of November), and Virgen de Guadalupe (12th of December). The village also celebrates the days of some of its local saints: Señor de la Misericordia (22nd of February) and Virgen de la Salud

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<sup>35</sup> For a full Catholic calendar, see *Calendario del más Antiguo Galván, Librería y Ediciones Murgía, México*.

<sup>36</sup> A commemoration of the end of the Virgin’s quarantine after Jesus’ birth.

<sup>37</sup> Movable celebrations have different dates, since they are cyclical and not fixed.



(17th of March). On those occasions, there is usually a mass, officiated by one of the parish priests, and sometimes a procession, followed in some of the bigger celebrations by the performance of dancers in the atrium, by *jaripeos* (Mexican rodeos), or by evening dances for young people. People usually eat special foods in their houses, or come together with others in communal meals. Some Jarácuaro people also travel to festivals in other places, both around the lake and beyond. There are four main pilgrimages in the region that some islanders attend: Señor de Carácuaro, Señor de Tzintzuntzan, Señor de los Milagros, and Señor de Araró. In addition to the calendrical festivals, there are other occasions of celebration, such as weddings, baptisms, confirmations, and first communions, all of which are Catholic sacraments. Each begins with a mass and concludes with a feast for the guests. So both the annual cycle of the community and the progression of individuals through their lives are punctuated by Church rituals. Yet it must also be said that, even on these special occasions, much of the daily routine and work is still carried out as usual, specially by the women.

The relationships between most people of Jarácuaro and the parish priests are, in general, quite tense. During the period I lived there, the priests used to drive to the island from Eronga for the mass on Thursdays and Saturdays, or for other religious ceremonies for which their presence was required, such as weddings or baptisms, and then left quickly after the service was finished, giving the impression that they were almost in a hurry. People regarded the priests with feelings that ranged from complete disinterest to open hostility. The parish priests, two of them in particular, were considered by many to be arrogant, distant, and authoritarian, and were not respected as individuals. Most islanders also complained bitterly about many of the changes that the priests had introduced into the village's life, such as moving the Sunday mass to Saturdays, because they felt those had been implemented without consulting the community or recognising their preferences. The "keepers of the church" had particularly difficult relationships with the parish priests, and although they attended to the latter when they came to the island, the "keepers" followed their instructions grudgingly, and often commented among themselves that the priests were "only interested in taking money from us". At the same time, the priests, three urban, educated, middle class *mestizo* men, who did not come from the region, disliked travelling to Jarácuaro<sup>38</sup>. As they explained to me in interviews, they thought the islanders were, difficult, stubborn, and "set in their

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<sup>38</sup> For the whole time I was there the nuns did not visit the island at all, whilst other priests visited on four or five occasions.



own ways", as well as untidy and disrespectful, when compared to the inhabitants of other communities, particularly *mestizo* ones. The priests claimed they had, in their own words, tried to get the villagers to do things in "the right way", that is, following the rules of the Catholic Church, but to no avail. The priests were particularly unhappy with the way in which Jarácuaro people behaved toward the saints, since they felt that their attitudes were "superstitious", and ignored the fundamental supremacy of God and his son Jesus Christ in the hierarchy of holy beings. Their attitudes in their personal dealings with the islanders tended to be impatient, and sometimes even rude. It could be said that, in many ways, the priests' behaviour towards their Purhépecha parishioners reproduced the prejudices of the *mestizo* urban middle classes towards the rural poor in general, and the Indians in particular<sup>39</sup>. The only islanders who had seemingly good relationships with the priests and nuns in Eronga were the Catechists, a group of ten or twelve teenage boys and girls who taught the Saturday Doctrine school for children on the island, and sung and read at the masses, and whose co-ordinator was a Jarácuaro young woman who had followed university courses in Mexico City.

As in the case of the state political structures, the Catholic institutions are experienced by most Jarácuaro people, with the exception noted above, as remote, unconcerned, or even, at times, despotic, or contemptuous<sup>40</sup>. The priests, though held in very little regard, are needed to officiate the religious services in the proper manner. However, apart from the specific tasks that the priests are required to do, the community considers it its prerogative and responsibility to run its own religious affairs, and thus processions, dances, performances, daily rosaries, saints' visits, the Bible Circle, and the upkeep of the church building and the saints, are organised by the islanders with little or no interference from the parish authorities. The parish priests, who feel they have been left with the difficult task of mending the islanders' ways, try to minimise what seems to be an unpleasant contact to the strictly necessary in terms of their functions.

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<sup>39</sup> In contrast, the islanders told me that there had been a Purhépecha priest in the past, a man from the area, who used to come to Jarácuaro. Islanders talked of him in affectionate terms, and appreciated the fact that he had delivered mass in Purhé. They could not understand why that priest had ceased coming to see them. It is the policy of the Catholic Church to move priests to different postings from time to time.

<sup>40</sup> It must be pointed out that the official Catholic Church in Michoacán is quite traditional, unlike that in other parts of Mexico. I did not hear of the existence of any "theology of liberation" movement, or of any "Catholic grassroots group" in the Pátzcuaro Lake area.

I will now describe some general aspects of Jarácuaro's daily life and gender relationships, starting with household formation and composition, and marriage patterns. The village of Jarácuaro has over 1,871 inhabitants, 944 men, and 927 women (source: *Censo de Población y Vivienda*, 1990). The houses, over three hundred of them<sup>41</sup>, are usually inhabited by the members of an extended family, along the lines of patrilocality. Many households consist of a middle aged couple and their married and unmarried sons, their unmarried daughters, and their daughters-in-law. When the daughters get married, they generally move to their husband's parental house. In contrast, the sons bring their new brides to live with them to the paternal house. The eldest married son (or sons) stays at home with his spouse until they have one or more children, and once their economic situation is sufficient, they move out with their children to their own house. It is the recognised responsibility of the youngest married son and his wife to stay in the house with his parents, and support them in their old age. I only know of one case on the island of an *adult*, a male, who had not married, and he stayed with his parents and married brother. Childless women without spouses (that is, widows or separated) could live with their parents, or with a brother or sister. Although there are a certain amount of expectations in terms of residential arrangements that people tend to acknowledge, there is also a degree of flexibility in the set up of households. For instance, if the parents do not get on with their youngest son or his wife, they might move to another son's house. Some young married couples, especially if the women does insist, may stay with the wife's parents, instead of moving in with the husbands' parents. Some young couples are able to have their own houses straight away. In addition to this, the increase in lifestyle alternatives (education or jobs outside the island; migration to the United States; the possibility for women to leave their husbands) has contributed to a diversification in the composition of households in the last few years. For instance, there are a number of houses occupied by a married woman with her children, where the husband is estranged, or working away from home.

Young women and men of Jarácuaro marry either other young islanders, or people from nearby settlements, whom they meet at dances or at school. Some men, and a few women, have married people in distant places, where they have migrated for reason of their studies or economic activities. Young people choose their own

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<sup>41</sup> 309 houses, with an average of 6.5 inhabitants per house, the highest level of occupancy in the municipality, according both to the *Censo de Población y Vivienda*, 1990, and to Castilleja Gonzalez 1995. During my stay in 1995-96, there were a few new houses being built in the lands near the lake shores.

partners, and often elope together without warning their families beforehand. Later, the consent of both families is required for the marriage to be formally approved. In a few cases, the boy's parents have not accepted their son's choice, and have returned the bride to her parent's house. This means that the girl's chances of finding another partner soon might be greatly reduced. As mentioned before, when a woman marries she is expected to go to live with her parents-in-law<sup>42</sup>, where she is usually under the supervision and control of her mother-in-law. For a few years, contact with her own natal household, with other relatives, or with girlfriends, might be difficult and infrequent, due to her many responsibilities, or to the excessive domination of her husband and/or her mother-in-law. However, she might also have a good relationship with her spouse and in-laws, and thus continuous contact with her own parental house, and with other relatives and female friends, might be allowed. A young married man, on the other hand, would have a greater degree of freedom to meet up with his male peers in the streets of the village. Yet his parents retain a significant degree of control over him whilst he still lives under the same roof, and might impose some restrictions over his activities.

Because of the gender divisions in terms of labour, household arrangements, community expectations, and their own emotional preferences, young married women spend much of their time visiting the women in their natal houses (their mothers, grandmothers, sisters, nieces, sisters-in-law), or in the company of the women in their marital houses (their mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, daughters, nieces). Young Jarácuaro women who marry outside the island, or indeed women from outside who marry in, often find themselves quite isolated if they do not get on with their in-laws, as they lack the access to networks of their own sympathetic relatives. As a married woman gets older, she might start progressively enjoying more autonomy, and thus might be able to devote more time to activities outside the household. She might be able to visit relatives more often, and can establish links with other unrelated women of the island, or even from outside it, more easily, through a variety of activities: travelling to regional markets, joining local groups such as the "keepers of the church" or the NGO's women's group, participating in communal celebrations, or going on pilgrimages. In addition to this, married couples establish, throughout their lives, many links of *compadrazgo* (usually translated as "ritual co-parenthood") with other married couples from the island. Ties of

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<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the husband's parental house is the usual place to where young couples elope: they might get there late at night, and announce their intention to live together, or else they might wait until their presence is discovered on the following day.

*compadrazgo* can be attained through, for instance, the marriage of children, church ceremonials, or even by proximity to one's own relatives. These links allow couples to enter wider networks of co-operation and exchange and enable women, in particular, to develop strong personal relationships with some of their *comadres* ("co-mothers").

The older married man within a household is considered its head, and he is, at least nominally, its *ultimate* authority. He takes the important decisions and is expected to provide for all its members. He also might represent, as senior male, the other men in his family in some events and celebrations, even if these are not living with him anymore. His wife is also central in the daily life of the household, and although she is expected to obey her husband, and consult with him on most matters, she is nevertheless in charge of the domestic activities, and has authority over unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law. She, as senior woman in the house, may play an important role among other women in festivals and family reunions. Younger married couples living in the same house are initially economically dependent on the husband's parents, and are expected to respect them and to follow their indications or commands. The sons usually work with the father in the house or the fields, and the daughters-in-law and unmarried daughters carry out most of the domestic tasks under the older woman's supervision and control. As the younger couples grow older, and they become more independent economically, the conflicting interpretations about their rights and obligations towards the husband's parents can cause many problems. It is usually at this stage when an elder son may decide to move out with his spouse to his own house, which the father has the responsibility to help build. On the other hand, as the older couple becomes increasingly frail, another son, usually the youngest, and his wife, might start taking over responsibilities as head of the house. The elderly parents can, nevertheless, remain relatively autonomous with respect to their children, and retain great influence over the decisions taken about household affairs.

Nowadays, the main economic activity in Jarácuaro, and the main source of cash for houses, is the production and sale of palm hats (Castilleja Gonzalez 1995). Usually, the tasks related to hat production are shared among the different members of the household, although the women tend to do more of the palm-plaiting, and the men use the sewing machines. Both men and women travel to regional or national markets to sell the hats. In addition to this, most men have the usufruct of a small plot of the land owned by the community, where they grow



maize, pumpkin, and beans in the summer season, and sometimes wheat and lentils in the winter season, all of which is for their own consumption, though not sufficient to meet all their subsistence needs. They are expected to do much of the agricultural work, with the occasional help of the women and children in their houses. A majority of households own a few domestic animals, which can be one or two horses, a cow and its calf, a few pigs and piglets, and/or some hens, but the time devoted to the care of the animals is very limited, and these usually roam around on their own in the streets of the village, at the fields, or in the yards. When money is needed to pay for the services of a doctor, or when there is a big family celebration, some of the animals might be sold or slaughtered. Women sometimes collect the eggs of their hens, and might also cultivate a small kitchen garden in their backyards, or might harvest a few fruit trees, to supplement their family's diet. Fishing used to be an important activity in the island, but the poor quality of the water, and the decrease of fish stocks, have made this a very occasional occupation. There are also a few professionals in Jarácuaro (male and female teachers, a male adult education specialist, two male agricultural engineers) who work either on the island, or for regional NGOs and governmental organisations. In addition to this, many men and women obtain small cash incomes from the production and sale of small crafts or surplus agricultural produce, or from the occasional paid job.

For the last few decades, many men have migrated to other parts of the republic, or to the United States, to work in factories and as seasonal agricultural labourers. Sometimes they take their wife and children with them, but on many occasions they stay away on their own for a few months or even years, and send money back to the house with a certain regularity. When they return to the island, they usually bring with them cash which is then used in building or repairing houses, in festival sponsorships, or to buy machinery for making hats. However, a small proportion of these men never return, and sometimes the communication with their spouses is cut altogether, usually because they have found new partners and might have had children with them. In those cases, as in the cases of widowhood and marital separation, the woman, if she does not have grown up male children, might assume the role of household head and main breadwinner. She may then make hats on her own or with the help of relatives, sell plaited palm and embroidered napkins and blouses in local markets, or even work as a home help in the nearby town of Pátzcuaro.



Only men can own the usufruct of communal land in Jarácuaro. Widows can hold *usufruct* rights while *sons* are still young. The rest of the valuables of a household (the house, sewing machines, animals, etc.) belong nominally to the married couple, but the man is ultimately in control of their use, and in charge of the cash resulting from their sale. It is he who takes the decisions about what to do with money, and how to distribute it for the household expenditure, although in most cases he does this in consultation with his wife. He also controls the money that his co-resident married sons might receive from their shared work. Upon his death, though it is difficult to generalise, his married sons resident in the village inherit his land, which they might proceed to divide among themselves, and also animals and machinery. His youngest son, if he is already married, inherits the house and its contents, where the elderly widow may remain. A woman does not commonly inherit a house from her parents, unless she is a single child, or the only one surviving of the children. She might at times inherit other property such as small pieces of machinery or animals, or she might receive these from her father when she gets married, but it is always of significantly less value than what her brothers receive. Any assets that she thus acquires are usually pulled together with her husband's property and, from then onwards, controlled by him. Women ask for money from their husbands for the daily running of the household, and are expected to administer it in consultation with them. Sometimes, the husband might even do some of the shopping himself, going to nearby markets to buy clothes for the whole family, kitchen utensils, or the foodstuffs required for a festival. However, given that men might spend the money from time to time in drink and celebrations, some women work to secure their own reliable sources of cash. They sell plaited palm, fruit, kitchen vegetables, chicken, cooked food, or embroidered cloth, and very often they keep these incomes secret from their spouses, and save the money or use it to improve the life conditions of their children. It is usually a younger married woman who is in the most precarious situation within a household, for she is dependent on her husband, and also on her mother-in-law and father-in-law, for the basics for herself and her children, and she generally has neither the resources, in terms of her own time or networks, to obtain extra cash from other sources.

Finally, the people of Jarácuaro are not differentiated in terms of class. However, differences in esteem and fortune are recognised. The older part of the village -the area confined within the old boundaries of the island, before the waters receded- is occupied by the older houses, which are usually occupied by larger families consisting of three or more generations of people. The new houses built

nearer the lake shores, on the lands which have emerged as a result of the drop in water levels, are usually inhabited by young couples, the children of households in the village centre who have become economically independent from them, and have moved to their own houses. Most village elders, men and, in certain aspects, women as well, have acquired prestige through the different services paid to the community throughout the years, such as the sponsorship of festivals<sup>43</sup>, or the participation in local political or religious groups, and are respected in the community for their wisdom and their knowledge of the traditions. Young married couples are expected to establish themselves in the village by a similar loosely defined progression through community offices and the sponsorship of celebrations. In addition to the differentiation in terms of age, there are also some differences between households with respect to their level of income. Some households might receive regular payments of cash in the form of dollars sent by husbands or sons working in the United States, and other families have become relatively prosperous by making palm hats and selling them at national markets, whilst others simply survive from a combination of subsistence economy activities. Although variations in income might be noticeable in the quality of houses and clothing, and in the amount of money spent in festivals and celebrations, Jarácuaro people do not think of their poorer neighbours in terms of a "lower class". They simply consider them less lucky than themselves, or perhaps blame their predicament to the laziness of the male head of the household. In any case, there are no apparent separations in the daily dealings of people with regards to economic situations or possibilities, and children of the poorer families marry children of the more affluent ones, without posing a significant problem.

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<sup>43</sup> For more information about the sociological dimensions of ritual sponsorship in the region, see Sepúlveda (1974), Beals (1992 [1945]), Brandes (1988), and Padilla Pineda (1995).

**Part One**

**EXPERIENCE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN DAILY LIFE**



Photograph 2 (above): Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe  
Photograph 3 (below): from left to right, Calí, little Cayincito, Tzán, Machí  
and Kikí.



## Chapter 1

### LIFE INSIDE HOUSES

#### I. From the outside to the inside

It was a sunny and warm afternoon, on the last day of October of 1995, just before the Day of the Dead. The trip from Pátzcuaro had been beautiful as usual, the rattling old bus running along the shores of the lake and passing through all the little villages. I was left at the small area in front of the schools, where the old harbour had been before the waters of the lake had receded. I walked with my bags up the unpaved street and round the corner, towards Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo's house. Women and children looked at me with curiosity from doorways. I felt self-conscious and slightly nervous, for I was about to start my second period of fieldwork<sup>1</sup>. I wished for it to go well.

The door to Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe's house was unlocked as usual: it was left in this way so that the customers of Don Alfredo's corn mill could simply walk in and wait to be served by the rusty machine at the entrance. Don Alfredo heard me opening the gate and appeared from behind the plastic screen which separated the mill area from the rest of the house. He greeted me with a cheerful expression on his face and invited me to come into the central courtyard.

The courtyard was bathed in the smooth afternoon sun; to me it felt peaceful and soothing. Don Alfredo offered me a chair and we sat down to a polite conversation about my trip and the weather. He said that he and his wife had been awaiting my arrival since the morning: "We were already thinking you might not be coming today!". Doña Lupe had left to run some quick errands "out there, at the square" and had hoped to be back before I arrived. I was flattered to see their eagerness to have me there amongst them, but found their worry puzzling, as we had not arranged a particular time and it was only mid afternoon. I offered him the money I was to pay for my keep but he declined to take it. "Give it to Doña Lupe", he said, "she will be really happy!". At that moment we heard some women stepping through the outside doorway. Their whispers and the muffled sounds of their feet were barely audible at the other side of the plastic screen, where the mill was. They stood there, waiting to be served. Don Alfredo got up from his chair

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<sup>1</sup> See Introduction.



slowly and reluctantly, and disappeared behind the screen to attend to them; I listened to the roaring sound of the mill's engine as it was switched on.

Having been left on my own I looked inquisitively around me at the place that was to become my house for the next few months. From what I had seen in many other villages, this was a typical house of the Pátzcuaro area<sup>2</sup>: a C-shaped roofed area surrounding a central courtyard. The open courtyard was full of flowers potted in discarded tins; a lime tree, home to many chirping birds, shaded one of its corners. The covered area consisted of a passageway, to which the doors and windows of the rooms opened. The kitchen was tucked away in a corner of this passageway; a door here led to the backyard and Feyo's house. The walls were whitewashed, with a red strip at the bottom all round, in the Pátzcuaro lake style. The roof was covered in red tiles. Despite the simplicity of its structure and the sobriety of the materials, the house looked beautiful to me. There were flowers everywhere, the lime tree was bursting with little green fragrant fruit and several pictures of saints decorated the walls. The golden afternoon light and the muted noises coming from the neighbouring houses accentuated the air of quotidianity and domesticity. The only feature that I found incongruous with the otherwise traditional Pátzcuaro house was the makeshift second floor Don Alfredo had incorporated into it. Made of wood planks and plastic sheets, it stood over the front door looking fragile; its lower part was the screen which separated Don Alfredo's mill from the rest of the house. Afterwards I would realise that this kind of home-made house extensions were part of the Jarácuaro landscape as much as the more traditional features, and that houses grew and changed with the sizes and fortunes of the groups occupying them<sup>3</sup>. It was only my own sense of aesthetics and order that had been slightly offended by what I perceived as an unorthodox way of building.

A short while afterwards, Doña Lupe came in from the street with a bunch of bright flowers in her arms. As soon as she saw me, she gave me a big, welcoming smile. The flowers she was carrying, *cempasúchitles*, were used in the area for the offerings to the Dead, and I assumed that Doña Lupe had been buying them for that

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<sup>2</sup> For a comparison with other Mexican houses, see Pader's detailed description of a village house in Jalisco (1993: 121-122); Ingham (1986:57-58) for houses in Morelos; and Foster's portrayal of houses in Tzintzuntzan, also in the Pátzcuaro Lake, in the sixties (1972: 56-57).

<sup>3</sup> Carsten and Hugh-Jones stress the "processual nature of the house" and state that buildings "are not static", but are continuously transformed, in coincidence with "important events and processes in the lives of their occupants" (1995: 39).

purpose. She apologised for not having been in on my arrival and looked extremely pleased that I was finally there. I gave her the money for my accommodation, as Don Alfredo had instructed me to do previously, and we joked about women being better at taking care of money.

Again we sat down at the courtyard for another conversation, this time about the imminent festivities of the Day of the Dead. Don Alfredo, back from his duties by the mill, sat at his chair, whilst Doña Lupe did the same on a little, lower stool by her husband. Don Alfredo commented that he was expecting his daughter Ester who lived in Apatzingan, a town some five hours away from Jarácuaro, to come round. "She has to come, she 'has the obligation' (*tiene la obligación*) to put offerings for her mum<sup>4</sup> in Arócutin, you know, the village just across the water". I must have looked puzzled, because he quickly explained:

"Ah! This?" he said, pointing a thumb at Doña Lupe, "this is not my first wife. This is only my second wife. I was married before, you see, to this woman from Arócutin, and she died. But I had two daughters with her, one is Ester and the other is Domitila. Tila lives here; Ester lives in Apatzingán and comes every year to put offerings in her mum's tomb, in the cemetery at Arócutin".

He suddenly looked sombre, as if talking of his first wife had brought sorrowful memories. I looked at Doña Lupe, curious to see if she was affected by her husband's reminiscences or his (in my view) lack of tact when referring to her. However, she remained silent and serious as she had been throughout, and just nodded solemnly at his words.

Our talk continued in a more cheerful mood as I asked about their family. They were keen to talk about this and they spoke in turns, Doña Lupe respectfully letting Don Alfredo go first and then softly correcting him when he could not remember names or forgot to mention someone. In their animated way, sometimes halting and doubtful, sometimes almost visual, they conjured up for me a picture of their respective close kin (parents, siblings, children) and the locations of their houses within the village or outside it.

Once more, the quiet voices of women could be heard by the mill behind the plastic screen, and Don Alfredo got up from his chair. Doña Lupe explained to me

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<sup>4</sup>I have kept the original expression, *mamá*, mum, as it is the widespread way in which people refers to their mothers. Terms applied to relatives, specially to children, are always in colloquial and diminutive forms. I think keeping these originals conveys the sense of affection and closeness.





Photograph 4: Doña Lupe's courtyard



that the mill was very busy on that day “because everyone is making *tamales* (boiled maize paste dumplings wrapped in maize leaves and filled with spicy meat) for the festivity, it is the custom (*la costumbre*) here”. In a tone of eager anticipation, she added:

“Tomorrow, I’ll prepare some *tamales* as well and we’ll go to the festival at night, shall we? It’s in the church’s esplanade, and there will be *pirecuas* (Purhépecha songs) and *pireris* (Purhépecha singers) and dances of the *Viejitos* (traditional humorous dance of the region). It happens every year, and everyone goes and takes food and *ponche* (hot fruit drink). We’ll go together, shall we?, because I could not go all on my own. And we’ll stay there till daylight! Now you’re here, we can go together”.

### Houses, boundaries

The warm reception at Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo’s household made me reflect on the many transitions that I had just undergone: from the town of Pátzcuaro, where I had been staying with friends, to the little island of Jarácuaro where I hardly knew anybody; from the comfort of the familiar spaces, of people perceived as similar, of recognisable behaviours and gestures, to the insecurity and fear of the unknown. I had a definite image in my mind which, to me, condensed what I had just gone through: the image of a passage from the outside of all the anonymous houses of the area, from which I had felt shut out so far, to the inside of one particular house, to which I had been admitted. I felt I had stepped into a world I had not been to before, and, however incompletely and temporarily, I was to be a part of it for the few forthcoming months. My feelings at the time were echoed by the words of Carsten and Hugh-Jones:

“To enter another culture is to stand nervously in front of an alien house and to step inside a world of unfamiliar objects and strange people, a maze of spatial conventions where invisible lines get easily scuffed and trampled by ignorant foreign feet”. (1995: 4)

The image of myself first outside houses and then inside a house was not merely metaphorical, but responded to a very definite personal experience. Ever since my arrival at the Pátzcuaro region I had been fascinated by the houses. In the villages, they sat side by side along the unevenly paved streets, which had been planned following the traditional “checkerboard pattern” imposed by the Spaniards (see Foster 1972: 39, and Brandes 1988: 12, for a description of Tzintzuntzan; also Beals about Cherán, 1992 [1945]: 32; and Gimenez 1978: 66 for Chalma). In the ones less prettified for the sake of tourism, like Jarácuaro, the façades were plain and uninteresting, just a square, usually carelessly painted in

white and red, the traditional colours of the area dating back to colonial times. The door was generally in the middle, wooden or metal and was rarely open. Sometimes there were one or two little windows, invariably covered by curtains or cardboard, and often also by metal bars. From beyond the plain and uninviting fronts, the sounds that came from the inner courtyards hidden from one's sight were those of chatter, the clinking of pots, children's cries. I occasionally had a glimpse through a half-closed door, but there was always a barrier (a plastic screen, an inner wall) which would stand between my curious glance and the domestic lives going on inside. I felt excluded from these lives, trapped outside the walls. By contrast, whenever I went into a house, as a visitor or a guest, it was as if I had been briefly admitted into a different world: inside, there were sunny courtyards full of flowers, old people plaiting palm strips to make hats, children playing, women doing house chores, smells of firewood and incessant conversations. On those occasions I knew it was such a world that I wanted to experience and learn about. Thus throughout my stay I came to think of the walls of houses as the physical, tangible boundaries which divided life in the inside from life in the outside. In part, as pointed out before, this was a reflection of my own status as an outsider (my life outside versus their life inside) or a metaphor for my desire to "transcend" the surfaces and be "let into" other's lives. However I would soon realise that the barriers seemed to stand there for others as well.

For instance, people seemed to be almost obsessively preoccupied with concealing the inside of their houses from the unwanted peering of their neighbours and co-villagers. As mentioned above, windows were usually covered and doors closed. If opened, one might only see as far as an entrance area, empty and undecorated. The interior of houses was always shielded from view by some kind of barrier, either defined in the very design of the house or added to, such as cardboard or plastic walls<sup>5</sup>. In our house, the door was left open during the day for the mill customers, but their curiosity was kept at bay with the black plastic screen and an extra curtain which was let down sometimes. The visual barricade was reinforced by an acoustic one: silence. Whenever women could be heard coming in through the door, Doña Lupe would signal to the rest of us to keep quiet: movements would be slowed down, conversations stopped and calls from the entrance were deliberately ignored. Not only she did not want anyone to see the inside of her house but she tried to keep our activities and our very presence a secret from her neighbours, unknown to them.

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<sup>5</sup>Brandes has described Tzintzuntzan houses in a similar manner (1988: 15).



The perception of walls of houses as boundaries was reinforced by the fact that crossing others' doorsteps was not such a frequent thing on the island. I used to visit lots of people in the village to talk to them in connection with my research. It was not uncommon for me to be left waiting outside, the door uncomfortably shut in front of me, whilst the person I had asked for was informed of my presence. At the beginning I thought this was due to my status as an stranger and that it would change when people got to know me better. Yet even towards the end of my stay I was still being left outside by some of my friends. At first, I felt slightly affronted by this, but soon realised I was not the only one to be given this treatment: people left their lifelong neighbours, who might have called to ask for a favour, in front of shut doors whilst they did whatever they had to do inside. A woman could share gossip at another woman's doorstep, but she would rarely be invited to come in.

Furthermore, there was a noticeable change in people's behaviour when they left houses to go into the streets, or when they came into others' houses. For instance Doña Lupe always grabbed her *rebozo*, the blue and black shawl worn by most Purhépecha women, and wrapped it around herself before she went into the street for any little errand. She also put a serious, almost stern expression on her face before stepping out. Whenever women entered someone else's house, they did it very slowly, with small halting steps, and would say "*buenos días*" ("good morning") or "*buenas tardes*" ("good afternoon") in a high pitched voice accompanied by a shy demeanour and some giggling, as if they were doing something slightly inappropriate. Attitudes and bearings were also different when inside one's house or outside of it: Don Alfredo hung around in his house most of the time in slippers and a bright orange woolly hat, looking tired and old. However, when he was out, he was the perfect image of a "proper" Jarácuaro household's head. Dressed in cowboy boots and hat, clean dark shirt and jeans, holding himself straight up with an air of importance and respectability, his aspect was a few years younger.

In short, it could be said that the walls of houses worked in Jarácuaro as physical and perceptual boundaries, which enclosed something inside them and shielded it from the outside. In this sense, it could be argued that the space within a house was somehow "closed"<sup>6</sup>. One could also see houses as "an extra skin,

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow the notion of "closed" space from James Littlejohn (1960), who used it with reference to Temne houses. According to this author, the nature of the space created within the walls of the Temne dwelling is "kanta", closed against evil creatures through the

carapace or second layer of clothes" which, in the case of Jarácuaro, served less "to reveal and display" than to "hide and protect" (Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995: 2). At a first glance, it would appear that what houses enveloped was the privacy and domestic life of the household, and that people wanted to protect this domestic life from the, perhaps, not so innocent curiosity of others. Yet such interpretations are somewhat simplistic, and might be more related to the gaze of an outsider like an anthropologist (as I expressed before) than to the experience of the people who lived in the houses.

There are two points that I would like to mention here briefly: first, the issue of superimposed categories; second, the question of activities. As far as categories are concerned, seeing the world of someone like Doña Lupe divided by her house walls into inside/outside, and perhaps into other dichotomies such as private/public, might be attributing one's own conceptual divisions (in my case, as an European and as an anthropologist) to others' perception of the world. As Unni Wikan suggests:

"Where the critical boundaries in people's lives go, what the vital distinctions they make cannot be decided a priori, but it is a matter for empirical investigation. [...] Anthropologists have a tendency to partition the world into distinct spheres or fields, a necessary step, in part, that we may begin to grasp a ramifying, bewildering world. [...] It is a *life-world* we partition when we apply Western conceptual schemes without critical examination of what are the notions in which the actor's own significant distinctions are cast" (1990: 76)

The fact that our pre-conceived, ready-made categories might fail to reflect others' vision of reality leads to the need to question the relevance of using them as a way of describing people's experience, perception and interpretation of their worlds. For instance, in the particular case of Jarácuaro, focusing exclusively on walls as boundaries, and on the concept of interior space as divided from the exterior one, has the effect of constructing relatively static categories. These not only might be completely irrelevant to the people involved, as pointed out before, but also seem to centre on objects (things or concepts) rather than on people who are, after all, subjects of their own lives. I do not deny the physical barrier that houses represented, or the use that people made of their structural characteristics to conceal, display or distort their lives in front of others. However, in people's lives, as experienced and expressed, abstract dichotomies and classified spaces were not

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effecting of some rituals. In this sense, Jarácuaro houses could be seen as "closed" against outside intrusions by and through the protective actions of their occupants.

so important as activities and interactions, thoughts and feelings, perceptions and opinions. People's lives were not so much about kitchen or street as about sleeping, eating, working with and talking to significant others in a flow of movement and experience and in different contexts. Many scholars have argued that "space comes to have meaning through particular practices. It has no fixed meaning outside these" (Bourdieu, 1977; Moore 1986; cited in Carsten & Hugh-Jones, 1995: 41). From this perspective, then, the focus should be not on the physical boundaries themselves, or in the spaces determined by them, but on the people creating, perceiving and experiencing such boundaries and spaces through their actions and movements, in interaction with others, and on the effects of such perceptions and experiences on their daily lives. In Unni Wikan's words:

"If [...] we anchor our interpretations in *praxis* (Bourdieu, 1977), we may hope to better illuminate how an actual range of events, and the specific interpretations imposed upon them by the actors, together create the experience that makes up a socially and culturally mediated 'reality'" (1990: 20)

Throughout my stay in Jarácuaro I realised that what was relevant for people like Doña Lupe or Don Alfredo was not so much the material building which constituted their dwelling, or the makeshift screens they made to stop neighbours from spying, or the area within which the kitchen lay. They had no specific or elaborate rituals or ceremonials devoted to them, and they did not talk about them in special modes, or even often for that matter<sup>7</sup>. What interested and concerned them, what they talked about and paid attention to in their daily lives, were matters such as what they and others did -in the kitchen, in the street- and how, who was there interacting with them and why, what others thought or said about all the above and for what, and so on. It was actions and activities, interactions, thoughts, perceptions and interpretations, feelings and relationships, what made up what Unni Wikan calls the "movement of their experience" (1990: 20). It was behaviours, considerations, visions, forms, gestures, moods and feelings of people, as exemplified above, which differentiated what I called the "inside" from the "outside" of houses, and which thus turned, in my view, walls into boundaries.

In the next pages I will try to reflect these daily lives from the point of view of the personal experience of people, and particularly of women. I have chosen to call the first chapter "Life inside houses" and the second "Life outside houses" not

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<sup>7</sup> Most conversations in Jarácuaro referring to houses or parts of them concerned inheritances, monetary valuations, purchases, sales or construction and repair works.

because I am going to focus on interior spaces, the exterior or boundaries, but because I want to present people's activities, actions and interactions, experiences and thoughts in different contexts and situations, and such division, albeit oversimplified, aids to a clearer and more concise presentation, necessary in the present thesis. I will also use the personal experiences of those closer to me throughout my fieldwork, but the whole picture I expect to portray is a composite of many people, in varying circumstances and displaying diverse attitudes and responses, through which I attempt to convey a sense of the flow and movement of everyday life from the viewpoint of the actors themselves. It is almost redundant to say that what follows does not intend to be an exhaustive account, but a glimpse of some lives as lived inside and outside houses.

## II. Life inside houses

### Quotidian work

People in Jarácuaro woke up early, around dawn. It was usually women who were up first, to go to the mill and grind the *nixtamal* (boiled maize) to make the daily *tortillas* (maize pancakes, the staple food of Mexicans). In our house, Don Alfredo got up earlier to attend to the first wave of exclusively female customers at around 5 am, but then went back to sleep. Doña Lupe used to get up shortly afterwards, and, surrounded by the morning mist, started sweeping the courtyard and getting the *nixtamal* ready. From that moment onwards, she seemed to be engaged in a constant flurry of activity. She, like any other married woman, was in charge of most domestic<sup>8</sup> tasks to do with the day to day running of the house: *el trabajo de las mujeres* (women's work). Cleaning and sweeping, washing clothes and kitchen utensils, cooking and serving the food were all women's work. In the hard living conditions of Jarácuaro, where houses were basic and there was no regular system of running water or gas supply, every chore was laborious, time consuming

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<sup>8</sup> I use the word "domestic" here not in opposition to "public" (see Ortner, 1974; Rosaldo 1974) but to refer to the work related to the necessary maintenance of hygiene and well-being of the occupants of a house. In this sense, some of this domestic work can take place outside a house, like washing clothes, and some of it might be done by men, like repairing a roof.



Photograph 5: Doña Lupe, at dawn, sweeping the courtyard.



and tiring. For instance, the *nixtamal* was normally boiled overnight in enormous tin pots placed on a coal fire. After washing and peeling the grains, they were ground twice, in the mechanical mill and in the *metate*, a flat volcanic stone used for manual grinding. The *tortillas*, dozens of them for each regular household of more than four adults, were made manually one by one, in an operation (rolling, flattening, baking on both sides) which lasted an hour or more. Up until the recent past water had to be collected by girls and women in pitchers from a well near the church. Nowadays, non-purified water was pumped into houses for two hours on alternate days from a central communal tank, using a pump which was broken more often than not. Clothes were washed in the lake, and the sight of women on their knees, bending by the dirty waters washing heaps of children's nappies, skirts, shirts, trousers and woollen blankets was very common. Doña Lupe did not have small children anymore, but young women who did had to work even harder.

Women did most of the domestic chores in houses; men were supposed to do none of the women's work. They were supposed to work in the fields, deal with the crops and with the large domestic animals. They were notionally in charge of bringing cash for the running of the house, and for that they bought and sold cattle, made hats, or migrated to the United States to work as labourers. Don Alfredo, for instance, was lucky and had inherited the mill from his father; his son Feyo made hats and the other, Tano, worked in a factory in a distant town. However, men's work in general did not appear to be as hard or as continuous as that of women. Agriculture was a seasonal job, and the fields were left alone between this year's harvest and next year's ploughing. Animals (horses, cows, donkeys, pigs) roamed alone in the grass fields and needed little attention. Many men seemed to spend a great deal of time hanging around *en la esquina* (at the corners of streets), drinking with other men, or, specially young men, at the billiard room, or in festivals and *jaripeos* (bull riding events, similar to rodeos) around the lake. Alcoholism amongst men seemed to be a widespread problem in the area (there was an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting room at Jarácuaro) and obviously this must have affected the productivity of many of them. As far as bringing money in, I got the impression that it was a combined effort between several members of the household: men sent valuable dollars from the United States, or got occasional good deals for cattle, but women secured reliable small amounts on a regular basis by selling vegetables, hats or plaited palm in local markets<sup>9</sup>. Also men often "neglected" their duties and spent

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<sup>9</sup> Henrietta Moore talks about the common assumption amongst researchers, usually reinforced by local gender ideologies, that women's "domestic work" is not productive in a

well-needed cash in drink and festivals. Don Alfredo attended to the mill, but between one busy time and the next, he lay in his bed sleeping or watching television. Perhaps once a week he would go shopping to Pátzcuaro or Eronga, in trips he used to call "*mis negocitos*" ("my little business") whose results were never obvious to me. I only saw him going to the fields on a few occasions, and then he would take his daughter Marta, daughter-in-law Machí, son-in-law Héctor and his grandson Tzan with him to help (in the past, Doña Lupe had gone as well). His mill produced a regular income, but when I stayed in the house, Doña Lupe was earning more than her husband from the rent I paid her.

Doña Lupe had to do all the housework by herself, with a little help from Machí, her daughter-in-law who lived in her own house built in the backyard. However, this was a slightly atypical situation, as in most houses there was more than one woman to share the tasks. Girls started doing women's work from an early age, following their mothers' and grandmothers' orders. Berenice, Doña Lupe's granddaughter, who was eight years old, was sent to the river with small buckets of baby clothes to wash, and whenever the communal pump was broken, it tended to be young girls whom one saw carrying the jugs of water on their heads. When a girl got married and moved to the groom's house, she automatically was expected to help her mother-in-law: in a few cases they were left to do all the domestic chores on their own, but more often they had the company and help of mothers-in-law and unmarried sisters-in-law. Older women did less, as they were usually attended to by their daughters-in-law. However, they participated in some of the tasks, like the preparation and serving of foods or the removing of maize grains from the cob. In general, women did their "obligations" (*obligaciones*), most of them taking place inside the house, in the company of daughters-in-law, unmarried daughters, mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law or mothers-in-law, depending on age and marital status.

How did women perceive their work? What and how did they think about it themselves? As I said before, women seemed to be continuously engaged in a perpetual motion of tasks and chores. Even when they had finished the bulk of the housework and had some time to rest, they often sat in their courtyards plaiting

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monetary sense (see Foster 1972: 43-55, for an example of this in the context of the Lake Pátzcuaro). Contrary to this, she argues that "through their activities, [...] women make a significant contribution to household income, both directly in terms of their unpaid agricultural and household labour, and directly through the money they earn in market-trading and petty commodity production" (1988: 43)



Photograph 6 (above): Doña Lupe making *tortillas* in her kitchen.  
Photograph 7 (below): Women selling fish in a regional market.

palm, embroidering, or mending clothes. Many of them complained about the strain of constant labouring. Doña Lupe used to refer quite often to the "laborious" condition of women:

"After getting married one cannot be out and about all the time, one has to get up and sweep, grind, make the *tortillas*, prepare something for breakfast, wash the dishes or clothes, then look for something for lunch (*el "con qué"*, the "what with?"); and it is like this all day, running from here to there, and there never seems to be enough time"

Women in general talked a great deal about what they did, and listed and described in minute detail the tasks in which they had been occupied on that day, always remarking the hardship of a "woman's responsibilities in the house" (*las responsabilidades de una en la casa*) with an overwhelmed expression. From my point of view, their work was exhausting, and despite the apparent readiness with which they undertook it, women looked much older than their actual ages and many suffered various ailments and deformities related to strenuous tasks, such as hernias or scoliosis.

However, despite the hardness, women accepted the tasks they had to do because, as I was told many a time, "This is a woman's obligation: it is her responsibility to attend to her husband and her children" (*atender al esposo y a los hijos*). Everyone I spoke to in Jarácuaro, men and women, old and young, concurred in this matter, and even young women who worked in paid employment assumed they still had to complete all their obligations at home. In this sense, women took pride in their hard work, and the long lists of exhausting tasks they so often related were accompanied by satisfied expressions. They felt, as far as I could sense, a certain gratification not so much in the pain of labouring but in the attitude of constant motion leading to the fulfilling of their obligations.

In any case, the experience of women of being "inside the house" must have been inextricably related to the experience of constant activity, of a sustained rhythm of motion and movement, and of the completion of task after task, only to start again the next day, which, as I just mentioned, was perceived simultaneously as a burden and a source of gratification. Not only that, but the sheer length of the chores that had to be performed kept them indoors much of the time. However, as was mentioned before, many of the tasks were done in the company of other close female relatives, sharing activity, time and space with them. In addition to this, the rhythm of activity changed throughout the day on a few occasions from arduous work into more relaxed activities, with even the occasional moment of pure leisure.



Then women chatted, received visits, exchanged gossip, played with their children or plaited palm quietly in their courtyards. I will talk about all these in forthcoming sections.

### Company and presence

One of the first things that I noticed when I moved into Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe's house was the way in which members of the household sought to be accompanied by others almost on a continuous basis. From the moment I opened my door in the morning, I knew that I was going to be talking with Doña Lupe or Machí, sitting with Don Alfredo in the courtyard or playing with one of the children for most of the time, for they actively "attended to me" (*me atendían*) as a matter of courtesy. Whenever I wanted to be on my own, to write my notes or simply to take a quiet moment, I had to close the door and pretend to be sleeping or working on something important, as the others simply thought it strange for someone to want to be completely alone without necessity.

People in Jarácuaro in general enjoyed the company and physical presence of the others in their households, and disliked being on their own tremendously. As far as I know, nobody lived alone in the island. There were a few couples who lived on their own, because they were childless, or because all their children were away, and they were pitied by their neighbours. Once Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo received a visit from an old woman. They all sat in the courtyard and the women spoke in Purhépecha in sorrowful tones, crying softly, whilst my hosts listened with a sad expression on their faces. When the woman left, Doña Lupe explained to me that the old lady was a distant relative of hers, who did not have children, and who lived "alone with her husband, just like Don Alfredo and I<sup>10</sup>". The old couple felt quite abandoned and hopeless, and the old lady went to see Doña Lupe now and then. "She talks a bit, and feels a bit more comforted", I was told. *Sentirse solo*, feeling lonely, or *estar solito*, being alone, were very undesirable, dreadful situations, and people avoided them as much as possible.

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<sup>10</sup> I found Doña Lupe's statement somehow strange, as Feyo and Machí lived in the house in the backyard and spent a great deal of their time in outside. However, as it will be seen in Chapter 5, Feyo and Machí, as the first son and his wife, did not strictly speaking "belong" to Don Alfredo's house, and they were meant to, and in fact did, lead increasingly independent lives from my hosts.



However, most people did not have to worry about being alone, for houses were usually full of other close relatives: many households<sup>11</sup> I visited consisted of a mature couple with their unmarried daughters and one or more married sons with their own families, as well as maybe their elderly surviving parents, a childless sibling, or a floating population of grandchildren. Even young couples who had just “set themselves apart” (*ponerse aparte*) had houses full of children, as they usually did not move out of the husband’s parents’ until after they had had some offspring. The noises, the chatter, the continuous contact and interaction with others were very pleasant for people, and made them, as Doña Lupe said, “comforted” and protected, as if enveloped by the constant presence of other bodies. The physical element of the daily intercourse with the members of one’s household was very strong. For instance, it became evident in the sleeping arrangements of most houses. When Doña Lupe’s children were still unmarried the girls slept together in one bed with their grandmother. When Feyo “ran away” with Machí and before the marriage was formalised, the latter slept with the girls as well in the same bed. At the time of my fieldwork, Marta spent many nights in our house, sleeping at her parents’ room, Doña Lupe, herself and the children all on a *petate* (straw mat) on the floor. And Kikí, the second of Feyo’s boys, liked sharing her grandparents’ bed. Foster mentioned people’s disposition to sleep communally in Tzintzuntzan, and he interpreted this conduct as “a source of comfort and security” (1972: 108). In Jarácuaro continuous presence and contact was perceived as an important condition to develop relationships, and becoming “accustomed” (*acostumbrarse*) to someone was at the basis of feelings of affection and attachment. For instance, Doña Lupe explained to me that her little granddaughter Vianney, who lived in Lerma, had not wanted to stay with her because she was accustomed to her parents (*ya se acostumbró a sus papas*), and thus she might have missed them too much. Also, whenever she referred to my departure, she argued that she would miss me a great deal because she had become accustomed to my being there.

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<sup>11</sup> I use the words “house” and “household” as interchangeable throughout the thesis to refer to the occupants of a domestic dwelling. “Household” was not a distinct, defined or relevant category on the island, as it seems to be in other parts of Latin America (see Bourque 1993a; Allen 1988). People’s living arrangements were relatively fluid and movable, and things were organised in different ways, by different people and for different reasons. For instance, many communal contributions in Jarácuaro were payable by “married man” (*por casado*), even if several *casados* lived under the same roof. Yet, at the same time, a father like Don Alfredo might act as a family’s senior man at certain events, even if all his sons were married and lived separately.

### Forging intimacy, forging relationships

Women spent a lot of time inside the houses in the company of other women who lived with them or of close female relatives who dropped by and stayed for a while - what Doña Lupe called "*una pasadita*", a little stop-by. Doña Lupe, despite the absence of a "proper" live-in daughter-in-law, had Machí around a lot of the time, and her daughter Marta turned up usually every day with her children. Less often, her younger daughter Cheli, her step-daughter Tila, her *comadre* Doña Yola or her mother Doña Cecilia called in for a short visit. Also, for the duration of my fieldwork, I spent most of my time in the village with Doña Lupe, something that she thought the obvious thing to do, and I found a little difficult at times.

Doña Cecilia, Reyna her daughter and Glafira her daughter-in-law lived in the same house. When I visited them I usually found them in the company of Doña Amelia, all of them making "flour *tortillas*" (*tortillas de harina*, wheat flour pancakes), or perhaps Glafira swept the courtyard whilst Reyna watered the many flower pots and Doña Cecilia plaited palm with her elderly mother. They were usually talking about something to do with the work, quarrelling about differences of opinion, chattering about some occurrence in the village or laughing at what one of the children had done. The children would be playing, and maybe Irene, Glafira's eleven-year-old girl, would be doing something her mother had urged her to do. Don Joaquín, Doña Cecilia's husband, was out in the street quite often, meeting other men, having a few drinks sometimes, and Joel, their son, worked away from home for the INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista) in Pátzcuaro.

In Doña Lupe's household, there was rarely so much animation. She worked with Machí on festivals, when both of them would prepare the food together in the kitchen, their repetitive movements of flattening, grinding and stirring animated by much chatter, laughter, gossiping and humorous puns. On most days, however, she sat after the afternoon meal in the courtyard or the covered passageway, sometimes plaiting palm, sometimes doing nothing, just talking with me or Machí. Marta used to come round at this time with her children, and Doña Lupe would lay down straw mats where they would all sit very closely, the women in the typical female Purhépecha way, with their legs bent and their feet tucked away under their bottoms. These times I was usually invited to join them by Doña Lupe (Marta did not seem to be so keen on the idea) but I was invariably given a chair to sit on.

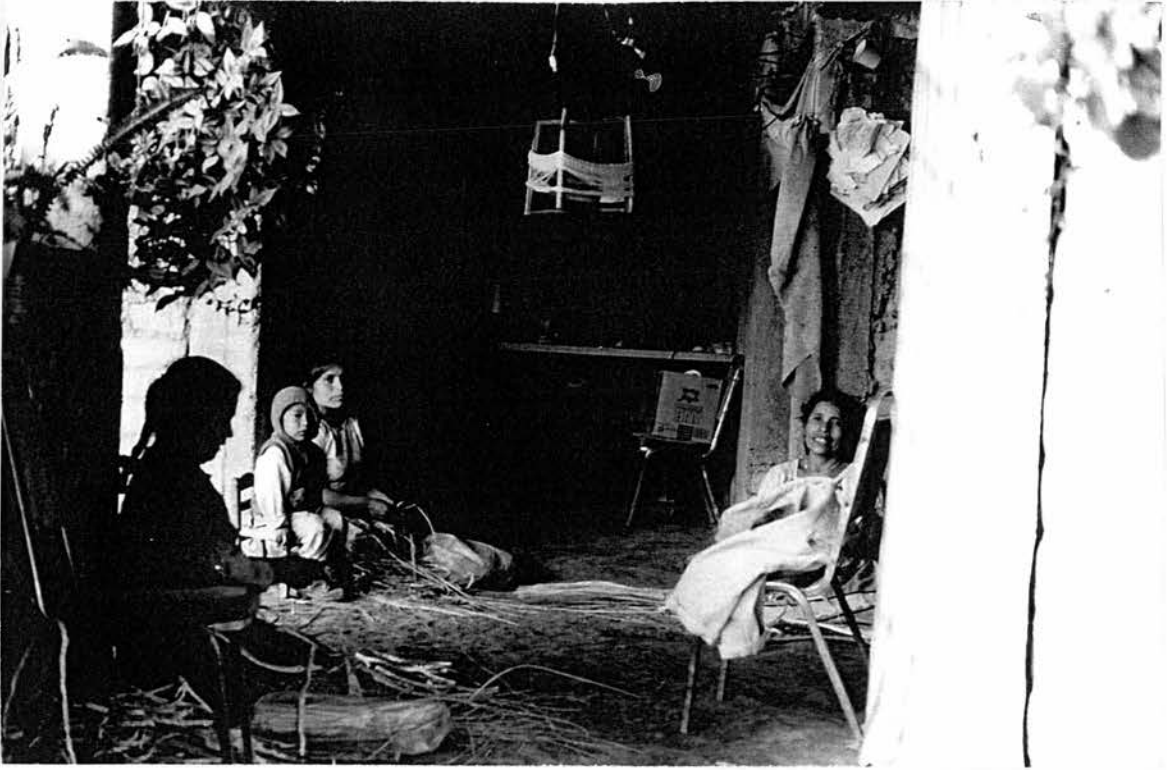
In those afternoons, Doña Lupe, Marta and Machí played with the little children, mostly with Marta's infant daughter and Machí's son, who was just a little older, but also with the others, all between one and eight years old. The adults would caress them, tease them, delouse them, and the mothers would breastfeed their little ones. I remember poignantly the scene of Marta combing her oldest daughter Berenice's hair with great care and tenderness, something that surprised me given the usual severity with which she used to treat her. All women sat together really closely, and although they did not behave towards each other in the same way they did towards the children, they would touch when talking, or would lean on each other in attacks of laughter. The only child who was excluded from this scene was Tzan, who had turned ten and was a "little man" already (*un hombrecito*). I will return to this point of the exclusion of men later.

Throughout all the time they were playing and caressing children, Doña Lupe and her close relatives usually talked incessantly. Conversations were commonly about things that had happened in their own households or about other people in the village: where they had been seen, what were they doing there, what they said, what others said about it all. At other times, they discussed more practical matters: the price of maize in this or that shop, the latest break up of the water pump; or the women diverted their attentions to the children, asking them questions, teasing them or cooing to the small ones. The most usual mode in which they talked was very descriptive, reproducing whole dialogues that had happened at other time and places:

"I saw so-and-so going towards the pharmacy today", Marta, for instance, would say, "and she was carrying a bag. I saw her from afar and I thought, 'who is that there?' and I say to my mother-in-law, 'who is that there?', and she says, "is that not so-and-so?", and I say, "what is she doing there, what for is she going to the pharmacy?", and my mother-in-law says, 'ahhh! it must be that her father-in-law is sick, he is very old, the poor man, and she must be buying a remedy for him'. And I said, 'really! is the old man dying?', and she says, 'I heard the other day they had to go to Eronga to the doctor, because he was so ill, he was already dying, I was told'"<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>The translation into English of the following original in Spanish: "Y pues le ví a la de ....yendo como a la farmacia, y pues llevaba comounsaco, y yo que la veo de lejos y me digo, '¿y esa quién es, pues?', y que le pregunto a mi suegra, '¿quién es?', y ella me dice, '¿pues no es esa, la de...?', y yo digo, '¿pues qué andará haciendo por aquí, pa' qué irá a la farmacia?', y mi suegra me dice, "ahhh, pues debe ser por el suegro, que ha de andar enfermo, pues, esta ya viejo, el pobrecito, y ella le ha de estar comprando remedio', y yo le dije, ¡a pocoya se anda muriendo el señor!, y ella pues me dice, 'me dijeron el otro día que lo tuvieron que llevar a Eronga con el doctor, se puso bien malo, ya se andaba muriendo, eso me dijeron, pues'".



Photograph 8: Plaiting palm at Machí's house. From left to right: Tila, Calí, Machí and Doña Lupe.



Sometimes, Marta would consult her mother about personal issues, such as what to do about one of her children's catarrh or how to react about something she had been told. In those cases, Doña Lupe adopted a pedagogical tone:

"They told me that so and so, the neighbour, he has something bad in his lungs and the doctor has said that there is nothing to be done, that his lungs will not get better with medicine or anything. Is he really going to die, mum?" Marta said once, looking at her mother, as if in disbelief and requesting some assurance of the contrary.

"Well, yes, if he is sick that way, and the doctor has said that, that means he is going to die. He is old, anyway, he has to die. They will have to resign themselves", answered Doña Lupe, matter-of-fact and pragmatic about death.

Some of the conversations were conducted in Spanish, but many of them fluctuated between Spanish and Purhépecha, and some of them (the ones that appear to be about more scandalous matters, given the amount of fuss) were spoken only in Purhé. When this happened, as my knowledge of Purhé was very limited, I used to observe their gestures. I realised that the motion and movement of talking, the flow and tone of voice, the touching of the arm, the eye contact and little sentences that confirmed attention (*¡a poco!*, really!; *¡no pues!*, no!; *¡Nana Purísima!*, Holy Virgin!), the alternation of speakers, were almost as important as the words that were said. The "use" of linguistic and extra-linguistic elements as functional instruments in social interaction has been noted by Bourdieu (1977:25).

Another thing which happened during these times of related women sitting together in the house was that little bits of food would be shared and eaten. Food in Doña Lupe's house was only eaten at meals (early morning, mid afternoon and early evening), and everything left over was tucked away in pots and bags in a room. At meals, women would serve men, and then they usually ate either standing up in a corner, almost surreptitiously, or later, alone in the kitchen. However, on these occasions in the afternoon, Doña Lupe produced some fruit or some dry *tamales*, which were supposedly for the children, but which the women always ended up munching as well, and they ate them slowly, with real delight.

All the behaviours described above were not exclusive of Doña Lupe's house: I saw similar scenes in other houses. The atmosphere at those times was usually one of informality and ease<sup>13</sup>, as it was also often the case when women

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<sup>13</sup> Janet Carsten has noted something similar amongst Malay women of Langkawi (1997: 47)



were working together: gestures were relaxed, smiles and laughter frequent. I started to realise that when closely related women (mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, sometimes sisters) lived together or came together in a house, a special form of intimacy would be created between them. Through working together, through close physical contact and company, through talking, gossiping, laughing and sharing little treats, Doña Lupe, her daughter and daughter-in-law, for example, developed a form of interaction that made them feel close, relaxed and somehow protected. Doña Lupe used to express this experience of pleasure and well-being by saying, her face lit up with a wide grin: “*¡Tan bien que se está aquí!*” (“One is so well here!”). The children were also included, and they learned these forms of behaviour and experience through words and action and through their bodies. I was left outside those interactions by subtle exclusions, like being sat on a chair and not the mat, not being touched or being linguistically isolated. From my external position, it seemed as if they produced a milieu of affection and trust, which then coloured and qualified the spaces in which it happened: the courtyard, the passageway, the kitchen.

From my point of view, this milieu was not a function of these spaces, but of the behaviour and experience of women together (for a similar position see Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 41). In fact, it could be recreated by them in other spaces outside the house. When women got together by the lake, or travelled to outside markets, or met in the church esplanade, they did sometimes produce small contexts of intimacy. Nevertheless, the house was a privileged setting in certain situations for various reasons, such as the indoor location of most women’s tasks<sup>14</sup>, the possible absence of men, the physical isolation from other, less socially close people, and the women’s overall perception that houses were an adequate place to be (all of these will be discussed later). Intimacy was, thus, not “conditioned” by space but created by people; or, as Wikan remarks, “place is not the salient variable so much as the constellation of place-and-person combined” (1990: 58). Hence it could be said that it was the actions and perceptions of women, the warmth and comfort felt by them in the company of certain others, which made their houses experientially nice places, and then ideal settings for sharing intimacy and trust.

Furthermore, throughout my fieldwork, I observed that this type of interaction only occurred amongst women who either lived together or who were

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<sup>14</sup> Which, as said before, meant for the women not only hard work but an experience and perception of satisfaction for the fulfilment of one’s obligations.

closely related. Did that mean that intimacy was therefore a result of a classification of people, women in this case, in different categories: relatives and non-relatives, kin and non-kin? Some anthropologists have interpreted similar situations like that (e.g. Norget 1993; Bourque 1993a about Ecuador). Yet I would argue that, among the women in Jarácuaro, affective bonds were not “prescribed” according to “categories” of people, although they were obviously desired and more frequent amongst close relatives and happened spontaneously between some *compadres*. My impression is that, in Jarácuaro, affectionate links were not the products of prescriptions but of certain psycho-social dynamics between specific persons. Women actively created them with certain others, mostly women, and then continuously re-created them through an on-going, circular, complex process of experience and interaction. From a perspective focused on the experience of people, it could be said that women interacted with specific others with whom they had personal, long-standing, close relationships in forms that created and re-created intimacy between them<sup>15</sup>. Those close personal relationships of trust and affection were not merely a pre-condition of these interactions of intimacy, but also, in turn, the result of a continuous interaction in and for intimacy. This process was possible and, in most cases, easier amongst women who lived together, worked together, and spent time together (cf. Janet Carsten 1997: 72-73, with reference to Malay mothers and daughters). However, it was neither conditioned by space -the interior of houses- nor contingent to types of kinship or affinity, but connected to specific significant others. This is not to say that kinship or affinity had nothing to do with it: as mentioned above, women desired intimate and harmonious relationships with their mothers, sisters, daughters and, in most cases, with their daughters-in-law; but in the complexity of their lives, circumstances and relationships, this was frequently not the case. Doña Lupe had close, intimate links with her daughters and daughters-in-law; yet her relationships with her mother and sisters were fraught with resentment and suspicion. Doña Cecilia, however, had excellent rapport with two of her daughters and her daughter-in-law, but was not so close to her own mother and her daughter Doña Lupe. Doña Amelia, in turn, got on with one of her sisters, Reyna, but not with the other, Doña Lupe, and was very attached to her two daughters, but could hardly speak to her co-resident daughter-in-law; and so on. In my particular case, a close relationship between Doña Lupe and myself was generated: through my stay in her household and thus our continuous physical

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<sup>15</sup> Wikan suggests something similar in the context of Bali when she says that “an eventual atmosphere of warmth and intimacy in private depends on the constellation of people present [and] the quality of their relationships” (1990:60; emphasis mine).

interaction, through our mutual companionship and some shared quotidian activities with her (eating, visiting, resting), and most specially, through our many daily hours of talking, we grew affectionate towards each other and sometimes interacted like mother and daughter. This was possibly why Marta found my company and presence in the household difficult and confusing.

### Women and men inside houses

Men spent a lot of their time occupied in their own "business" outside houses. Many of them were absent altogether, working in the United States as temporary labourers; others went to distant towns to sell hats or buy animals, or do other kinds of shopping, which was not at all an activity exclusive for women. If they were on the island, they were usually visiting other men to talk about "men's issues": local politics, agricultural matters, tax contributions, or water payments. A fixture in the island was a group of men, always different in composition, of various ages, drinking beer or the strong *Tres Cañas* (sugar cane alcohol) at one of the street corners near Doña Lupe's house. Young men were expected to be away at other villages' festivities. When they married, they became a lot "calmer" and spent more time indoors, like Feyo, who in fact got married, according to Doña Lupe, "so that he stayed more at home and did not hang around in the street drinking".

Whenever married men were at home, they rarely mixed with the women. Not only did they have different activities to do inside, like sewing hats or mending farming tools, but also they did not share much of their leisure time with their female relatives. I was jokingly told that if men spent much time with their wives, for instance, others called them *mandilones*, roughly translated as "those who wore big aprons", which was offensive and humiliating for them. Don Alfredo had to stay in the house for periods of time during the day to attend to the mill. However, as mentioned before, he confined himself in his room and watched television or slept. Sometimes he sat in the courtyard and soaked in the sun or played with his little grandsons, but Doña Lupe rarely sat with him at those times, since she was usually busy with one of her many chores. I have also pointed out that men and women did not share meals properly speaking. For instance, Doña Lupe served Don Alfredo and often Tzan, and when they had almost finished and got up, she carelessly took a few *tortillas* filled with the day's stew.



On occasions, however, men and women sat together in kitchens or passageways, usually when there were "*visitas*", visitors. Don Joaquín often pulled up a chair when I went to see them, and would chat with me for a while. Doña Cecilia sometimes sat on the floor by him, but remained mostly quiet, occupied in plaiting palm, now and then adding something to her husband's comments, her restrained attitude so different from her usual talkative and even sharp manners. Many times when Marta or Tila came round, Don Alfredo sat with us in the courtyard and he did so on a high chair, his body above all the women's heads except mine. Although in those situations conversations were fairly easygoing, it was different from the times women were alone. Their behaviours were less relaxed and more alert. They respectfully listened to Don Alfredo whenever he spoke, they kept their children quieter and they usually broke up the company earlier and more willingly than they would have done among themselves.

I did not perceive this separation of men and women inside households to be a result of spatial classificatory divisions, as is suggested in many anthropological works in diverse contexts (Hugh-Jones, 1979; Boddy 1989; Sciamia 1993). This view was never reported or acknowledged at all by anyone throughout my stay on the island. Neither was there a clear-cut, structural segregation and men did not look uncomfortable or expressed any experience of "being out of place" inside their houses. On the contrary, men and women spoke of spending time at home as a desirable situation, and willingly remaining indoors was seen as a good quality in both genders. Little boys were told to "come in", like their sisters, and women praised men who were not "somewhere out there all day long" (*todo el día por ahí*). Older men remained behind "to take care of the house" when the rest of the household went to celebrations or even to Mass. The detachment between men and women inside houses appeared to be more a case of separate tasks and differential perceptions of their obligations. However, it also responded, in part, to the women's experience of discomfort in the presence of the men, which, it must be said, was clearly reciprocated by the men.

The presence of men had a definite effect on women's gatherings. It affected their behaviour, their topics of conversation and the overall tone of ease and intimacy. I still remember a time when Don Alfredo and Feyo were away on some business. Through the door of my room, I listened to Machí, Doña Lupe, Marta and Tila talking vivaciously through a rapid succession of topics. Machí gave a detailed and hilarious description of Feyo coming in drunk on the previous night, which was

followed by roaring laughter. Then, they discussed who was getting married next in the island and how the brides and their in-laws were running some pre-wedding customary visits. They joked about some old man who was so upset about not being invited to a wedding that he cried. They laughed heartily again. Next came a quieter conversation about the children's recent illnesses and after that, a debate about the qualities of the water from the tank and the well. Finally, they pondered various prices, money collections, payments and debts. Tila left and the three remaining women, now even more at ease as Tila was less intimate with them, switched into Purhé and lowered their voices, obviously talking about something quite confidential. At that point I noticed a silence and heard them shifting their bodies. I could not see what had happened but I detected a clear change in the mood prevailing in the sunny courtyard. Then, I heard Don Alfredo's "*¡Buenas tardes!*" ("Good afternoon!") and his steps towards where the women were. After a quick exchange about the details of the trip, I heard Machí said she had things to do and started to leave. Doña Lupe and Marta continued with their plaiting, now in silence. When I later recorded this episode in my field diary, I gave it a title, "House without men".

Why did the presence of men had such an impact on women's interaction? What did women feel and perceive about men being there that made them change their attitudes, their demeanours, the mode of their activities, the content of their conversations? This question alone could be the subject of a whole thesis, as it could be attempted from a variety of epistemological perspectives and theoretical frameworks. Here I will try a brief, partial answer addressed from the point of view of personal experience, interactions and perceptions.

### **Creating separate realities**

In a previous section I explained how women, when together, interacted in particular ways and created and re-created intimacy and thus personal, close and trusting relationships. In the contexts of these forms of intimate interaction, closely related women worked, touched, talked, joked, laughed, rested and sometimes ate in each other's company, thus re-creating the very intimacy that had dynamised their form of relatedness. On those occasions, children were included as part of the group. They were touched and talked to, fed and cleaned, teased and pampered. Yet I never saw older male children in any of such group situations in Jarácuaro.



When Doña Lupe, Machí, Marta and Tila and all the other children sat on mats on the floor and played, Tzan disappeared into his house, or looked at us from behind the low wall which divided the passageway from the courtyard. I do not know exactly when it had happened, but, because of his gender and his age, he had been excluded, ejected from this form of companionship and interaction. He was still close to his grandmother, mother and aunts, but he was not treated or talked to in the same ways as his younger brothers or touched and caressed so much. I noticed he was slightly jealous of the way I played with the other little children, and Doña Lupe told me that he had been admonished for “wanting to spend so much time with Susana, for he is already a big boy” (*ya está grandecito*). Perhaps as a reaction to this exclusion, he had started to act as a “young man”, boasting about his bravery and prowess at things, and seeking the company of his father and grandfather. Indeed, he was already treated in many ways as a man. He was served by Doña Lupe at mealtimes with Don Alfredo, and he was sent with me, to “accompany” me in my late night visits, so that I was not disturbed by “other” men. (Something that I, at first, used to hate, for it felt humiliating and diminishing for me to be “protected” by what I saw as a small child).

As opposed to what had happened to Tzan, his cousin Berenice, who was only two years his junior, continued to enjoy the closeness and fun of her female relatives’ gatherings. She was already a *mujercita* (a little woman) in the same way Tzan was an *hombrecito* (little man), and she was also treated accordingly. Her mother Marta was very strict with her, and she was given tasks to do. She had to take care of her little sister in the absence of her mother, wash clothes, run errands, go to the mill and serve her own younger brother at mealtimes. She was also told to stay in and not play in the street too much (though she did not like this restriction). She found boys “loud and brutish”; in particular, she did not like the company of Tzan and had been told, by her own mother, not to play with him and his brothers, “because they play hard and they can make you cry [hurt you]”.

What exactly was the meaning of the exclusion of Tzan from the interactions of his female kin? What, similarly, was the meaning of the continuing inclusion of Berenice? I have mentioned already that, for Tzan, it meant he was outside the milieu of intimacy and closeness that was created and re-created. For Berenice it meant being inside. However, was the consequence only the inclusion or exclusion from a given “emotional” or “affective” milieu? From my own point of view, the answer to that last question is “no”. Interaction not only creates emotional contexts

and thus emotional realities, but perceptual and intellectual contexts and realities, in a word, fully experiential realities<sup>16</sup>. Furthermore, interaction with others, through the process of socialisation, provides not only the emotional, perceptive, intellectual and experiential contexts and contents, it also provides the “tools”, the modes for the interaction itself, and the modes of feeling, seeing, interpreting, thinking and experiencing. In short, the modes of creating and re-creating realities, including self-realities, through interaction with others.

The psychologists Vygotski and Luria (Vygotski 1994 [1929]; Luria 1994 [1928]; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1994) saw development as a process in which the child, through interaction in socialisation, actively acquired and internalised “cultural tools”. Signs, concepts, language are “cultural tools” insofar as they not only have a semantic value, but also an instrumental one. They effect a qualitative transformation in the psychological processes of the child, in terms of new connections and new operative forms, which in turn must affect her interpretations of stimuli. The child acquires them, internalises them, and then they are incorporated into perceptual and cognitive operations, in an implicit, rather than explicit way, henceforth changing the way she sees, experiences, interprets and acts upon a perceived reality. Similarly, Bourdieu talks about the “inculcation in the earliest years of life” of schemes and dispositions, which become “embedded in the agents’ very bodies in the form of mental dispositions, schemes of perception and thought, extremely general in their application [...] and also, at a deeper level, in the form of bodily postures and stances, ways of standing, sitting, looking, speaking and walking” (1977:15). These schemes are generative devices through which the agents engender practices, and they are “inculcated” by the group and reinforced throughout a person’s life. In both theoretical perspectives the emphasis is on a child’s acquisition not so much of “models” or “thought objects”, but of “instruments” of thought or “devices” of action, which are internalised and become immanent in the very psycho-social processes they engender, dynamise or transform. Importance is also attached to the action of others. Whilst Vygotski and

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<sup>16</sup> It could be argued that a classification which separates “emotion” from “thought” (and other aspects such as “perception”, “cognition”, etc.) lacks resonance with the actual experience of a person. “It is the essence of life experience”, explains Wikan, “that it cannot be compartmentalised into neat and orderly sections to be dealt with sequentially one by one” (1990: 27). Equally, Boddy, following Bourdieu (1977: 15) argues that “dispositions are inscribed in [...] bodies not only physically but also cognitively and emotionally”, in complex wholes (1989:57).

Luria see specific others interacting with the child, Bourdieu considers the group as the agency in the inculcation and maintenance of dispositions<sup>17</sup>.

The fundamental conclusion that can be drawn from the above perspectives for the particular cases of Tzan and Berenice is two-fold. On the one hand, they would both learn, not only to interact in different manners with men or women, but also to create, through these interactions, different modes of relatedness. Furthermore, they would learn to perceive, experience and interpret themselves in specific ways, Tzan as a Jarácuaro man, Berenice as a Jarácuaro woman, and would see and interpret others from that perspective. Second, and most importantly, their emerging new experiences and understandings would have, for them, the experiential character of “realities”, for they would be “interiorised” (Vygotski 1994 [1929]; Luria 1994 [1928]; Van der Veer & Valsiner 1994), “incorporated” (Bourdieu, 1977) and immanent in their processes of perception, cognition and action. These realities would not be just conceptual and static but dynamic, created and re-created with other men or women in the context of their quotidian interactions. Such realities would be, at the same time, intensely personal, since they were experienced, and pertained to self-perception as well as perception of the surrounding world. They would be unique, since they were the dynamic product of a person immersed in a multiplicity of variables, and also socially and culturally shared and understood, since they were acquired in interaction with others and continuously expressed, negotiated and dynamised in relational contexts.

Thus, during the time I remained at Doña Lupe’s house, I saw Tzan progressively interacting less with the women of his household, and more with his father and grandfather. This was obviously not just a product of his exclusion from the women’s gatherings and company, but also a result of his own desire and motivation to be with grown men and become one of them<sup>18</sup>, something that was patent in his often clumsy attempts to behave in the proper male ways. His gestures

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<sup>17</sup> In addition to this, it is necessary to highlight two important matters. First, although both views focus on cognitive aspects of experience, their relevance should also be extended to “emotional” ones (see note 16). Second, it could be argued that since the authors referred to above are discussing “culturally transformed processes of perception and thought” and “generative, self-regulatory schemes of action” they are opening up the possibility for understanding personal dynamics of experience and action from a more flexible outlook, where experiential realities are processual, created and re-created, and not static, and where they are experienced as personal yet shared, thus social and cultural in their genesis.

<sup>18</sup> As Vygotski notes, the acquisition of “cultural tools” requires the active participation of the child (1994 [1929]).





Photograph 9 (above): Marta's children. From right to left, Berenice, little Joanna and Angelo.

Photograph 10 (below): Learning to be *mujercitas*. Doña Hermila's granddaughters playing with miniature pottery.

became rougher, his voice coarser, and his whole body posture straighter and more imposing than those of his three younger siblings. Now, he stood with his legs apart, and walked in the slow, elaborate manner of the men in the island. He started wearing cowboy boots and his father's hat. He acquired boasting attitudes. For example, one time he told with undisguised pride that he had obtained a permission from his father to go out before his own mother did, something that obviously marked his position as a young man. He told me once he wanted to leave school and work to earn money and help his father, and expressed a desire to learn to make hats in the sewing machine, like his father did. His relationship with his mother and grandmother was changing, from those of a child to those of a man, reinforced by the women's own attitudes towards him, which were now more distant, less tolerant and less openly affectionate. Moreover, he started treating them as he saw his father and grandfather do, and, for instance, demanded being served quickly at meal times, something that was not only tolerated but encouraged.

In a similar way, Berenice was at the time slowly becoming a *mujercita*, a "little woman" in and of Jarácuaro. She was spending more time indoors, and indeed was told to do so, in the company of her mother, grandmothers and aunts, talking, joking and working with them. She was, therefore, spending less time in the company of her male relatives or men of other households, and although she was close and affectionate to her grandfather and father, she interacted with them in noticeably different forms from those of her cousin. For instance, she obeyed them unquestioningly, acted respectfully and submissively towards them and served them when necessary. Although Tzan had to obey them too, his attitude was deferential but not subservient. Berenice told me she did not like boys. She was weary of their presence and was scared they could hurt her. On many occasions, I saw her acting in what, to me, were over-protective ways, holding my arm and hiding behind my *rebozo* at the mere sounds of unknown male voices. She had already been allocated her own domestic responsibilities, like washing clothes in the lake and taking care of her little baby sister in the absence of Marta, which she resented at times but accepted dutifully. Her bodily postures and attitudes were very different from those of her male cousin. She walked with little steps, smiled in a sweet, shy manner and spoke softly, and her relatives praised her prettiness and sympathy. She talked more articulately than Tzan, even though he was older, and enjoyed long, confidential conversations with me, as opposed to the mumbling, laconic expressions of her cousin.





Photograph 11: Feyo teaching his son Tzan how to make palm hats

Returning to the question posed in the previous section, it could be said that girls in Jarácuaro, like Berenice, grew to become women in a particular context of experiencing particular realities and perceiving and understanding themselves and others in specific forms. Thus, in this reality, they interacted with male relatives in different forms from those they used with other women. This resulted in a different, less intimate form of relatedness which in turn informed perceptions, re-creating the dynamics of interaction in an on-going, circular process. In this reality, men of the same household were perceived and experienced as more distant, less close and perhaps slightly menacing. Forms of relatedness with them did not involve talking, touching, laughing and sharing in the same ways it did with other women, but talking more respectfully, not touching, being deferential and serving them. It is important to clarify that, from my point of view, women's perceptions, actions, thoughts and modes of relatedness with others were not the result of a mere intellectual indoctrination, in the sense of "being told" (either discursively or symbolically) what women or men were about or how they should behave. They were, instead, complex experiential realities, whose potency and capacity to inform emanated precisely because they were felt, seen and experienced personally by the women.

### *Santitos* in the house

In addition to parents, siblings, husbands, in-laws and children, women shared their houses with *santitos*. As explained in the Introduction, "*santitos*" was the general name given to Christs, Virgins and saints. Christs were specifically referred to as *crisitos*, Virgins and female saints as *virgencitas*, and male saints as *santitos* (cf. Carrasco 1952: 23). People usually referred to them in the diminutive form, by finishing the words with the suffixes *-ito* or *-ita*, which was also used for people's names as an indication of tenderness and affection. In this way, Doña Amelia's daughter was called "Lupita" by her relatives and friends, and Doña Lupe called her grandsons "Tzanito" and "Cayincito". Each one of the *santitos* had a distinct identity, a name (Señor de Carácuaro, Virgencita de la Salud or San Pegrito<sup>19</sup>), an address (Señor de Carácuaro lived in Carácuaro, one Virgencita de la Salud lived in Pátzcuaro and another in Jarácuaro, San Pegrito lived in the island's church), and a particular physiognomy and appearance (Señor de Carácuaro had

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<sup>19</sup> Lord of Carácuaro, Virgin of Health and Saint Peter. The latter's name was pronounced in the distinctive Spanish in the island, which substituted the consonant group "dr" for "gr".

dark skin, long hair and a beard, and was very thin as opposed to Señor de Araró, who was “plump”). Some *santitos* lived in Jarácuaro’s church, as described later, but many *santitos* had their domicile in houses and shared their existences with the people in them.

In our house, as in all others in the island, there were many *santitos*. There were photographs, prints and paintings of them in each room in the house, and they occupied large parts of the walls, together with old calendars, family photographs and bags of food and clothes which hung from nails. I shared my room with a big print of a *crstituto*, and the table which served as his altar, where the flowers were set, was also my night table. In the room besides mine, the one that was used as a store and also for guests, the Virgin of Guadalupe dominated the space. There was a big picture of her, nicely framed, a few prints and photographs of other *santitos* surrounding her, and a little table in front of her served as her altar, where Doña Lupe regularly put fresh flowers and lit candles.

On one occasion I asked Doña Lupe to tell me who all of the *santitos* in her house were, as I did not know all their names. She took me first to her bedroom:

“This is San Antonio, who is really good for the cattle, he stops people from robbing the cows. We bought him when we bought the cows, and we put candles to him so that he takes care of them. This is San Judas, he is good with drunkards, he helps them. I also put candles to him.” [Her two sons and husband were alcoholics and her husband still drank heavily sometimes. See Chapter 5].

Every time she told me the name of one of the *Santitos*, she picked up the image with care, and gently rubbed her finger over the face or dusted the surface before returning it to its place.

“This is Señor de la Misericordia, who just protects us from all danger. This here is Señor de Carácuaro, I have two of them, I have gone to his festivities. Señor del Rescate, he is in Tzintzuntzan, you know him! He helps you when you’re sick, that’s why they say he rescues you. [*Rescate* means “rescue”].”

She had looked at this last group of *santitos* with particular affection, and I knew she was very fond of Señor de la Misericordia, who lived in the village’s church, and of Señor de Carácuaro, who had helped her in difficult times and whom she had visited at his home in Tierra Caliente (see Chapter 4). “And this”, she finally said, “is Santo Santiaguito. We used to go to his festivity in Asajo, we ask him to take care of our horses, because he has horses himself. And this is my son Tano here, see?”

She took the passport-sized photograph of the smiling young man from under a picture of the Last Supper, and showed it to me more closely. She then continued to introduce me to the *santitos* in the passageway, where there was a calendar with the photograph of the Virgencita de la Salud from Pátzcuaro.

“Every time I go to Pátzcuaro, I make it in time to go to Mass in her church. Once a drug addict shot her with a gun, but nothing happened to her, poor thing! Then the man went to jail, and he started to get thinner and thinner, till he eventually died. It must have been the Virgin, punishing him!”

We moved on to my room, where she identified all the *santitos* that had been accompanying me all that time. In amongst them all, she stopped a little longer in front of the Virgencita del Rosario:

“She is in Puruarán. There is a hermitage there. We used to go, and once Marta danced in front of her. Marta had a temperature, but we told her, ‘come on, do it, dance, you’ll see how she will help you!’. And the Virgencita cured her! She is very miraculous, she appeared to a lady there. She is *bultito* (body-like) and has her *rebocito* and all! Poor thing<sup>20</sup>! She sends many messages, she talks to a priest in the hermitage where she is”.

At the same time that she was looking at the *santitos*, she took down a few photos of Don Alfredo’s parents and of her daughter-in-law Ina, whose pictures were interspersed with those of *crisitos* and *virgencitas*. She showed them to me, in the same way that she had shown me the *santitos*, rubbing their faces and dusting them lovingly with her apron: “This is my father-in-law, the only photo we have of him. And this is Ina, my daughter-in-law, the one in Lerma: she’s very funny, you’ll meet her!”. I could not help thinking that I was being guided through a kind of family photo-album, where *santitos* and relatives were placed side by side. We then went into the store room, to see the Virgencita de Guadalupe (“she is so dark skinned, so pretty!”) and also Señor de Araró (“he’s plump, *gordito*, well-fed”), whose photograph I had just brought from the town of the same name. Finally, we sat at the kitchen table under a picture of the Holy Family: “San José, the Virgin Mary and their little child. They bless us when we are eating”, Doña Lupe concluded, before launching herself into a completely unrelated conversation.

Doña Lupe was not the only woman in the village who was interested and attached to the *santitos* in the house. I got to know many bedrooms and store rooms in the village when their occupants, my female friends and acquaintances, took me there to see the *santitos*. On those occasions, they did not show particularly pious

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<sup>20</sup> ¡Pobrecita!, “poor thing!”, is an expression that women use frequently, not so much in pity but as a sign of affection and care, expressed through worry.



behaviour, or perform elaborate rituals in their presence: most times, the women simply ushered me into their rooms, sat on a bed or a chair, and started talking about them. Their explanations were not basically different from any others that they gave about a variety of issues in their daily lives. In quiet and matter-of-fact tones, they referred to the *santitos'* beauty, goodness, or abilities, to the time they saw their namesake in another village or shrine, or the time they did something for them. And when, out of my own anthropological interest, I asked something more abstract, they answered with resignation, as if stating the obvious or displaying a lack of interest in such matters. As for men, I think they were also interested and knowledgeable about the *santitos* in their houses, yet, because of my condition as a woman, and my closer relationship with the females of the households I visited, they did not talk about them with me.

### **Interacting with the santitos: shared experience, affection and reciprocity**

Many anthropologists have mentioned the presence of saints in Mexican houses (in Michoacán: Carrasco, 1952: 26; Foster, 1972: 99, 224, 229; Beals, 1992 [1945]: 319-343 *passim*; and Van Zantwijk, 1974: 166-190 *passim*; in other parts of Mexico: Ruz, 1995: 29; Ingham 1986: 58, 59, 76, 96; Vogt, 1990 [1970]: 21, 101-114 *passim*; Gimenez 1978: 145). However, most of these authors have referred to saints in houses only obliquely, in their descriptions of "house altars", "ritual sponsorships" (*mayordomías* or *cargos*), or particular ceremonies. With the exception of Ruz (1995), none of the works cited focuses on the saints themselves, or in their significance in the lives of the people near them, although some of the ethnographers have noted certain aspects of the links between saints in houses and their hosts. For instance, Van Zantwijk (1974: 165) sees in the location of saints in houses of Ihuatzio<sup>21</sup> an indication of their status as members of the community. Foster (1972: 99, 229) talks about the "dyadic relationships" that people from Tzintzuntzan establish with saints in their own houses, and about their daily contacts with them through prayers, offerings, and the lighting of candles. Cabarrús (1979: 88; cited in Ruz, 1995: 29) suggests that K'echí of Central America consider the images in their domestic altars the most important members of their families. Despite their interest in other matters, the majority of works named above allow the reader glimpses of scenes in which people talk or pay respects to saints, or quote the occasional personal testimony of feelings towards them. Yet those ethnographic writings do not show the full extent to which persons might interact daily with the

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<sup>21</sup> A village in the Lake Pátzcuaro. See map in Introduction.



Photograph 12: my room at Doña Lupe's house, shared with *santitos*

*santitos* who live with them, the full range, depth and impact on their activities, the sentiments and thoughts in their company. Furthermore, they do not convey the sense of quotidian, continuous contact, of shared daily experience and of relatedness that I witnessed between women and saints in Jarácuaro houses.

Women and men in Jarácuaro lived with the *santitos* from the moment they were born. Children played, ate, and slept in rooms dominated by the *santitos'* presence, under their benevolent eyes. Girls and boys learned their names from their mothers, grandmothers and aunts, and they heard stories about them, about their miracles and abilities. They also heard comments about their physical appearance ("*esta gordito*", he is plump, or "*esta bonita*", she is pretty), about mundane issues related to them ("we have to change the flowers of Virgencita de Guadalupe in that room"), and about the movements in the island of the most itinerant ones (see Chapter 3). Children saw their female relatives talking to them, lovingly touching their photographs or cleaning the frames around them, and they would learn that *santitos* were benevolent, understanding and deserved one's affection. On the occasion of the visit of a *crstituto* to our household, Machí's children were free to go into in the room where he was staying during the day, and at night, all their cousins were left to play there. The *crstituto* was on a table set as an altar, covered with an embroidered cloth and adorned with pots of flowers. He was surrounded by many of the other *santitos* of the house, and there were candles burning at his feet. I thought the space had a solemn and sacred feel to it. Yet, despite my many pre-conceptions about "sacred spaces" and "devotion", I was amused to see that the children did not behave in a particularly reverent manner in that room, nor were they told to do so. They joked, tickled each other and laughed in an excited manner, and eventually switched the television on and settled to watch cartoons side by side with the *santitos*. What could have been interpreted as a space to honour the "divinity", was instead a very pleasantly illuminated, warm, comfortable place for the children to have fun and enjoy each other's company.

Adult women also lived in the constant presence and company of the well-known *santitos* of their houses. When women worked in their kitchens, or sat down in the afternoons in courtyards, to plait palm or to gossip with their relatives, the *santitos* were there as well, witnessing their work and leisure. "They see everything you do", I was told on many occasions and by many different people. In conversations, they were constantly remembered, as women often exclaimed their



names: "*Virgencita!*", "*Ay, Nana Purísima!*", "*Ay, Diosito!*".<sup>22</sup> Their photos and paintings were there, mixed with and resembling the photos of far away relatives. In both cases, the figures were standing up, hieratical and serious<sup>23</sup>. In addition to their taken-for-granted presence, the women interacted actively with them at several points during the day. Doña Lupe told me she prayed to some of them, "not all", every morning, as she got out of bed: "I just ask the *Virgencita*, *Nuestro Señor*"<sup>24</sup> (Our Lord) or any other *santito* to take care of me and protect me, and help me to get through the day, so that everything is fine". Then women might look at their photographs, touch them, and have a little talk to them if they were feeling low or if there was something that was worrying them. In many cases, a woman preferred the *santitos*, or a particular one, to her relatives to pour her heart out. As Doña Lupe put it: "When I have a problem, I'd rather talk about it to Diosito or the *santitos*, instead of going around telling others. I do that so that the *santitos* help me, because they really help you". On occasion of their saints' days<sup>25</sup>, women celebrate together with the *santito* or *virgencita* of the same name. Doña Lupe set a special altar for the *Virgencita de Guadalupe* first on the 12th of December, with fresh flowers and candles, and then proceeded to have her own revelry. When I arrived at Doña Cecilia's for her saint's day party, Santa Cecilia's painting was there at the door, surrounded by flowers and colourful paper ornaments: Doña Cecilia had pulled her out of her usual place inside a room so that the guests could greet her on her day.

Women expressed and communicated a lot of affection to the *santitos* in their houses. As well as talking to them tenderly, taking care of their needs and upkeep (cleaning them, buying them flowers or candles), they touched them frequently and often kissed them. When I brought back photos of Señor de Araró as

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<sup>22</sup> *Nana Purísima*: Purhépecha form of referring to the Virgin. *Nana* means "mother". *Diosito* is the affectionate diminutive for God.

<sup>23</sup> Christian (1972: 131) describes family photographs and saints' pictures in the houses of the Nansa Valley (Spain) as being very different, the saints' ones more colorful and animated. In Jarácuaro, people liked photographs of themselves which actually resembled the hieratism of saints. Once, I took a whole set of photographs of Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo, and when they got to choose some of the prints, they rejected the ones in which they were seen at close range ("you cannot see the feet!"), laughing or moving. Instead, they selected images in which they appeared in full, straight, immobile and expressionless.

<sup>24</sup> A general name for Jesus Christ, which does not specify any one *crisito* in particular.

<sup>25</sup> Each day in the ecclesiastical calendar commemorates a particular saint or saints: thus each saint has a day in which he or she is celebrated. People who share the name with a saint also celebrate their saint's day on that date, and in many cases this celebrations are more important than birthdays.



presents to Doña Lupe and Doña Cecilia, they both looked at them fondly, perhaps remembering the time when they had visited him, and then kissed the image. "What did you think about him?", Doña Lupe asked, adding then: "He is nice and plump, isn't he? He is not very thin, like other *crisitos*". Both women thanked me profusely for my gift and placed the new photographs in a prominent place amongst the other *santitos* in their houses. *Santitos'* dispositions were usually described in praiseworthy tones by the women: "they are good to you if you're good to them", "they really care", "they truly help you", were all common statements on the island. In general, women felt very attached to them, and thought them good-willed, benevolent and trustworthy.

The expressions, communications, feelings and thoughts described above were not experienced by the women as being just one-sided. The most important aspect about the quotidian relationships between Jarácuaro women and the *santitos* in their houses was that these relationships were real, interactive and reciprocal. The women did and felt things for the *santitos*, but the *santitos* also did and felt things for the women. To start with, *santitos* truly were there; their physical, quotidian presence was as clear and distinct as that of the other occupants of the house. When the women wanted to talk to one of them, they did not just close their eyes or put their hands together, they went to the appropriate room, and looked at, touched or kissed the specific *santito*, and thus established a proper communication, as they would do with relatives. *Santitos* shared the quotidian lives of households, accompanied the others living there and participated in their festivities. Ruz, speaking of saints in the Mayan world, describes them as coexisting with the people in the comings and goings of their communities (1995: 2). Virgins, Christs and saints were also daily witnesses of the difficulties in women's lives, their heavy workload and their problems, and they understood their predicaments. That is perhaps why they were willing to offer their help. Women and *santitos* had a regular flow of exchanges amongst themselves. The latter had specific quotidian needs and desires that the women knew and fulfilled. They needed to be cleaned, dusted, dressed in some cases, and they liked flowers, presents and celebrations<sup>26</sup>. In turn, the *santitos* offered daily help with general or specific matters, and an overall mantle of care, protection and benevolence for the women and their loved ones. Of course, if they were not properly looked after, the *santitos* might be disappointed, and they would communicate that clearly to the others. For instance, Doña Hermila told me of the

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<sup>26</sup> Vogt (1990[1970]: 23) reports a Zinacantecan person saying that "the saint is a very human person who likes nice things".

time her husband had decided not to throw a party on behalf of San Miguel, a saint that stayed in their bedroom:

“Baldomiano [her husband] thought it was too much expense, so he decided not to celebrate San Miguel. But he then started to feel unwell, tired and ill, and he had to go to bed, and he did not understand what was going on. So then I told him: ‘Perhaps the *santito* is angry because you are not celebrating his day’. Baldomiano then decided to celebrate after all, and immediately he started feeling better and got cured. It must have been that, you know, San Miguelito is very miraculous, and he must have been angry because we were not giving a party for him, and he must have made Baldomiano ill”.

In short, much of the content and experience of relationships between women and the *santitos* in their houses were based on the clear perception of their shared company and on the continuous, regular current of mutual and reciprocal communication and exchange.

### **Interacting with the *santitos*: intimacy and trust**

In addition to experiencing the quotidian company of the *santitos*, and communicating and exchanging with them on a regular basis, Jarácuaro women, through their specific forms of interaction with the *santitos*, realised forms of intimacy and trust with them. In many respects, the interactive behaviours of women and the *santitos* were very similar to those which appeared between women and their closest female relatives (see earlier in this chapter). For instance, on many days, Doña Lupe rested or plaited in peaceful silence in the presence and company of the *santitos* of her house, enjoying the sun in the courtyard or the quietness of the afternoon, as she did at times in the company of one of her daughters or with Machí. When Don Alfredo was there, she usually engaged in a more resolute type of activity, more serious and concentrated, and less relaxed. When she talked to the *santitos*, she did it closely, tenderly, the voice being a material, physical link between them. Indeed, much of her contact with the *santitos* in her house was very physical, and many times I saw her touching, moving, cleaning or simply looking at them. She and many other women confided things to a *santito* that they would not tell others, sometimes not even their daughters, sisters or mothers, in the certainty that the *crisito* or *virgencita* would not gossip around, and that he or she would understand and sympathise with their predicaments. Women shared their daily concerns with the *santitos*: the worry about a husband, the illness of a child or their preoccupation about money, and they experienced the *santitos*' reassuring, comforting and affectionate responses. As Doña Lupe said, “it is as if [they] tell

you, 'go on, don't worry anymore', and you just feel much better". Women shared food with Virgins, Christs and saints, leaving little trays of tamales or fruit in front of them in their festive days and other celebrations. They did not hide comestibles or other possessions from the *santitos*, as they did from other people, and indeed the former often stayed in the rooms where things were stored, as trusted custodians of the household's most precious belongings. As girls grew up, boys gradually left the company of women to join that of the men, but the *santitos* in the house, male and female, remained understanding witnesses of women's quotidian routines, and willing, if silent, parties to their leisurely meetings. Moreover, women actively cared for the *santitos*, and positively felt and experienced the flow of benevolent, almost maternal concern bestowed, in turn, upon them. As will be explained in Chapter 4, "caring" was a common form of interaction between women, their children, and other close people, and it was always interpreted as an expression of deep affection.

Thus these ways of interacting with the *santitos* shared many of the elements of the interactions between Jarácuaro women and their close female relatives: talking, sharing, relaxing, confiding. In this sense it could be said that, as happened in the case of closely related women, the interactions of women with the *santitos* in their houses created and re-created specific forms of relationships. Through continuous interactions and exchanges, through physical contact and shared daily encounters, through real, felt and experienced communication and affection between them, women realised particular forms of relatedness with the *santitos* which were close, affectionate, warm and trusting. Women learned these ways of interacting with the *santitos* from their early childhood, and through the continuity of their mutual and reciprocal relationships, the reliability of the *santitos'* responses, and the flow of communication and affection, an experiential reality of warmth and trust was created and re-created, which, in turn, served as the context for the continuation of intimate and close interactions.

As with other people, these intimate, trusting relationships were not prescribed by an external classification of "saints" as a specific type of being, but the result of a complex, ongoing dynamic of personal interaction, perception and experience. The fact that co-resident Virgins, Christs and saints were considered good, trustworthy, reliable and willing to help did not simply stand as an external fact prior to establishing particular relationships with them. The personal perceptions of women, the life-long, trusting, warm relationships with them were

clear, definite experiential realities that made possible the specific interactions that occurred between them, and, therefore, the continuity of the process of relatedness. This might explain the differences in the relationships between a woman and each particular *santito* in her house. Each one of them responded to a personal, specific process of interaction, which evolved through time and changed with circumstances, and which meant different feelings, thoughts, perceptions and experiences. In this sense, the relationships between Jarácuaro women and the Virgins, Christs and saints in their houses were just as personal, idiosyncratic, embedded in specific circumstances, and changing as those between the women and all their significant others. As such, they have to be examined and reflected not through a taxonomy of types of relationships (i.e. “relationships with Virgins”, “relationships with local saints”, etc.) but by looking at particular persons interacting with specific *santitos* in a distinct situation, perceiving, feeling, thinking and acting in the context of their life histories and experiences, and responding to concrete predicaments<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>27</sup> This will be dealt with in Part Two of this thesis.



## Chapter 2

### LIFE OUTSIDE HOUSES

#### I. Life in the streets

Part of the quotidian routine of work and leisure of women in the island took place outside their own houses. Don Alfredo's mill was very busy first thing in the morning, used by many young girls who had walked in the foggy and cold streets before dawn to grind their *nixtamal* for the daily *tortillas*. Throughout the day, Doña Lupe went outside several times for her different daily tasks. She made trips to the little shops in the village which sold basic products, or to the weekly itinerant market which brought vegetables or clothes. Marta popped round sometimes on the way to the lake, where she could be seen later washing clothes in the muddy waters. On the numerous occasions when the pump was broken, Lupita and many other unmarried girls<sup>1</sup> went to collect water from the communal well. In the afternoons, when the main daily tasks of cleaning and cooking had been done, Marta, Cheli, or her *comadre* Doña Yola, came to see Doña Lupe. Doña Amelia went to her mother and sister's house, and Marielena visited a friendly neighbour. As many other women did, they carried with them bags with palm strips to plait during their chats. Later on, they all returned to their houses, and perhaps run the last errands, fetching some hen or pig that had strayed or buying some oil for the dinner.

During the day the streets of Jarácuaro were teeming with people: children running to and from school or playing; women walking in their *rebozos*; men loading old cars and pick-ups with hats and bags of fertiliser or standing in groups, in corners, holding bottles of Tres Cañas. The regular *combis* (mini-vans that operated as a bus service) went by picking up passengers to Pátzcuaro. Streets were also populated by thin dogs, plump pigs and chickens. Often, when I passed through the esplanade in front of the church, I met Doña Cecilia or Doña Hermila, chatting away with one of their *comadres*, whilst other women, the *Damas de la Vela* (Ladies of the Candle)<sup>2</sup>, stood in little groups, chatting and plaiting their palm as they watched over the church. The esplanade was a busy point of the village. People emerged from the daily rosary at seven in the morning, a lone woman entered the church or

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<sup>1</sup> It was usually unmarried girls who volunteered to go to the well, as, in this way, they could meet up with their boyfriends.

<sup>2</sup> A group of women who attended daily rosaries and other religious services, and kept an eye on visitors to the church to stop them from stealing or damaging anything.

left it as she crossed herself, or children run around and sat in circles for the Saturday Catholic doctrine school (*la doctrina*).

Whenever I left the house at night in the company of Doña Lupe or one of the children, I found the atmosphere of the streets changed slightly. There was not much public lighting in the island, so the village became extremely dark. There were not very many people left around at that time, apart from the last of the drunk men, a few women wrapped in their *rebozos* walking quickly and some children playing. This was the time when young courting couples met surreptitiously. They stood close in dark corners, protected by the obscurity, and talked quietly or broke up their embraces as we passed by. On Saturdays, and on the eves of festivities, there was a Mass in Jarácuaro. As the bells tolled calling the people, Doña Lupe, Machí, the children and myself usually walked together towards the centrally located church, surrounded by many other groups of women and children. After the service, we all returned to our houses chatting, and the fence surrounding the central esplanade was closed by the *encargados del templo* (the “keepers of the church”, a locally organised group who took care of the church building) until the following day.

### Walking in the streets of Jarácuaro

From the moment I arrived in the island, one of my main preoccupations was to learn how to conduct myself in the different situations and contexts in which I was participating. In this enterprise I was helped by Doña Lupe’s gentle but unfailing advice and coaching. However, my curious and attentive observation of others’ behaviours soon made something very evident: people’s, and particularly women’s, attitudes and behaviours changed dramatically from the inside of their own houses to the outside and the streets of Jarácuaro.

For instance, the threshold of our house marked a change of mode in the bearing and movements of Doña Lupe. Whenever she was getting ready to go somewhere, for an errand or on a visit, she made sure beforehand that her appearance was neat, by quickly combing her hair and donning a nicer apron than the one she used for the housework. Then, she grabbed her *rebozo* and hid in it, or in her apron, whatever money she was taking with her. At the doorway, she paused briefly, looking to one side and then the other, as if carefully considering how best to go about the errand. Then, she almost jumped on to the unpaved street, and rushed

along with little short steps, her face stern and serious, her movements determined. She occasionally peeked with curiosity inside the rare open doors or the humble shops of the island. Whenever she saw an acquaintance, she scrutinised the person from a distance, trying to guess many pieces of information. As she herself used to describe to me later on in great detail, she had whole speculative conversations with herself inside her head: "Who is that? Ahhh! It's Bety, from *cá*<sup>3</sup> Fili. Where is she going, then? She cannot go to the church, it's not the day of the Bible meeting. What is that she is wearing? It looks like an expensive new dress. She must have bought it for the wedding in her house, because Fili is the godfather, and he must want his family to look good. That must be it". When the other person reached her level, they both stared ahead, in a manner that always made me think that they were almost ignoring each other. However, at the very last minute, Doña Lupe said "*jadios!*", in a high pitched voice, echoed by the expeditious "*jadios!*" of the other by-passer, and then they each continued their ways. Occasionally, Doña Lupe paused for a little chat with someone she knew well, such as one of her sisters, *comadres* or *compadres*. At those times, they stopped briefly, facing each other without touching, and conducted what to me sounded like vague and uninformative conversations: "What are you doing" "Nothing, just here. And you, where are you coming from?" "From the square, just to see what they [the itinerant sellers who came to the island once a week], had brought today". If we went to one of the shops in the village which sold basic products, Doña Lupe hid carefully in her *rebozo* whatever she had bought (maize, oranges, oil), so that nobody would know what she had purchased.

The *rebozo*, mentioned a few times in the last paragraph, was an important item of clothing which accompanied women onto the streets. All women I met in Jarácuaro possessed at least one, and little girls got small versions of them, which they carried around proudly. Not wearing a *rebozo* was something only foreigners or really poor women did. I recall Doña Lupe saying to me once, with reference to her memories of poverty during her childhood: "I was so poor, I didn't even have a *rebozo*, and I used to borrow the one from my neighbour to go to the street. We just shared it!". On the island, women always wore their *rebozos* when they were in the streets: sometimes they wrapped them round the waist like a belt, sometimes they put them over the shoulders, like a shawl. At other times they covered their heads, part of their faces and upper body with them. Doña Amelia once told me that she

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<sup>3</sup>The expression *cá*, a shortened local version of the word "*casa*" (house), followed by a person's first name, indicates a particular household. The first name is usually that of the eldest married man.



felt “naked” without her *rebozo*, echoing what I think was a commonly shared feeling amongst the women of Jarácuaro. I, too, after a few months on the island, did not conceive of going anywhere without it. *Rebozos* defended the wearer from the cold and rain, served to carry children and goods, and were used as wiping cloths and towels. However, above all, *rebozos* were something very personal: they gave warmth to, covered, protected, hid, and produced a feeling of womb-like comfort in their female owners. I will refer to those issues in a forthcoming section of this chapter.

In amongst all the changes that I noticed amongst my female friends and acquaintances when they left houses to go into the streets, which I also adopted in my own way, the single most noticeable one was, perhaps, the transformation of their bodily attitudes and manners. Whenever I accompanied Jarácuaro women in the street, I noted with curiosity their concentrated, severe facial expression, which was rather blank and uninviting. Their movements were restrained. The arms hung loosely by the sides, straight, or were hidden inside the *rebozo*. They walked with short, deliberate steps, their heads erect, their gaze seemingly fixed forward but also taking in all the details going on around them: an open door, someone in a corner, a car passing, sounds from a house. This kind of walking reminded me of those they used in processions, when people went around the village escorting the *santitos* during their festivities. Their street demeanours, in general, were very uncommunicative. They did not talk much and seldom laughed or expressed any kind of “emotion”. I do not think this was just an impression brought by my incapacity to recognise subtle signs. It was clear that they made a deliberate effort to suppress expressive behaviours, and they taught me to do the same. For instance, whenever my friend Marielena and I went to the lake shores for a chat, she just walked by my side through the streets of the village, nodding absently to my questions and comments, reluctant to respond. However, as soon as we reached our destination and we sat alone by the water, she talked openly and animatedly about intimate things of her life. On two occasions I accompanied Marta and Doña Lupe to one of the healers in the island to see about the illness of Marta’s baby (see Chapter 4). After the first visit, we returned silently. Marta and Doña Lupe just exchanged a few knowing looks and quiet words, even though they seemed eager to talk about the issue. As soon as we reached Doña Lupe’s house, a whole excited conversation took place. After the second visit, I ventured a question in the street about the healing session I had just witnessed. They both stared at me briefly with slightly disgusted expressions, as if I had done something highly inappropriate.



Then, Doña Lupe answered with an unhelpful monosyllable, and they continued to walk in silence, their serious faces looking ahead. Yet when we got back to the house, Marta asked me eagerly how to prepare a camomile infusion and listened carefully to my instructions, requesting more details whenever she felt she needed them.

Why did the attitude of women change so much when they left houses to walk in the streets? What did they feel in the streets? What did their change of behaviours respond to? Why did their bodily postures and facial expressions alter? Why did they restrict their expressions and hide things? I will look at several aspects of these important questions through the next few sections.

### **Concealing and disguising: protection and distance**

Most of the people I met in Jarácuaro, old and young, had a guarded attitude towards others. For instance, I mentioned in the previous chapter the special care that they took in order to protect their activities inside their houses from the unwanted gaze of others. This same guarded attitude informed their movements in the streets. Doña Lupe, for instance, liked to wear her *rebozo* covering her head, and she pulled a part of it over her face to disguise the direction of her eyes or her facial expression. In that way, nobody knew what had caught her attention or what her reactions might be. Her zeal to hide her shopping on the island always amused me, and she achieved great feats in camouflaging large amounts of maize, vegetables and even bottles of alcohol underneath her many layers of clothing. She rarely answered direct questions about what she was doing, where she was coming from or where she was going, and evaded them with the self-evident "*aquí, nomás*" ("just here"). It must be said that this did not stop her from questioning others herself, which got her the same type of vague answer.

On one occasion, some women stopped Doña Lupe in the street and asked her in Purhépecha about my identity. Back at home, she explained to me, "I told them that you were the sister of my son's boss and that you're just visiting. I said that because, in this village, people are very gossipy. You can do nothing without them wanting to know everything about it! They have seen us together, and I do not want them to go around saying that my son left his wife and got another woman, so I told them that". As she spoke, I noticed a slightly mischievous expression on her face, as if this time she had beaten her neighbours and misguided their curiosity. In

general, I heard the same complaint about the intrusive curiosity of people from many of my other female friends, and the practice of answering with lies to impertinent questions was quite widespread. Marielena and I were once sitting just outside the village, talking. A woman came down from one of the streets and started asking questions of Marielena. "Who is that?", she said at one point, gesturing towards me with her head. To my astonishment, Marielena replied: "Oh, this is my sister, she has just come to visit me from Uruapan". "Is that so? Yes, she looks like you!", was the other's comment. When she finally left, not without asking many more questions first, Marielena turned to me and said: "People here are so *metiche!* [prying, intrusively curious]. Why did she have to ask so much? They ask about everything. They want to know everything. That's why I told her the lie that you're my sister. After all, it's none of her business who you are".

It would be easy to speculate that one of the reasons behind Doña Lupe's cautious, self-suppressive behaviour in the streets of Jarácuaro, or Marielena's blatant lying, was a response to their desire to conceal some information about their lives from the unrelenting curiosity of their neighbours, in order to preserve some intimacy and perhaps some sense of self-identity or idiosyncrasy<sup>4</sup>. After all, Jarácuaro was a small village, situated in a small island, with the houses standing side by side, and the people living under the constant surveillance of others. Thus it could be speculated that women used their *rebozos* as material barriers, in the same way they used plastic partitions or curtains in their houses. Perhaps their *rebozos* were metaphoric extensions of the house walls, something like portable boundaries. At the same time, their actions in the streets, their silences or inaccurate answers, their deliberately inexpressive movements, their intentional lies also served in turn as screens which protected them against the others' inquisitiveness. I too felt overwhelmed by the incessant interest my movements and actions generated amongst the residents, and I developed my own strategies for dealing with it, like going for daily walks to the solitary shores of the lake, or taking whole days off outside the island. It is obvious that in my particular case, I had to put great physical distance between myself and the village before I could feel safe from the prying curiosity of others. Whereas the women in Jarácuaro could experience some self-containment and protection by virtue of their actions, attitudes, body movements, and attire.

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<sup>4</sup>In a similar way, duBoulay (1976; quoted in Sciama 1993: 100) has suggested that women of Ambéli (Greece) lie to protect their privacy within the village.

Yet women's actions and words in the streets not only had the effect of protecting them from others, but also, and most importantly, created modes of relating with those others. When Doña Lupe interacted with the people she met in the streets, she was not only making sure they did not know what she was doing. She kept a physical and psycho-social distance, clearly perceived by all the persons involved in the transactions. She deliberately did not share anything with them, neither about what she carried nor information about herself. She did not touch them and she spoke to them in a polite but perfunctory tone of voice and smiled courteously, never laughing out loud. Marielena created distance with her curious neighbour by presenting to her a fictitious picture which we knew was false but the neighbour did not. Even if she suspected something, she was excluded from our shared secret and from our subsequent enjoyment of the joke. Thus, in the same way that women created intimacy inside their houses through their interactions with close female relatives, they created, in those casual encounters with others in the streets, relationships of distance and exclusion through their interactions. Furthermore, all women involved in these outdoors encounters behaved in the same way, understanding and reciprocating the dynamics of such interactions, and hence creating amongst them these forms of distant, removed relationships.

So, did Doña Lupe and Marielena interact with others in an excluding manner because they were in the street? Was it specifically this space that prompted their restrained or distancing behaviour? Who were those "others" who engaged with them in that particular form of interaction? I mentioned in Chapter 1 that the forms of interaction that created and re-created intimacy among closely related women were neither a function of interior spaces nor just concomitant to categories of kinship. They happened in the context of personal, long-standing, close relationships amongst women and, in turn, generated and sustained these relationships in complex yet regularly renewed processes. In the same way, I would suggest that forms of interaction of distance and withdrawal among women in the street did not happen as a direct consequence of the specific setting, since, as pointed out before, interactions of intimacy could and did happen outdoors. Nor were they due to prescriptive behaviours based on some clear, abstract kinship/non-kinship categorisation. They were dynamics linked to specific persons with whom one had specific personal forms of relatedness. The people Doña Lupe, for instance, encountered only in the streets were those others with whom she did not have a close relationship, that is, people that she would not usually see in her own house or whom she would not spontaneously visit, such as neighbours and

distant relatives. Her daughters, her mother and her friendly *comadre* Doña Yola visited often, and Machí was practically part of her household. They could also be near relatives whom she rarely saw or visited because she was not in good terms with them, like one of her other *comadres*. I saw Doña Lupe behaving in a cold, distancing manner on certain occasions in which she met her own sister Reyna, with whom she had a strained relationship. Yet, in those same streets, I saw her exchanging looks of complicity and silences full of meaning and affection with her daughter Marta or with Machí, in forms that conveyed warmth, intimacy and close communication between them.

In short, a particular form of interaction was linked to a specific person with whom one had a specific personal relationship. An interaction of distance was linked to people one did not know that well, people to whom one did not feel close, people with whom one did not have relatively regular contact. A woman's perception of that form of relationship constituted an experiential reality of detachment, which then informed the manner of her interaction. This was an ongoing process, renewed in each encounter and also through the usual absence of that person from the woman's intimate milieu. This is not to say that there were two categories of females for the women of Jarácuaro, those who were close and those who were distant. It does not mean that women of the island classified other people in discrete groups, such as "relatives", "*compadres*", "neighbours" or "friends" (see Fortes 1972; Beals 1992 [1945]; Chiñas 1973: 87-92); or even that they conceptualised them according to a grading system going from "near closeness" to "extreme distance", or from "insiders" to "outsiders", as some anthropologists have suggested in other contexts (see Bourque, 1993a: 32 for an example in Ecuador; Boddy, 1989: 89 for the Sudan). As I said before in the previous chapter, particular forms of relatedness of women towards specific kin were desired, but they did not happen as a result of a "prescriptive rule" or even as regularly as expected. In the same way, distance was the usual experience in relationships amongst most co-villagers in Jarácuaro, but then children married, for instance, and those with whom people were before only briefly acquainted became, from one day to another, *compadres*. People did not have particular relationships with others simply because of who those others were (kin or non-kin), neither just because of where they were located (inside or outside). People had constellations of personal, varied, and changing forms of relationships, which were connected with kinship and space but not prescribed by them. They were created, as in my case, or generated and maintained throughout a lifetime of quotidian contact, like those between parents



and children, or had been distant but had to become closer, as in the case of some *compadres*, and which adapted, transformed, grew or subdued at different points of one's life, like those between certain relatives, neighbours or friends.

### **"People here are bad": criticism and self-perceptions**

In the previous section I have argued that women's guarded and inexpressive behaviour in the streets of Jarácuaro could have been partially due to their desire for privacy and partially to the more distant and exclusive relationships they had with most people they encountered only outside their houses. However, these reasons would not serve to understand fully why women still behaved in a restrained and protective manner when they were out in the streets in the company of close female relatives or their own children. Why did Doña Lupe and Marta keep silent when they walked home from the healer's house? Why did Marielena avoid speaking to me until we were physically away from all others?

During my stay on the island I was told, on many occasions and by all sorts of persons, variations of the following statements: "*La gente aquí es muy mala*" ("people here are very bad"). They are very gossipy (*muy chismosa*), and they go around talking, they tell other people. *¡La gente aquí critica mucho!* (the people here criticise a lot!)" Foster also noted similar comments from people in the nearby village of Tzintzuntzan (1972: 95). People, and particularly women, expected others to scrutinise their movements and activities, their clothes, their expressions, the things they were carrying and the company they kept. This scrutiny was not perceived as being just out of indiscreet curiosity, or being *metiches* (intrusive), as mentioned before. It was also expected to be ruthlessly critical and aimed at finding faults. Doña Amelia held the celebration of her daughter's *civilada* (civil wedding) at her house. Throughout it, her main preoccupation was what would people say, and what they would criticise. When the traditional *churipo* (beef soup) was not ready on time on the first morning, she worried enormously about the people's comments. She looked anguished and spoke nervously to her close female relatives who were helping her. "What are the guests going to say? They will say that I am not organised, that I do not care about them, that I am not feeding them, that I don't want to feed them!". She later explained to me: "People here go around looking to find something to criticise, that's why one has to be very careful with things. And even when one does everything right, they always criticise something or another, anyway". At first, her preoccupation and anxiety seemed to me slightly out of

proportion: why would people be so negative? I thought her attitude responded more to her own suspicions than to the real behaviour of others. However, her fears made more sense to me as the celebration progressed. When, as was customary on those occasions, we (the bride's guests) went to the groom's house, Doña Amelia, her sisters, and her *comadres*, already slightly drunk, looked at everything around them with prying eyes, and began to find fault with everything. The hosts took too long to serve them, they did not give them enough beers, they left them alone for too long, there were not enough chairs for everybody. I still clearly remember Doña Lupe examining the tablecloth with expert eyes and declaring in a whisper to the others, "It's not very nice, it's not good. It is not even hand-embroidered!".

Whether the negative comments of others occurred in all situations or not, the perception of other people as critical was widespread among women. Young girls like Berenice were encouraged to stay at home as much as possible, and not hang around in the streets late, because, as her mother Marta put it, "what would people think?". Newly weds like Chabe worried about being seen going to the mill after dawn ("people would think I am lazy!"); or about what they wore in the street. Her sister Lupita explained to me that she had given her *rebozo de bolita* (a finer, more expensive type of *rebozo*) to Chabe "because recently married girls have to wear them, otherwise people criticise them a lot". Doña Lupe was always concerned when she went visiting, and tried to come back home early, as "people might say 'what is she doing in the street for so long, what is she up to?, she is leaving her husband unattended!"". Doña Amelia was careful in her dealings with the Pátzcuaro NGO which ran a women's group because, as she said, "I don't want people to think that I am getting advantages from them, you know?".

The mistrust of others and the fear of what they might say, what Foster (1972: 100) refers to as "*el qué dirán*", the "what will they say", informed the actions and attitudes of women, their perceptions and experiences. Inside their houses, they usually felt safer, because their only witnesses were people close to them, and whom they trusted<sup>5</sup>. The walls and the screens were the physical barriers that turned many houses into refuges. Walking in the streets, the women seemed to

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<sup>5</sup>This was not always necessarily the case, as in the example of Doña Amelia surrounded by her mistrusted guests. Similarly, as mentioned before, many women had strained, tense relationships with their daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law or sisters-in-law, sometimes full of resentment. However, their relationships did have dynamics which were not so much informed by the profound sense of distrust experienced towards the distant others outside one's household as by a particular conflictive form of inter-relating.

be very conscious of the presence of others. Physically exposed, perhaps only covered by a *rebozo*, they must have felt vulnerable. It could be speculated that the perception of others' critical presence might have been physically experienced by the women. Their physical responses to it (the use of the *rebozo*, the stiffness of movements, the blank expression) may have provided a protection as tangible and material as the walls of houses. Moreover, in the same way that women changed their attitudes when they went into the streets, they changed them again when they returned to their houses. When Doña Lupe came in after running some errands, she used to take off her *rebozo* and fancy apron, and started chatting animatedly almost straight away, as her posture relaxed and a smile appeared on her face<sup>6</sup>. In addition to this, Foster (1972: 98) suggests that, in the context of Tzintzuntzan, revealing thoughts and information to others made a person more vulnerable to their malevolence. Perhaps, then, when women of Jarácuaro kept silent or told lies to their neighbours, they were deliberately using those as strategies to safeguard themselves against their criticism.

There was finally another important dimension to women's protective and inexpressive behaviour outdoors. For these behaviour are not only passive protections, physical and psycho-social shields, or strategies of avoidance. They were also active defences in so far as they were the "right" kind of behaviour in the women's own experience and understanding. Let me explain this point. It could be argued that the suspicion or conviction of being criticised was experienced with anxiety by a Jarácuaro woman because it was linked to her own self-perceptions and self-interpretations. A woman might have felt that if she was criticised it was, in part, due to the malevolence of others, as Foster indicates, but she could also have perceived criticism as a legitimate comment about an improper attitude or behaviour on her part. If, as in the example above, Doña Lupe worried about people's comments when she remained in the street for a long time ("what is she doing in the street for so long, what is she up to? She is leaving her husband unattended!"), she might have interpreted her own apprehension as an indicator of the impropriety of her own actions. Thus her reaction was to act from the outset in a manner she considered was the right and proper attitude and behaviour for herself

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<sup>6</sup>In my own case, the gaze of others fixed on me, the silent interruption of their activities when I went by, and the sound of their whispers as I passed felt like a piercing pressure, which made me very uncomfortable and self-conscious. Little by little, I discovered myself often covering my head with the *rebozo*, looking ahead or at the ground, avoiding the eyes of people. I always looked forward to going back to the house after I had been visiting, as I felt I could relax there and act in a more uninhibited manner.

as a good woman. In this way, not only did she avert the possibility of being criticised, but she also felt good about herself and satisfied with her own actions. As she herself explained to me once:

“I taught my daughters that they should not walk around in the streets laughing, because when a woman laughs in the streets, then men see them and start wondering ‘what’s up with that woman, why is she laughing so much? I’m just going to ask her and see what she says’. And then they approach the woman and start making conversation,... and that’s how the problems arise! That’s why I do not behave like that in the street. I just walk quickly, I do what I have to do and I put on a serious expression. I do not laugh or anything, I just go and come back straight away and in this way I avoid trouble. And I’d rather go back into the house and laugh there. Here, with my family, I can be cheerful. There are some people who are all serious and grumpy in the house and then they go to the street and they laugh, and that’s all upside down!”

Thus the reserved, cautious attitudes of women in the streets of the island, their busy, concentrated attitudes, responded not only to a desire to preserve and conceal privacy, to create distance with certain others, and to shield themselves against criticism. They were, above all, connected with the women’s own perceptions and interpretations of what it entailed to be and behave like a good, proper Jarácuaro woman. Hence they were active, deliberate actions which allowed them to experience themselves in that way, in the context of, and through, the dialectic with the others’ perceptions and opinions.

### Intimacy in other spaces

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned that the church’s atrium was a popular place in Jarácuaro. The Church and the esplanade were situated approximately in the centre of the village and also at its highest point. It was a very pleasant space. The church was a rather typical 16th century building, with a beautiful front and a bell tower. Besides it there stood an attached edification dating from the same epoch known as the *curato* (priests’ house), with an inner courtyard and an outside gallery. The esplanade itself was enclosed by a white wall with three fence doors opening to the streets. There were tall trees which offered pleasant shade in the heat of the day. And from there one could see all the volcanoes and some of the other communities around the lake. The atrium was a very busy spot, since the shortcut to most places on the island traversed it. It was also devoid of traffic, as the only accesses to it were the fenced doors.



The people seemed to be rather attached to this space and thought it very agreeable. Don Joaquín, for instance, told me several stories -possibly apocryphal- about the construction of the church by the Franciscans and the antiquity of the trees<sup>7</sup>. Most of the festivals and celebrations of the island took place here, so it was regularly adorned with garlands and lights, and sometimes filled with the smells of food stalls, or the music of bands or dancers. On Saturday mornings, the space became animated by the laughter and games of the children's Catholic doctrine school, and on those nights, practically all the village women and children, and a few men, congregated before and after Mass. Every day, during the hours the church was open (from dawn to late in the evening) there were members of the *Damas de la Vela* (Ladies of the Candle) watching over its door, sitting under the trees in groups, plaiting palm and chatting amicably. The women that passed through on their daily errands sometimes stopped to chat to a *comadre* or a relative. Many of them also entered the church, where you could see them through the open doors sitting down at one of the benches, or kneeling and crossing themselves as they left. I met Doña Cecilia or Doña Reyna here on numerous occasions, sometimes waiting for a meeting in the church, sometimes just sitting down resting.

For me, it was curious that the esplanade was the only place inside the village in which women seemed to feel comfortable enough to stop and talk, or sit down, without having to rush around with serious expressions on their faces. Furthermore, it would appear that, in some ways, it was a legitimate space for women to be without feeling they had to justify it to themselves or others. For instance, whenever I met my friend Marielena just for a chat, many times we ended up on the church's atrium, where she would feel relaxed enough to sit down with her children and enjoy the sun. I also remember one time when we met by chance there, and had a amiable, rather personal chat about her pregnancy and the situation in her house. I offered to accompany her in her chores in order to carry on with our conversation, but as soon as we left the esplanade, she started walking fast, looking concentrated and preoccupied, and answered my questions in courteous but monosyllabic utterances. It is possible to speculate that the church yard must have been a pleasant place in itself: beautifully situated, the location of nice, solid, old, and somehow luxurious buildings (as compared with all the others), and away from the dust and noise of the streets. Yet there was definitely a sense of comfort and

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<sup>7</sup> One of them reputedly planted by Vasco de Quiroga himself, a personage for whom many people expressed sympathy and admiration.

intimacy emanating from the actions and demeanours of women when they were here that could not simply be explained by beauty.

Before the traditional Day of the Day festival on the island, I saw Doña Cecilia, her daughters and daughter-in-law sweeping the site where they were going to put their hat stand. It struck me that they were brushing the dusty grass with the same tender care they would have devoted to their own courtyard. The way in which they were chatting, laughing and joking with each other also reminded me of similar interactions amongst them that I had witnessed inside their own house. It was in front of the church, where I was sat down sometimes to rest between my daily visits, that Doña Reyna had told me about Doña Lupe's dead children or about her family's despair about Chabe's wedding, issues about which she would normally have only talked inside her house. When there were festivities celebrated here, Doña Lupe, Machí and the children stood up or sat in a close, tight group, wrapped in their *rebozos*, and gossiped, laughed, and ate little treats, surrounded by many similar groups of closely related women and their children. I realised that women were interacting in the church's esplanade in ways that were very similar to those I saw inside their houses, and that they were creating and re-creating intimacy with their close female relatives through their interactions. The bodies of the women crammed together and their *rebozos*, which sometimes enveloped more than one person (two girls, or a woman and a child) were quite clearly used as barriers that defined the little groups and protected them against the meddling of other, less close people. In this sense, it was quite amusing for me to see how, as soon as someone from outside the circle of potential intimacy approached, the women's expressions changed, their intimate conversations ceased, food disappeared behind clothes, and they engaged in the polite chit-chat of visits, but, interestingly, not in the uncommunicative distance of street encounters.

Thus women created intimacy in outside spaces, and they did that in similar ways, through interactions, physical closeness, confidential talk, shared food, enjoyment, and with the same people, mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, sisters, *comadres*, that they did inside their own houses. The church courtyard was not the only outdoor place in which this happened. Marielena and I went on many occasions to the lake shore, and sat on the grass, contemplating the villages on the other side of the water, playing with her children, eating fruit and *chicharrón* (charred pork skins), and talking about very intimate and painful episodes of her recent past and present life. I also saw from afar (although I was never part of

them) groups of women and children by the lake waters, washing clothes or bathing, whose joyful voices and frequent laughter told of the pleasure and warmth of each other's company<sup>8</sup>. However, the church courtyard, just like houses, seemed to be an appropriate space for women to bond with close others. And, whilst resting or plaiting palm, a "likeable" occupation, in Doña Lupe's own words, and talking about personal, funny or gossipy matters, they created warm and intimate moments, and thus developed forms of relatedness which constituted the content and substance of close, personal relationships.

Why was the church's yard such a privileged space for this kind of interactions? Why was it, in many senses, perceived or experienced by the women more like a "house" than a "street"? Paraphrasing previous interpretations, it could be argued that it was not the space in itself which "conditioned" a particular reaction on the part of the women, but the women's actions, perceptions and experiences in interaction with significant others which turned the space into a potentially intimate, pleasurable context. As in the case of their life inside houses, girls experienced from an early age specific forms of interaction with their mothers, grandmothers and aunts when they went to the courtyard on the occasions of festivals and celebrations, or simply in the flow of daily life. Berenice and all the little girls on the island would grow up with "embodied" memories of warmth, intimacy and enjoyment in the company of their close female relatives and "embodied"<sup>9</sup> instruments of interaction, perception, cognition and emotion to create and re-create similar contexts and experiences.

Yet it must be said that the esplanade was actually, in many ways, a house, for the church was the house where *santitos* lived. I will explore this issue in more depth in the following parts of this chapter. For the moment, however, I would suggest that women's perception of the church as a house, and its atrium as akin to a house's courtyard, might explain in part their attitudes of comfort and ease as well as their particular actions and modes of relatedness towards others in that space: intimate with close female relatives, courteous and formal, as in a visiting

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, women who travelled outside the island to go to a nearby market, something they usually did in pairs or small groups, also seemed to create contexts of closeness and intimacy amongst them, in the midst of the cheerful atmosphere that these occasions appeared to bring.

<sup>9</sup> I use this word in inverted commas to denote that I do not consider something "embodied" as the result of a process of "incorporating" something that pre-exists outside the body; but rather something that has its genesis and exists embedded in the body, inseparable from it, in an immanent form.

situation, with neighbours and acquaintances. However, as it will be also suggested in forthcoming sections, their dispositions and attitudes could not be understood but in the context of a specific form of relatedness with the *santitos* who live there.

## II. *Santitos* outside houses

### The house where *santitos* live

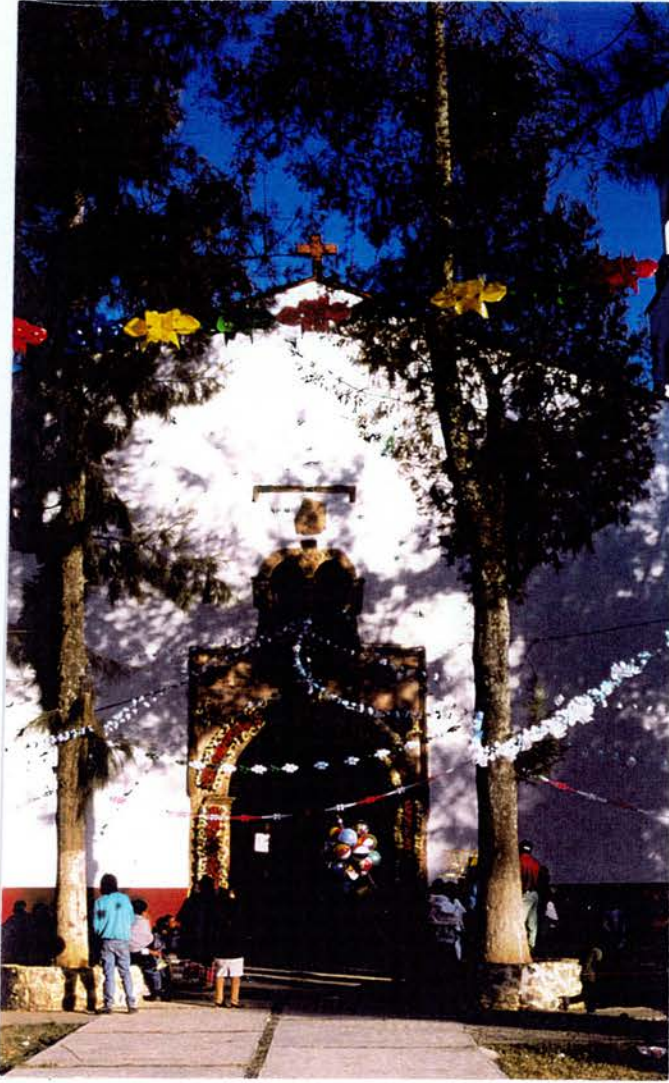
Jarácuaro's church, as mentioned before, was a nice white colonial building which stood in the middle of the village, flanked by the adjacent *curato* and surrounded by the atrium. Its height surpassed that of all other structures, and its volume contrasted with the humble dimensions of the houses. It was, undeniably, the most imposing building in the island, its tower clearly visible from afar<sup>10</sup>. The façade was quite pretty, with a simple doorway of sculpted stone sporting a bass-relief of San Pedro (the patron saint of the village) and San Pablo, Saint Peter and Saint Paul. The interior was spacious and relatively luminous. It consisted of a single, ample rectangular nave topped by a painted vaulted roof. The altar stood at the far end, on the opposite side from the main door, with the tabernacle and some saints' niches behind it. The walls were rather bare, covered in peeling off-white paint with green and black patterns, adorned by some dusty paintings and pierced by plain windows at regular intervals. A door besides the altar connected the church with the *curato*. There was a wooden, unused pulpit on the left hand side, a confessional box on the right hand side, and a few other trinkets lying about. The rows of benches, twenty or so, occupied roughly half of the central area. There were many *santitos* inside the church, and they were either positioned above the altar, around it, or else stood inside portable wooden niches along the walls.

Despite the apparent simplicity of the building and its slightly rundown state, the church was one of the most pleasant places to be in the island. During the day, beams of bright sunshine entered through the open doors and the windows, enveloping the inside in a soft light. At the height of the dry season, when it was hot and dusty outside, the church remained cool, smelling of flowers and candle wax. In

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<sup>10</sup> I was told by the anthropologist at the Museo Regional de Pátzcuaro that the church in Jarácuaro had been built, under the direction of Franciscan friars, atop the ruins of the island's *yácatas*. *Yácatas* were the pyramid-like temple complexes which existed in Michoacán in times of the Tarascan kingdom (see Warren 1977:18, and Brandes 1988: 12, for a description of the *yácatas* at Tzintzuntzan). According to my informant, this circumstance would explain the elevation of the terrain on which the church stood (Castilleja, personal communication).





Photograph 13: Jarácuaro church, decorated for the festival of Señor de la Misericordia

the evenings, and until it was closed for the night, the church was nicely illuminated by the candles and electric lights, and maintained a warmer temperature than the cold outside. It was, by far, the most luxurious building in Jarácuaro, containing a few beautiful and expensive objects - glass lamps, golden cups and silver trays for the mass, embroidered tablecloths, some pieces of fine wood furniture, the pretty attires of the *santitos* -, and it was always full of flower arrangements. On days of festivities, it was profusely decorated with colourful papers, banners and velvet curtains, and the elaborate "sculpted" candles<sup>11</sup>, donated by the islanders, were pulled out of storage. The church was kept clean and tidy, the candles burning, and the flowers fresh, by the *encargados del templo* (keepers of the church), a group of seven married couples, approved -but not chosen- by the parish priest, who were in charge of the building's upkeep, as well as attending to the *santitos* and assisting in the services.

The church was open every day of the week from dawn to late in the evening, and saw a lot of activity around it. There were rosaries, attended mostly by the Ladies of the Candle, early each morning; there was the *Círculo Bíblico* Bible classes held in the *curato*, once or twice a week; there was the *Doctrina* (Catholic Doctrine School) for the children on Saturdays; and then, of course, there were masses on Thursdays and Saturdays, and on many other special occasions such as saint's days, as well as specific services for particular events like weddings or baptisms. However, those more or less organised events were not the only times when the church was busy. During the many hours I sat in the atrium, writing my fieldnotes or having a break between visits, and I came to realise that there was a constant, daily flow of people going into the church, coming out of it, doing things inside it, or simply passing by its doors. For many hours every day, the nave was animated by the voices of the keepers, and by the noises they made whilst fulfilling their tasks at the church: mopping the floors, changing the flowers or moving furniture around. The Ladies of the Candle, who kept turns to watch the church<sup>12</sup>, stayed sometimes under the trees of the esplanade, and at other times they sat just inside the main door, seeking some freshness and shade. As mentioned before, a great deal of people criss-crossed the esplanade in their daily movements around

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<sup>11</sup>For certain festivities, people bought big candles shaped in various intricate forms and ornamented with little wax figurines and ribbons, which they presented at the church.

<sup>12</sup>It was explained to me that, a few years before, some *gringos* (the word for North Americans, and, by extension, for all foreigners) had entered Jarácuaro's church when momentarily unattended, and had stolen a *virgencita*, a Baby Jesus and San Ramos (Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey). Ever since then, the Ladies of the Candle had been very zealous in their duty as guardians of the church and its contents.

the island, and everyone, no matter how much in a hurry they were, acknowledged the presence of the church. Men and women would pause briefly in front of its door, bowed their heads, bent their knees slightly, and crossed themselves quickly before resuming their walk. Now and then, a person, usually a woman, would enter the church; from the outside, they could be seen kneeling on the cold tiled floor, sitting on a bench, or lighting a candle in front of one of the *santitos*.

Before I went to Jarácuaro, I had expected to encounter a particular type of behaviour inside the church, one which reflected the “fervour”, “devotion” or “piety” reported in many ethnographies dealing with aspects of religion in Latin America (for examples about this, see Gimenez 1978: 144; Allen 1988: 196; Wolf 1979: 150; Vogt 1990 [1970]: 24; Ingham 1986: 98; Foster 1972: 192; Norget 1993: 53; Turner & Turner, 1979: *passim*). Moreover, it could have been easy to assume that the church was a “sacred space” for the community, “set apart from the secular world outside” and which elicited “ritualistic behaviours” (Ardener, 1993: 14). However, the tone of people’s comportment in Jarácuaro’s church, and particularly that of the women, was neither “fervently devotional” nor “ritualised” or even particularly “reverential” in the sense implied by the above authors<sup>13</sup>. Take, for instance, the islanders’ behaviour during mass. I remember one particular occasion, at the beginning of my fieldwork, in which I went to the Saturday mass with Doña Lupe, Machí and the children as usual. We arrived late, something we did quite regularly, and we stood near the door as all the benches were already occupied. I noticed that there were a few people sitting at the front rows of seats, men on the left and women on the right, who were attentively following the priest’s words, singing eagerly and promptly replying in the right places of the liturgy. Yet most people were distracted and seemed to be thinking of or occupied with something else. People kept arriving late throughout the service; particularly teenage boys and girls who, dressed in their best clothes, eyed their sweethearts, whispered to their friends, and went in and out of the church talking or laughing quietly. Doña Lupe, although following most of the ceremony, turned her head at times, curious to see who was there and what they were wearing; then, she got close to Machí and told her some piece of gossip with her mouth covered by her *rebozo*. Machí, like

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<sup>13</sup> With particular reference to Mexico, Gilberto Gimenez talks about people in Chalma kissing images “passionately” and refers to their “heart-rending devotion” (1978: 144). Ingham (1986: 98) describes “devotion” to saints in Tlayacapan as consisting of “pious appeals” and “expressions of praise and gratitude”. Vogt mentions “emotionally intense” praying amongst Zinacantecos and also their “complex rituals performed for the saints” (1990 [1970]: 24)

many other young mothers, breast-fed her baby for most of the time, and then played little games with him to keep him distracted until she eventually rocked him to sleep. Meanwhile, all the older children ran around in the empty area between the last benches and the door, screaming and laughing, to the consternation of the officiating priest.

In general, the people of Jarácuaro seemed to be quite relaxed inside the church at most times<sup>14</sup>. After the morning rosaries and some masses, groups of people used to remain sitting on the benches, and proceeded to hold what looked like congenial and carefree gatherings. They turned round to face each other, chatted amiably about various things and, in general, behaved very much as if they were in a friendly reunion in a neighbour's house. During the Saturday Doctrine School, the children gathered in noisy groups near the altar, playing and talking, whilst their young female teachers tried to explain to them the basics of Catholic teachings through little rhymed prayers and cheerful songs. Almost every day I observed women who had gone inside the church for a visit. Sometimes they kneeled, crossed themselves slowly, and uttered quiet prayers towards a particular *santito*. Yet many other times, they walked to a bench and sat there quietly, their bodies relaxed as they looked around them at the altar and the *santitos*, but also at the flowers, the candles and the embroidered napkins decorating the portable shrines. The Ladies of the Candle on watch duty often moved to the cool interior of the church during the hottest hours of the day, and one could see them there on their little *petate* on the floor, plaiting palm, talking animatedly to other ladies, or reprimanding their children.

In short, people of Jarácuaro, and particularly the women, seemed to be relatively relaxed and comfortable within the island's church, and their behaviours, demeanours and actions reflected more a feeling of ease than any "fervid devotion". Even when they were engaged in what could be interpreted as "ritualistic behaviours", such as the praying or chanting during the mass ceremonial, these were, in most cases, little more than perfunctorily and absently done. In fact, most of the women's movements and actions inside the church had a familiar quality about them, and appeared to be no more than extensions of their routine, daily activities: breast-feeding babies, plaiting palm, gossiping, scolding children, resting in silence.

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<sup>14</sup> Similar experiences of comfort and familiarity inside a church have been reported amongst Greek people by Jill Dubisch (1995: 74).



Why was the church in Jarácuaro a place where people, and specifically women, seemed to feel at ease? Why were their attitudes and behaviours more casual or quotidian than elaborately ritualistic? Why did women visit the church often, and why did they sit there on their own sometimes, seemingly relaxed? It could be argued that one of the reasons why women might have felt comfortable in the church was due to the actual physical qualities of the building, and to its overall atmosphere. It is undeniable that it was a pleasant, luxurious space in comparison to the poor, humble houses which people inhabited. It could also be said that it was a place where women could go easily, without having to give many explanations to their husbands or mothers-in-law, as its respectability and propriety was undoubted. Their brief visits served to interrupt the hard work of their daily routines: they could sit there and relax for a short while, looking at the nice things around them, at the pretty candles and colourful flowers. They might have even been able to let their imaginations fly, something not easy to achieve in the continuous hurry of daily labour. If they had conflictive situations in their houses, the church provided a momentary respite from them. As a young woman from the island told me once: "If I feel bad in the house, I go to the church. There, I am in peace and quiet, and nobody bothers me". I personally found the church tranquil and beautiful, and, at times, a haven of needed familiarity, since I could recognise many of its objects, its shapes, smells and sounds, from many other Mexican and Spanish churches from my childhood and adolescence.

All the above explanations are somehow focused on the structural and functional characteristics of the church as building: a material collection of walls, doors, windows, roofs and ornaments. Yet my impression is that for Doña Lupe, Machí, Doña Cecilia, and most of the other women in Jarácuaro, the church was not just an empty building, used for ecclesiastical ceremonies or social recreational purposes, or even for personal escapism. It was certainly not a "sacred space" set apart from the "secular space" of daily life, nor a mere location for "a complex ritual system", as Foster (1972: 193) described churches around Tzintzuntzan. On the contrary, the church was full, inhabited by certain *santitos*, significant others whose presence was clearly and distinctly perceived, experienced and expressed. The church was, above all, the house where those *santitos* lived. It was the *santitos* whom the women went to see in their house during their frequent visits to the church. Moreover, it was the modes of relatedness they had with those *santitos* who lived there, their interpersonal, life-long relationships with some of them, and their specific interactions in different situations, which informed their experiences and

perceptions, and thus made the church a comfortable, secure and overall pleasant place to be. I will deal with these issues in more depth in forthcoming sections. But first, let us have a look at the *santitos* who lived in Jarácuaro's church.

### The *santitos* who lived in the church

In the same way that some *santitos* lived in houses with people, some others lived in the church in Jarácuaro. In general, people used to refer to *santitos* and their dwellings in the idiom of habitation. Thus Don Alfredo explained to me that "Señor de Carácuaro *está* [resides] in Tierra Caliente", just like his son *está* in Lerma; Doña Amelia told me of the time she "went to see Santiago in Asajo, in the church where he stays"; and Doña Lupe said that every time she travelled to Pátzcuaro, she "paid a little visit to the Virgin in her church"<sup>15</sup>. In general, churches were considered appropriate residences for *santitos* to live, a perception that seems to be common also in many other parts of Mexico (see Carrasco, 1952: 24; Ruz, 1995: passim; Vogt 1990 [1970]:21-23). In many ways, the church resembled all the other houses in the island. For instance, women took to the church, as presents for the *santitos*, the same embroidered napkins, trays, flowers and little palm hats that they used to embellish their own houses. They also took to the church a kind of candle that they bought in the local shops, which were contained in decorated glasses; once the wax had been consumed, they returned for the glasses, which then were used back at their homes for drinking and displayed with all the other crockery in beautiful cabinets. Moreover, one of the specific tasks of the "keepers of the church" was to maintain it clean and tidy, and when Doña Hermila, who was one of the keepers during my stay in the island, described to me what their chores were, it sounded very familiar, like a list of housework routines.

"The women wash the flower basins, the tablecloths, the priests' tunics and the *santitos*' dresses, and we sew whatever needs mending; between all of us we dust everywhere, and mop the floor and wax it, and

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<sup>15</sup>This perception of churches as houses was not contradicted by the priests' words, who, in their homilies, referred to the church as "the house of God", "our Father's house", the "house of our Lord", "this holy house", and so on. Indeed, the Catholic teachings in Latin America and other parts of the world are full of metaphors of houses: for instance, heaven is a "big house above" where God lives, surrounded by angels, Mary, the saints, and the just. I once attended a Biblical Circle meeting with Doña Cecilia, where the catequist, a young woman from Jarácuaro, explained to us in plain terms that heaven is like a big house full of rooms, and that there were enough rooms up there for all of us. After finishing, on our way home, Doña Cecilia explained to me, excitedly: "This is really how I imagine heaven! It is like a house full of rooms, and Diosito is waiting up there for us, and I will get up there and there will be a room for me, like in my house".

change the flowers and the old candles. Now and then, some couples, or some of the men, go to buy the flowers and other things we need in Pátzcuaro. And the women usually cook something in the *curato*, sometimes a *pozole*, sometimes just chocolate and "sweet bread" (*pan dulce*) for all the keepers to eat"<sup>16</sup>.

Every night, the keepers locked the church and the atrium fence, and the sounds of the keys and locks echoed similar noises throughout the village, of houses' doors being bolted and courtyard gates secured for the night.

But, who were those *santitos* who lived in the church in Jarácuaro? Above the altar in a niche stood San Pedrito<sup>17</sup>, who, as the patron saint of Jarácuaro, presided in the church from this prominent place. Señor de la Misericordia (Lord of Mercy) was on the wall on the left hand side, a crucified *cristito* surrounded by a neon light in the form of a heart. Opposite Señor de la Misericordia sat Virgencita de la Salud (Virgin of Health), her figure of stone covered by an embroidered cloth placed like a *rebozo*. Besides San Pedrito, on the right hand side, there was the Virgencita de Guadalupe (Virgin of Guadalupe). Further along the wall, several portable wooden niches were the abodes of Virgen de los Dolores (Virgin of Sorrows) and María Reina (a crowned virgin) amongst others. On that same right hand side wall, there were also two crucified *cristitos*, plus San Ramos (literally "Saint Palms"<sup>18</sup>), and Santo Entierro, an entombed Christ. In addition to those mentioned above, there were many other *santitos* in Jarácuaro's church: some stayed permanently in dark and dusty corners, and some appeared suddenly, pulled from their storage at the *curato* by the keepers in some form of rotation. When I asked about these, my friends were unsure about their identities ("I don't know that one", they would tell me with an apologetic look), or gave me contradictory information. For instance, one *santito* to the left of the altar was San Lázaro according to Doña Lupe, and San Alejo according to Doña Hermila. Yet neither of them seemed to be bothered by this lack of acquaintance with some of the *santitos*. In general, I got the impression that most people knew, were familiar, and interacted in varying degrees with Señor de la Misericordia, Virgencita de la Salud, San Pegrito and Virgencita de Guadalupe; the rest were respected and

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<sup>16</sup> It was quite curious for me to notice that in the church, even though the keepers were couples, the tasks were divided just as they would be in any household, with the men in charge of the sweeping and the shopping trips, and the women doing the washing, cooking and sewing of clothes.

<sup>17</sup> San Pegro or San Pedro, Saint Peter, pronounced in the island's characteristic manner, substituting the consonant group "dr" for "gr". (cf Brandes 1988: 33).

<sup>18</sup> My own interpretation about the identity of this *santito* is that he was Jesus on a donkey entering Jerusalem.

acknowledged as *santitos*, but remained in most cases as a sort of background crowd to the “important” ones. As Berenice responded to me once, when I persistently questioned her inside the church to test her knowledge: “I don’t know their names. But they are all *santitos*, anyway!”

### Relating to the *santitos*: shared histories, shared bodies

Despite living in their own house, the church of Jarácuaro, the *santitos* mentioned above were not separated from the daily experience of women, nor their interactions confined to occasional visits, the weekly mass, and the yearly festivities. These *santitos* were very often present in women’s lives: in their memories, their conversations, taken into account for many aspects of their existence. For instance, some the first things people related to me upon my arrival in the island were stories about some *santitos*, which were told spontaneously and with apparent enthusiasm. Doña Cecilia explained to me that Señor de la Misericordia appeared on a tree here, in Jarácuaro: “They say he came out of a tree: there was this branch growing, and they saw it was in the shape of a *crisfito*, and it was him”. On another occasion, Lupita told me the story of the Virgencita de la Salud in Jarácuaro. According to her grandparents, she had been found by a farmer in a field near Jarácuaro. When he tried to put her in his donkey and carry her, the only place she had wanted to go was the island. “If he tried to take her in a different direction, she just went too heavy, and he could not move her. She wanted to come over here”<sup>19</sup>.

There was obviously an undeniable ludic component in the telling of these stories about the *santitos*: when women related them to me, we were usually leisurely sitting in a sunny courtyard, or resting after a meal, and they often described the details vividly, in an almost visual manner. It could be added that these stories about *santitos* were not that original, since they shared many elements with those told in many other parts of Mexico (see Vogt 1990 [1970]: 21-22; Carrasco 1952: 42; Turner & Turner, 1978) and of Latin America (for an example in Peru, see Sallnow, 1987; for Panama, see Gudeman 1976: 714; in Ecuador, see

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<sup>19</sup> A story of both Señor de la Misericordia or Virgencita de la Salud might have been told to Carrasco back in the fifties, for in his book *Tarascan Folk Religion*, written on the basis of data gathered in Jarácuaro, he says: “The saint’s image appears to some person who sees, hears or dreams of it and calls the attention of the people. Often it is a shapeless piece of wood or stone in which someone imagines he sees a saint” (1952: 42).



Bourque 1993b: 189)<sup>20</sup>. Many anthropologists would see them as just part of the local “folk-lore”, enjoyable story-telling, or, as Carrasco (1952) has proposed, symbolic showcases of a “folk” religious ideology. Yet, I do not think talks about *santitos* were just “folk” tales told for fun, neither complexes of abstract ideas dressed as some kind of legend, for people to display or absorb (cf. Turner & Turner 1978; Gudeman 1976). The ludic component was more in the pleasure of talking, of interacting with others in an agreeable environment, than in any kind of artistic story-telling. For what was striking to me about these stories was their commonplace character, the matter-of-fact tone with which the women spoke about them: they were not general, but about specific *santitos* and specific events, unusual or quotidian, that referred to them. To me, most of the time, these stories sounded very much like any other piece of information or gossip I was given about the women’s relatives or neighbours.

Listening to my friends’ words, to their expressions and gestures, and to the things they stressed, I realised these “stories” were much more like personal “histories”. Women talked about bits of information that chartered some biographical details of the *santitos*, aspects of their personalities, things they had done or had happened to them. For Doña Cecilia, Señor de la Misericordia had been born in the island and, like herself, he was a native of Jarácuaro. For Lupita, the Virgencita de la Salud had clearly expressed a desire to stay in her village, which she had communicated in a way which others had understood and fulfilled, and which she also apprehended. Some of the information I was given had been personally witnessed by someone. Doña Cecilia’s mother, Doña Carolina, had noticed Señor de la Misericordia had grown throughout the years. When she arrived in the island, “he had a baby face, and no beard, and he was young (*estaba chiquito*); but now he’s grown, he is like a man, he has a beard and his skin is much darker”. In general, it could be said that, in the women’s daily experience, in the flow of their daily lives, the *santitos* in the church (or at least some of them) were not static entities: they had biographies and more or less eventful existences, things happened to them, and they kept busy. Some of them were native to the island, some of them grew, they communicated with others, they interacted, just like the women did, and all of these dynamic aspects were present in the women verbal exchanges. It is important to note that, as mentioned before, not all the *santitos* in the church were manifest in the women’s conversations or lives equally: the four mentioned above

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<sup>20</sup> I also found a similar story in Greece about a Panayia’s (Virgin) icon which had been found, carried and then had become too heavy to be lifted (Dubisch 1995: 69).

(the Señor, the Virgencita, San Pegrito and the Guadalupana) were the most popular and loved ones, and the ones about whom people regularly talked. People from the island seemed to hold particularly the first two in greater esteem, not only because they belonged there, by birth or by election, but because, as Don Joaquín put it, “they are not just images, like other images, but they are images that have appeared. They appeared in a tree, or in a stone, and they are very miraculous”. (This issue of the “miraculousness” of *santitos* will be dealt with in Chapter 4).

Not only the *santitos* in the church had personal biographies<sup>21</sup>, just like the women had their own, peculiar life histories and stories. They also had distinctive physiques; even more so than the *santitos* who lived in houses, for most of the *santitos* in the church were *bultitos*, that is, they had three-dimensional bodies. For instance, San Pedrito was quite tall, had a beard, and was dressed in red, like a bishop. Señor de la Misericordia was thin, dark, had long hair, a beard, and a sweet expression on his face. Like most other crucified *crisititos*, he was wearing only the short skirt around his hips. Virgencita de la Salud was of stone, a square block with some faint paintings of a virgin on it. She was, nevertheless, standing up, and covered with a cloth in the manner of a *rebozo*, and that made her look quite anthropomorphic: even I did not think of her as a stone, but as a human figure. Most of the other *santitos* had also very distinguishing faces, clothes and gestures. Virgen de los Dolores was a middle-aged woman, all covered in a black velvet cloak, who looked up with sorrowful eyes, as tears ran down her cheeks, whilst María Reina was youthful, pretty, had a faint smile on her lips and was wearing a fetching bright blue dress.

One important aspect of the relationships of women with the *santitos* in the church is that these relationships were based on their shared physicality. Women had bodies, but so did the *santitos*<sup>22</sup>, and thus the women could empathise with them at the level of these bodies. I remember that, on occasion of a wedding that took place in the island, San Pegrito was taken down from its usual place to repair

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<sup>21</sup> I talk about all the *santitos* in the church because, although people in general were more attached to those four than to others, some persons had very special relationships with one or two of the most “obscure” ones; for them, those would also have stories and histories. Equally, women were very careful not to offend any of the *santitos*, even if they did not know them. I am assuming that, as far as they were concerned, the difference between *santitos* was, perhaps, one of knowledge, rather than one of category.

<sup>22</sup> Ruz (1995:15) describes something similar when he says that saints in the Mayan world are perceived as “individual beings, incarnated in their images”. Carrasco (1952: 24) reports that, in Jarácuaro, “images [...] appear to behave like a person, [and] are believed to move, weep or speak”.

his wooden base and wash his clothes. For a couple of days, he was left by the keepers lying on the floor of the *curato*, his head resting on the cold stones. When I told this to Doña Lupe, who did not see him prostrate like that, she was concerned for his comfort, and exclaimed “¡Pobrecito!” (“Poor thing!”) with a worried expression. Another time, on the festivity of Señor de la Misericordia, I arrived at Doña Amelia’s house and found her very distressed. Lupita informed me with a serious expression: “This morning, they took the Señor down from his place, and his head broke! The priest said that they had to take him down to pray, and when they did that, his head broke”. Doña Amelia, looking very distraught, said:

“We are in mourning! In mourning! (*¡estamos de luto!*) . We are just about to celebrate his festival, and meanwhile, he is lying there, with his head broken! What are we going to do? They took him down, but perhaps he didn’t want to, and that’s why his head broke: they forced him”.

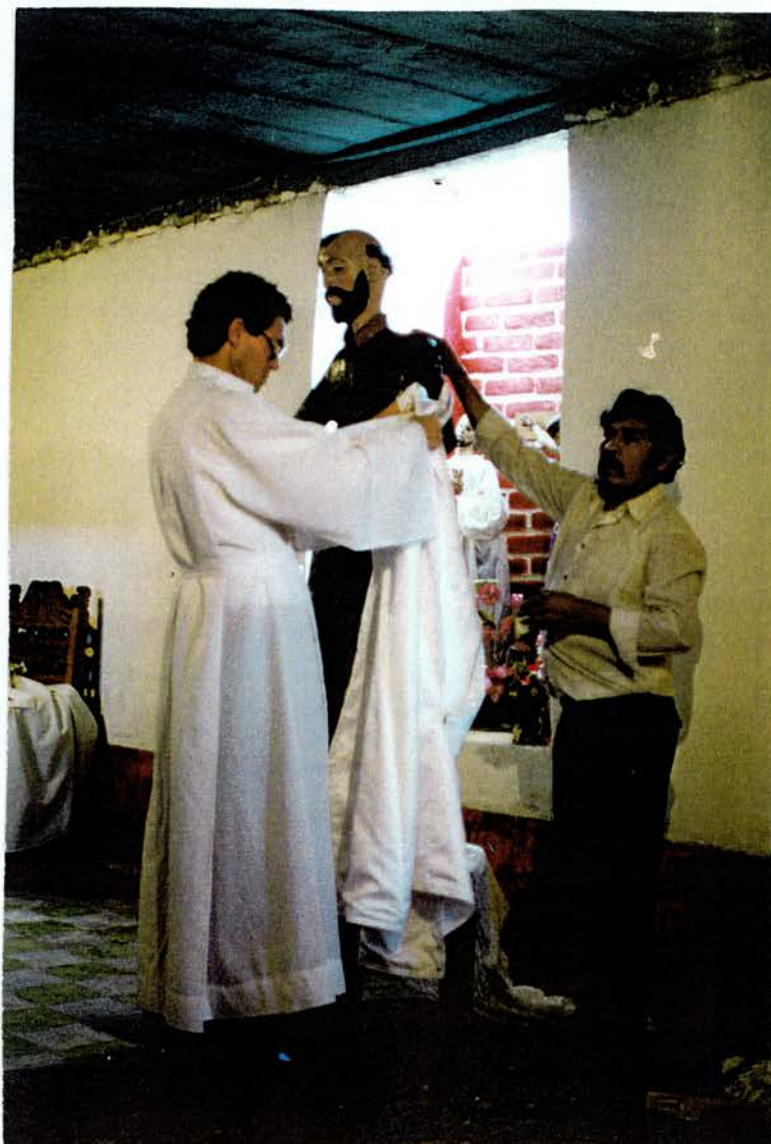
As she said that, the graphic quality of her description made me feel, in my own body, a sense of aggression: perhaps Doña Amelia transmitted to me a sensation of the violence the Señor had suffered in his own body. I would say that she could certainly feel empathy with him for the assault that had been physically perpetrated on him<sup>23</sup>.

### Becoming familiar

The *santitos* in the church of Jarácuaro, like those ones in houses, entered the lives of women early on. As has been mentioned before, women took their babies and little children to the church, and those grew up becoming accustomed to all the others they saw there, including the personages who lived in it. Machí carried her little son inside her *rebozo* to the masses, and I could see him peeking in curiosity at all the strange and slightly menacing figures around him. Older children like Berenice attended the Saturday doctrine school, and sat at the benches in the sunny nave whilst patient adolescents from the village told them, amongst other things, who the *santitos* were. Every year there was a particular day, Easter Saturday, when most young mothers in the island took their little daughters and sons to the church for a special blessing. On that evening, after the mass was over and the priest had left, the keepers reorganised the church, so that the benches were pushed to the sides, and many of the *santitos* were placed within people’s reach at the centre of the

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<sup>23</sup> Norget describes a similar case, this time of emotional empathy, which she witnessed in Oaxaca. The jewels belonging to Virgin de la Soledad were stolen, and people took to wearing mourningbands in sympathy; some women commented that the Virgin’s face had shrunk, that she looked sad, and that she had tears in her eyes (1993: 53).



Photograph 14: The parish priest and Don Baldomiano, a keeper, dressing San Pedrito after his niche had been repaired and his clothes washed.



nave. In a festive and pleasant environment, where the keepers chatted animatedly and the women sat in groups and commented the event, whilst children played and laughed in the brightly illuminated church, the young mothers hurried around choosing a *madrina* or *padrino de manto* (godmother or godfather "of cloak") for their babies and infants. These *madrina* or *padrino*, a young girl or boy acquainted with the mother, had to take the little child to one of the *santitos* of their choice, request one of the male keepers to do some praying, make a donation for the church, then hold the child and pass her or him under the *santito's* cloak, to get the latter's blessing and protection for the little one. My own goddaughter Carlita, who was two years old, found Virgen de los Dolores too scary, and she cried and refused to get near her. Yet she was happy enough to get close to San Pedrito, and she was timid but curious about this *santito*, her tearful eyes wide open as her little hands grabbed the cloth of his cloak. I noticed other children were rather unperturbed by their intimate encounter with a particular *santito*, and although most remained serious during the operation, the older ones asked questions ("Who is that *virgencita*, mum?" "Why is she wearing that?"). By the end of the night, most children had been passed under most *santitos'* cloaks.

Thus children grew surrounded by the *santitos* who lived in the church, saw their mothers interacting with them, and they themselves commenced, little by little, to become familiar with them, and to have a relationship with some of them. The *santitos* were the benevolent witnesses of their games at the church, and shared with them the fun of sunny Saturday mornings. Little girls and boys learned from their mothers and grandmothers that the *santitos* were good, and they saw their female relatives entrusting them with their own offspring's security and protection. Furthermore, children watched their own mothers turning to certain *santitos* when they themselves were sick and felt bad, and once they were well, they might even be told that the *santito* was to be thanked for it. My friend Marielena's eldest son, Mayito, was, at the time of my fieldwork, a small, fragile child, who had suffered various serious illnesses during his early life. Marielena, although she was not from the island herself, had developed a strong affection and trust for San Pedrito, and she visited him often in the church to ask him to cure Mayito from one or another of his frequent ailments<sup>24</sup>. During one of our chats, she told me the following anecdote in an amused tone:

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<sup>24</sup> For an example of the interactions between young mothers and *santitos* with reference to children's health, see Chapter 4.

"You know what happened the other day? Mayito was sick, and I went to the church with him, just for a little "drop by" (*una pasadita*) to see San Pedrito. And as we walked into the church, Mayito let my hand go and started running towards the altar on his own, screaming: 'San Pedrito, cure me, cure me!' [She laughed] "Isn't it funny? He has seen me asking San Pedro to cure him before, and now he knows whom he has to ask. But he was screaming at him, like in a bad mood (*enojado*), like demanding from him to be cured! He was so comical!"

In short, children of Jarácuaro became increasingly familiar with the *santitos* in the church in a progressive way. From the moment they left their houses wrapped in their mothers' *rebozos*, they encountered them as significant others in their daily lives: others who were in the church, to whom one talked, and who were good, as, when asked, they did things for one. Children heard the stories and histories of the *santitos*, from their parents and from their doctrine teachers, and they related to them in a physical way, through their bodies. Yet I do not think that the emerging relationship between the children and the *santitos*, or their arising perception of the latter as good beings, was the result of an "ideological indoctrination" based on a process of "semiotic" ingraining (see Mitchell, 1997 for a similar position to this in the context of Malta). It was, as far as I could see it, more like an experiential realisation: an increasing awareness of their presence, and a gradual acquaintance that happened in an inter-personal, interactive context. This realisation was as much the result of what they had been told as of what they were beginning to experience. When Mayito got sick, he saw her mother talking to, interacting with San Pedrito; he then started to feel better, and he saw his mother thanking or repaying the saint, and it was in this form that all started making sense for him. In his reality, connected to that of his mother, father and of others, there had been an active, positive response on the part of the *santito*. Moreover, what he would learn from his parents and those surrounding him in these situations will be not so much the pieces of semantic information ("*santitos* are good"), or just a certain "emotional memory" of an event (an aspect in which I differ from Mitchell's interpretation, 1997). It will be the "tools" (Vygotski 1994 [1929]; Luria 1994 [1928]), the forms of interacting and modes of relatedness with *santitos*, which will allow him, in the dynamic process of his experience and in the specific contexts, to interpret and re-create, or in other words, to see and experience, those perceptual realities within which, in turn, those interactions occur and make sense (see Bourdieu 1977).



Photograph 15: Marielena taking her children for a visit to the church. From left to right, little Lupita, Mayito, and Marielena holding Ulises.

### Interacting with the *santitos*: celebrating and accompanying

Some of the early experiences women shared with the *santitos* were the collective celebrations of festivities, when the people of Jarácuaro *le hacían la fiesta al santo*, literally “fêted” the corresponding saint, Virgin or Christ. For instance, on the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the 12th of December, many women and men of the village celebrated with this *virgencita*. From the previous night, the whole village participated in an atmosphere of titillation. Doña Lupe, who shared her saint’s day with that of the virgin, was busy at home preparing for her own party, as I imagined were her numerous namesakes<sup>25</sup> around the island. On the big day, many people, mostly women with children, young girls and boys, went to the church at dawn “*a cantarle las mañanitas a la virgen*”, as it was explained: to sing to the virgin the Mexican equivalent of “Happy Birthday”. Later on all the Guadalupes in the village, including Doña Lupe, would have those same *mañanitas* sung to them by their relatives at their houses. Inside the church, the *virgencita* had been placed in a prominent position just above the altar, partially covering San Pegrigo; the nave was filled with flowers, and incense and candles were burning in front of her. The people sang songs in her honour, remarking her beauty and her goodness. After the songs, there was a rosary and a procession, and then, back at the church, more songs, and a set of *porras* (cheers) which I found quite charming: “Let us give a round of applause to the Virgin of Guadalupe! [Clapping] Let us cheer the virgin! ¡*Viva la Virgen de Guadalupe!* [Hurrah for the virgin of Guadalupe!]”. Once the cheers were over, some girls and boys resumed the singing, whilst most women made their way back to their houses, to prepare the food for the house parties that were going to take place that afternoon all over Jarácuaro.

Many anthropologists working in Mexico have paid special attention to the theme of saints’ festivals<sup>26</sup> (for example, Beals 1992 [1945]; Van Zantwijk 1974; Ingham 1986; Vogt 1990 [1970]; Norget 1993; Chiñas 1973; to mention but a few). However, many of those ethnographers have focused on the “ritual” aspects of these festivities, either from a functionalist or from a symbolic point of view. That

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<sup>25</sup> Guadalupe was a very popular name in the island, as it is in the rest of the country. In general, every girl born in December seemed to receive this name in honour of this *virgencita*, the patron saint of Mexico.

<sup>26</sup> Also this issue has been a traditional object of interest to anthropologists researching in other parts of Latin America: for some examples, see Gudeman, 1976; Bourque, 1993b; Sallnow 1987. Given the vastness and variety of the material about the matter, it would be impossible to reproduce the main positions here, and it nevertheless falls outwith the purpose of this thesis.



is, they have been concerned with the varying social functions of ritual activity within a community, and/or with the symbolic meanings of ritual performances with reference to specific religious ideologies. In both these perspectives, though, the ritual activity in itself becomes the centre of the anthropological analysis, sometimes even at the cost of ignoring the actors' points of view. Yet, I would say that from the position of the women of Jarácuaro, it did not seem it was the "ritual" that was fundamental, or even defined the *santitos'* festive days. First of all, the so called "rituals" were reduced in the island (and in many other places that I visited in the area) to a few stereotyped gestures and some loosely set sequences of events, interspersed amongst rather quotidian manners and behaviours. Moreover, many of those "stereotyped gestures" appeared also in the interpersonal relationships between the people themselves: the *mañanitas* sung to the virgin were also sung to all the other Guadalupe; the flowers decorated houses as well as the church, and were given as gifts to Doña Lupe and other women celebrating their saint's day. Furthermore, those supposedly stereotyped gestures were not unidirectional, as "ritual" is sometimes portrayed in the literature: they were not just "performances", "gestures" or "symbolic" actions directed at an indeterminate, or non-existing, audience. They were forms of interacting with the *santitos*, activities and behaviours directed at those significant others who, as agents, would react or respond to them<sup>27</sup>. Thus the *mañanitas* were sung to please the *virgencita*, to "cheer" her in her day, and to remind her personally, directly and physically, in her own house, of all the people who cared about her.

Therefore, what was important for the Jarácuaro women when they celebrated saints' days was not so much the "ritualised" activities in themselves, but the different actions and interactions, stereotyped or not, which took place between them and the specifically fêted *santito*. Without denying the pleasurable aspects of saints' days -the slight change of daily routines, the leisurely gatherings, the special food- I would argue that, as far as the women were concerned, an important side of those festivities lay in the fact that they experienced a sociable

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<sup>27</sup> In this respect, Carrasco (1952: 44) notes that people of Jarácuaro thought saints could get angry if they did not show enough concern for them. In Tzintzuntzan, Foster (1972:237) refers to the concept of "*la palanca*" with respect to saints, explaining it as the courting activities of people aimed at obtaining the saints' favours. Ruz (1995: 22) citing Wagley (1957: 181) says that saints feel the contempt and disrespect of others. Vogt (1990[1970]: 23) quotes a Zinacanteco saying that saints "like nice things". Finally, Christian states that people of the Nansa valley (Spain) do things for a certain Virgin "as though she would be hurt" if they did not do them and concluded that their actions were "for her as much as for themselves" (1972: 129)

encounter with the *santitos*. An encounter that could be seen as “stereotyped” at times, but which was also undeniably easy-going and flexible, matter-of-fact, and even casual in many ways. Even more: an encounter that took place regularly and cyclically, and as such, was integrated in the ongoing social life of the women.

Thus Jarácuaro women, in festivities, spent time with the *santitos* in their house, together with other people of the village, in a convivial manner. For instance, on the eve of the 12th, a group of people congregated in the church after a *virgencita particular*<sup>28</sup> had been taken there from a house. Women and men sat leisurely on the benches, talking amongst themselves in little groups, in a cordial and distended atmosphere. Watching them, it appeared to me that they were just sharing the anticipation of the next day’s celebrations, not only amongst themselves, but also with the *virgencitas* and the rest of the *santitos* in the church. There were also occasions when women accompanied *crisitos* or *virgencitas* in less joyful situations. On Easter Thursday, after the mass, a group of women and men from the island stayed in the church to hold a wake for Jesus (cf. Norget 1993: 53), who had just “died”<sup>29</sup>. Doña Cecilia explained to me how these *velaciones* (wakes) were in the past:

“We did not sleep, we spent all night there, because there were various groups and first, a group sang *alabanzas* [songs to Jesus Christ], and then another group sang *alabanzas*, and so on, and we just spent the night like that: it was not easy to fall sleep. Then, the morning after, we sang the *mañanitas* to Jesus, except those were not *mañanitas-mañanitas*, not the happy ones, but more *alabanzas*. [...] During the wake, we felt very sad, because Jesus had died, how can one not be sad?”

Furthermore, the women of Jarácuaro did not only accompany the *santitos* inside the church, but also around the streets of Jarácuaro, when those left their habitual dwelling in a procession. On the day of the Virgen de Guadalupe, as I mentioned before, the virgin was taken out of the church after the *mañanitas*. I noticed it was a group of young girls, dressed in traditional Purhépecha costumes or in pretty dresses, who took turns to carry her around. During the procession, we walked along the streets of Jarácuaro, reciting the rosary and singing songs. Some

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<sup>28</sup> Literally “private Virgin”. This was a Virgencita de Guadalupe who stayed in a house in the village. Every year, on her day, she was taken to the church in a small procession to join her namesake for their commoncelebration. A few days after the festivity, she was taken back to her usual residence.

<sup>29</sup> According to the official Catholic doctrine, the death of Jesus Christ took place on the evening of the Friday; yet in Jarácuaro, his death was commemorated mostly on the Thursday, although there was a representation of the Via Crucis and the crucifixion on Holy Friday.

men were trying to orchestrate the procession, concerned with the proper way of doing things, but the women remained rather unruffled by their instructions, and continued to walk in a disarrayed, casual manner, whispering to each other under their *rebozos*. The women walked slowly, deliberately, very close together, holding lit candles and singing songs to the virgin; there were many sleepy children, also holding candles, and hanging to their mothers to avoid falling on the unevenly paved streets. The young girls who carried the virgin took their task rather seriously, and performed it with solemn expressions, careful not to shake the *virgencita* too much. As we walked the streets in slow motion, and we stopped at the corners of each *cuartel*<sup>30</sup>, more women came out of their houses and joined the cortege, after saluting the virgin with a bow or lightly kissing her feet. The rhythmical sound of the steps, the warm light of the candles, the closeness of the bodies, the cadence of the women's voices, and their continuous references in their songs to the virgin ("White dove", "she came down to the Tepeyac"<sup>31</sup> and she looked Mexican", "wife of God and mother of Jesus"), together with the whispers under *rebozos* and the sight of the somnolent children, all contributed to create a sensation of intimacy. It made me think of the group as a separate bubble traversing the streets of the village at dawn. This intimacy most clearly included the *virgencita*, enveloped her and revolved around her central position. As I wrote in my diary that night, "the presence of the Virgin was patent; we were accompanying a woman, a lady". Afterwards, reflecting on that procession and on the numerous others I attended in the island, I also noticed another interesting detail: in processions, a form of intimacy was created in the street amongst women, only this time they included a *virgencita*, or another *santito*, in the interaction. Not only that, but processions were one of the few contexts within which women walked the streets in leisure, their presence there legitimised and justified by the presence of the holy being.

### Interacting with the *santitos*: physicality and quotidian work

Not all the encounters between the women and the *santitos* in the church of Jarácuaro were confined to sociable occasions during festivities or other celebrations. These *santitos* were very much part of the quotidian lives of women in the island. As mentioned before, the church was open every day for many hours, and women, in

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<sup>30</sup> Jarácuaro was divided in two *barrios* (neighborhoods or sections) and four *cuarteles* (quarters).

<sup>31</sup> A reference to the apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe in the Tepeyac hill, in Mexico City. For more information about this event, see Turner and Turner (1978) and Wolf (1979).



Photograph 16: Inside the Church, after the *mañanitas* to the Virgin of Guadalupe. Note the people leisurely chatting among themselves.



their daily comings and goings, passed in front of it continuously. When they walked in front of its open doors, some women genuflected properly and made the sign of the cross over themselves carefully, in salutation to the *santitos* who stayed inside. Others, usually the younger ones like Machí or Marta, hurried in front of it, busy with their daily chores, and half-crossed themselves on the go, which was like a quick “¡Adios!” to the *santitos*, like the ones they exchanged between themselves in the streets at times. Yet each one of them, including the little girls like Berenice, acknowledged the presence of those saintly beings who, through the open doors of their residence, witnessed the passage of the days in the village (cf. Ruz 1995: 2).

During my fieldwork, I sat inside the church for many hours, seeking its tranquillity and spaciousness, and the silence which I could not find back at Doña Lupe’s house. I remember one occasion, early on in my stay, when I entered the nave, and I noticed an elderly woman kneeling on the floor between the benches, murmuring something. I was surprised to see her there on her own, or what I thought was “on her own”, for I soon realised that she was not, as William Christian once put it, having a conversation “in front of [an] image” (Christian 1972: 115), but fully and really talking to the *santitos*. However, she was not talking to all the *santitos* in general, but to some of them in particular. She first kneeled towards San Pedrito, bowing her head and crossing herself, muttering words without pausing. I could not hear what she was saying, but I recognised the intonation, as I had heard Doña Lupe before using those same tones to ask something of a *santito*. She moved her hand in a gesture of supplication, extending it towards the saint, and then motioned it in contrition, softly hitting her chest with her fist. Next, she turned to the two crucified *crisitos* which were on the right hand side, and repeated her motions. Finally, she faced Señor de la Misericordia to talk to him, and I could see her face: her expression was intense, concentrated, imploring, and it showed what I interpreted as pain. Her voice sounded like a lament. At that moment, she saw me, and she looked annoyed, as if I had interrupted her personal, intimate conversation with some *santitos*, her private pleas and business with them. Yet she did not stop talking, and continued for a little while, until, crossing herself in farewell, she left.

This woman was not the only one to visit the church and talk to the *santitos* in that direct, personal and intimate form, for I knew that most women, young and old, married and unmarried, visited the church during the day, on their own, to talk to the *santitos* about a variety of issues. Following Doña Lupe in her daily routines, I entered the church with her on numerous occasions, for “*una pasadita*”, just a little

“drop by” to say “hi”, just as she sometimes dropped in at her sister’s or her mother’s house for a little chat. I also ended up in the church with Marielena many times after our walks together, and I witnessed her asking San Pedrito and a *virgencita*, in clear and direct terms, for assistance with the health of her son. Very frequently I bumped into Doña Cecilia, Reyna and many other of my friends and acquaintances at the doors of the church, as they were just leaving after a “*visitita*” (“a little visit”)<sup>32</sup>. Doña Amelia once explained to me:

“Many times, I prefer just to go on my own to the church to talk to the *santitos* (*para platicar con los santitos*), rather than going to mass on Saturdays. Some people only go to mass to be seen, so that the others say “look how good so and so is”, but then they are not good, they behave badly towards others. Me, I’d much rather go to the church on my own, talk to the *santitos*, and that is that: it’s between them and me”.

What were the day-to-day interactions of women with the *santitos* in the church? How did they behave towards them in quotidian contexts? One of the things that surprised me when I arrived in Jarácuaro was to see how physical the relationships between the women and the saints, Virgins and Christs were. After all the readings mentioned above that described “reverent devotion” towards “sacred images” (as in Vogt 1990 [1970]), and after considering how imposing some of those *santitos* appeared to me at the beginning, I had expected attitudes far more ceremonious and distant coming from the women. However, they did not seem to think of saints as menacing or lugubrious; on the contrary, they talked of them as being “pretty”, or “nice”, or “having pretty faces”<sup>33</sup>. As I mentioned before, women related to *santitos* in the church as beings with bodies, and thus their appreciation of their physical characteristics happened within the same human parameters<sup>34</sup>.

Moreover, most *santitos* in the church, with the exception of San Pedrito and another one or two, were positioned within reach of people, and women, upon entering the church and performing the more formal greetings (the equivalent of a handshake and a “good day”), approached them and sat or stood quite close to

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<sup>32</sup> I will deal with the issue of “visiting” in more depth in Chapter 3.

<sup>33</sup> Once I showed Doña Cecilia a postcard of Virgen de Begoña, the patron saint of Vizcaya, where I come from. This is a romanesque Virgin and, as far as I had thought until then, very hieratic in her posture and with rather expressionless and plain features. Yet Doña Cecilia was very enthusiastic about her; she kissed her image and then said: “She is so pretty! She looks like Irenita, my granddaughter”. Ever since, I have changed my perception about this Virgin, and I can now see softness and beauty in her features.

<sup>34</sup> Gillin (1958: 244) explains that Mayan people in Guatemala talk about the saints “using the same terms with which they refer to living people” (quoted in Ruz 1995: 15).

them. Sometimes the women just sat on a bench, looking at the *santitos'* faces, in silence. Sometimes, they got near them and touched their feet, their clothes, or their cheeks. Doña Hermila instructed me once to go to the church and rub my hand onto the Virgencita de la Salud's face, and then onto my nose, to alleviate my unremitting allergy; according to her, "it is good, she will help you, you'll see how she'll cure you!". Young mothers rubbed their babies against the *santitos'* cloaks: I once saw Marielena standing near the Virgencita de los Dolores, looking at her eyes, holding Mayito close to the virgin's chest, and talking to her in soft whispers.

However, tactile expressions did not always carry an instrumental intention, although touching the *santitos* was beneficial, just like being "rubbed" (*una sobada*) by a healer or a relative was also good for one's health. Touching the *santitos* was very often just a demonstration of affection, and a form of endearing interaction. For instance, women took little gifts for the *santitos*, like palm hats, embroidered napkins or necklaces, which they made specially with their own hands, and they themselves put them onto the corresponding *virgencita* or *crisito*, with great care and tenderness. Furthermore, the desired and needed physical communication moved some of the women and men, usually the younger ones, to write letters to a particular *santito*. Señor de la Misericordia, for instance, had a few letters pinned on the wall besides him. Since they were open letters, I read them all, and I was surprised by the warm, fond words which some of them contained. Yet perhaps one of the most physical forms of communication between women in Jarácuaro and a *santito* in the church was the act of talking. The voice of a woman, with the special cadences and tones adopted when speaking with a *santito*, the whispers and monotone murmurs, the sporadic laments, was a very physical, tangible aspect of the contact, lending it an undeniable material reality. At the same time, and as it happened with *santitos* in houses, the voice was a link, a sort of "connecting cable" between the particular woman and the particular Virgin, Christ or saint, the perception of which could be seen as confirming the authenticity and the reciprocity of a true dialogue.

Thus the daily relationships between women and the *santitos* in the church of Jarácuaro were not characterised by a rigidity of forms, or the corseting of some ritual performed at a distance. The attitudes and behaviours of the women towards Christs, Virgins and saints were respectful and proper, but also spontaneous, casual, and, over all, warm, affectionate and tender. The familiarity of the women's behaviours towards the *santitos*, and the distension of their attitudes vis-à-vis them

were also patent in the fact that some women performed domestic chores in their presence: Doña Hermila, for instance, who had her obligations as a keeper to fulfil, or some of the Ladies of the Candle, who brought their palm to plait inside the church. When I accompanied Doña Hermila in the completion of her tasks, I was always taken by the confident way she moved around the nave, dusting niches, refreshing flowers and changing candles, and then energetically rearranging a *virgencita's* dress or carefully wiping her face. When she had to leave the *cargo* (responsibility) as a keeper, she told me that she was really sad: "I cried, I was so sad, I asked myself, 'why do we have to go? [...]' I felt good to be there, doing things. Carlita [her two year old granddaughter] says now 'let's go there!' because she misses it". Even when other women, like Doña Amelia or Marielena, dropped in for a short visit, they usually did so in the middle of their busy days, therefore turning the *santitos* in the church into benevolent and understanding witnesses of their domestic workloads. If women were quite at ease labouring in front of the *santitos* in the church, they were also happy to rest in their company. Many of the women I saw in the church, after talking to some *crisito* or *virgencita*, sat quietly on a bench, admiring the nave or perhaps just lost in their thoughts, their hands resting on their lap, and their bodily posture conveying a feeling of comfort and leisure, a respite in the daily hectic schedules of women's obligations.

### Talking to *santitos*: trust, confidence and self-confidence

Women touched the *santitos* in the church, showed them affection through little presents, and worked and rested comfortably in front of them: these were all important forms of relatedness between them. Yet perhaps the most important manner of interaction that took place between women and particular saintly beings was, as has already been mentioned, talking. Doña Lupe, Doña Amelia, Marielena, and all the others in the island went to the church sometimes just for a little visit, to say "hi", but even in those times greetings were directed more specifically to some of the *santitos* than to others, and brief thanks, compliments, and requests to them were uttered. On the many occasions that I went to the church with Doña Lupe, I heard her naming San Pegrito, Virgencita de Guadalupe, Virgencita de la Salud and Señor de la Misericordia in her murmured salutations, together with some sentences directed to them: "¡Ay, San Pegrito protégenos, ayúdanos! ¡Ay Virgencita, tú que eres tan buena, haz que tenga un buen día, que no me pase nada, y ayuda a mi familia!" ("San Pegrito, protect us, help us! Virgencita, you are so good, make it possible for



me to have a good day, stop anything bad from happening to me, and help my family!").

If talking was perceived by women as an important part of their interactions with *santitos* in normal occasions, when they were only "dropping in" for a little chat and a little rest, talking became crucial when they went to visit a specific Virgin, saint or Christ for assistance with a problematic matter. Prior to my trip to Carácuaro (see Chapter 4), I asked Doña Lupe to explain how I should behave when I arrived before Señor de Carácuaro's presence, and how to go about requesting from him help with my recurring health problems. She instructed me in very clear terms:

"Talk to him! Ask him to cure you once and for all. Enter the church, and greet him, and tell him [here she changed her voice into an imploring tone] "Señor, I am here, I have come to see you, I have travelled all this way here to see you, to say hello to you...'. And then you just ask him to help you with your problem, so that you do not carry on getting sick, so that you are well and do not get sick all the time."

When my friends and acquaintances related their visits to *santitos* to seek help for particular problems, the expressions they used were things like "*tú háblales*" ("talk to them"), "*platicarles los problemas*" ("to tell them one's problems"), "*decirles lo que le pasa a uno*" ("to say to them what is wrong with me") or "*le pedí que me compusiera*" ("I asked her/him to cure me"). According to what they told me, and to the fragments that I could hear when I visited the church with them, the women did not converse with the *santitos* just using conventional sentences: they talked to them in similar terms to those used with a relative or a neighbour. Thus they had to state to the particular saintly being the reason for their request, explain the circumstances, the gravity of the matter, and reveal the depth of their concern, worry or pain they were experiencing.

When I say that Jarácuaro women talked to the *santitos* in the church in the same terms as they did with their relatives, neighbours and *comadres*, I am only referring to the conversational form their interactions took. For there was a fundamental difference between the modes of relatedness of a woman like Doña Lupe with her mother or sister, and her modes of relatedness with the Virgencita de Guadalupe or Señor de la Misericordia. This difference rested on the degree of trust and confidence that she had in the *santitos*. As Doña Lupe explained to me, she, like many other women, would rather confide her problems to Diosito or a *santito* than to their relatives or *comadres* (see Chapter 1). Or, as Doña Amelia put



it, "What do I get by telling others about my troubles? (*"¿Qué me gano contando mis problemas por ahí?"*). They cannot do anything, so it's better just to go straight to the church to talk to the *santitos*". What Doña Amelia or Doña Lupe expressed referred not only to a question of capacity for help: it was not simply a recognition of the miraculous abilities of Christs, Virgins and saints. Over all, it was a reflection of the profound mistrust that most Jarácuaro women experienced about others in general, and to which I referred in the first part of this chapter. As opposed to people, who criticised all the time, the *santitos*, as many of my friends explained to me on numerous occasions, did not criticise. They did not laugh at anyone, or ridicule her, or go around gossiping to others. They kept the secret and, instead of rejoicing in others' sorrows, they felt for a woman's predicaments, understood her existential problems, and genuinely helped her.

Therefore, most women told the *santitos* things they would not confess to their closest relatives. Virgins, Christs and saints became, for some matters, their bosom confidants and the recipients of items of information that perhaps nobody else in the island knew. Not only that but, in many ways, Jarácuaro women seemed to be able to communicate their true feelings and thoughts to the *santitos*, their pain, sorrow and suffering about a particular issue, much more than they could do to their friends or relatives. This was most obvious in the cases of women whose problem was precisely related to those close others in whom she could have confided. When Marielena had difficulties with her in-laws, there was no relative she could turn to, since she was from outside the island and her own family had disowned her. San Pedrito, the Virgencita de los Dolores, and a *santito* back at home, Señor de los Milagros, lent an understanding ear, and became her good-willed allies. At her in-laws house, she felt she had to act properly but coldly and distantly; it was only to the *santitos* in the church, or outside the village, were she could express herself more openly, within a richer register of gestures and statements. Equally, when Doña Lupe experienced a conflict with her husband and children (see Chapter 5), she showed her pain to them, but not in the same way and with the same mixed attitude of desperation and sourness with which I saw her talking to the *santitos* about the matter.

So, why did women feel they could trust and confide more in the *santitos*, for certain issues and at certain points, than in their own close relatives or *comadres*? The answer, as far as I could see, lay in the attitude of all those others towards the women's problems, and on the impact of these attitudes in the women's self-



perceptions and self-esteem. As I explained in the first part of this chapter, someone like Doña Lupe might perceive relatives, even close female relatives like her mother or sisters, as “critical”, and their criticisms might affect her own self-perceptions as a “good woman”. Whereas *santitos* are, in general (if one has behaved well to them, and one is not at fault with them), benevolent, understanding, and generous: “*ellos si te escuchan*” (they listen to you), “*te ayudan*” (they help you), “*ellos si le cumplen a uno*” (they do things for one). Thus they do not question the woman’s “good behaviour” or criticise her unjustly; furthermore, in doing so, in being uncritical, they are indirectly reassuring the woman, implying that she is not to be blamed, allowing her to retain her self-esteem and maybe even to achieve a more positive self-perception. I will return to this issue at various points throughout this thesis.

### **Relationships with *santitos*: instrumental or reciprocal?**

In the previous section, I have discussed the way in which many of the women in Jarácuaro talked to the *santitos*, or to certain *virgencitas* or *crístitos*, about their problems. Yet, it should not be inferred that all relationships between my female friends and acquaintances in the island and the *santitos* were informed by an instrumental intention on the part of the women. Many ethnographers dealing with religious issues in Mexico have highlighted people’s frequent petitions and requests to holy beings (for example, Carrasco, 1952: 24; Foster 1972: *passim*; Van Zantwijk 1974: 172, 189; Ingham 1986: *passim*; Norget 1993: 51,55; also in other parts of Latin America, Gudeman, 1976: 712, 714; Bourque 1993b: *passim*). However, in doing so, they have sometimes represented -willingly or not- a reality in which people seemed to establish a contact with Virgins, saints or Christs only in and exclusively for cases of need. Foster makes this very explicit, going as far as describing the connections of Tzintzuntzeños with “supernatural beings” as “patron-client contracts” (1972: 211-225). According to Foster (1972: 225), people in Tzintzuntzan may have “continuous patron-client exchanges”, in which both sides exchange goods and services without achieving an “exact balance”. Yet often they have what he calls “punctual exchanges”, in which the “human client” petitions the “supernatural patron” for help in a particular situation of crisis, and then pays for the received favour (fulfilling a vow, for instance). With this final action of repayment, the “contract” between them expires.



The relationships between Doña Lupe, Doña Amelia, Doña Hermila, Lupita and all the others, and the *santitos* in the church were certainly not deliberately interested or strategically instrumental, nor quasi-commercial transactions, as Foster implies in the case of Tzintzuntzan. These relationships between Jarácuaro women and *santitos* were, above all, relationships in the deepest sense, and thus were experienced and conducted in similar manners to other personal ties the women had in their lives. Like those with others, links with *santitos* had many beneficial aspects, but these were perceived as part and parcel of any relationship, and were not emphatically sought as the only intrinsic reason for the connection. As Bourdieu notes, actions and attitudes that have an instrumental dimension are not necessarily the result of a deliberate strategic planning on the part of the person (1977). In this sense, one could say that someone like Doña Lupe might have had an “instrumental” interest in San Pegrito just as much as she might have had an “instrumental” interest in her husband, her daughter Marta or her comadre Doña Yola. She requested a *santitos*’ help if she needed it, and trusted him or her to be understanding and benevolent, but she also requested the assistance of her comadre in some times of need, she expected the protection of Don Alfredo, and she confided certain painful matters to her daughter.

Thus my female friends and acquaintances in the island did not visit the *santitos* in the church only when they needed them for something in particular; equally, they did not just behave nicely to secure their help in the future. They had complex, life-long, continuing and quotidian relationships with them, in the contexts of which regular exchanges took place. Women thought of the *santitos* often, empathised with their predicaments, popped in to see them now and then, touched them, talked to them, gave them little presents, accompanied them in crucial times, walked with them, and asked them for an occasional favour. This form in which their link with a particular *santito* was experienced, thought of or acted upon was not dissimilar from the ways in which they thought or felt about a relative or a *comadre*<sup>35</sup>. (This issue will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 3).

There is another important aspect in which the relationships of Jarácuaro women with the *santitos* were just like all the other significant ones in their lives: they were mutual and reciprocal. Doña Lupe, for instance, did not consider for a moment

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<sup>35</sup> In her doctoral thesis about popular religiosity in Oaxaca (Mexico), Norget writes: “[Saints in Oaxaca] are clothed, visited, offered food and flowers, kept company, talked to, sung to, laid down, caressed and kissed as much as any beloved human being” (1993:53).

that her relationships with Virgencita de Guadalupe or with Señor de la Misericordia were just unidirectional. In the flow of daily life, both sides perceived and experienced the physical presence of the other: she acknowledged their inhabitation of the church, and they were pleased, she felt, when she visited. Her behaviour in their company -greeting them, touching them, facing them- was a logical response to an experiential apperception of their nearness. Both sides communicated with each other in recognisable forms: Doña Lupe touched, talked and gestured to them, and the *santitos* expressed themselves through understandable actions, like when, in the past, the Virgencita de la Salud had become heavy to express her desire to remain in the island, or when San Ramón had granted her a favour, which she interpreted as a compassionate and reassuring disposition towards her predicaments. The flow of reciprocal exchanges between Doña Lupe and certain *santitos* did not stop there: the former continuously did things for the *santitos* in a spontaneous manner, like bringing them flowers, little gifts, lighting candles in front of them, accompanying them in celebrations and processions, and in turn they also did things for her out of good-will, like protecting her against unfortunate events, as she very well knew. She showed her honest, genuine affection towards them and, in response, they bestowed a mantle of warmth, sympathy and benevolence upon her which she could feel ("they take care of one", she said on numerous occasions). In short, she, like most other women in the island, continuously interacted with *santitos* in the context of ongoing relationships characterised by their mutual fondness and good-will, and the stream of exchanges experientially confirmed the reality and strength of such relationships. (See Chapter 3 for further elaboration on the topic in the context of visiting exchanges).

***Santitos* and women: personal relationships of intimacy, affection and trust**

Throughout my stay in the island, through what my female friends and acquaintances told me, through their actions and attitudes, I realised that, just like they did with the *santitos* who lived in their houses, the women of Jarácuaro had complex, personal relationships with those *santitos* who lived in the island's church. These relationships, as I saw them and as I have described throughout this section, were not just based on some form of ritual veneration, nor they were exclusively instrumental. They were, above all, full and real: just as real as any other relationship the women had with significant others. They developed in and with

time, through the ongoing and dynamic interactions between the two parts. The reality of such links was perceptually confirmed from the very beginning by the numerous gestures of response, acceptance, and exchange on the part of the *santitos*, and by the felt, experienced, known impact of their presence and actions in their daily life and that of the village. These perceptions, experiences and knowledge did not happen in a vacuum, nor constituted some kind of inchoate sensation, for the women were surrounded by others who had similar perceptions and experiences, thus confirming, legitimising and articulating their own in an interactive context of shared, social reality.

I do not think it useful to try to establish a clear comparison between the relationships women had with saints, virgins and christs, and those they had with all others: were they like the links they had with their husbands? were they like the connections they had with mothers, or daughters, or powerful neighbours? The answer for these questions is “yes” and “no” to all of them. Insofar as the modes of relatedness of women, their forms of interaction with all significant others, emanated from and happened within the same perceptual, experiential, emotional and cognitive realities, all relations were similar. There was not a particular “ritual mode of relatedness” towards *santitos*, neither the experience of women leaped in some kind of “mystic” or “sacred” dimension when dealing with *santitos*<sup>36</sup>. I would not use the term “cults” to refer to those connections (as in Norget 1993; Bourque 1993b) because I think this actually obscures the fact that they were, above all, relationships, part of quotidian experience and not separated from it (this perception of familiarity in the relations with saints appears clearly in Carrasco 1952: 24; Foster 1972: 209-229; Ruz, 1995: *passim*; Van Zantwijk 1974: 165; also in the context of Peru, Allen, 1988: 93-94; and in Spain, Christian 1972: 117-132). On the other hand, each association was also idiosyncratic, since in each case there were particular genesis, developments, shared histories, circumstances, personalities, and needs. Thus Doña Lupe’s relationship with Señor de la Misericordia, for instance, was different from that with Don Alfredo, but also different from that with San Pegruto or with Virgencita de la Salud; and her bond with her daughter Marta was different from that with her mother, or even her other daughter. Just as each association between people was unique, a link with a *santito*

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<sup>36</sup> In this sense, Norget (1993: 51) speaks of “informal religious worship” amongst Oaxacans. In the context of Spain, Christian notes the lack of separation between the human and the “divine” (1972: 132), whilst similarly Dubish states that in eastern Orthodox religion the “spiritual world” is “close and familiar”, and there prevails an “informality of worship” (1995: 74).

was unique as well, and not simply a cloned item within a separate “category” of relationships. Thus in order to understand a distinct, personal relationship between a woman and a saint, Virgin or Christ, it would be necessary to explore it in great depth, and to see it working, “happening” so to speak, in a specific, contextualised moment of both participants’ existences<sup>37</sup>.

Thus relationships between Jarácuaro women and the *santitos* in the church were real, interactive, and personal, and thus they participated of the same modes of relatedness and experience present in the other relationships women had. However, what was the content, the tone of these relationships between women and *santitos* in a broad sense? What were the perceptions of the other contained in and informing the interactions and exchanges? What were the feelings mobilised? Bearing in mind that the answer to this can only be an artificial generalisation, I would say that, as already mentioned throughout this section, the relations of women and *santitos* were trusting and warm. Women felt great affection for some of the Virgins, saints and Christs, which they clearly expressed and demonstrated. They also felt a deep confidence in the *santitos* fairness, benevolence, good-will and positive disposition (the issue of their miraculous abilities will be discussed in Chapter 4). Yet, as it was the case with *santitos* who lived in houses (see Chapter 1), I do not think these relationships were modelled *a priori* by a form of discursive ideology. Fundamentally, women did not feel affection or trusted *santitos* because they were told to, because it was the “done thing”, or because they had been “programmed” to behave like that. Returning to the issue of categories, women did not love or confide in *virgencitas* or *crisitos* simply because of what they were, “good” or “powerful”, since this would not explain either the range of sentiments experienced, nor the differences between one saintly being and another. Relationships between both sides were informed by and the result of a complex ongoing dynamic of interaction, perception, experience and reality, which was particular and distinct for each case. Women had grown up being told *santitos* were good, but, most importantly, they had grown up knowing that this or that *santito* was good, for them and for others, through their personal experience of her or his good actions, their perception of her or his sympathetic presence, their reciprocal interactions and the warmth and closeness felt for him or her. This personal experience of the relationship, in turn, created a contextual reality within which further interactions, perceptions, experiences, interpretations and knowledge took place. Women did not need to be told that *santitos* were good, because they could

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<sup>37</sup> As mentioned before, this will be examined in Part Two.



verify their trustworthiness and generosity in their quotidian lives and in ordinary contexts, and this motivated them to feel gratitude, love, and trust for them, to treat them with affection and to turn to them with confidence in bad times.

Moreover, it could also be said that the relationships between Jarácuaro women and *santitos* in the church participated to a degree of the intimacy found in the relationships of women with close female relatives and friends, and also with *santitos* who lived in their houses. As described at several points above, women interacted with the *santitos* in the church in a physical manner, through bodily empathy and closeness, touching and talking; they performed daily tasks in front of them, and they also shared leisurely moments; they confided in them, and spoke to them about very personal, delicate or painful matters, thus disclosing very intimate details about themselves. Through their actions and interactions, inscribed in a particular mode of relatedness, they created a clearly perceived and experienced atmosphere of intimacy and comfort, which in turn realised the re-creation of those very close and familiar actions and interactions. As in the case of the intimacy experienced at certain times and with certain people in houses, the sense of intimacy that women might have experienced sometimes in the Jarácuaro church did not “emanate” from the place in itself, but responded to the personal yet shared interactions and forms of relatedness they had with some, and in many ways, all, the *santitos* who lived there. It was not a matter of place, but a matter which involved persons, *santitos*, experiences, perceptions, emotions, cognitions and interpretations, in place, in situational context, and in interaction. And thus, it was the women’s experience of their relationships with those significant others which made them welcome there and turned the church into a comfortable, familiar place to be.

## Chapter 3

### MOVEMENTS AND ENCOUNTERS

“To move from any ‘outside’ to any ‘inside’

is thus ‘to visit’”

(Sweet, 1974: 114)

The inhabitants of Jarácuaro, like many other people in the region (see Foster 1972: 216; Beals 1990 [1945]: 466; Jacinto Zavala 1988: 105; Brandes 1988: 37), spent much of their time visiting or being visited by others. For the women of the island, it was the activity, together with doing some domestic chores and participating in festivities, that took them out of their houses most frequently. It was also an occupation they seemed to find very pleasurable (cf. Beals 1990 [1945]: 466). Many women, like Doña Amelia, Tila, Doña Hermila, or Marta, called on their mothers', sisters', daughters' or *comadres'* houses every day, in some cases even several times a day. Married couples like Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe, often visited, or were visited by, other couples to request their presence and assistance in a wedding or a baptism. Younger women, like Marielena or Lupita, visited friends and neighbours in order to spend part of the afternoon plaiting together. Doña Amelia and Don Joaquín received frequent visits from development workers or researchers. Relatives who lived far away, like Don Alfredo's daughter Ester, or his son Tano, visited their parents perhaps once or twice a year. As explained in the previous chapter, most women, and some of the men, visited the *santitos* in the island's church, or those in other villages. Furthermore, as will be seen later on in this chapter, *santitos* paid visits to people's houses, as well as visiting each other in their own chapels and churches. Once a year, on the eve of the Day of the Dead, it was said that deceased people left their tombs to visit their former houses, and, the morning after, their live relatives visited them at the cemetery for their special commemoration. In short, visiting was an activity that occupied much time in the life of islanders, and one that took place in diverse contexts, involved a variety of others, and implied different intentions, duration, frequencies and forms of interaction. Visiting in Jarácuaro was, as Sweet has described in the case of a Lebanese village, “a continuous movement of social interaction” (1974: 112).

However, despite the relevance that this activity obviously had for Jarácuaro people, the subject of “visiting” has not been considered significant in most



Photograph 19: Jarácuaro people visiting their dead relatives at the island cemetery, on the Day of the Dead

anthropological literature concerning the area (see Foster 1972; Beals 1990 [1945]; Jacinto Zavala 1988; Zárate Hernández, 1993). When mentioned in the ethnographies about the region, it is often with the aim of illustrating people's behaviour in formalised or ceremonial situations (Jacinto Zavala 1988: 105), or in connection with the treatment given to individuals according to their "status" (Zárate Hernández, 1993: 104, 110-1). Foster (1972: 211-217) sees visiting in Tzintzuntzan not as an activity significant in itself, but as part of the pattern of reciprocal exchanges. In a more general context, a common anthropological interpretation of "visiting" is that it is relevant insofar as it expresses and signifies particular types of relationships. For instance, Carsten, talking about Malaysia (1997: 162-173), and Bourque, referring to Ecuador (1993a: 31-32), link modes of visiting to categories of relatedness<sup>1</sup>. Another prevalent viewpoint with reference to visiting is that it is heavily linked to personal or collective interests, and thus often informed by instrumental purposes (see Foster 1972: 211-217; also Sweet 1974, in the context of Lebanon, or Boddy 1989: 44-5, for the Sudan). Therefore visiting is considered, in turn, a showcase of formalised behaviour, a part of a wider system of reciprocity, a signalling practice which classifies types of social relations, or an instrumental device for the advantage of individuals or groups.

In my view, and after having not only observed but also participated in the daily, rich, varied, flow of visiting that took place on the island, the above perspectives cannot fully explain what it meant and felt for someone like Doña Lupe to visit certain others, or to be visited by them. Indeed, there were certain forms of stereotyped behaviour that were repeated in many visiting situations, such as standard greetings, expressions and phrases. Yet calling on someone also had a spontaneous dimension, and produced contexts in which imagination and creativity played a very important part. Exchanges took place sometimes as part of a visit, and calls were reciprocated now and then, but people did not keep some kind of accountancy of this type of social interaction in itself<sup>2</sup>. I would not deny the semantic value of visiting, and the information that a social call could convey to others, but looking at it from this point of view obscures the fact that visiting was also a mode of interaction between actors, and thus an active, dynamic form of

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<sup>1</sup> Carsten also suggests that "both formal and informal visiting are a way of publicly declaring the harmony of social relations; when these break, communications are cut" (1997:169).

<sup>2</sup> In the context of Malaysia, Carsten notes that many forms of visiting are actually characterised by a lack of perfect balance of exchange (1997: 163).



constituting those very relationships that it then signified<sup>3</sup>. Lastly, there were instrumental intentions in many of the calls that I observed or that I paid. Yet, as already noted in a former chapter, it could be argued that any form of interpersonal interaction implies a benefit (company, affection, self-esteem). Furthermore, visiting to obtain a certain favour, even a material one, did not preclude the realisation of experiences, perceptions and feelings which were unrelated to the concrete petition or exchange, and which transcended any instrumental intention.

Jarácuaro women spent a considerable part of their daily existence stepping out of their own houses and into the houses of other women, and interacting with them in the context of these settings. They placed importance on visits, taking great pleasure in them, and what happened during these visits constituted a very important part of their daily experience. So, which were the women's perceptions whilst visiting in diverse situations? What moved them to stop by at a certain person's place? What was, in short the experience and the significance of visiting as an activity in a Jarácuaro woman's life? I will address these questions in the following parts of this chapter.

## I. *Pasaditas*<sup>4</sup>

### *Pasaditas: the dynamic of "dropping in"*

One of the first things I noticed after arriving at Doña Lupe's house was the constant, daily flow of female relatives and friends that came in and stayed for a brief chat, a bit of gossip, or a *taco*<sup>5</sup>. Marta, her daughter, came in practically every day, sometimes quite early in the morning to help with the *tortillas* for breakfast, sometimes in the afternoon to plait palm for a while in the company of her mother. Tila was also a regular caller, usually bringing along one or two of her children to consult her stepmother about their health problems. Sometimes, I returned from my own round of daily visits, and found a woman I only knew vaguely sitting in the kitchen with Doña Lupe, having a laugh, or quietly discussing a serious matter. I

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<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu has noted that, when looking at practices from an outsider's perspective, there is a tendency to objectify them, interpreting them in terms of "communicative relations" (Bourdieu 1977: 1)

<sup>4</sup> Literally, *pasadita* means "drop-in", or "brief stop-by".

<sup>5</sup> Maize *tortilla* filled with beans (*frijolitos*), eggs, meat or vegetable stew, or simply with some chillies and salt, and rolled up into a tubular form.

noticed these callers used to announce themselves by saying "*vine rapidito, una pasadita nomás*" ("I just came quickly, just a little stop-by"), or "*vine a verte, a ver qué tal andas*" ("I came to see you, to see how you are"). It surprised me that, after all the care Doña Lupe devoted to disguise her daily activities (see Chapter 1), many of these female callers could just cross the threshold of her house, and walk straight into her kitchen. Furthermore, they were not received with much fuss or formality, and, in some cases, Doña Lupe did not even interrupt her work as she talked to them. This regular flow of female frequenters was not peculiar to our household, for most women left their houses at one point during the day to go to see a female relative, a *comadre* or a neighbour.

It also soon became apparent that it was mainly women who tended to go round to see each other on a regular, casual basis, and not men. Don Alfredo hardly ever left the house during the day, unless he was going to Pátzcuaro or to one of the other villages for some business matter. Not once did he receive the visit of a male friend during my stay. Don Joaquín came around once or twice, always about a particular issue, such as the election of a local representative, or the thefts of crops in their lands, and his visits were brief and surrounded by a certain stiffness and decorum. A few times, Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo were visited by a married couple: these were usually *compadres* who had come to announce a wedding, or a first communion, for which my hosts' presence and contribution were politely solicited. These encounters tended to be pleasurable and full of good humour, yet they nevertheless became a more formal affair.

So, why did women go around calling on other women, in what from an outsider's perspective felt like a continuous motion? Why were those continuous, informal, almost casual encounters in each other's houses so important in their daily lives? What did those *pasaditas* mean for someone like Doña Amelia, or Lupita?

First of all, it was quite easy to see that these *pasaditas* were the logistical context within which much of the relationships of Jarácuaro women with other women took place. As has been pointed out before (see Chapter 2), women did not have particularly communicative interactions with others in the streets of the village, only occasionally at the church's atrium, or at the fields by the lake. Thus women, on their *pasaditas*, created contexts for the interaction with those others who did not live in their own households but with whom they had some form of relationship. Moreover, they did so inside houses, which, as explained before (see Chapter 2),

were perceived as adequate and safe places for encounters. Furthermore, whenever a woman went to see a female relative or friend, she would often meet other women there, such as a co-villager with whom she might not exchange *pasaditas*, or even someone from another village, and thus she would be able to interact with people from outside her usual social circle<sup>6</sup>. In a sense, calling on other's houses was a form of "networking" amongst Jarácuaro women: of meeting physically, of exchanging goods, favours and information, of enlarging one's web of acquaintances, and of expanding one's overall knowledge about the village and beyond<sup>7</sup>.

However, as I have argued before, interpreting these *pasaditas* solely as the mediums for "exchange and communication" amongst Jarácuaro women misses out the very important aspect of the activity of "stopping by" in itself. For, as hinted previously, not only did the women "use" calls for the exchange of material objects, verbal information, or physical labour, but, most importantly, they constituted and maintained relationships amongst themselves through the very actions and interactions involved in the dynamics of "dropping in".

### Constituting relationships: frequency and choice

After I had started my own daily rounds of *pasaditas* in Jarácuaro, I expected to be questioned by my female friends and acquaintances about the content of my meetings with others. However, I soon noticed that women were also interested in the frequency and regularity of calls that I, and other people, made. For instance, I had to be very tactful with Doña Lupe when I went to see the same person for a few consecutive days, since I got the impression that she became a bit suspicious, or perhaps jealous, of my supposed budding friendship with the other woman concerned. "Are you going there again? But you were there yesterday!", she would comment, with a hurt expression in her eyes. It soon became apparent that many Jarácuaro women calibrated others' attachment and affection towards them through the degree of continuity, or discontinuity, of their *pasaditas*. Doña Amelia and Doña Reyna used to express their dissatisfaction at Doña Lupe's lack of concern for them by saying: "*Esa* ("that one") never comes to see us, never stops by, *¡dizque está muy ocupada!* ("she is 'supposedly' very busy!")". Similarly, Doña Lupe told me on several occasions how hurt she felt by the *desprecio* (rejection) she

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<sup>6</sup> It was precisely in this way that I met many of the women who would later become my friends or acquaintances.

<sup>7</sup> cf. Boddy 1989: 44-45, for a similar interpretation with reference to Sudanese women.

perceived from her own mother and sisters, and she often put it in the following terms:

“Do they ever drop in to see me? Do they ever stop by, just for a little chat, just to sit down and plait palm with me for a little while? They are all the time with each other, always at each other’s houses, but not with me! They never come to see me”.

In addition to this, many of my friends told me they knew I cared for them because of the regularity of my calls to their houses. Doña Cecilia, for instance, said on my departure that she was going to miss me very much. As she put it,

“*tú si te preocupas por mí* (“you worry about me”, “you truly care for me”). You always come to see me, every day you come to see me, and bring me something, some fruit or bread, and I have got used to your coming to see me”.

This issue of “frequency” in visiting has not been given much attention in the anthropological literature. Some scholars have argued that a particular rhythm of visits between people or groups can indicate the type of relationship that exists between them (see Foster 1972: 219; Carsten 1997: 162; Abu-Lughod 1988: 66). For Janet Carsten, the great frequency and informality of visits in Langkawi among compound neighbours (1997: 162) reflects their close, familiar mode of relatedness. A mode of relatedness which is, according to her, a result of the notional association people made between compounds and houses, neighbours and close kin. In other words, a particular frequency and format of visits in Langkawi would express and signify the particular form of relating to a specific category of people. This perspective could be seen as resting on two main presuppositions: first, that relationships and modes of relatedness are actually determined by categories; and second, that relationships, insofar as signified, pre-exist and precede the activity of visiting as its signifier (cf. Abu-Lughod 1988:66).

However, as mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, Jarácuaro women’s relationships with others were not prescribed by classifications of people, even if they were somehow linked to them. Modes of relatedness among Jarácuaro women were not fully imposed by hypothetical “rules” pertaining to categories of people, but were accepted as unpredictable and variable. Nor were most calls, as far as the women were concerned, mere acts of formality, courtesy or obligation, prescribed by those same “rules”. People like Doña Hermila, Doña Cecilia or Lupita did not talk about *pasaditas*, for instance, in terms of “the right thing to do” in the context of some of their relationships. Furthermore, the flow of *pasaditas* did not just passively



communicate something about relationships between women: closeness when frequent, distance when scarce. On the contrary, many women on the island perceived *pasaditas*, and more specifically the continuity and regularity of *pasaditas*, as an active form of creating relationships<sup>8</sup>. When Doña Lupe saw her sisters and mother stopping by regularly at each others' houses, she saw them not only signalling their attachment, but actively, willingly and deliberately creating and re-creating that very attachment<sup>9</sup>. Equally, when her sisters complained about her not going to see them often, they were really perceiving and experiencing her lack of willingness and desire to establish a close relationship with them, and also her active disengagement from a mode of relatedness conducive to growing warmth and affection.

That women on the island could actively constitute different modes of relatedness through the flow of *pasaditas* became very apparent in the cases of those who had moved to Jarácuaro from elsewhere. Marielena, for instance, had come from Uruapan to find a very hostile situation in her in-laws house. She then had moved in with more benign affines, and had subsequently managed to establish friendships with some women outside the circle of her husband's relatives. On one occasion she told me that she was becoming quite close with one of her neighbours, another young daughter-in-law like herself:

"We started saying 'hi' in the street, and then stopping for a little chat. Afterwards we began dropping in on each other's houses, just for a little bit, *un saludito* ("a little greeting"), and now we go to see each other almost every afternoon. We plait together for a while and we talk about our in-laws".

I also initiated and cemented my relationships with other women in Jarácuaro through the continuity of my calls, and I noticed that most of them responded to my *pasaditas* rather positively, encouraging me to return promptly. Obviously, a particular rhythm of calls not only could start a particular, closer mode of relatedness, but also, when sustained, increased, or decreased, it helped to maintain, or change, a certain level of attachment. When I lived on the island, Doña Lupe and Reyna had a very strained relationship: they talked to each other with much suspicion when they met in the street, and they hardly ever stopped by at

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<sup>8</sup> In this respect, Sweet has noted that, in the context of Lebanon, "the flow [of visiting] was an on-going dynamic of forming and dissolving linkages and alliances" (1974: 113)

<sup>9</sup> In the context of Bedouin society, Abu-Lughod suggests that "Visits [...] provide occasions for strengthening identification between those who already have bonds" (1988:67).

each other's houses. Yet when I returned two years later<sup>10</sup>, Doña Reyna was calling on her sister regularly. "She comes very often now", Doña Lupe informed me, with noticeable satisfaction. "These days, she drops in almost every day, to talk to me, or to plait with me in the courtyard. She's always here now!". And indeed, I realised their relationship was now easier, more fluid and comfortable, and, above all, more trusting.

Not only did Jarácuaro women perceive and interpret the frequency of *pasaditas* as a deliberate and willing form of activating closer modes of relating. They also experienced and saw a voluntary choice of person in those actions. For women could decide, to a great extent, whom they were going to see, as well as with what frequency they were going to do this. Returning to a point made previously, there was neither a firm "prescription", nor some kind of "customary specification" that "obliged" a woman to drop in on particular people, or categories of people. Machí, for instance, hardly ever went to see her mother, despite their seemingly smooth relationship, and Doña Lupe's encouragement: "I tell her, 'Go, go to see your mum!', but she doesn't want to, she says she's all right here. Who knows why! She's just being lazy, I think". Doña Hermila, Doña Cecilia, and most other women I met, had numerous *comadres*<sup>11</sup>, yet they called on some of them very often, and never on some others. Doña Lupe explained to me in matter-of-fact tones why she never went to see Cheli's mother-in-law: "We don't call on each other, *casi no nos llevamos, pues!*" ("we hardly get on with each other"). In contrast, another of her *comadres*, Doña Yola (Marta's mother-in-law), came to our house a few times a week. Thus most women on the island exchanged *pasaditas* with some of their female relatives, affines, *comadres*, and neighbours, but not with the others, for a variety of reasons. It could be argued that, still, the kind of people that a woman went to see tended to fall within a close circle. It is true that it was easier, more probable and more convenient to desire and work towards closer relationships with people one already knew or to whom one was linked. Yet, as in the case of Doña Lupe, a woman could choose to maintain a relationship of distance with someone supposedly "close" simply by avoiding going to see her. Or, as in the case of Marielena, or myself, she

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<sup>10</sup>In 1999, I went back to Jarácuaro for a brief visit.

<sup>11</sup> Doña Lupe explained to me that each woman became *comadre* to all their children's godmothers (of baptism, of confirmation, of first communion, of wedding, of saint's cloak, etc.), and also to most of the *comadres'* close female relatives and own *comadres*. In addition to this, a woman was automatically the *comadre* of her children's mothers-in-law, and of some of their female relatives. Thus my friends and acquaintances addressed many other women from the island with the word *comadre*, or its Purhépecha version, *comari*.

could choose to initiate a relationship with someone new, and to activate a particular form of relatedness through the frequency of her interactions. In this sense, *pasaditas* were deliberate actions that realised relationships which were voluntary. Many of the relationships forged in this way were, in numerous respects, very similar to my own perceptions and experiences of friendship<sup>12</sup>.

Thus women constituted relationships of greater or lesser closeness through the regularity of their calls. When two women met each other on a very regular, almost quotidian, basis, they usually experienced more attachment to each other, and might have also felt they could trust the other person more than many others. Furthermore, when a woman perceived, felt, and interpreted another's *pasaditas* as an act of willingness and choice towards her, she must have experienced more self-confidence and an enhanced self-esteem, which in turn might have resulted in an open, affectionate and well disposed attitude towards her female relative, friend or neighbour. Thus, one could speculate that when Reyna, for instance, started regularly stopping by at Doña Lupe's house, Doña Lupe reacted positively, by feeling more confident, less defensive, and more welcoming towards her sister, hence making it possible for the two of them to change the way in which they interacted.

However, the flow of deliberate, voluntary, active calling was not the only means by which women of Jarácuaro constituted different modes of relatedness amongst themselves. They also created and re-created diverse relationships through the actions and interactions, perceptions, thoughts and experiences that took place during the contexts made possible by the *pasaditas*.

### **Constituting relationships: degrees of intimacy and closeness**

Marta visited her parents practically every day. When she came into the house, she did so without any special greetings or announcements: she usually just walked straight towards the kitchen area. Doña Lupe did not interrupt her tasks when Marta arrived. On the contrary, Marta just slipped into helping her mother make *tortillas*, light the fire, or feed Don Alfredo. If food had already been eaten, Marta made herself a *taco* and sat down at the kitchen for a chat. Doña Lupe's

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<sup>12</sup> Robinette Kennedy notes that most anthropologists assume that peasant women cannot have friendships, since they are confined within "domestic" contexts. "Implicit in androcentric research assumptions about women's friendships", she adds, "is a denial of women's roles as social actors, aside from the functional support women give to their family and kin" (1986:121).

attitude did not mean that she did not welcome her daughter: her face lit every time she saw her, and she showed contentment at her presence and tenderness towards her.

In those *pasaditas*, Marta, her mother, and many times Machí, normally carried on doing house chores together, whilst they talked and joked about all sorts of themes. As was explained in Chapter 1, the atmosphere at these encounters was warm and affectionate, the interactions close and physical, and the conversations personal. In their talks, they devoted a lot of attention to the minute occurrences in each one of their lives, not only about what they had done but also about their thoughts and feelings in each case. They discussed the particular instances of children's health, gave detailed descriptions of their shopping expeditions to Pátzcuaro, or chatted about their respective husband's moods or behaviours, all of it in the form of detailed exchanges ("and he said...and I said..."). They would be amused at revelations and laugh together.

Once or twice a week, Tila, with whom Doña Lupe did not feel so close, stopped by as well. When she arrived, Doña Lupe normally carried on with her chores for a while, but there tended to be a polite exchange of information between them, often about Tila's children's health. Don Alfredo or Feyo sometimes joined in the conversation, and then the chat would change slightly in its theme and tones: they pondered how Doña Amelia was to organise a wedding feast, or stated whether they intended to go to Tzintzuntzan on this year's festivity. Still, the atmosphere was very congenial in those encounters: the women might pause in their work, and sit down for a bit of good humoured chatting, whilst the children ran around playing, and Doña Lupe went into the room used as a store and came out with oranges or peanuts for everyone to eat.

Doña Yola was also a regular caller, although she was received with a little more fuss. She generally announced herself with a high pitched "*Buenas tardes, comari!*" ("Good afternoon, *comadre!*") as she went in. Doña Lupe would stop her work and greet her graciously in a similarly high pitched voice, whilst Don Alfredo would rise and approach her with a welcoming smile. She was normally given a chair and, after some polite and light-hearted conversation, which included Don Alfredo, the two women used to sit down on their own in the kitchen for long periods, face to face or around the table, leisurely drinking some water, their body postures relaxed. I remember them sitting there many an afternoon, holding detailed



conversations about their own daily affairs, the comings and goings of many people, and in general about the most minute details of village life, intersected with jokes and humorous puns, sometimes even of a sexual nature.

During my stay on the island, I witnessed and participated in many such encounters between Doña Lupe and other women who dropped in to see her. I realised that, through their actions and interactions, through their attitudes and behaviours, the women constituted varying modes of relatedness between them, which could be closer or more distant, more or less intimate or affectionate. Doña Lupe was not the only one to do this, for all the other women I met in Jarácuaro behaved and interacted in a similar manner in this respect. In the same way that particular forms of interaction amongst closely related women created and re-created trust, warmth and intimacy (see Chapter 1), I saw that forms of interaction amongst women who stopped by at each others' houses could and did create different atmospheres, different perceptions, different experiences and different modes of relatedness.

For instance, when Marta dropped in on her mother, and Machí was around as well, the three of them interacted in the ways described above (and in Chapter 1) and created an atmosphere of physical closeness, affection and warmth in each other's company. This, in turn, informed their perceptions of each other and of their relationship, and also their subsequent interactions. On the other hand, when Tila dropped in, there were subtle differences in their comportments and attitudes that kept them at a slightly further distance. Doña Lupe was not as casual and warm in her reception of Tila as she was with her own daughter. Moreover, Tila acted and talked more shyly, as if unsure of her own position. She did not eat, unless something was openly offered to her, and her calls did not extend in time smoothly, as Marta's did. The sitting and talking arrangements were more formal, and the contents of conversations more topical and less personal. I knew from their own confidences to me that Doña Lupe did not entirely trust her step-daughter; neither had Tila had a good experience of growing up with her step-mother. Their behaviour and interactions together reflected and, above all, re-created this distance, which would inform in turn each woman's perception of the reality of their shared relationship.

At the same time, whenever Doña Yola visited her *comadre*, the former did not walk unannounced into Doña Lupe's kitchen, as Marta and Tila did. There was

a certain exchange of polite greetings between them, and an interruption of tasks. They usually sat more formally on chairs at the kitchen, and Don Alfredo felt he had to join them for a while. Still, when they were left alone, their postures were relaxed, something which, according to Jacinto Zavala (1988: 115), only happens amongst Purhépecha people in front of others perceived as equals. They seldom touched, and their hands lay limp on their aprons, for they rarely plaited palm together. Yet they often looked each other in the eye, or inclined their bodies towards the other in order to hear each other's words better. Doña Lupe rarely offered food to Doña Yola, apart from a little bit of fruit or a few nuts. Overall, there was a clear element of distancing, of slight mistrust, in Doña Lupe's attitude towards her *comadre*. She often hid things, food or shopping, from the kitchen table, so that Doña Yola did not see them. Or she would tell me explicitly not to mention something we had done in front of her *comadre*. "¡No le avises!" ("don't tell her"), she would whisper to me as we heard the other woman coming in.

As explained before, modes of interaction between Jarácuaro women were not consistent with supposed categories. Doña Lupe treated one *comadre* with relative closeness and familiarity, and another with extreme detachment and formality; Doña Cecilia interacted with her daughter in a more distant way than she did with some of her friends<sup>13</sup>. In my opinion, modes of interaction were informed by the specific personal relationship that specific women perceived and experienced amongst themselves. These perceived and experienced relationships were not so much conceptual absolutes as they were continuums that flowed in time and space. Relationships and modes of relatedness were worked out and reworked, increased or decreased, started, changed or maintained by the women through complex yet subtle dynamics of actions (for instance, *pasaditas*), interactions, perceptions, experiences and thoughts.

Yet, this interpretation brings with it a puzzle: namely, that relationships, somehow, did not possess a definite beginning, since having a form of relationship was a pre-condition (as well as the end result) of subsequent interactions. In this respect, I would argue that, to a certain extent, this is what happened amongst Jarácuaro women. As Doña Lupe once explained to me, "everybody on the island

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<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Norget, referring to Oaxaca, sees *confianza* (trust) as "an a priori attribute of intra-familial relations [whereas] with non-kin such trust develops with time and shared experience" (1993: 26)

knows everybody else”<sup>14</sup>. A woman would grow up knowing all the other people in the village, crossing them in the streets, seeing them at the church, hearing about them in gossip, bumping into them in Pátzcuaro’s market. They were not just figures in the background, but, somehow, active agents in one’s life. From what my friends and acquaintances told me, and from how they behaved about it, not having close interactions with some others on the island did not imply not having a relationship at all. Lack of obvious interaction<sup>15</sup> did not mean a complete absence of relationship, but, on the contrary, it meant interacting in a way which created distance and mistrust and was experienced as such<sup>16</sup>. I will discuss this issue in greater detail later in this chapter.

### Creating shared realities

Jarácuaro women who met each other in the context of *pasaditas* put great emphasis on their conversations. The way they sat on chairs or straw mats, in circles, or facing each other; the times of the day when most calls were made, when women had already completed the greater part of their daily obligations; and the type of activities that they kept doing throughout their encounters, such as plaiting, or shelling nuts, were all conducive to congenial and long chats. Sometimes, as illustrated previously, these chats were very descriptive and very detailed, and had an almost sensorial -visual, aural, olfactory, tactile, kinetic- quality to them.

I remember one particular conversation between Doña Yola and Doña Lupe which exemplified these qualities very clearly. The two *comadres* sat on chairs round the table in the kitchen, facing each other, their elbows on their knees and their heads close, as Doña Lupe listened attentively to Doña Yola. I was sitting nearby, and as I listened as well, I started getting very involved in the mood of the talk, conjuring up in my mind very vivid representations of the things, places and people about which Doña Yola was talking.

“I haven’t been well, I have a cough and I can hardly breathe. The other day, I was feeling really bad, *ay!*, my head was hurting so much! It felt like this [she gestured with her hands to indicate a swollen head]. I felt I could not even stand up, so I said to my son, ‘son, I cannot stand my head anymore’. And my daughter said, ‘why didn’t you say anything? I have

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<sup>14</sup> cf. Brandes 1988: 20

<sup>15</sup> I use the word “obvious” here to refer to what an outside observer might perceive from her point of view.

<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 2.

some pills here!'. And she gave me the pills and the pain went away, so I keep on taking them. [She took some pills out of her pocket and showed them to Doña Lupe, who examined them with a serious expression]. Well, I have been to Pátzcuaro, to the market, to buy all the stuff for the wedding, you know, my niece's. They had nice tomatoes, big and ripe, better than here in the shop, and cheaper! But I didn't buy any chicken, it was so expensive! [Doña Lupe assented, knowingly]. And the other day I saw Doña... going out of the bus with twenty or so chickens, very nice, very plump, and I was thinking, 'where did she get them? maybe she got them in Eronga, I'll need to go and see'. [Doña Lupe suggested where she might have got them]. The other day, I was walking down this side of the atrium [she gestured with her hand to indicate right], and I was asking Marta [Doña Lupe's daughter and Doña Yola's daughter-in-law] 'who are those women over there?'. And Marta said to me, "Well, it's my mum!", and when we got to the corner with the electric light, I could see you, and I said, 'Yes, that's Marta's mum!' Well, I am really coming here because I need to ask you for a favour: that you accompany me ("*que me acompañen*")<sup>17</sup> to a marriage celebration, you know, the one I told you of, my niece's. [Doña Lupe made polite excuses, declining the invitation]. It will be in two Saturdays, they are killing a cow for the *churipo* [traditional beef soup], and I have to take twenty chickens, two blankets, two buckets of vegetables [she puts her arms round to indicate size], two kilos of rice, and four boxes of beer! It's all so costly with these marriages!" [Doña Lupe sympathised]

Many anthropologists have referred to the talking that occurs among women in visiting situations as either a pleasant activity (in Michoacán, Beals 1992 [1945]: 466-7; Boddy 1989: 44, with respect to Sudanese women; Carsten 1997: 168, in the context of Malaysia), or as the means for the exchange of information (Boddy 1989: 44-5). However, my impression after witnessing, and being party to, innumerable conversations on the island, was that the women's chatting in their continuous, casual *pasaditas* meant much more than just enjoyable conviviality or amusing gossip. From my point of view, Jarácuaro women actually created and re-created personal and shared realities through their conversations.

To start with, Jarácuaro women talked to other women about their own and other's daily lives on the island, about events, encounters, and situations, in highly sensorial terms. Like Doña Yola, most women rendered their own realities through accounts directly connected to their immediate personal experiences. These accounts were almost visual -as in when Doña Yola gestured right or left-, aural - as in her blow by blow reproduction of the conversation with Marta-, gustative -as when she carefully described the ripeness of tomatoes-, tactile -as in her gestures to

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<sup>17</sup> *Acompañar*, "to accompany one", was the expression used by Jarácuaro people when they asked relatives or *compadres* to attend a particular celebration with them and thus to help them with food, drink and work for the event.



convey size-, and also related to sense of self-being, as when she talked about her feelings of pain. Therefore it must have been relatively easy for those listening, like Doña Lupe, to empathise with the experiences of those talking, and thus to re-create vivid pictures of the particular situations, places, moments in time, people, things, and moods, referred to by the other.

Yet these vivid pictures of life on the island which might have formed in women's minds, as well as in their whole bodies, were not merely sensorial reproductions, images transferred through some kind of empathetic channels. They were, in fact, created realities. According to developmental psychologist Vygotski, the process of imagination in adults is not just "visual, imagistic and concrete" (1994 [1931]: 274), but has been heavily transformed by abstract thinking, which is present in images and perceptions. And he adds:

"Imagination is a creative transforming activity which moves from one form of concreteness to another. But the mere movement from a given concrete form to a newly created form of it and the very feasibility of a creative construction, is only possible with the help of abstraction" (1994 [1931]: 282).

Thus the realities represented by Doña Yola, for instance, would not have been absorbed as wholes by Doña Lupe, nor just reproduced by her as mental images or vicarious experiences, but would have become her own personal realities, effectively reinterpreted, transformed, and thus re-created. These new personal realities would be the result of a complex psycho-social process, involving not only visual images, but also perceptions, ideas, memories, experiences, and interpretations, all in the context and through the dynamics of an ongoing interaction.

Furthermore, the realities created through these dialogues between Jarácuaro women were not, as indicated before, just "individual" and thus incommunicable to others. Because they were created in and through interactions, these realities must have been both perceived as personal, insofar as they were interiorised, and interpersonal, since they were based on common assumptions, immediately apprehensible and understood by others. When Doña Yola spoke to Doña Lupe about places on the island, people she had seen, things she had bought, she was doing so on the basis of their common knowledge about everyday life in the village<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup>Talking about the reality of everyday life, Berger and Luckmann say: "I know that there is an ongoing correspondence between *my* meanings and *their* [others'] meanings in this world, that we share a commonsense about this reality" (1967: 37; emphasis in original)

At the same time, she was taking for granted that Doña Lupe shared with her a way of perceiving, feeling, experiencing, and thinking, that made any other kind of background explanation irrelevant. Moreover, interacting was, in itself, a form of action, fundamental in this inter-personal process of creating realities. The physical closeness in conversations, the flow of the voices, the non-verbal exchanges that took place, and, over all, the act of talking, combined to set in motion the complex psycho-social dynamic through which women created and re-created their everyday worlds. In this respect, Classen has argued the importance of speaking in “oral” (non-literate) societies, which she describes as “sound-based universes” (1993: 11). Referring to Andean culture before the conquest, she alludes to the “creative power of speech”, and the “dynamic force of sound”, which accounted for Andeans living “in a world set into motion by sound” (1993: 106-7).

So, what was the significance of these realities created and re-created through verbal interactions which took place during *pasaditas*? What was their meaning and relevance in Jarácuaro women’s lives? First of all, it could be said that women, through the medium of these conversations, apprehended the flow of life in the island. Doña Lupe, Marielena, or Doña Hermila did not spend much of their days outside their houses, and thus did not have a direct experience of most things that were happening in the streets or in others’ houses. Thus for them, talking was not just about “information”, but more precisely about “cognition”. It was a form of gaining knowledge about events, and about others, in Jarácuaro and sometimes beyond, in Arócutin or Eronga. This knowledge would then be incorporated into one’s personal experiential landscape, and would become part of one’s own and shared reality. When Doña Lupe listened to Doña Yola, and created her own personal reality, the activities of people they had been talking about, the things that had been happening on the island, were then part of her experience, possibly in quite a perceptually vivid form. In a way, it could be speculated that she might have “seen” her *comadre* and her daughter walking about at the atrium; she might have “felt” the weight of the chickens; and she experienced with her *comadre* the burden and anxiety of reciprocal obligations at village weddings, and thus she expressed it. To me, listening to the women’s accounts, watching their gestures and expressions, feeling their movements and close physical presence, it was as if the whole village came to life in those *pasaditas*, as if my female friends were “knitting the world”, as I wrote in my diary.

Finally, knowledge about the comings and goings of neighbours, about the social events going on at the village, about prices and products, and about relationships and interactions of others, gave Doña Lupe, Doña Yola, and all the other women a feeling of being in control. Remaining unaware of what was happening around them meant, for most of my female friends and acquaintances, to experience exclusion and vulnerability. I will return to these issues in Chapter 5.

### **A note about self-perceptions and self-esteem**

Before finishing this section, it is necessary to mention briefly the issue of women's self-perceptions and self-esteem. I explained earlier in this chapter that my female friends and acquaintances in Jarácuaro might have experienced healthier levels of self-esteem whenever they received the frequent *pasaditas* of neighbours or relatives. It could be speculated that Doña Lupe, Doña Cecilia and Marielena felt better about themselves, and more trusting towards other women, when they perceived that those others had made the active choice and effort to spend time in their company, and to share information, confidences and affectionate interactions with them<sup>19</sup>.

In the last few paragraphs, I talked about how Jarácuaro women could create and re-create personal and shared realities through the dynamics of their interactions, and most particularly through the interactive process of their conversations. In this respect, it is important to specify that these realities were also self-realities, for they were not just imaginistic pictures of external events. Most importantly, they were fully personal, experiential realities that were created in and through the processual dynamics of interaction, perception, memory, emotion, interpretation and cognition, and through which self-images were also constituted and experienced. In other words: when Doña Lupe, Marta and Machí sat in the former's kitchen discussing husbands' behaviour, or children's health, they were not merely informing each other of the weekly happenings, nor just creating shared experiential realities of such happenings, or re-creating forms of relatedness amongst themselves. They were also perceiving themselves as part of, and in relation to, the situations they were describing and creating. Therefore, they were,

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<sup>19</sup> In a similar way, Robinette Kennedy describes women's friendships on Crete as "psychologically empowering", since women perceive the element of choice in them, and they also bring forth "the experience of being supported, recognised, and valued as the people they feel themselves to be" (1986: 135).

directly or indirectly, talking about themselves, and about their experiences as mothers, wives, daughters-in-law. They were negotiating and contrasting different understandings about their roles, duties, responsibilities and rights. And they were, in many cases, legitimising and justifying feelings, actions and interpretations they had about particular difficult issues, all in the context of their particular personal relationship. As Kennedy describes with reference to friendly meetings amongst Cretan women, “[there is] an atmosphere of warmth and empathy. In this environment, women are able to laugh and talk freely and to express their opinions and their identity in a self- rather than an other-defined manner” (1986: 135).

Equally, when Doña Yola and Doña Lupe brought the village to life through their conversations, they were doing so from the perspective of the experienced relationship between themselves, and of the experienced relationships with others. From those perspectives and experiences, they could, as agents, re-constitute contexts and events, feel amusement, relief, anxiety, respect or disdain, and emit interpretations and judgements about themselves and others, about their actions and those of others. These feelings, interpretations and actions were, in most cases, fully subscribed by the other women, thus providing a degree of coherency and justification for both their self-perceptions and their views of others (cf. Kennedy 1986: 130). Those issues will be discussed in more depth and in the context of particular cases in Chapters 4 and 5

### The visits of others

As has been said before, Doña Lupe received the *pasaditas* of Marta and her *comadre* Doña Yola almost every day. Occasionally, other women stopped by to see her: her sisters and mother, the family friend Doña Felicitas, her goddaughter Dionila, Lupita or Chabe. Yet these were not the only visitors who came to our household. Throughout my stay on the island, many other people appeared at Doña Lupe’s house, at different times and for different purposes, as mentioned in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter.

For instance, one November afternoon I came to the house to find a couple I had never seen before. They were sitting at the courtyard with my hosts, holding what sounded like an amiable but extremely polite and topical conversation. The men looked proper and upright, although they were smiling, and the women were talking animatedly, and laughing demurely. The whole encounter felt rather more



formal and courteous than the women's *pasaditas* I had witnessed. Afterwards, Doña Lupe told me that the couple were a distant cousin of hers and her husband, with whom she and Don Alfredo were on friendly terms. "*Nos reconocemos como parientes*" ("we recognise each other as relatives")<sup>20</sup>, she added as a way of explanation. This couple had visited them, Doña Lupe continued, to invite them to an *aviso* ("*invitarnos a acompañarles a un aviso*")<sup>21</sup>, which was going to take place on the following day, and for which they were expected to cooperate with labour and drink. They were not the only couple to visit my hosts with a similar request, for, during my fieldwork, many other married couples arrived to invite them to what seemed like an endless succession of *avisos*, civil and church weddings, confirmations, baptisms, and so on<sup>22</sup>. In addition to this, many other people entered our house during my stay: Don Alfredo's brother-in-law, widower of his late sister, who came to offer some pumpkins for sale and to check out the strange *gringa*; various male neighbours who wished to discuss with Don Alfredo some "men's business", such as the latest break down of the village's water pump; my hosts' nieces, who were having a screaming argument just outside our window, and were pulled into our courtyard by a concerned Doña Lupe ("What are the people going to say!"); and so on. It was curious to notice that visits tended to happen mostly in the evenings, when the daily work had ceased in most households. Also, they appeared to be made along gender lines, for married couples (or a widow, or widower, representing a couple) were attended by both my hosts, whilst men called to see Don Alfredo, and women came to talk to Doña Lupe.

In general, it could be said that most households in the village received the occasional visit of a variety of people, men and women, who arrived at their doorsteps with different pleas, offers, intentions and dispositions. Some of those visits were paid by strangers, such as NGO workers, government officials, or other researchers based in the area like myself. However, most visitors were other people from the island itself, who had some kind of link with the household occupants. For

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<sup>20</sup> Zárte Hernández has noted that people in Santa Fé de la Laguna use this expression to state the existence of an active relationship with certain others, in cases in which genealogical connections cannot be easily established (1993: 104).

<sup>21</sup> *Aviso* is the meeting that takes place between two groups of relatives after a boy and a girl have got married, that is, runoff together on the island.

<sup>22</sup> Whenever there was a big celebration on the island, the people directly involved in its organisation invited most of their married relatives, *compadres*, and friends. Those were usually expected to contribute to the cost of the event with labour, money, comestibles, and alcohol in variable quantities. For similar examples in the area, see Zárte Hernández 1993: 102-105; Beals, 1992 [1945]: 253, 256, 441; Jacinto Zavala 1988: 93-98; Foster 1972: 215-216).

instance, they could be relatives or affines who did not live nearby, or *compadres* with whom relations were not particularly close, or simply neighbours with whom one exchanged sporadic favours. In fact, potentially anyone from Jarácuaro could arrive at one's house, for a meeting or a reunion, as we will see in section II of this chapter.

So, how were the relationships of Jarácuaro women with all those *compadres*, relatives and friends who occasionally came into their houses? How did the women perceive their relatedness to them? What was the significance of their visits in the women's lives?

### Relating to others: intermittence and continuity

From their comments and conversations, attitudes and actions, I inferred that Doña Lupe, Doña Amelia, Lupita, and my other friends on the island experienced the day-to-day presence of, and frequent encounters with, a few close others as a continuum. Men and women who lived in their own houses, relatives and affines in their natal household, female friends who came around in regular *pasaditas*, were just an unquestioned part of their daily lives. As explained in Chapter 1, and in the first part of the present chapter, Jarácuaro women constantly communicated with a close constellation of *comadres*, friends, and male and female relatives, shared things with them, talked to them, felt their physical proximity, and the affection of their ties. In short, they probably perceived their relationships with them as an uninterrupted flow of connectedness which crossed over space (albeit in different degrees of trust and intimacy, depending on personal bonds, gender<sup>23</sup>, etc.).

On the other hand, I got the impression that Jarácuaro women did not devote much time or effort on a daily basis to all those who were not actively part of their quotidian existence. My female friends and acquaintances never referred to the majority of their *comadres*, distant relatives, or neighbours in their conversations with me, only to those close to them. I did not know of the existence of most of Doña Lupe's relations until we bumped into them in the street, or we met them by chance at a celebration. It was only then when she would give me a brief ad-hoc explanation about their identity, personality, and connection to her, in a bare and

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<sup>23</sup> See "Women and men inside Houses" in Chapter 1.

almost uninterested manner. "That one we met at the square", she would say, "was my *comadre*, Machi's *niña*. She's nice". If acquaintances crossed each other in the street, they would exchange the quick "*¡adios!*" and uninformative conversations mentioned in Chapter 2. Only in visiting situations (see above), or at joyful feasts, would relatives and friends who rarely saw each other behave in openly amicable and engaging manners. For the rest of the time, and at least from my own perspective, it was as if most others existed only at the far background of the women's perceptions and thoughts, distant, mute figures in their quotidian experience.

Let me give you an example: I knew nothing about Doña Lupe's brother-in-law Marcos and her *concuña* (co-sister-in-law) Carlota until I met them at the island's cemetery on the occasion of the Day of the Big Dead. At the cemetery, Doña Carlota and Doña Lupe treated each other with familiarity, working together at the tombs of their common deceased parents-in-law, praying closely together, and eating together amidst relative conviviality. That night, I learnt from my hostess that, in the past, they had lived together at their husbands' parental house for several years, but that they had never got on really well. After that day, I did not see Doña Carlota for another few months, and I did not hear a word about her, until the day she came to our house with her husband to invite Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe to a wedding. On that occasion, the two couples sat at the courtyard to a cheerful long conversation, full of lively jokes and gossip. Some weeks later, I saw Doña Carlota constantly for three days, during the wedding celebrations to which my hosts had been invited. At the feast, both Doña Carlota and Doña Lupe worked hard together preparing and serving the food, in an atmosphere of great excitement and camaraderie. Then, on the following day, my hostess talked to me about her *concuña* and her reprehensible behaviour as a mother-in-law, exemplified in some incidents during the celebration. And once again, after the wedding hangover had faded away, Doña Carlota and Marcos disappeared from our daily lives, to the point that I did not see them for the rest of my fieldwork.

Doña Lupe was not the only one to have such intermittent modes of connectedness with many of her relatives, *comadres* and friends, which I described in my diary as "on/off relationships". In fact, this appeared to be much the way in which Jarácuaro women related to the majority of others on the island. At first, I found this dynamic very puzzling, because I had assumed beforehand that personal bonds with people living nearby necessarily meant constant interactions (cf. Carsten

1997:169, with reference to compound neighbours in Langkawi). Furthermore, I interpreted the scantiness of communication between people as an expression of emotional remoteness. Yet I soon realised that this intermittent dynamic of relatedness did not imply a lack of a personal link, or the absence of an affective bond between the people involved. On the contrary, the personal ties existed, but they were somehow “dormant”<sup>24</sup> for most of the time. Metaphorically speaking, relationships underwent periods of “fallow”, only to be “activated” in certain contexts, and for certain reasons.

During the muted periods of relatedness, women on the island interacted with many others in ways that created and maintained a starched distance with them. For instance, my female friends did not exchange daily *pasaditas* with those less close relations. When they met *comadres* or female neighbours in the street, they would hide their shopping, lie about events, and appear serious and detached, as described in Chapter 2. When they met *compadres* or distant male relatives, they exchanged brief greetings, and often walked on without a smile. Yet, at the same time, relationships were actively being kept alive through those small, deliberate instances of formal interaction. The greetings and the conversations were, after all, intentional exchanges, which allowed communications to be kept open, and relations to be perceived and experienced as ongoing. Now and then, Jarácuaro women became more proactive and engaged in more involved forms of interaction with those same others who were usually kept at bay. For instance, they would go with their husbands to see other couples to request help at a particular event, or they would simply visit a female second cousin because they felt the desire to rekindle attachment and affections. On those occasions, interactions could be, and often were, closer and warmer, creating and re-creating friendlier modes of relatedness, for the duration of a call, a festival, or even a chance encounter at a celebration. Thus, in this context, deliberate actions such as occasional visits however sporadic, were perceived and interpreted as intentional acts, informing an experiential reality in which personal bonds were very much operative. As Bourdieu has described elsewhere:

“[There exist] strategies intended simply to neutralise the action of time and ensure the continuity of interpersonal relations, drawing the continuous out of the discontinuous [...], through infinite multiplication of the infinitely small, in the form, for example, of ‘little presents’ said to keep ‘friendships going’”. (Bourdieu 1977: 7)

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<sup>24</sup> Brandes uses this expression to describe certain relationships in Tzintzuntzan (1988: 35).





Photograph 20: Taking baskets of fruit to a *compadre's* house for a celebration. From left to right, Joel, his friend, Doña Amelia, Glafira, Doña Reyna, Irenita, and some other guests.

### Relating to others: interest, obligation, or emotional involvement?

My female friends and acquaintances on the island used to visit others for instrumental reasons on numerous occasions. For instance, Doña Cecilia once went around the houses of many of her female relatives and *comadres*, “inviting” them to vote for her son Joel in the local elections -whilst, at the same time, her husband Don Joaquín did the same with male relatives. Doña Yola had appealed to most people she knew at the time her husband had been shot, as she had needed the money for the doctor. When Doña Lupe’s distant cousin and her husband visited my hosts, they were concerned, amongst other things, with obtaining help, material and practical, for a costly celebration.

Moreover, there was, in general, an element of reciprocity in the way Jarácuaro people perceived their relationships with others<sup>25</sup>. For example, on the occasion Doña Carlota and Marcos had come to invite my hosts to the wedding, Doña Lupe had explained to me that, if they accepted, they would have to contribute with money, several boxes of beer, dozens of chickens, pots, blankets, rice fruit, plus her own labour. Despite the huge expense that this meant for them, Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo felt that they had to accompany their relations, because, as Doña Lupe put it:

“we have the obligation (*obligación*). The groom is the son of my *comadre* Libia<sup>26</sup>, who is Doña Carlota’s sister and Marta’s godmother, and her husband is a cousin of Don Alfredo. We have to “correspond” (“*corresponder*”, reciprocate) Libia, because she helped us with chickens and all that when Feyo got married. And Feyo told me, ‘look, my children are small now, but when they grow up, I am going to need help, so, why don’t we help them now? In this way, we will do them a favour now, and later it will be their turn’. So we have an obligation there with my *comadre*, and we have to return her past favours (*tenemos que emparejarle*).”

In addition to this, it seemed to me that there was a great deal of give and take among the people on the island. I was impressed by the amount of “things”, material and immaterial, that appeared to be handed out, returned, and exchanged between my friends and acquaintances: food, money, visits, favours. Whenever I dropped in at Doña Cecilia’s or Doña Hermila’s, I took some fruit for them, or little presents for the children, and I invariably was offered something in exchange -fruit,

<sup>25</sup> Reciprocity is also quite important in the relationships of other Latin American peoples, particularly in the Andean region. For examples, see Allen (1988); Bourque 1993a.

<sup>26</sup> Libia and her husband came subsequently to invite my hosts to that same wedding.

*frijoles*, a soft drink. When Doña Cecilia came to see her daughter, she often brought her something, such as oranges from the Pátzcuaro market, and was, in turn, given limes from the courtyard tree. At the various weddings I attended there, the groom's guests would cross the streets of the village, dancing and carrying baskets of fruit and bread, blankets and pots, as the customary gifts for the bride's parents. In turn, the bride's people danced their way back to the groom's house, to offer them exactly the same customary present of baskets of fruit and bread, blankets and pots<sup>27</sup>.

Pondering on the above examples, it would be easy to assume that relationships among Jarácuaro people, and specifically for the women, were mostly motivated by interest. It would also be tempting to reduce relationships to mere vehicles for reciprocal exchange. In fact, several anthropologists who have worked in Mexico have somehow represented people's social relations as little more than mercenary arrangements for the obtaining of benefits (see Foster's model of the "dyadic contract" in Tzintzuntzan, 1961, 1972: 209-217; Chiñas 1973: 89-91; Brandes 1988: 32, 35-36, 60-62; Zárate Hernández 1993: 104-105). Furthermore, some authors like Chiñas or Foster seem to suggest an intrinsic inability of some Mexican peoples to actually develop or manage personal bonds outside relationships of ritual or contractual exchange<sup>28</sup>. Those same authors have also seen in relationships of reciprocal exchange a pattern of regulatory mechanisms which are designed to attain social balance in the long term.

I will not discuss here the obvious ethical implications of the above representations. I will only say that I did not conceive of Doña Lupe, Doña Cecilia, or Chabe as cunning contractual strategists, coldly assessing the advantages of a certain association. Nor were they unaware instruments of some form of functional homeostasis, which "forced" them to relate to others according to grand patterns of social equilibrium. First of all, their relationships with others were integral, rich personal bonds which pertained not only practicalities, but cognitions and emotions in varying degrees, depending on persons and shared histories. For Doña Lupe, for

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<sup>27</sup> Campbell (1995:144) records an instance in which identical plates of peccary stew are exchanged between two co-resident married couples.

<sup>28</sup> Chiñas refers to the "suspicion and secrecy [of] secular social relations" (1973: 81) amongst Isthmus Zapotecs, and even goes as far as to declare that "[their] entire social system is permeated with anxiety and paranoia" (1973: 92). She sees Zapotecs as "lonely individuals [...] never completely trusting even the most trusted of kin" (1973: 92). Foster coincides with her in this last respect, and thinks that, due to the suspicion and misdoubt people feel about others, they are reserved and, finally, alone (1972: 98).

instance, her relationships with Doña Carlota, or with her distant cousin, were more than mechanical or skin-deep. She visibly rejoiced in their company, and expressed great affection for her cousin, and a certain degree of care and concern about her co-sister-in-law, based on their past common experiences at their husband's parental house. Once, when Doña Lupe's *comadre*, Cheli's mother-in-law, denied her a favour, she took this as a personal rejection, and spent a few days worrying at the other's reasons for the denial, clearly hurt. And Doña Lupe was not a special case of sensitivity. For all Jarácuaro women I met, relationships with most others were experienced and perceived as real, personal, and full, touching different levels of their existences. Leaving aside the material and practical benefits that they gained, personal ties caused my female friends and acquaintances pleasure and reassurance when they were running smoothly, but they brought about anxiety, pain and feelings of rejection when they were troubled, or broke altogether.

Secondly, women's relationships and modes of relatedness with others were not determined by some external code of rules. Visiting with a purpose in mind, requesting and returning favours, exchanging food, gifts, or conversations, were all felt and interpreted as deliberate actions, not as behaviours prescribed by etiquette or custom<sup>29</sup>. These actions were, in practice, understood as intentional, not only expressing the reality of a personal bond, but also creating, re-creating, and maintaining it through their very intentionality. For instance, when Doña Lupe received the invitation of Libia to her son's wedding, she did not see this as an interested move on the part of her *comadre*, nor just as a courtesy dictated by local "custom". Libia could have decided to ignore her, for, after all, they were only related through others. Instead, Doña Lupe felt Libia had made a conscious effort to include her in the celebrations, and she expressed her content to have been appreciated ("*le hicieron el aprecio*"), "given her place" ("*le dieron su lugar*"). Furthermore, these kind of approaches were not unidirectional, but willingly reciprocated by others, not as a form of mechanical and measured exchange, but as a mode of interaction. Returning to the example above, when Doña Lupe talked about her "obligation" towards Libia, she was not referring to an inescapable duty of reciprocity, since she obviously had pondered whether to accept her invitation or not with her husband and her son Feyo. As I understood later, she was making a

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<sup>29</sup>It is interesting to note here that Mauss thought of reciprocity and exchange as internal, "spiritual mechanisms" (1990 [1950]: 7). It is outside the purpose of this thesis to discuss his theories in depth. However, I think the word "mechanism" could be misleading in this context, in so far as it conveys a sense of automatism in human behaviour.



point about a felt responsibility towards Libia and her husband, in the context of the experienced reality of an ongoing, good relationship with them<sup>30</sup>. The fact that she could foresee Libia helping them in the future with Feyo's sons -that is, returning the favour-, was testament to the trust and confidence deposited in their solid personal bonds. In short, it could be said that Jarácuaro women interacted with certain others in ways that constituted perceived and lived realities of relationships, which, in turn, informed subsequent interactions and modes of relatedness.

Finally, visits, reciprocated favours, and exchanges, that is, specific modes of relatedness, and, above all, bonds, were not prescribed by classifications of people. If Jarácuaro women did not perceive their visits, gifts, and favours as mere acts of customary duty, they certainly did not perceive them as contingent to prescribed modes of relatedness with specific categories of others. The fact that someone was a *compadre*, a distant relative, or a friend, did not dictate that relationships had to be more or less intermittent, harmonious, and friendly; moreover, they did not even need to be operative at all. Of course Doña Lupe and most other women on the island desired friendly relations with certain others, such as most of one's *compadres*, affines, distant relatives or street neighbours, that is, people that one might encounter often throughout life. Yet, having certain kinds of relationships, or certain modes of relatedness with specific others was not perceived as compulsory. The women made decisions about their interactions and approaches to persons based on their own experiences of the relationships with them. Thus, for instance, Doña Lupe had resolved to "recognise" one distant cousin as a relative (but not many others), and had a good intermittent relationship with her. Yet she ignored her own sisters when it came to ask or return favours. Equally, when she accepted Doña Carlota's invitation, she did it because of her connection to Libia, and to honour her felt responsibilities towards the latter. However, a few months later, my host told me that she had declined an invitation by this same Doña Carlota to her son's wedding, although, it could be argued, Marcos, Carlota and their son, Doña Lupe's nephew, were much "closer" kin than Libia. Furthermore, my female acquaintances did initiate occasional relationships with totally unrelated co-villagers, and could even become very close friends, even *comadres*<sup>31</sup>, as it had been the case for Doña Amelia and Doña Hermila, or for Doña

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<sup>30</sup> Campbell explains that, among the Wayapí of Brazil, "exchange wasn't, of course, an 'economic' act which distributed scarce resources. It was a moral act, *expressing the obligations of the relationship the people were in*" (1995: 144; emphasis mine).

<sup>31</sup> Becoming *comadres* was a relatively simple operation in Jarácuaro, for all it took was for women to start calling each other by that term. Alternatively, a woman could choose a

Cecilia and Doña Felicitas. In short, Jarácuaro women did not have different relationships and different modes of relatedness with certain others as a result of categorical dictates. They had constellations of relationships with a variety of persons, from relatives to remote neighbours, from close kin to strangers (like myself), with whom they interacted in ways informed by the experience and shared history of the particular relationship.

## II. The visit of the Cristito

On the afternoon I arrived in Jarácuaro, Doña Lupe had come into the house carrying a bunch of *cempasúchitles* (bright orange flowers), which she had just bought in the village square. Since that day was the eve of the *Día de Difuntitos Chicos* (Day of the Little Dead), I assumed at the time that those flowers were to be taken to the cemetery, or perhaps they were for the *ofrendas* (offerings at a house altar) for the dead (see Chapter 1). Afterwards, I had the chance to ask Doña Lupe about the flowers. To my surprise, she exclaimed: "Noo! They are not for the offerings!". With a pleased smile, and adopting a confidential tone, she proceeded to explain:

*"Tengo visita* ("I have a visit"). The flowers are for the *visita*. He is a *crisitito* who comes here visiting. He's there at my son's house. He is Señor de la Misericordia, *uno chiquito* (a little one), like the one in the church in Jarácuaro, at this side of the altar [she gestured with her hand]. He goes from house to house, stays in each for a little while, and then moves on to another. We'll go to see him later".

A while later, we left by the little door situated at the back of Doña Lupe's kitchen, and went through a large fenced backyard. At the furthest side of it lay Feyo's house, an L-shaped, humble-looking structure of grey concrete. We entered one of its two bedrooms. The space was small and square, with a ceiling of plastic sheets. It was very simply furnished: Feyo and Machí's bed occupied one corner, and a little sofa another. However, opposite the sofa, an altar had been set on a table covered with an embroidered cloth. In the middle of this makeshift altar stood a crucified *crisitito*. He was inside a glass-fronted box, surrounded by burning

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female friend to become a minor godmother of one of her children. However, I do not think that becoming *comadres* necessarily compelled two women to feel more "obliged" towards each other, for the perception of a tie was there beforehand. Other anthropologists have interpreted relationships of *compadrazgo* in Mexico in a more prescriptive way (in the Pátzcuaro area, Foster 1972: 81; Beals 1992 [1945]: 254-259; Zárate Hernández 1993: 104-5; in Oaxaca, Norget 1993: 26).

candles and bright flowers, some of which were the *cempasúchitles* I had seen before. On the wall around the altar, several pictures of *santitos* accompanied the *crisito*. I noticed there was a small television set sitting just besides the table, which I found quite amusing.

"This is the *crisito*", said Doña Lupe, gesturing towards the altar. To my surprise, she did not kneel down or cross herself. She simply walked towards the sofa, sat down, and invited me to do the same with a gentle smile on her face. Her behaviour was not disrespectful, but she had shown no sign of altering the tone of her voice nor her comportment in the presence of Señor de la Misericordia, as I had expected her to do. When I sat by her side, she continued to talk to me, acting and moving naturally, as she would have done in her own courtyard. "Those flowers there are lilies, the ones which smell nicely. They are from the *zapote* (sapota tree) in the yard". She then fell silent, still smiling, her hands comfortably resting on her lap. She looked towards the *crisito* for a while, and gave him a warm and affectionate glance. She then turned towards the window, which I noticed was covered with a tattered cloth.

"It does not have a glass yet" she explained, as if justifying its poor aspect. "My son *ya se puso aparte* ("set house apart"), as it should be, shouldn't it? But he is building this house little by little: when he has a bit of money, he lays the roof, or the floor. Everything is so expensive these days!".

As I listened to her talking, I realised I found the atmosphere in the room quite pleasant. The flowers gave a strong, sweet scent, the warm breeze of the afternoon ruffled the window cloth softly, and rays of sunlight filtered through the gaps in the modest roof.

Doña Lupe continued chatting animatedly, and answered my questions about the identity of the other *santitos* in very good spirits. As we spoke, her grandsons sneaked quietly into the room and sat timidly on the bed. They were listening very attentively to their grandmother's words, and thus, what was supposed to be an explanation for my benefit, was also instructive for them. I asked Tzan, the eldest of Doña Lupe's grandsons, if he knew the names of the other two *santitos*, and he proudly showed his knowledge to me.

At that point Doña Lupe, who had been benevolently listening to her grandson, turned to me and explained: "It feels really good ("*se siente bien bonito*") to have the *crisito* here on a visit. I feel very happy ("*bien contenta que se siente una*")

that he is here visiting, very happy!". And she gave me a satisfied, contented smile. I asked her if she visited him when he was away in other houses, and how one could know his exact whereabouts. She pondered at this question for a few minutes, puzzled, as if its meaning was unclear, or the query was not fully logical or relevant. However, she dutifully produced a polite, if somehow perfunctory, answer.

"One just knows where he is, you just ask people and they tell you". (She hesitated slightly). "Well, sometimes you go to visit him, to pray to him a little bit... If you have faith in him, you go, isn't that right? If you have faith in them [the *santitos*] ("*teniéndoles fe*"), that's how they help you, isn't it? If you don't have faith, they know it. So that's why you have faith, otherwise, what's left?"

She did not sound fully convinced of her own words, and looked elsewhere, seemingly trying to avoid more questioning on such a bizarre matter. Yet a little after she added, in a more assured tone: "But it feels really good when they are here. They help you, you come to see them, you ask them for things, and they help you".

As we left the room, we met Marta. She greeted me politely, with a shy demeanour, and returned promptly to her kitchen to continue with the preparation of a *pozole* (meat and corn stew). Doña Lupe then explained:

"This *pozole* is for the people coming later to take the *crisquito* to another house. This is the custom (*costumbre*) here: when people come to take him away, one has to give them some food. They will come here, pray the rosary, and then they will take the *crisquito*, the *visita*, somewhere else. He has been here for two weeks now: one on my son's behalf and one on our behalf. He should have been in my house as well, but I said, 'let him stay here, in this room, all the time. He is fine here'".

That evening, we returned to Feyo and Marta's house. The *pozole* was still boiling, and Doña Lupe knelt on the floor to grind some chillies for it in the *metate* (hand grinder made out of volcanic stone). Machí and Tila arrived, and Doña Lupe introduced me to them, explaining my presence at her house in terms that I had not anticipated. "This is a visitor (*una visita*)", she said, somehow proudly, "to whom I have to attend". The atmosphere at Marta's kitchen was now one of great animation and expectation. The four women were talking lively, in a mixture of Spanish and Purhé, laughing out loud at each other's jokes as they skilfully chopped vegetables, or stirred the boiling broth. Now and then, one or another of the three young mothers breastfed her baby. I had been given a high chair at a far corner, and, from that detached position, I looked on at their chattering and shared activities with a mixture of amused curiosity and painful feelings of alienation.



Meanwhile, all the children had been playing together in the room where the *cristito* was. I went to sit with them for a while. It was now dark outside, and some candles had been lit for the Señor. The flowers, the shivering light, and the faces of the *santitos*, made me feel that the space was somehow special, and the atmosphere solemn and slightly eerie. Yet, the children did not seem to share my impression, since they had switched the television on, and were happily watching cartoons, tickling each other, and dissolving in fits of loud and contagious laughter. Neither did their mothers and grandmother seem to think there was something special about the room, since, from the kitchen, they instructed me to take pictures of the children there with my camera<sup>32</sup>.

At one point, the dogs at the backyard started barking, announcing the arrival of the expected guests. The four women at the kitchen hastened with last minute preparations, as the group of visitors came in through the street gate, and gathered just outside the house, uttering "*Buenas noches!*" ("Good evening!") in the chanting intonation of polite greetings in the area. There were four men and four women, two of whom had their little children with them. Doña Lupe and Marta, smiling but courteously distant, invited them to enter the room where Señor de la Misericordia was. It surprised me to see the naturality with which the men immediately sat on the chairs and the little sofa, whilst the women settled themselves on the *petates* laid for them on the floor.

Once they had all been accommodated, all facing the *cristito* in a casual semi-circle, one of the men started exchanging jokes and puns with the two older women of the group. The rest of the gathering laughed wholeheartedly at each of their inventive responses, whilst the young mothers rocked their babies to keep them quiet, and the children sat looking intimidated. I could hear Doña Lupe, Marta, Machí and Tila still busying themselves in the kitchen, and occasionally laughing quietly. Feyo, who had been absent until now, appeared suddenly at the room's threshold. With his usual serious expression, he uttered a laconic general greeting, and sat on a chair just outside the cubicle. Tzan was instructed to distribute cigarettes, which men and women accepted graciously, the women to hide them immediately in their *rebozos*, the men to light them up. The playful atmosphere continued for a while, amongst light-hearted jokes and cigarette smoke.

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<sup>32</sup>This brief passage has already been described in Chapter 1.



Photograph 21: The visiting *cristito* in Machí's room. The television set is on the right hand side.

Suddenly, the men extinguished their cigarettes, and the voices of the women faded as they enveloped themselves in their *rebozos*. My female hosts arrived from the kitchen, and sat at the room's threshold. One of the men knelt down in front of the *crstituto*, and began to lead the rosary with the aid of a book. During the monotonous, chant-like prayers, I noticed the two older women at the front seemed to follow the rosary attentively, their gazes fixed on the *crstituto*, their voices strong and assured. However, the rest of the company seemed distracted. The younger women slurred their words as they breastfed their babies, the children had become restless with boredom, and Doña Lupe and Marta kept on disappearing to the kitchen to check on the *pozole*. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the rosary was finished. Without noticeable transition, at least to me, the men began joking again, the women laughed cheerfully, the television set was switched on, and the atmosphere of the room recovered the previous air of affability and conviviality, after the more serious interlude of the rosary.

At the kitchen, Doña Lupe, Marta and Machí started serving enormous portions of *pozole* for everyone. As they did this, they talked vivaciously, teased each other playfully, and laughed. They seemed immersed in a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere of their own. They delivered the *pozole* plates to all their guests in the room, including the children. These were received by the visitors with polite expressions of thanks. Then, they ate their food with evident satisfaction, the men talking amongst themselves about the prices of televisions, the women chatting in Purhé on their *petates*, with their *rebozos* casually thrown over their shoulders. In the background, the television blasted out the sounds of a kung fu programme.

Doña Lupe and Marta started to bring little pots for the guests to take home the remaining of their *pozole*<sup>33</sup>. Then, there was another, rather hurried, set of prayers, during which containers were still being circulated. At the end of this set, one of the men took a small notebook from underneath the *crstituto's* urn, and asked: "Which names?". Feyo proceeded to volunteer his own name, his wife's and his four children's. Doña Lupe also stopped her solicitous attentions to the visitors and gave her name, her husband's, and that of her younger son's and his family. Later on, when I had the chance to ask Doña Lupe about this, she explained to me that

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<sup>33</sup>In festivities and celebrations in Jarácuaro, it was customary for people to take home whatever food they had not consumed on the spot. As portions tended to be rather large, most people, and particularly women, returned to their houses with bags and pots full of victuals, which they gleefully re-heated (*el recalentadito*) and ate with their families on the following days.

what they had done was to “entrust (*encomendar*) the named persons to the Señor”.

Once all the names had been carefully written down, everyone began getting ready to leave. In amongst all the noisy activity, I heard the man with the notebook telling Feyo: “You will have the *cristito* back here in four years time”<sup>34</sup>. All the persons in the room were taking something to carry to the house where the *cristito* was now going: the women carried the flowers and some incense, the children the candles, still burning, and the men the urn with the *cristito*. We left the room and traversed the backyard in a small procession, with Doña Lupe, Marta, and her children bringing up the rear, all singing a song of farewell to the Señor. We crossed the street gate and walked a few yards with short, deliberate steps, illuminated by the flames of the candles, and singing mournfully. Round the corner, a door opened directly into a well lit room full of people, all awaiting the arrival of the *cristito*, with a makeshift altar already prepared in one corner. The men placed the Señor on this altar, the flowers were arranged around him, and the fuming incense was set in front. We all knelt down, said a few prayers, crossed ourselves. Then, we greeted the new hosts with soft handshakes and courteous “*Buenas noches*”, after which we left the house.

The following morning, the household was filled with an air of excitement. It was the Day of the Little Dead (*Día de Difuntitos Chicos*), and several events were going to take place in the village. In the midst of all that cheerful anticipation, I managed to ask Doña Lupe a few questions about the night before, which were responded to politely but expeditiously, since I was obviously interrupting her work. However, when I questioned her about how she felt after the *cristito*'s departure, she stopped her hurried preparations for a moment, considered the matter gravely, and answered in a quiet voice.

“I feel sad because he is not here any longer. I was very happy when he was here, I felt very content (*¡lo sentía bien agusto!*) . I went there [to Marta's house] every morning to see him, and to talk to him. Every day I told him, ‘Señor, help me, so that today it is a good day, and everything goes fine (*para que el día pase bien, y para que todo pase bien*)’. And everyday, on returning to my house, I felt as if he had told me, ‘That's fine, go on, don't worry, everything is going to be fine’. And now, he is not here, he's gone, and

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<sup>34</sup>I found out afterwards that the Señor stayed one year in each *cuartel*, that is, in each one of the four quarters of the village. This is a traditional way of dividing villages in the area since colonial times (cf. Zárate Hernández 1993:70).



I feel sad. Well, one becomes attached, isn't that right?, one becomes attached in this way".

### Visiting *santitos*, *santitos* visiting

In the first section of this chapter I explained that visiting was an important activity for the people of Jarácuaro, and specially for the women. Women exchanged *pasaditas*; *compadres*, friends, neighbours, and the occasional stranger, called regularly on the houses of others. Needless to say, as beings who took part in the quotidian ebb and flow of life on the island, the *santitos* also visited and were visited by others.

From very early on after my arrival on the island, I heard my female acquaintances talking about going to "visit" this or that *santito*. "To visit" was the most common expression they used when they themselves, or others, went to see a *crisito* or a *virgencita*, at either the island's church<sup>35</sup>, at people's houses, or at other villages and towns. Whenever Marielena told me of her excursions to the church during the day, she used to say: "I just went to see San Pegrito, una *visitita* ("a little visit")". Don Alfredo visited Señor de Carácuaro in Tierra Caliente every year, as described in Chapter 4; Doña Hermila described in great detail her visit to a miraculous *virgencita* near Pichátaro, and she took me to visit a Virgen de Guadalupe at a neighbour's house. I accompanied Doña Lupe to Pátzcuaro to visit San Ramón and the Virgen de la Salud. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork, I followed many other people to see many saints, Virgins, and Christs inside and outside the island. Needless to say, I paid my own visits to them as well.

In a similar way, *santitos* visited women and their relatives in their houses. Sometimes the visits were quite long, like that one of the *crisito* to our household described above. On other occasions, *santitos* paid just brief visits, as in the time Doña Lupe called into my room, exclaiming: "Come, come, quick, come and see the *visita* (visitor)!", referring to a little Baby Jesus who had just been brought into our courtyard to stay there for only a few minutes. In a way, the visit of a *santito* could mean quite a big event for the women, involving the arrival of other guests, the preparation of food, and certain set activities, like rosaries. However, the visits of Virgins, saints or Christs were, for most of the time, small, quiet affairs, fitted within and filling the usual quotidian routines of Jarácuaro women. In addition to

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<sup>35</sup> See Chapter 2 for a more extensive discussion on this issue.

this, *santitos* visited each other as well. For instance, Señor de Carácuaro left the island once a year, in the company of a group of people, to go to see his namesake in Tierra Caliente; and the Virgen de Guadalupe *particular*, that is, the one who stayed at a house, went to the village's church on her own festival, to celebrate with the Guadalupana who lived there, and also with the rest of the islanders.

Many ethnographies about Mexico, and about other parts of Latin America, have referred to the visiting activities of holy beings (for examples in Michoacán, Beals 1990 [1945]: 330-332; Jacinto Zavala 1988: 105; in Mexico, Carrasco, 1952: 42; Ruz 1995: 25; Ingham, 1986: 96; Vogt 1990 [1970]: 112; Norget, 1993: 53; in Panama, Gudeman 1976: 718, 723; in Ecuador, Bourque 1993b: 187)<sup>36</sup>. Some of them have even specifically described the visits of these saintly beings to people's houses (Carrasco, 1952: 42; Beals 1990 [1945]: 330-332; Ingham, 1986: 96; Gudeman 1976: 718, 723; Bourque 1993b: 187). Yet it is curious to notice that their representations and interpretations of such visits seem to be at odds with my own observations and experiences on the island of Jarácuaro.

First of all, many anthropologists working in Latin America seem to resort to a recurrent functionalist explanation which sees saints' (or Virgins', or Christs') visits as mere contexts for ritual occasions, which in turn serve different purposes within the society. Thus, for instance, Vogt (1990 [1970]: 112) mentions in passing that saints from other villages attend festivities at Zinacantan, but then proceeds to describe the ceremonies that take place on those occasions, placing these within what he calls "the ritual cycle". Whereas Beals argues that sponsoring the visits of saints to one's house in Cherán implies organising ceremonial gatherings for relatives and neighbours, hence accruing "social prestige" (1990 [1945: 330-331])<sup>37</sup>. However, I did not get the impression that the visit of the *crstituto* to Doña Lupe's household was perceived as a "ritual encounter", a ceremonial event meant for the acquisition of "prestige", or for some kind of "social homeostasis". The formalised activities that were performed during it, like the rosary, did not seem to be terribly significant

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<sup>36</sup> For an example outside Latin America, see Christian 1972: 84, describing similar instances in Spain. I personally remember San Antonio visiting my grandmother's house, when I was a youngchild in the Basque Country.

<sup>37</sup> Other anthropologists also uphold this viewpoint indirectly. For instance, for Zárate Hernández, festivities at sponsors' houses in Santa Fé, which commonly involve the arrival of a saintly being, are ritual occasions which serve to maintain the communal order (1993: 111-113). For other similar positions, see Carrasco (1952: 42), Tapia Santamaría (1995), Chiñas (1973), and Brandes (1988).

for my hosts, but mostly a matter of hastily fulfilled routine<sup>38</sup>. Furthermore, I would argue that such a functionalist perspective denies *santitos* their true protagonism and agency in their own visits. It obscures the fact that, as far as Doña Lupe and Machí were concerned, the *cristito* was the important being in the whole affair, the one whose visit brought happiness, and whose experienced presence mattered the most. Moreover, for them, he was not merely a “sacred object” which had been delivered to their house, and served as the excuse for a “ritual occasion”. Instead, he was a true agent who, like many other visitors they received, had chosen to go to their house and interact with them.

Yet not all anthropologists who deal with the visits of saints in Latin America share the approach presented above. There are those who, acknowledging people’s perspectives, recognise the existence of experienced relationships between persons and saints, Virgins and Christs. Relationships which, according to some ethnographers, are very similar to those men and women have with significant others in their lives, and are thus reciprocal and interactive. This interpretation, then, would tacitly recognise agency on the part of the *santitos*. However, many of these same scholars fall into a kind of representational dilemma. On the one hand, they might describe active and deliberate behaviours of *santitos*, as reported by the people themselves, thus conveying experiential realities in which holy beings are true agents. Whereas, on the other hand, they deny the very agency they just granted to the saints, by classifying and representing them as passive, inanimate objects. For example, Norget speaks of the “intimate and highly personalised relationship between worshipper and saint” in Oaxaca, and informs about a virgin who “is said to ‘go around visiting’ various homes”, but then goes on to refer to saints as “objects of veneration” and “visible, tangible, plastic symbols who are *attributed* human needs and qualities” (1993: 53; emphasis mine). Similarly, Bourque, with reference to an Ecuadorian village, tells of “images” carried from “household to household, giving [their] blessing to the inmates”. Yet, interestingly, she adds that “the movement of Saints is *couched in social terms*. A Saint is said to visit the patron Saint and residents of other villages” (1993:187; emphasis mine)<sup>39</sup>. In my opinion, these paradoxes and apparent contradictions respond to the perplexity of the anthropologists, who can observe the relationships that men and women have with

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<sup>38</sup> In this sense, the fulfilment of the proper procedures on special occasions seemed to be of interest to the men, who organised them. As seen in the episode above, and in others in this thesis, the women were far less bothered about performing formal activities, and they tended to follow the men’s instructions rather carelessly.

<sup>39</sup> For comparable examples, refer to Ingham (1986: 96); also Vogt (1990 [1970]: 23, 112-113).

holy beings at an intellectual level, yet cannot share people's experiences and perceptions of real, deliberate actions of, and true reciprocal interactions with, saints. However, from the perspective of Doña Lupe and Machí, from their perceptions and experiences, there was no doubt about the reality of the *crítico's* visit, of his presence, and of his will. He went to the house to see them, and chose to remain with them for a while, independently of who might have aided his movements from house to house, or who came around to take him away. Moreover, the significance of his call was, I think, not to be found in some hypothetical "symbolic meanings" provided by a "sacred statue", but in the impact of the felt personal relationship with the *crítico*, and in the true actions, interactions, and modes of relatedness which took place between him and my female hosts. I will refer to these issues next.

### Constituting relationships: intention and choice

Señor de la Misericordia, who came to visit Doña Lupe and Machí's household, was an itinerant *crítico*, whose movements and passages from house to house were very much part of quotidian life in Jarácuaro. That is, he was part of the village's "social flow of life", to put it in Sweet's words (1974: 112). His arrivals and departures were relatively quiet events, which involved only a handful of people, and went largely unnoticed by the majority of the others on the island. He was not the only *santito* who moved around in the village, for Doña Cecilia told me that she received the visits of an itinerant Señor de Carácuaro, and I also knew of the existence of a few Baby Jesus and *virgencitas* who went about. It is important to notice that, despite the fact that, to me, the itinerant *críticos* looked like smaller replicas of the ones in Jarácuaro's and Carácuaro's churches, respectively, to Doña Lupe, Machí, Doña Cecilia, and to most others, they were distinct personages, different from their namesakes<sup>40</sup>.

As I found out during his farewell party, Señor de la Misericordia only visited Doña Lupe, Machí, and their families once every four years. By Doña Lupe's own admission, she did not go to see him often in between. In fact, for the duration of my fieldwork, I did not learn of one single time that she went to any of his

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<sup>40</sup> Some authors have noted that many people in Mexico consider different Virgins, Christs, or saints, even if they bear the same name and a close resemblance, as having separate and individual identities. See Carrasco 1952: 23; Ruz 1995: 29; Van Zantwijk 1974: 190; Norget 1993: 53. For a similar example in Spain, see Christian 1972: 48.



receptions or farewells at neighbours' houses. Could it be that my hostess did not care about the Señor? Could it be that his visit was just perceived as the occasion for the performance of a "religious duty"? These might be, and have been, the interpretations on similar situations (see above). Still, I do not think this was the case for Doña Lupe, or for Doña Cecilia, or for most of my female friends and acquaintances on the island. Doña Lupe, as she told me, was happy with the visits of the *santito*, since, although they were sparse, they happened at regular intervals. It was the certainty of his return to her house that was important to my hostess, and she rejoiced at the periods that she spent in his company. In this sense, her relationship with the *crítico* was not substantially different from her relationships with many other islanders -with many *compadres*, neighbours, or relatives. As described before, relatedness to others outside a small close circle happened in an intermittent manner, "on and off". And, certainly, Doña Lupe's connectedness with Señor de la Misericordia was dormant for long periods of time; then, he would visit her, and his call made it possible to activate closer, more intense forms of interaction. Thus, despite his long absences, and the lack of apparent contact throughout them, his visits were regular actions which kept the relationship alive.

Moreover, as in many other cases with *comadres*, relatives, or friends, the *crítico's* visits were perceived, experienced, and interpreted by Doña Lupe as fully intentional, and out of personal choice. It was one particular conversation with Doña Cecilia in which this perception became quite clear to me. I knew that the *crítico* did not visit all the households on the island, but only a few. So, the day after his farewell, I told Doña Cecilia about the visit of Señor de la Misericordia to our house. She showed great interest about it, and asked me many questions. I initially attributed her enquiries to mere curiosity. Yet, when her son Joel happened to pass nearby, she stopped him, and told him avidly: "Lupe had the visit of a *crítico*! He is Señor de la Misericordia, a little one. And he has *celadores* [carers] and all!". Then she turned round to me, and added with a proud expression on her face: "I also receive the visit of a *crítico*, you know? He is not the same one, he is another one, Señor de Carácuaro, that one there [she pointed towards a photograph of a *crítico* on the wall]. He has just been here to see us, and he is coming back next year". Doña Cecilia's reaction caused me surprise at first, for it sounded as if she had felt jealous and had defensively retorted by showing off. Then I realised that she had interpreted the visit of Señor de la Misericordia to her daughter, in among other things, as a wilful act on his part. From this, she had been excluded, not only by Doña Lupe, who had not invited her to the farewell party, but also by the *crítico*

himself, who was not visiting her house. This was probably why she needed to reassure me, and herself, that she too received the visits of a *santito*, who had chosen to call on her, whom she had chosen to receive as a guest, and with whom she had a good, reciprocal, operative relationship. In this sense, it could be said that the visits of *santitos* had a positive effect on a woman's self-esteem since, as intentional actions, reassured them of their worth as good women and as companionable persons.

Thus, Doña Lupe, Doña Cecilia, and most other Jarácuaro women perceived and interpreted the sporadic visits of *santitos* to their houses as voluntary actions. The women experienced the reality of these deliberate actions, and therefore, the reality of an existing, ongoing relationship between Christs, Virgins, and saints, and themselves, based on reciprocal willingness. As far as the women were concerned, through their intentional calls, the *santitos* were not only signalling their bonds with their occasional hostesses. They were also creating and maintaining real relationships with the women, as much as the women, by receiving them enthusiastically, were producing and reproducing personal relationships with them<sup>41</sup>. In this sense, the modes of relatedness of Jarácuaro women with the *santitos* partook of the same elements which characterised their modes of relatedness with many others on the island: they were intermittent, intentional, selective, reciprocal, and interactive (cf. Foster 1972:209-229). Hence, it could be said, that the women felt and perceived the *santitos* to be players in their constellations of significant others, and thus players in their personal and social lives (cf. Brandes 1988 :62; Van Zantwijk 1974: 165; Ruz 1995: 2; also Christian 1972: 132; Bourque 1993b: 190).

However, as it was the case with other women in the context of *pasaditas*, and with many others in the context of visits, relationships and modes of relatedness were not only constituted through regularity of contact, intention and choice. They were also realised, at different levels with different others, through the actions and interactions that took place during visits. I will finish the present chapter by focusing on this point.

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<sup>41</sup> In this respect, Christian sees the visits between people and saints as "a personal settling process, a psychological reassurance, a reconfirmation of a personal contract with the divine" (1972: 116).

### Constituting relationships: intimacy and distance

As seen in the episode at the beginning of this section, the *crítico* stayed at Doña Lupe and Machí's household for a couple of weeks. I missed his arrival, since I had not moved to the island yet, but when I appeared, he was already comfortably staying at Machí and Feyo's room. Doña Lupe felt that he was at ease there, and that is why she did not want to move him. Indeed, the sensation of comfort was shared by all my hosts, for the *crítico* had entered their daily lives and routines in a smooth way. Doña Lupe went into his room every morning, to talk to him and get his help for the day ahead. Then, she dropped in at various times, just to have quick word with him, or simply to sit there in his company, in the peaceful atmosphere of his room. Her little, affectionate calls, I thought, were very much like *pasaditas*. Machí also felt relaxed in his presence, and she performed her daily house chores in front of him, letting him witness her hard work. The children, as described above, did not think twice about tickling each other, or watching television, with the *crítico* around, neither were they scolded by their female relatives for doing this. Moreover, they sensed his warmth and benevolence reflected in their mother and grandmother's tender attitudes towards him.

Doña Lupe and Machí's experience of comfort, closeness, and trust informed and was informed by all the little, quotidian interactions that the women had with the Señor. Doña Lupe talked to him in soft tones, with a familiarity and an affection that I had only seen her display towards other members of her household, or towards other close female relatives who stopped by regularly. She told him of ordinary, daily events, and spoke of personal things in his presence, like her comments about her son Feyo. Many times, she just sat there, resting from her daily tasks, in the presence of someone who, she was confident, understood the strenuous labour involved in being a woman (see Chapter 1). She stood physically close to him, and lovingly arranged the flowers around him, since, as everyone knew, *santitos* liked flowers. There was no sense of "sacredness", no special "ritual" behaviours displayed, no fear or fervour in their one-to-one encounters. There were just everyday attitudes and comportments -conversations, proximity, unaffected gestures. Their meetings were a continuation of her quotidian experience, just as the intercourse with household members, or the *pasaditas* of women, were.

Above all, Doña Lupe's actions and expressions were not just one-sided, acts directed at an inanimate object who could not respond. I do not think she was

just projecting some kind of “religious” fantasy over a piece of wood, nor “giving the image life”, to paraphrase Dubisch (1995: 73). She was, in her own experiential reality, truly interacting with the Señor de la Misericordia. He had chosen to go there, and she could feel he was comfortable, because she was comfortable as well (“It feels really good to have the *crisito* here”). She talked to him, and she experienced his response. Her own words were, “I felt as if he had told me, ‘That’s fine, go on, don’t worry, everything is going to be fine’”, which she reconstructed in the tender tones of someone who cares. He might have not responded verbally, but that was not an issue, because she could feel what he had said, she could feel his warmth and protection, and the fact that things were all right was a confirmation of his willing, benevolent reply. His positive, encouraging responses, had the effect of confirming the closeness, affection, and trust that Doña Lupe had deposited on him. When he left, she felt his absence acutely, for he had been such a noticeable, clear presence for a few days.

In short, Doña Lupe, like all the other Jarácuaro women I met, interacted with a visiting *santito* in ways that created and re-created an experiential reality of warmth, trust and comfort. In turn, her experience of closeness with him, and of intimacy in their modes of relatedness, compelled intimate and affectionate interactions in future encounters, thus constituting and maintaining relationships in and through an ongoing dynamic of perceptions, feelings, understandings and interpretations. As Doña Lupe expressed it, “one becomes attached this way”.

On the other hand, and as seen in the opening episode, the interactions of my hosts with the guests of the farewell party were very different in tone and mode. To start with, their reception was formal and corseted, for the visitors were people they did not know that well, and with whom they had very distant and sparse relations. The facial expressions of Doña Lupe and Machí were polite but somehow stern, keeping a clear communicational distance with the others<sup>42</sup>. The newcomers themselves were clearly not at ease, for they sat in the gender-segregated arrangement common at more formal, serious occasions. Then, Doña Lupe and Machí set off to “attend to” (“*atender*”) the guests, and whilst they talked and

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<sup>42</sup> Facial expressions were both an index of personal distance between people, and an active way of creating that very distance. Jarácuaro women reserved a specially stern facial cast for strangers, which acted as a physical screen between themselves and the others. I still remember how, in my first visit to the island, Doña Cecilia received me with a particularly “stony” face, which I interpreted then as anger, and which made me feel excluded and unwelcome.



laughed with Marta and Tila back at the kitchen, they returned to composed and severe demeanours as soon as they entered the *crstituto's* room. In this sense, I do not think that my hostesses' change of attitude was concomitant to the space, since it was their house. Neither was it due to a "ritualised environment", for, as explained, the encounter was actually quite unceremonious. The modulations in their behaviour and poise seemed due to their feelings of aloofness towards others -but not the *crstituto* - in that room, and also to their feelings of mistrust towards them (see Chapter 2)<sup>43</sup>. Furthermore, "attending to the guests" by, for instance, feeding them large quantities of customary food, amounted to keeping a distance with them. In doing so, Doña Lupe and, specially, her daughter-in-law Machí, were also demonstrating to their visitors that they were hard-working, proper women, who knew their duties and obligations, a demonstration accentuated by their frantic flurry of activity. If they did that, perhaps they would minimise the chances for the others to find something to criticise, and thus their self-esteem would remain intact.

Therefore, Doña Lupe and Machí, through their actions and interactions with their guests, were producing and reproducing a relationship of distance with them. These modes of relatedness had been informed by the experience of detachment in their relations with the others, which in turn was perpetuated by their actions and interactions, in their perceptions and emotions, and in their lived quotidian realities. In the visit of the *crstituto* to our household, it was the others -the neighbours, and acquaintances- who were felt as remote, as opposed to the Señor, who was experientially known to be close, warm and trustworthy.

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Part One of the present thesis has dealt with perceptions, feelings, thoughts, actions, and interactions of Jarácuaro women within quotidian contexts. It has described the texture of women's daily experience, and of their relationships and modes of relatedness with others, particularly with the *santitos*, in their day-to-day lives. This description has not attempted to be exhaustive, as this would have been an impossible task. It has merely wanted to convey a sense of the "movement of their experience", as Wikan puts it (1990: 20). In this Part, I have suggested that women of the island had different relationships and modes of relatedness with a variety of others, including the *santitos* who lived with them, the ones in the local church, and those who visited them occasionally. I have argued that the differential

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<sup>43</sup> For a similar interpretation in the context of Bali, see Wikan (1990: 75).

modes of relatedness with others were not a direct result of categorical prescriptions or ideological indoctrination. On the contrary, I saw women's relationships as the result of complex dynamic processes of perception, interaction, interpretation and experience. The particular forms of interaction with others constituted diverse experiential realities (of intimacy, of distance, of trust, etc.) which in turn informed future interactions and perceptions. In this context, then, Jarácuaro women perceived the *santitos* as agents in their everyday lives, and interacted with them in ways that created and re-created relationships of intimacy, warmth, and trust.

In Part Two, I will look at experience and relationships from a slightly different perspective. Instead of examining the broad picture, and considering how Jarácuaro women, in general, perceived and interpreted their quotidian existence, I will focus on specific women facing particular situations, and I will explore the ways in which they felt, understood, and acted upon their own experienced realities. I will thus start the next two chapters with descriptive episodes of two women's real predicaments. Using those episodes as a base, and part of their personal histories as contexts, I will explore the ways in which each woman felt and understood their own positions and circumstances, and how they acted upon them. Especial attention will be given to the inter-relational aspects of their experiences. That is, to the manners in which the women interpreted their perceptions in relation to their connections with certain others, including the *santitos*, and to the modes in which they attempted to act upon their concerns through their interactions with some of those others. By examining not general abstractions, but concrete cases of people facing lived problems, I hope to convey a sense of the dynamic processes through which a Jarácuaro woman might articulate her emotions, thoughts, and understandings, in the context of a poignant personal concern, and in interaction with relatives, friends, neighbours and *santitos*. In short, I hope to portray the complex, fluid, changeable, interactive, and shared aspects of a woman's experienced personal reality, as seen and lived from her own perspective.

**Part Two**

**EXPERIENCE AND RELATIONSHIPS IN CONTEXT**

## Chapter 4

### A RELATIONSHIP WITH SEÑOR DE CARACUARO

#### Introduction: A baby's illness, a mother's promise

March the 20th 1996, the day before Ash Wednesday. I met Marta and Don Alfredo at the bus station in Pátzcuaro. Don Alfredo was carrying a large sports bag; Marta was holding her little girl, prettily dressed in white. In the mid-day heat, groups of men and women carrying bags and babies were trying to board dusty old looking buses. There were station employees in front of the vehicles crying out their destinations: "Carácuaro! Carácuaro!". This is where our little group was going: we were on our way to see Señor de Carácuaro (Our Lord of Carácuaro<sup>1</sup>), for his annual festival at his home in Tierra Caliente, the Hot Land valley which splits the state of Michoacán in two.

Don Alfredo was a seasoned traveller to Carácuaro, as he had been going for quite a number of years. Some time ago he had made a *promesa*, a promise<sup>2</sup> to Señor de Carácuaro. Doña Lupe had related this story to me during one of our long afternoon conversations:

"Don Alfredo didn't always behave well like he does now. There was a time when he used to drink a lot, you know. One day he was very drunk, and some men grabbed him and started hitting him. He was so drunk he couldn't do anything, he couldn't defend himself. He really thought he was going to die! He was so scared, he asked the Señor de Carácuaro to help him. Don Alfredo said to him: 'Señor de Carácuaro, please, save me, rescue me, and if you save me, I promise I will go to see you there, where you live, every year of my life, for as long as I am able to!'. And, you know what?, at that moment those men just left him alone, stopped hitting him and went away, just like that. Señor de Carácuaro saved him. That's why now he has the obligation (*tiene la obligación*) to go every year. Because he made the promise (*hizo la promesa*) and now he has to fulfil the vow (*pagar*

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout this chapter, I will refer to Señor de Carácuaro (Lord of Carácuaro) also as *Nuestro Señor* (Our Lord), *el Señor* (the Lord) or simply "the Señor". People in Jarácuaro used these terms as interchangeable when referring to this particular *crisito*.

<sup>2</sup> This is frequently translated as a "vow" in the anthropological literature. See, for instance, Gross 1971.



*la manda*<sup>3</sup>). He has to do it because otherwise Our Lord, who is very miraculous, might get angry and do something bad to him!"

For Marta, this was her first journey to Carácuaro. She, like her father Don Alfredo, had made a *promesa*, a promise to Señor de Carácuaro. However, her *promesa* was linked to much more recent, but also quite traumatic, events. I will explain these in the following paragraphs.

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In November of the previous year, Marta's baby daughter, the one she was taking to Carácuaro, had become very sick. One morning, Marta had appeared in our house, with the little girl carefully wrapped in her *rebozo*. The child, usually quite an alert baby, was limp, and her eyes were full of sleep. Marta said that the infant was sick: she was weak, had a temperature, had not wanted to eat since the morning, and had vomited several times. Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo quickly diagnosed *ojito* (evil eye, also called *mal de ojo*), and, following Don Alfredo's instructions, Marta and her mother took the baby to Doña Felicitas, a local healer, to be cured<sup>4</sup>.

Marta was noticeably nervous and preoccupied. During the curing sessions, which I attended, invited by Doña Lupe, Marta sat down on a chair, clutching her baby daughter tightly, and enveloping her in her *rebozo*. She paid great attention to the healer's actions, occasionally glancing at her mother for reassurance. It seemed to me that the young woman, filled with anxiety, was depending on her mother for wisdom; Doña Lupe, obligingly, had taken control of the situation calmly and

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<sup>3</sup>*Pagar la manda* is an expression used by Jarácuaro people, and by other Mexican people (see Gimenez 1978), which literally means to "repay the vow". *Manda*, like *promesa*, is usually translated as "vow".

<sup>4</sup>Curiously, Doña Felicitas was the woman identified by Marta and her mother as the culprit for the child's *ojito*. Doña Felicitas had been at a party with us the night before, when Doña Yola had handed her Marta's daughter. Doña Felicitas had then spent quite some time hugging and kissing the little girl in an exuberant manner, much to Marta's discomfort. Thus my host's choice for treating the baby's condition surprised me greatly. However, it was explained to me that, at most times, people did not cause *ojito* intentionally. Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo thought that Doña Felicitas probably had just liked the baby too much, and had looked at her longingly (*con muchas ganas*) or too strongly (*con mucha fuerza*), which was enough to make the child ill. Because her harm had most possibly been unintentional, she posed no danger. Moreover, she was the most appropriate person to cure the child.

For other descriptions and interpretations of *mal de ojo* in Latin America, and also in Spain, see Foster, 1980; Diaz Ojeda and Sevilla, 1980; Kenny, 1980.

efficiently. Yet, after several days of unsuccessful curing sessions, herbal remedies, and so on, Doña Lupe distanced herself from her daughter's efforts. She stopped accompanying Marta in her comings and goings, although she remained visibly concerned, and eagerly awaited Marta's daily reports. I did not understand the change in Doña Lupe's attitude, but it appeared that she had lost hope about the little girl's recovery. She definitely looked dispirited and resigned, and frequently exclaimed, "Poor little baby!". One morning, after I enquired about the child's health as usual, she confided to me in a sad tone of voice:

"We made the attempt (*hicimos el intento*), we "did the appreciation" (*le hicimos el aprecio* <sup>5</sup>), and it couldn't be. If we hadn't done anything, well, that would have been a different matter. But we "did the appreciation", and it just couldn't be".

Despite her mother's apparent surrender, Marta continued desperately trying to find a cure for her daughter. My memories of that time bring me the image of a distraught, frantic Marta, attempting everything to stop the little girl's decline. She went on her own to Pátzcuaro, something that she had probably not done often in the past, and bought some medicine from a pharmacy. Yet the suspicious-looking powder she was given made the child even more ill. Then Marta and her husband Héctor took the baby to a doctor in Erongarícuaro -an arrangement that Doña Lupe found improper, for, according to her, it was the mother-in-law's responsibility to accompany the young woman. The doctor diagnosed gastric infection, and prescribed a course of penicillin. I provided the syringes and alcohol, Don Alfredo administered the injections, and everyone was relieved, thinking that this was going to be the end of the child's ailment; but it was not, and the little girl got much worse.

At this stage, I had to leave the island for a few days, as I was feeling ill myself, and needed to rest in Pátzcuaro. When, a few days later, I returned to Doña Lupe's house, I found, to my relief, that the baby had started to recover. Don Alfredo, looking cheerful for the first time in weeks, offered me an account of the events as soon as I crossed the door:

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<sup>5</sup> Jarácuaro women used the expression "*hacer el aprecio*", literally "to do the appreciation", to talk about a conscious and active effort to provide others with the attention they are due. Thus, it could refer, for instance, to the affection and interest bestowed on a relative with problems, or to the good willing disposition showed to a visitor.

"The little girl got a lot worse after you left, and Marta and Héctor took her to another doctor in Eronga. He said she had *empacho* [a gastric condition] and gave her more injections. He told Marta not to breast-feed her, and her milk stopped. And they stayed here last night, Marta, the baby and Angelo [Marta's son] because the little one was crying a lot, she was so weak! I told Marta "Feed her", but Marta said, "I can't, it stopped". She feeds her Nido powdered milk now. She was so weak before!, she was not eating, and on top of that she was just vomiting everything, even the medicine. We really thought she was going to die, she was so sick! But she is well now"

Doña Lupe also gave me her own version of events. With a big, happy smile which spoke of her relief, she told me:

"She was already dead! We thought we were losing her, she got so sick with the *ojito!* We took her to another healer to get cured: not Doña Felicitas, another one, because Doña Felicitas could not cure her. It just happens that sometimes a healer cannot cure someone. We went to Nocutzepo, to Doña Carmen, she knows how to cure these things. She told us, 'You should have brought her earlier, and not bother with the doctor', because doctors cannot cure these things. She said the baby also had *mollera*<sup>6</sup>, and "cleansed" her (*la limpió*<sup>7</sup>) as well, with plants and with an egg from our backyard"

I noticed that there was a distinctly happy atmosphere about the house now, in contrast to the unspoken tension of the previous weeks. Marta was definitely looking more relaxed. Back to her normal mischievous self, she even joked about the recent trauma she had suffered. On one particular evening, she sat at the courtyard surrounded by her family, and merrily explained: "Héctor and I had already started calling the baby girl *la difuntita* (the little dead one). We thought she was already dead!". To my surprise, everyone found this very funny. The only thing that seemed still to trouble Marta was the baby's feeding arrangements. As her milk flow had stopped, Machí, her sister-in-law, had stepped in as a wet nurse. As a result of this, the little girl had become quite attached to Machí. Every night, Marta brought her daughter to be fed by her brother's wife, and Machí played with and teased the child, who responded with obvious delight. Marta looked at them together with an expression of pained resignation, and she used to make comments that betrayed her feelings of jealousy: "Héctor says that now the girl prefers Machí to me, because Machí feeds her, and I cannot".

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<sup>6</sup> As many Jarácuaro friends explained, *mollera* happened when babies fell, and the inside of their heads moved down to the roof of their mouths, and settled there in the form of a ball. This had to be put back in place by a healer.

<sup>7</sup> *Limpiar*, or "cleansing", consists of extracting the "heat" (*calor*) from the body, since it is the heat which makes a child suffering from *ojito* feel uncomfortable and bothered.

Marta's anxiety and desperation had been quite obvious during her infant's illness. Yet it was only much later that I fully realised the extent of her fear and suffering. One sunny afternoon, in January, I was sitting in Doña Lupe's kitchen with Marta, watching her as she breast fed her little girl. Her milk had started up again, and she looked relaxed and content. We were alone. Doña Lupe had gone to Eronga with Don Alfredo to see a doctor about a skin rash. Our conversation started cautiously around the obvious topic of ailments. To my surprise, she started talking spontaneously about her daughter's illness, something she had not done so far. All throughout her ordeal, she had been distant and cautious with me, avoiding answering my probably impertinent questions about the baby's condition, and trying to conceal details of it, or of her actions, in my presence. However, she was now speaking openly, and in a calm tone of voice:

"Héctor and I thought she was going to die; we thought she was already dead. We even got her baptised in a hurry in Eronga; Father Jesús scolded us for this. He said: "You only want to baptise your children when they are sick, otherwise you don't do it until you have the money for the celebration!" [She let out a laugh, and continued]. "We first went to a doctor, but it did not work, and then we took her to another and this one did work".

I remembered Doña Lupe telling me about the healer in Nocutzepo, so, encouraged by her apparent ease towards me, I asked who she thought had cured the child. Marta looked at me suspiciously, and her expression went serious. "That doctor, the last one, I think", she said laconically. Engrossed in my own curiosity, and despite her sudden reluctance, I insisted: "But, who do you think cured her of the *ojito*?". She answered cautiously:

"Well, we did everything and we took her everywhere, because we thought: 'If she dies, at least we "did the fighting" (*hicimos la lucha*), it's not as if we have done nothing. If she dies, there's nothing we can do! We have done our obligation; if she is going to die anyway, there is nothing else we can do".

She did not seem keen on continuing the conversation, and started playing with her little girl. I was momentarily torn between respecting her privacy or satisfying my interest. Finally, after some polite chit-chat to appease her, I could not restrain my curiosity, and I ventured a shy question:

"Did you ask any *santito* for help?"  
 "Well, yes...". Silence.  
 "Which *santito*?"  
 "Señor de Carácuaro"



"And what did you promise to do? Did you promise him that you would go to see him?"

"Yes, I promised I would go to see him". She paused. "But I am not quite sure if I can go this year", she added.

In a curt but courteous tone, Marta continued to answer my subsequent queries. She explained how she had entrusted herself (*se encomendó*) to Señor de Carácuaro at the height of her child's sickness. "I asked him to cure her and, yes, at that very point she started to get better", she volunteered. In exchange, she said, she had promised to pay a visit to *Nuestro Señor* in person. Finally, she told me that the reason why she had chosen him was not because of her father, who in the past had made his promise to him as well. "It was because of myself: it was because I have faith in him".

### **Pilgrimage: sacred journey or personal visit?**

Much of the anthropological literature concerned with pilgrimage within the Catholic tradition in Latin America refers to it as a phenomenon defined by a series of fundamental features. First of all, for many ethnographers, pilgrimage is a sacred journey to a sacred place (Turner and Turner 1978; Sallnow 1987; Crumrine & Morinis 1991; Morinis 1991<sup>8</sup>). It is a journey that can be thought of as sacred because of its liminal qualities (see Turner 1974, 1978), which separate it from everyday life, and also because of its goal, namely the contact with the sacred. The destination, a shrine, or a mere site in the landscape, is a sacred location by reason of the miracles that have happened in it, or the saintly apparitions which have taken place there. As Sallnow has put it, pilgrimage shrines are places of theophanies, "where divine power has suddenly burst through" (1987: 3). Hence, according to most authors, the ultimate aim of the pilgrims' travel would be to tap, or to be exposed to, that sacred, divine power, which can then be utilised for their own benefit. The emphasis of this perspective is, therefore, on the travel and on the geographical destination, on the sacredness and separateness of both the site and the journey, on the sacred power which pilgrims seek to contact and capture, and on their instrumental utilisation of such power.

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<sup>8</sup> For a similar interpretation of pilgrimage in Mexico, in a non-Catholic context, see Myerhoff, 1974. For comparison with other Christian pilgrimages in Europe, see Dubisch 1995; Christian 1972.



Photograph 22: Marta's little girl, after her illness.

At the same time, most authors have noted that Catholic shrines in Latin America are usually dedicated to a Virgin, a saint, or a specific advocacy of Jesus Christ. When referring to these saintly figures, the anthropologists describe them as “icons”, “statues”, or “images”, and interpret them within the framework of their analytical models. They are the “sacred objects” to which the pilgrims are exposed, the “symbols” that carry the ideological meanings of the religious system, the “representations” of the divine, the “emblems” of a collectivity, the objects of the “cult” which is the ostensible reason for a pilgrimage (Sallnow 1987, 1981; Morinis 199; Turner and Turner 1978; Crumrine and Morinis 1991). Thus, the Virgin of Guadalupe (Turner and Turner 1978) or Señor de Qoyllur Rit’i (Sallnow 1987), for instance, are not considered significant as themselves. On the contrary, their importance lies in their role as signifiers of meanings -the abstract divinity, the sacred power, the religious paradigm- within a wider system. Despite being referred to as sacred or supernatural “beings”, they are thought of as mere objects, not subjects, and their agency is thus implicitly denied.

Some anthropologists have, nevertheless, explicitly pointed at a relational dimension of pilgrimage. For instance, Gross has noted that Brazilian pilgrims to *Bom Jesus da Lapa* (Good Jesus of Lapa) establish, through their vows, contractual debts with this saintly being. By ritualising their debt and its repayment through the pilgrimage, they project earthly debt-credit relationships into the sacred sphere, thus providing an ideological justification for the vertical social structure existing on the region (Gross 1971). Similarly, Morinis acknowledges the communicative purpose of vows, through which pilgrims “establish a reciprocal relationship with the divine” (1991: 14). Gimenez (1978: 13) refers also to the personal relationships of pilgrims with sacred beings, in which people display a submissive attitude towards those sacred beings in order to obtain their favour. Those authors, also deny, ultimately, the agency of saints, Virgins and Christs. Their final interpretation sees pilgrimage as a ritual performance, through which the pilgrim enacts, or effects, a metaphorical connection with an abstract “sacred sphere” or a “divinity”, represented by the saintly being. Thus, so to speak, the ritual enactment creates the illusion of a connection, and the agency of the sacred or supernatural being is, in the end, only in the pilgrim’s imagination (Gimenez 1978: 33).

Paradoxically, all those authors, in their ethnographic accounts, quote testimonies of pilgrims which suggest a somewhat different picture. In the texts,

people declare that they are “visiting”, or “going to see” a particular saint. They explain their trip to a shrine in terms of a “promise” they made to the saint there. They say that, in their past, they “requested” a favour from the holy being, and this was “granted” by the saint. The anthropologists also portray the actions of people at the shrines: we read about pilgrims who “talk to”, “gaze intently at”, or even “write notes for” a saint, a Virgin or a Christ, who “touch” them, “kiss” them, and “give” them presents (Turner and Turner 1978: passim; Sallnow 1987: 183-184, 191-192, 194; Crumrine & Morinis 1991: passim; Gimenez 1978: 111, 120; Gross 1971: 138, 142). All those words and behaviours seem to indicate that, for many Latin American pilgrims, from their own point of view, their journey might be more about a relationship with a saint than about ritual performance, communication rather than enactment, reciprocal exchange rather than unilateral gesture. In short, for people, pilgrimage might be an instance of real interaction, and not just ritual action directed at an object. An interaction that would take place between themselves and a saint, Virgin, or Christ, who would then be, in their eyes and in their experience, a true agent. So, why is there such a gap between anthropologists’ interpretations and people’s testimonies? Why is there a paradox in the representation of saintly beings in the texts? I will discuss all these important issues later in this thesis. For the moment, let me return to Marta’s story.

It could be said that the considerations noted above applied in the case of Marta and Señor de Carácuaro. For her, her visit to Señor de Carácuaro, as she herself called it, was an instance in the process of interaction with him. First of all, there had been a definite verbal and emotional communication between her and the Señor, at a time when she had desperately needed help. She had asked him for something important, and he had responded positively, since, in her own words, the little girl had immediately started to get better. In exchange for his great favour, Marta had made a promise to the Señor, to go to see him. By going to visit him in Tierra Caliente, she was just fulfilling the arrangement she had made with him, that is, doing what she had said she would do. It is very obvious that this particular interaction of Marta with Señor de Carácuaro had begun months before the journey itself, and that the travel to the shrine was only the conclusion of an ongoing communication and exchange. Furthermore, and most importantly, this genuine interaction, in each one of its moments (the verbal request, the promise, the active response, the visit) had not happened in a vacuum, isolated, or in a separated “sacred” or “religious” realm or dimension. It had happened in the context of a life-long, personal relationship that Marta had with the *santito* since before the events



that had prompted her specific request. It had also happened in connection with a real, painful predicament which had emerged in Marta's everyday life, which had affected profoundly her personal thoughts and feelings, and which was connected with her quotidian experience as a young Jarácuaro woman.

Perhaps, then, the widespread anthropological perspective of pilgrimage, which focuses exclusively on the journey, on its "sacredness", and on its "ritual" and "symbolic" connections with a "religious ideology", obscures people's real experiences in this respect, and their own perceptions and interpretations. This might mean, in short, that for them, as for Marta, the whole affair of what we would call a "pilgrimage" might be altogether about something else<sup>9</sup>. It might have been an experience about predicaments and pain, about personal relationships with real agents, and about actions and interactions with others to obtain results, all of which preceded the travel in itself, and might have surpassed its significance. This is precisely what I will try to explore further through the remainder of this chapter. In order to do that, I will look at Marta's story, focusing not particularly on her trip to Tierra Caliente, but on the contexts and events prior and leading to it. Thus, I will look at the circumstances of Marta's life at the time of her daughter's illness, at her perceptions, thoughts, and experiences surrounding the baby's ailment, and also at the attitudes and opinions of others such as her mother, at her inter-personal relationships, and most specifically at her relationship with Señor de Carácuaro, at the motivations behind her actions and interactions, and at the outcomes of her decisions and behaviours.

#### **Contexts: mother's concerns, daughter-in-law's predicaments**

The catalyst for Marta's communication with, and request to, Señor de Carácuaro had been, as seen in the introductory episode, her baby girl's sickness, the *ojito*. It is easy to comprehend that the anxiety Marta displayed at the time, and which had prompted her to turn to the Señor, was a reflection of her apprehension for her baby girl's safety. To make matters worse, I learned during her ordeal that a few years before she had lost her firstborn, a boy, to an illness<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup>In this respect, Unni Wikan has noted that "[anthropological] analyses often do not make it clear whether the symbolic interpretations and logical entailments adduced are a product of the analyst's mind or if they truly reveal templates for people's actions." (1990: 16).

<sup>10</sup>Child mortality is quite high in Jarácuaro, even at present. Almost every woman I met on the island had lost one or more babies to illness. The death of one's children was a

Several remarks by Doña Lupe made me realise that she was probably experiencing the fear, and reliving the pain and hopelessness of the previous time. However, I realised that her anguish was also linked to complex aspects of her self-image: more exactly to her own negative perceptions of herself as a mother. Let me explain this point. When the *ojito* was diagnosed, I had expected much pondering about the possible culprit, and the curing procedures to be somehow centred around this person. Yet, as soon as Doña Felicitas was identified as the unwilling perpetrator, and chosen as healer, she was hardly mentioned again, or given much consideration in conversations and discussions, and was soon abandoned as a practitioner to pursue solutions somewhere else. This situation puzzled me for a while, until I started realising that, although Doña Felicitas had been the obvious agent of harm, Marta felt herself responsible for her daughter's condition, and she was personally suffering for it. Why was that?

Throughout the little girl's illness, and throughout Marta's comings and goings in a desperate search for a cure, I had the opportunity to learn much about my female friend's experiences of mothering in Jarácuaro<sup>11</sup>. First of all, I understood from the women's explanations, attitudes, and reactions that mothers felt and were felt to be responsible for their babies overall well-being, and ultimately for their lives. Babies were treated as extensions of their mothers, and spent practically the first year of their lives wrapped inside their mother's *rebozos*, close to their bodies, feeding from their breasts. The mothers cleaned them, fed them, carried them, kept them warm, and through those actions they made sure that their children were healthy, safe, and protected. Yet, mothers, and also others, perceived that physical, material acts were not their only means for ensuring their babies well-being, and for protecting them from harm. Their attitudes, their dispositions, their willingness were very important as well<sup>12</sup>. A mother's affection, attention, concern, and worry,

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painfully common experience, and it must have had an impact on women's perceptions and behaviours as mothers. For further discussion on this subject, refer to Scheper-Hughes' study of the connection between infant mortality and mothering practices and ideas in Brazil (1992).

<sup>11</sup> Mothering and being a mother in Jarácuaro is, of course, a complex issue, which would merit a whole thesis devoted to it. However, as I cannot develop this area of women's experience in its full extent here, I have chosen to provide a brief account of some salient aspects that are relevant in Marta's case, and which became apparent during my research. Needless to say, this does not pretend to be a full, all-encompassing examination of a topic which I intend to explore further in the future.

<sup>12</sup> Let me give you an example in this respect. After a wedding that I did not attend, Doña Lupe was telling me about a drunk woman who was there with a little baby. "She was drinking and drinking beer, and she had this baby stuck to her breast. And the poor thing was sucking and sucking and nothing was coming out. No milk. She doesn't have any, that

for instance, were thought of and experienced as equally necessary for the survival and healthy growth of a child. I pictured this as a deliberate emotional output coming from the mothers, who, through it, bestowed a kind of shield over their little ones.

Given such relationship, the responsibility that Marta must have felt as a mother in the case of her daughter's illness must have been considerable. Because, since the little girl had become sick, she must have thought that this was partially her fault. Perhaps she did not take sufficient care. Her child's sickness was not just due to an infection, an *empacho*, or even Doña Felicitas. Those were dangerous, but she should have protected her baby from their impact, she should have kept her close to her, shielded from external dangers, well-wrapped under her *rebozo*. Yet she had failed somewhere, she had lost control. The little one became ill, and she could not cure her, not even nourish her from her own body. All those feelings of guilt, all those negative self-perceptions, which were very obvious in her conduct at the time, might have combined with a distinct sensation of being watched and judged by the others on the island (see Chapter 2). Her daughter's illness could be interpreted by critical neighbours as proof of her lack of care as a mother, and that must have an impact on her self-esteem.

In this context, Marta's desperate efforts to cure the child could be interpreted as deliberate actions of mothering, of active physical and material care, necessary for her child's recovery. At the same time, they could be seen as invisible instances of protection, for she might have perceived that her intense worry and anxiety had a positive effect in restoring her little one's health, and in shielding her from further damage. This is perhaps what she and Doña Lupe referred to when they used the expressions 'doing the fighting' (*hacerle la lucha*) and 'doing the appreciation' (*hacerle el aprecio*). Finally, it could be added that her interactions with others (with her mother, Doña Felicitas, her husband) were also dimensions of her fight as a mother.

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woman!". An expression of disgust accompanied her words. "She only feeds him a little tea with a spoon. She says her milk stopped. Oh, that woman! She already has many children, [she lowered her voice] she even lost one. She is always the same, all drunk and she doesn't care".

Marta was not just a young mother at the time. She was also a young daughter-in-law<sup>13</sup>. Like almost all women of her age in Jarácuaro, she was married, and lived at her husband's parental house, as was customary on the island (cf. Castilleja Gonzalez 1995: 25)<sup>14</sup>. Like the majority of young married women living with in-laws, she was responsible not only for the care of her own spouse and children (Berenice, Angelo and the little girl), but also for a great deal of the household's domestic chores. As a wife, she was expected to obey and attend to her husband Héctor, but as a young daughter-in-law, she was also expected to show a submissive attitude towards her husband's parents, in this case, the widow Doña Yola. In fact, ever since she had left her parents' house ten years before, she had been under the strict control and supervision of her mother-in-law. She could visit Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo, and indeed she did almost on a daily basis (see Chapter 3). However, she did not belong with them anymore, and it was her mother-in-law, Doña Yola, who now granted permissions and made decisions about her life. This arrangement was not because Marta's husband was absent or weak, nor because Doña Yola was a widow, but because, in Jarácuaro, it was mothers-in-law who took charge of the young married women, their son's wives, when they came into their houses.

In fact, the relationship a daughter-in-law enjoyed with her mother-in-law is one of the most important and defining of her life. Some mothers-in-law, like Doña Carlota (see Chapter 3) exerted a control over their young daughters-in-law at times taxing, tyrannical, and excessive. Yet other mothers-in-law, such as Doña Lupe, were more benevolent, and trained their young charges in their duties with relative patience and compassion. At first, I was surprised by the docility that daughters-in-law displayed towards their not always kind mothers-in-law, and I wondered why the young women did not rebel against their lot. After spending some time on the island, and after hundreds of conversations on the topic with my female friends, I realised that there was a mutual and reciprocal benefit in this, to

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<sup>13</sup> Again, the topic of marriage on the island could be the subject of a whole thesis on its own. Indeed, the transition from daughter to daughter-in-law is one of the most traumatic and defining in the life of a Jarácuaro woman. However, as there is no space here to explore the subject in all its extent, I will limit myself to a few pointers which would facilitate the comprehension of Marta's specific predicament. A further discussion will be published in a separate paper.

<sup>14</sup> Although this was the most common and desirable arrangement for newlyweds, it was not a strict "rule", and there was a great deal of flexibility. In the past, it might have been difficult to escape this tradition, but nowadays, many young women were choosing to set house apart, to live in their own natal houses, or to move with other affines, like Marielena.



me, paradoxical relationship. The mothers-in-law, of course, obtained release from their relentless domestic obligations, gained access to a freer lifestyle, and became respected and in charge of things<sup>15</sup>. Daughters-in-law, on the other hand, by abiding to the older women's rule, and by behaving deferentially and working hard, perceived themselves and were perceived by others as "doing the right thing". In this sense, through the relationship, their attitude and their work, they experienced themselves as "proper women" by Jarácuaro standards.

It was, however, very difficult for most daughters-in-law to maintain a balance between their perceptions of doing things right and their experience of being exploited, constrained, and badly treated. Usually the young wives felt they had little influence and received little respect in their in-laws household. Most young brides I spoke to (and many older women as well) resented enormously the lack of consideration on the part of co-resident sisters and brothers-in-law, and the inordinate amounts of work expected from them. Above all, they felt angry about the abuse of their position (almost as a delayed, displaced revenge) on the part of their mothers-in-law. The relationship of daughters-in-law with their mothers-in-law deteriorated under the strain and tension of the daily tugs-of-war between the latter's demands and the former's self-esteem. It was thus not surprising that the main aspiration of my young married female friends was, as they explained to me, to get enough money to "set their own house apart" (*para ponerse aparte*) with their husbands and children<sup>16</sup>.

In Marta's case I cannot know for sure how tense her relationship with Doña Yola was, as this was not something that she would have discussed directly with me. However, I detected signs of it having reached some sort of critical point at the time of the incident related in this chapter. Doña Lupe told me in confidence that there had been episodes of domestic violence towards Marta in the past: a drunk Héctor had hit her on more than one occasion. Doña Lupe, and presumably Marta as well, held Doña Yola responsible for this. "She should have controlled her son", she said, in a critical tone of voice. On many occasions I overheard Marta talking to her mother about arguments and quarrels with her mother-in-law. She showed a

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<sup>15</sup> This is just a simplified outline of this situation. For a more extended discussion on this issue, see Chapter 5.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that many of the issues involved in the relationships between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law in Jarácuaro have also been noted in the same type of relationships among women in other parts of the world. For examples about India, see Jeffery and Jeffery 1996; about Malaysia, see Carsten 1997: 75; about China, see Wolf 1968.

very different behaviour in front of her. At the parties in our house, Marta drank beer and joked with the rest of the company until Doña Yola turned up; at that moment, she used to give up her beer, grabbed her baby daughter, and sat down quietly at one corner, suddenly transformed from prominent daughter into secondary, subservient daughter-in-law.

Most significantly, Doña Yola had been heavily involved in the episode of Marta's daughter's illness. First, during a festive reunion at Doña Cecilia's, Doña Yola had handed the baby girl to Doña Felicitas. Marta had been visibly unhappy about this, but she could not oppose her mother-in-law's decision. It was the following day when she discovered that her baby was suffering from *ojito*. Then, Doña Yola had shown very little worry throughout the child's illness. She never once came to our house with Marta and the little girl, and when she did come, it was alone, to extend an invitation to Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo for a wedding. She had obviously neglected her obligations as mother-in-law in that situation, since, as Doña Lupe noted, it should have been her, and not Héctor, who accompanied Marta in her desperate comings and goings. In addition to this, Marta had already been living for ten years in Héctor's parental house, serving him, his mother, and his sister and younger brothers, working relentlessly, bringing up her children, and still being treated as the lowly daughter-in-law. It is not difficult to imagine that she might have felt it was time for her to move on<sup>17</sup>.

### Contexts: learning to relate to Señor de Carácuaro

I mentioned above that Marta's interaction with Señor de Carácuaro at the time of her little girl's illness had not taken place in a vacuum; for Marta had had a relationship with *el Señor* throughout her life. So, what was this relationship? How had it started and developed?<sup>18</sup>

Señor de Carácuaro was a *crístito* who lived in Tierra Caliente, about two hundred kilometres south of the Pátzcuaro area. The Señor became known in

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<sup>17</sup> When I returned to the island three years after my fieldwork, she had, indeed, moved to a new house with her husband, children and new baby.

<sup>18</sup> The following account is a reconstruction of various aspects of this ongoing bond, assembled from conversations with Marta and her relatives, from the observations of various other persons, and from perceptions based on my own familiarity with the household's and island's life. Although I did not collect her life history as such, I have made sure that every detail here was resonant with things that I heard, was told, or saw in the house.

Jarácuaro a few generations ago, when a man from the island visited his shrine in the village of Carácuaro in the 1920's or 1930's. Having become very attached to the *santito*, and realising he was very miraculous, this man brought a *vicario*, a representative of the same name, to Jarácuaro. This representative was one of the *crístitos* who went around visiting households on the island, to whom I referred in Chapter 3<sup>19</sup>. Thus Señor de Carácuaro had been present and well established in Jarácuaro's life at the time Marta was growing up there.

During her childhood, Marta must have learnt about him, about his kindness and his abilities, at home, through the lively stories she heard from Doña Cecilia and Don Alfredo, both of whom used to visit him as children with their respective grandparents. She must have seen cards and paintings of him on the house's walls, brought by those who had been there, and mixed with the photographs of absent relatives. She probably related to him in a physical mode and as a physical being (see Chapters 1 and 2). For instance, she might have worn around her neck the necklaces made of bits of his garments, which Don Alfredo used to bring back, and touched the bits of cotton and blessed water that had been rubbed on his body<sup>20</sup>. She must also have heard many times her mother's vivid descriptions of his appearance:

"He is very thin, not plump like Señor de Araró, dark-skinned, and with long hair. He wears a cloth wrapped around his hips, like a skirt, and they change this all the time, and put a new one on him".

In short, Marta's own history had been interwoven with that of Señor de Carácuaro throughout her early life. He had become a known, if not seen, benevolent presence, through the stories of close relatives. And he had been physically, sensorially experienced, however vaguely, through images, evocative descriptions, and material objects.

Growing up on the island, Señor de Carácuaro must have been constantly at the background of Marta's day-to-day existence, briefly seen on a picture, or remembered in a comment, yet not really given much thought. She could have been, and probably was, aware of his representative's movements around the village. Now and then, her contacts with him became closer and more intense: she must have, for instance, prayed to him following her mother's example and advice. For a

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<sup>19</sup> Although the Señor de Carácuaro and this itinerant *crístito* bore the same name, people usually spoke of and treated the visiting *crístito* as a distinct *santito*.

<sup>20</sup> Señor de Carácuaro was bathed by his carers in blessed water and dried with cotton. Those items were the sold to the people who went to visit him at the shrine.

few weeks every year, the *crístito* became intensely present in everyone's thoughts and conversations, since many people from the island went to his annual festival in Carácuaro. I saw Marta participating in this atmosphere of anticipation and excitement, just like everybody else. Then, as she explained to me, once every four years his representative paid a visit to her in-laws' house. It could then be said that her relationship with the Señor, like many other relationships in her life, was ongoing and continuous, but remained dormant for most of the time. Yet, as in other cases, it was kept alive through little instances of deliberate and voluntary interaction. In Doña Lupe's own words, these active approaches were meant to "let him know that we still remember him" ("*así el ya sabe que nos acordamos de él*"), and hence constituted the experience of relatedness between Marta and the *santito*, as seen in Chapter 3.

Later on in her life, it was her parents' personal experiences with the *crístito* what made her fully aware of his goodness and miraculous abilities, and more emotionally attached to him. Don Alfredo's story of his promise to the Señor was related at the beginning of this chapter. Year after year, Marta saw him departing to Tierra Caliente, for his annual promised meeting with the *santito*<sup>21</sup>. Doña Lupe, in turn, had also experienced in her own life the help of this *crístito* in a time of trouble. She had only gone to see him once, but she had very vivid memories of her visit, and used to talk about it often. This is how she told her story:

"Señor de Carácuaro saved me once as well. It was the time I drowned. I was in this canoe crossing the lake towards Arócutin, taking food for Don Alfredo, who was working in the fields. Marta, her husband Héctor, and I were in the canoe. Then the canoe just turned round and we fell into the water. I felt as though my feet were being pulled down, like this! [She made a gesture with her hands]. Marta and Héctor can swim, so they reached the shore. I was in the water. I went down once, then got back up, then down again, then up, and the third time I went down, I implored to Señor de Carácuaro. I said: 'Señor de Carácuaro, I don't know you, and you're so far away! But save me!, and I promise I will go to meet you, I will 'do the fighting' (*haré la lucha*) to go there where you are, to meet you.' And then, at that moment, I came to the surface, and didn't go back down again! I was just floating and floating [...] Before this happened, I had heard about the Señor, from my mum and Don Alfredo, and I had always wanted to go on a visit there, but I had never gone. When I went there to fulfil my vow (*a pagar la manda*), I felt very nice inside, I cried with the emotion of being there, and I told the Señor, 'My Lord, here I am, I have come to see you, as I said I would (*así como te dije*). You have made it possible for me to come, and here I am, at last I have met you, and have seen where you live (*por fin te pude conocer, y conocer aquí donde tú vives*)'".

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<sup>21</sup> In fact, after the episode of her baby illness, when the time came for her own promised visit, she made the trip with her father.



Therefore Marta, as a young adult, learned of and witnessed the dangerous episodes in both her parents' lives. Most importantly, she was told, as I was, of the genuine interaction which had taken place between each parent and Señor de Carácuaro on those occasions, and which had made such a great difference. They explained how they had called for him, how they had spoken to him with supplicating words, which they rendered in pleading tones. They took for granted that the *santito* had heard them, since he responded swiftly with good actions. They had felt and still felt his active care. In gratefulness, and as an act of voluntary reciprocity in the context of their own relationships with the Señor, Doña Lupe and Don Alfredo had promised to go to see him. They both had fulfilled their pledge, and thus had met the *crístico* in person. Encountering him in his place had been, according to Doña Lupe, a very emotional, significant moment. Moreover, Marta had probably been instructed in the details of how to talk to the Señor, as I had been patiently coached myself in this matter. For instance, prior to my own visit to Señor de Carácuaro, Doña Lupe had directed:

“When you get to the church, talk to him, and ask him to help you with your health<sup>22</sup>. You only have to walk in and greet him. Then tell him, ‘Señor, I am here, I came to see you, I came all this way to see you and say hello’. After that, ask him to help you and protect you, so that you don’t get sick anymore, so that you keep well”

Furthermore, Señor de Carácuaro's benevolence, as experienced by her parents in their bodies and their lives, must have also been clearly perceived and understood by Marta, for her beloved ones had been rescued from certain danger. In this sense, Marta's trust in the Señor, her confidence in his abilities and willingness, her warmth and affection for him, had not been inculcated through plain ideological indoctrination. Her perception of him as good and reliable had grown as the result of a process of increasing interaction and vicarious experience<sup>23</sup>. Trust, confidence, warmth, were not an *a priori* quality of any relationship with the *crístico*, but emerged in the progressive knowledge of and interaction with him, as experiential realities. She had come to know that the Señor was good, and he had proved it over and over, through his intervention in her relatives' existences. She felt confidence

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<sup>22</sup> My trip to Tierra Caliente took place just after I had been seriously ill again with recurrent typhoid fever; hence Doña Lupe's references to my health.

<sup>23</sup> In a similar way, Christian notes that, in Spain, many adults are linked by “special relationship[s] to one sacred figure that they feel particularly close to” (1972: 130). He argues that the choice of figure is informed by the history and circumstances of each person, and that the relationship develops through time.

and affection towards him; she had, as she had said, her own “faith” in him (I will return to the point of faith later in this chapter). It was in this context that Marta requested Señor de Carácuaro’s help in a difficult moment of her own life.

### “Vow” as action, “vow” as interaction

As explained in the introduction to this chapter, Marta confided to me that she had turned to Señor de Carácuaro at the height of her daughter’s illness, when she had lost almost all hope for the baby’s recovery. She had asked him to cure the child and, in exchange, she had promised him she would go to visit him in his own church at Tierra Caliente, undertaking the strenuous and dangerous four-hour trip through the arid mountains at the centre of Michoacán<sup>24</sup>. The promise she made is usually referred to in the anthropological literature as a “vow”.

Vows are curiously neglected aspects in the ethnographic texts devoted to pilgrimages in Latin America (Turner and Turner 1978; Sallnow 1987; Crumrine & Morinis 1991; Gimenez 1978; Gross 1971)<sup>25</sup>. Whilst vows (called *promesas* or *mandas* by Spanish-speaking people) are often mentioned by pilgrims as the main reason for their visits to saints, anthropologists do not seem to credit them with much significance. Vows are usually seen as minor, anecdotal incidents in the process of pilgrimage as a whole. When they are given some attention it is to highlight the instrumentality of pilgrimage. For instance, Gross says that a “vow is a private *contract* between a man and a Saint” (1971: 142; emphasis mine). This perspective of vows as instances of formalised exchange has also been echoed by other ethnographers who have not specifically focused on pilgrimages (for examples in Mexico, see Carrasco 1952: 24, 42; Foster 1972: 225, 230-236; Norget 1993: 53,55; Chiñas 1973: 69, 77; Brandes 1988: 63; in Ecuador, Bourque 1993b: 185). Although these authors acknowledge the reciprocity involved in these arrangements, much of their emphasis falls on the commercial, utilitarian dimensions of the operation. That is, they see it as people obtaining an advantage from saintly beings, and paying for it in the currency of a particular material action. The exchange involved in a vow is generally seen as bounded and finite, restricted to the

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<sup>24</sup>This trip was usually done by bus, but those tended to be old, uncomfortable, and unsafe vehicles, filled to the brim with travellers. In addition to this, the remote, winding roads were infested with bandits, who took advantage of the arrival of pilgrims to their impoverished region.

<sup>25</sup>This is also usually the case in works about Christian pilgrimages in other parts of the world. For examples, see Dubisch (1995), Eade and Sallnow (1991), Christian (1972).

transaction in itself (cf. Foster 1972: 225). This understanding of vows is probably linked to the analytical focus on pilgrimage as a journey, and also to the understanding of pilgrimages as instrumental devices used by people to tap “sacred” or “divine” power. In the end, since saintly beings are not generally considered real agents by many scholars, the vow paradoxically loses its reciprocal and relational qualities, to be finally interpreted as a unilateral “ritual” action on the part of the pilgrim. It is just an act of devotion, projected at an abstract source of “supernatural” power, represented by the holy object.

I do not think that Marta’s promise to Señor de Carácuaro could be reduced to the parameters just mentioned, for it was more complex, more personal, more emotionally rich, and more interactive and communicative than that. Of course her request and her offering had an element of transactional exchange. Yet, as explained above, these had occurred in the context of her ongoing, long-term, personal relationship with the Señor, which transcended a mere mercantilist operation. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, there was a certain instrumental aspect in the reciprocity of Jarácuaro people’s relationships with all others, including *santitos*; but what was important in most cases was the continuation of the bond, not the punctual material exchange. Most importantly, her promise had not been made as a unilateral action directed at an object, but it was, above all, a real interaction with a real, experienced and acknowledged, agent.

So, what was the significance of Marta’s vow (or, as everyone called it in Jarácuaro, her “promise”, “*promesa*”), in the particular episode of her daughter’s illness? How did she perceive and experience her exchange with the Señor?

First of all, Marta’s promise could be understood as an action. Not as a “symbolic” or “ritual” action, but as a real, active motion on her part at two different levels. On the one hand, not only her promise, but her initial petition, her receptive attitude, and her pledge to do something in exchange for the granted favour, were deliberate acts on her part which constituted and maintained a relationship with the *crístico*. This particular contact was a just an intentional, closer, and more involved approach, which activated their otherwise dormant mode of relatedness. As mentioned in Chapter 3, this was a common form of dealing not only with *santitos*, but also with some relatives and friends. Hence, her subsequent visit to the Señor in Tierra Caliente could also be seen as another one of this

voluntary, willing approaches, by which she let the *crístito* know that she still “remembered him” and trusted him.

On the other hand, Marta’s desperate request, her willing promise, and, in general, her communication with the Señor at the moment of her baby’s ailment, were conscious acts of mothering on her part. As said before, she felt that her active care was needed to protect her child and guarantee her recovery. Thus she had taken action by consulting her parents and enlisting Doña Felicitas’ services; by travelling to Pátzcuaro and Erongarícuaro; by attending Doña Carmen’s practice. She had also taken invisible action by worrying, caring, fretting, and keeping a watchful eye on her little girl all throughout her ordeal. When those actions had not been sufficient, she took another step: to talk to Señor de Carácuaro, to ask him for his kind help, and to offer something valuable in exchange. The process of her “vow” could thus be seen as a continuation of her actions to save her daughter from a sure death. It was part of “doing the fighting”. Moreover, contacting the Señor had not been such an extraordinary move on her part, not just a “religious” or “devotional” action, for all Jarácuaro mothers I met, including herself, regularly requested the help of the *santitos* for the general safekeeping of their children in their day-to-day lives<sup>26</sup>.

Finally, Marta’s request and promise could be seen as an instance of dynamic interaction between her and Señor de Carácuaro. Within the context of their ongoing, warm, trusting relationship, at a time when she had been desperate and hopeless, she approached him and talked to him as she talked to others, using words, as her mother had taught her to do. The words had been a physical, sensorial link that had connected her to the Señor, wherever he was. She had not heard a verbal reply, or at least she did not state this to me; but she had experienced his generous, active response, since her daughter had started to

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<sup>26</sup> Mothers on the island frequently talked to the *santitos* in their houses, and often dropped in at the church to see other *santitos*, about their children’s health and well-being. They entrusted their babies and infants to the *virgencitas* and *crístitos* in the church by passing them underneath their cloaks (see Chapter 2). Many times, I saw my friend Marielena rubbing her little son against a *virgencita*’s clothes so that he would recover from an ailment. On one occasion, on leaving a church in a nearby village, I asked Marielena whether she had asked for something from the Señor who lived there. She said: “I prayed for my children, so that they are well, so that they grow up well...One, as a mother, almost always prays for the children, so that they do not get sick. Because, how laborious it is to “grow up” kids! [*crecerlos*; the Spanish intransitive verb is used in an unusual transitive form]. As a mother, one is always worrying, it is the mother who gets all the work and the responsibility. You’ll see when you have children yourself!”



recuperate immediately afterwards<sup>27</sup>. She had then known that he had heard. Not only that, but she had then also confirmed that he cared, for he had granted the great favour that she had requested. Listening to her own account, and to those of Doña Lupe, Don Alfredo, Doña Hermila, and others who had had similar communications with Señor de Carácuaro, I realised how close, how intimate, how sensorial, how real their experience of contact had been<sup>28</sup>. For Marta, as for the others, it had been a two-way communication between herself and the *crisito*. The reality of this interaction was further confirmed through her subsequent visit to the Señor at his home in Tierra Caliente, for there, their encounter was truly close and physical. In Carácuaro, Marta talked to him looking at his face, touched his body and his clothes, and was able to thank him in person for his previous generosity. And she could feel, she told me, how he knew of her arrival, how he recognised her, and how he acknowledged her effort to be there honouring her word.

In short, Marta's request and promise had been instances of real interaction with Señor de Carácuaro. She had started a communication, experienced its clear, visible effects, and thus known within herself that what was taking place was a true exchange. As far as she was concerned, and in her own perception and understandings, she was not just performing a "ritual", not talking to a "symbolic object", not "tapping sacred power". She was talking, asking, explaining, and promising to an agent who, in turn, heard, judged and responded in an active, comprehensible manner. For Marta, Señor de Carácuaro's agency, his receptivity, readiness, actions, expectations, were experientially real and factually proven. Hence, because of this real interaction that had taken place with the *crisito*, in the context of all the others which had happened before, Marta apprehended and confirmed the mutual and reciprocal dynamic of their relationship, its ongoing flow, based on both their willingness and effort, and the kind, generous, and trustworthy disposition of the Señor. Her perceptions, in turn, would inform the way in which she would continue to relate to him in the future. Moreover, her perceptions would constitute the experiential reality within which their encounters would be felt and interpreted.

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<sup>27</sup> Christian (1972: 118) says that, in the Spanish Valley of Nansa, people pray to saints and seek their response in the form of an action.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis (1986: 429-430) describes similar sensorial experiences of the presence of spirits among Gnao people in New Guinea.

### Power, ability, trust and faith

In the previous paragraphs I have explored the active and interactive aspects of Marta's relationship with Señor de Carácuaro. I have explained that, for Marta's viewpoint, her relatedness with the Señor was based on her experience of their reciprocal agency. It can be added that, as far as the modes of connectedness were concerned, Marta related to the *crisito* in much the same way she did with many significant others in her life. That is, she talked to them, expected a response, offered something in exchange, visited them, thought of them, and so on. However, what those interpretations have not explained so far is why she turned to Señor de Carácuaro, and not to any other *santito*, in this particular crisis. Or why, whilst she interacted with various persons in order to obtain a cure for her daughter, it was the Señor whom she called upon in desperation, and who delivered success. Could it be said that there was something qualitatively or categorically different about this *crisito*? Was he perceived, after all, as being invested with a special "sacred" or "supernatural" power?

Many scholars working in Latin America have argued that there is a distinct quality that makes a saint, the Virgin, or Jesus Christ a special being: his or her 'supernatural' or 'sacred' powers (in Mexico, Turner & Turner 1978; Carrasco 1952; Vogt 1990 [1970]; Brandes 1988; Gimenez 1978; Foster 1972; in other parts of Latin America, Gudeman 1976; Sallnow 1987)<sup>29</sup>. In fact, pilgrimage is generally defined in relation to these otherworldly powers; and people are said to travel to shrines to tap this sacred power from the holy beings themselves, or from the site where they have appeared. Furthermore, for many of these authors, this power is not even an intrinsic characteristic of saints, the Virgin, or even Jesus Christ, since they are only emissaries of the divinity and thus vessels of divine, sacred force (Sallnow 1987; Turner & Turner 1978; Morinis 1991).

In Jarácuaro, however, things seemed to be rather different. First of all, people in general did not embark upon theological considerations about the figures of Christ, the Virgin or any saint, and thus comments on the "sacredness" or "divine nature" of the *santitos* were largely irrelevant. *Santitos* were good, trustworthy, kind, generous, they helped you, but they were not referred to as "sacred" or "divine". I particularly remember a conversation with Doña Lupe, in

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<sup>29</sup> See also Dubisch (1995) for an example about Christianity in an European context.

which I asked her whether she thought Jesus Christ was the same as *diosito* (the affectionate term for God). She uttered an uneasy “ahha?”, looked at me with suspicion, and then asked back, “Why do you say that? Do you think he is not?”. I realised then that she did not have an answer for my question, which she probably found incongruous and strange. She was just wanting to hear my opinion first, so that she could then agree with whatever I said.

Men and women of Jarácuaro did, nevertheless, refer to the miracles of Señor de Carácuaro. Marta, Doña Lupe, Don Alfredo, and all others with whom I spoke about the *crístico* said to me: “he is miraculous” (*es muy milagroso*). Yet, significantly, they never referred to his miraculous capacity as ‘power’ or qualified the Señor in relation to this; they never said “*tiene poderes*” (“he has powers”) or “*es poderoso*” (“he is powerful”). Amongst the expressions they used when talking about him were “he is good for curing” (“*es bueno puru curar*”), “he sure can” (“*él sí puede*”), “he listens to you” (“*él te escucha*”), or “he really helps you” (“*él sí que le ayuda a uno*”). Thus one important thing that they seemed to appreciate in him was his incommensurable capacity or ability to do things and achieve results (cf. Norget 1993: 53). This is, in fact, how the verb “*poder*” translates into English. My friends and acquaintances also perceived that others around them had capacities or abilities. Doctors, for instance, could cure certain types of illness but not others, like *ojito* (as Doña Lupe said, “*ellos no pueden*”); parents can help children, like Marta’s parents assisted her (“*mis papas sí me ayudan*”); some healers, like Doña Carmen, are good for specific things (“*ella es buena puru curar ojito*”). More pertinently, people perceive that certain others can do special things that would qualify, according to the literature, as “supernatural”, and thus the domain of saints. Doña Felicitas, the healer, once told a very significant story: one of her customers had brought to her a very small baby to be cured of a grave ailment. When Doña Felicitas had expressed doubts about her own capacity to cure such a small child, the mother retorted: “Yes you can! You cure everything, I don’t know how you do it! Perhaps you are a *santita*...”. It could be said, then, that people perceived and felt abilities and capacities in themselves and in others, although those varied greatly from person to person. As they explained it, it was more a matter of degree than one of qualitative difference. At the top of the range of agents with capacities were the *santitos*, *virgencitas*, and *crísticos*, and most particularly some of them, like Virgencita de la Salud, Virgencita de Guadalupe, Señor de la Misericordia, and Señor de Carácuaro. Therefore, what the ethnographer might have called “power” could be understood, in the context of Jarácuaro, and with reference to the *crístico*, as a capacity or an

ability. A capacity which, according to people, was enormous and unfailing in his case. In short, his abilities did not appear to imply a "sacred" or "divine" nature, but were shared, albeit in an infinite lesser degree and at varying levels, by men and women on the island and outside it. The fact that some of such capacities were invisible, and perhaps difficult to apprehend, did not make them "supernatural" in people's experience. Thus it could be speculated that Marta turned to Señor de Carácuaro because of his great capacities, but that she had not thought of those capacities as categorically different from those of Doña Carmen, for instance, just much more bigger and intense. In fact, it could be said that the healing had been a combined effort and a cumulative process resulting from the combination of the abilities of several people: Doña Felicitas, the doctors, Doña Carmen, the Señor, and herself.

Another important quality that Jarácuaro people, and particularly women like Marta and Doña Lupe, appreciated in Señor de Carácuaro was his availability and his willingness. When Marta turned to her relatives, to healers, and to doctors for help, she discovered that some of them were not that willing or available to lend a hand. Doña Lupe started by helping wholeheartedly with her granddaughter's illness, but then she gave up, and distanced herself from the problem. The pharmacist in Pátzcuaro had been unhelpful and rude. The *mestizo*<sup>30</sup> doctors in Erongarícuaro had treated her with the contempt they felt Indians deserved. Most significantly, her own mother-in-law Doña Yola, the person who should have been involved in her predicament from beginning to end, showed little interest, in such an obvious manner that even Doña Lupe noticed it. Furthermore, Marta probably did not trust most of her relatives or neighbours in this matter, for she felt they could, and would, be critical (see Chapter 2). Worst of all, they could even spread gossip about her baby's illness, ruining her reputation as a mother, and making her feel inadequate and guilty. On the other hand, she could always trust Señor de Carácuaro. She knew he had listened to her parents, and many other people. She knew he had responded to their pleas benevolently and swiftly. Moreover, she knew that any dealings with him would be confidential, and the issue would remain a personal matter between him and herself. In this, she followed her mother Doña Lupe who used to comment: "I always prefer to talk to the *santitos*. Instead of going

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<sup>30</sup> *Mestizo* is the word used in Mexico to refer to people of mixed Indian and European descent. *Mestizo* people usually distance themselves ostentatiously from Indian culture, and embrace Western lifestyles as a form of separating themselves from those whom they perceive as "backward".



around telling people about my problems, I'd much rather just tell a *santito* so that they help me; and they do help you!". In short, Marta had perceptual and experiential proof not only of the Señor's capacity to help people in great trouble, but also of his good disposition, his kindness and his receptivity towards those in peril and those who suffered. Furthermore, she had experienced his warmth and gentle protection all throughout her life.

Marta was thus aware that Señor de Carácuaro had been unfailingly reliable and trustworthy, and a source of consolation to many of her relatives and acquaintances when they had needed his help. Yet she also knew that, as in their cases, she needed to reciprocate his favours. This was not just a matter of settling an account, but a matter of showing willingness and making a voluntary effort to continue the personal relationship she had with him. What could she offer to someone like a *cristito*? She had displayed care towards him in the past. She had been mindful and respectful, and had remembered him now and then. Yet, in this particular, special, more important case, she also needed to give him her faith. Faith was mentioned often in Jarácuaro in connection with *santitos*. Marta, for instance, had referred to her "own faith" in Señor de Carácuaro. Doña Lupe once told me, speaking of *santitos* in general: "One has faith in them, isn't that right? If you have faith in them, that's how they really help you. If you don't have faith, they know it. That's why you have to have faith; if you don't, what's left?". Don Alfredo recounted the following story before we departed to Carácuaro:

"When you go to Carácuaro, you have to go with faith. Many people don't go there with faith, they don't go there for the right reasons, they don't go to visit the *Cristito* or to repay a vow. They just go there to have fun and they don't go to see *el Señor* first of all. Well, once I heard of this young man who was there with a friend, and they were swimming in the river, jumping in and laughing. Then this young man jumps into the water and... he doesn't come back up! His friend jumped into the water and looked for him. Finally, he brought him up to the surface: he was dead. He had hit his head against a rock. And the people there said that it had been *el Señor* who had punished him, because he knows you are there and if he doesn't see you in the church, he gets angry and punishes you. That's why you have to go and see the Señor first!"

In this way, from all the accounts I heard in Jarácuaro, from all the explanations that my friends gave, and from their use of the word in their conversations, I started to understand what they meant by "faith". It appeared to me it was something complex, that had several dimensions. For instance, in the case of Marta, it related to her trust in the well-proven capacities of the Señor de

Carácuaro (cf. Bourque 1993b: 185). It also involved respecting him and treating him as the good, generous, reliable, yet potentially stern and unforgiving *santito* that she knew he could be. Finally it was about her having an active, positive disposition towards him<sup>31</sup>. This active disposition translated in her attitude of willingness to interact with the Señor in a certain reciprocal way, and to accept her part of the responsibility in the dynamics of their mutual relationship. In this sense, faith for Marta involved actively giving something to the Señor: if she had not actively had her “own faith”, if she had been doubtful, flippant, or had not completed her part of the bargain, the Señor might have not heard her, might have simply ignored her, or might have even got angry for her lack of recognition. Moreover, as in the case of abilities or capacities, faith was not understood in Jarácuaro as something exclusive to the interactions with *santitos*, for people reported having faith in a variety of agents in other contexts and interactions. For instance, Tila explained to me that she had faith in a certain doctor, and also in certain medicines her children had been prescribed. In short, it could be said that neither Marta nor others on the island perceived faith as a passive “religious attitude” or “devoted disposition” pertaining “the sacred”. Faith was an active mode of relatedness with others, which was more common in the relationships with *santitos*, but by no means restricted to them. Marta’s faith in Señor de Carácuaro, that is, her trust in him, willingness to interact with him, and respect to the reciprocity of the relationship, had been her active contributions to the dynamics of the relationship, and to the continuity of their bond. Furthermore, Marta’s faith had been, in part, what she had exchanged in her interaction with the *cristito*, for when she had offered her own faith, together with her promise, the *santito* had offered her child’s cure in return. Most importantly, both her faith and her trust in Señor de Carácuaro were not unilateral dispositions, born of ideological indoctrination and directed at an object. They were real experiences emerging from the dynamic of her reciprocal relationship with an agent, and they would, in turn, inform the development of her relationship with the Señor.

#### **A final note: self-perception, self-esteem and change**

For Marta, and perhaps for some of her closest relatives who knew about her promise, the most evident outcome of her close involvement with Señor de

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<sup>31</sup> In a similar way, Christian points out that Spanish people of Nansa consider that faith and trust are “the most efficacious position[s] to take” in their communications with saints (1972: 118)

Carácuaro was her daughter's recovery. Thanks to their relationship, to her request, faith, and promise, and to his generous, efficient intervention, the little girl was rescued from death's door, and was given a chance to continue living and growing. Yet, Marta's close and punctual association with the Señor, shaped by this particular interaction with him, might have had other consequences. From observing Marta's dealings with others around her, from participating in conversations in which she was involved, and from the clarifications that Doña Lupe volunteered, I realised that her attitudes and behaviours, her actions, her bearings, and, above all, her inter-relations with others, had undergone a subtle, yet noticeable change. She was more assertive and self-confident when she spoke to her parents and other close relatives that she saw often. She became less hostile towards me, and started including me in her activities and conversations. Above all, she became more autonomous with respect to her mother-in-law, and started spending much more time in our house, in what I thought was quite a defiant stance. All her newly self-assured attitudes became even more appreciable after she returned from her promised visit to Señor de Carácuaro. So, what had happened?

It could be speculated that Marta involvement with the Señor had helped her change her self-perception. She had had a relationship with him throughout all her life, but this had been vague, if deferential and affectionate. Her daughter's illness had provided the first occasion for her to ask for a very important favour from the *crisito*. He had helped her parents in the past, and she knew he was kind, and trustworthy but, what if he did not help her? Señor de Carácuaro was good, loved and well-respected by many people from Jarácuaro, and had enormous, benevolent abilities. Yet, he was also capable, as Don Alfredo had confirmed, of punishing or ignoring those who were not considerate with him, did not have the right attitude, or did not deserve his assistance. Had he not aided her, Marta could have questioned whether there was something wrong with her. However, Señor de Carácuaro had concerned himself with her suffering, had entered into a close interaction with her, and had cured the little girl in good will. He had helped her, and, later on, during her visit to him, she had sensed his contentment with seeing her there. Her special connection with the Señor might have made her feel that she was worth of his attention and care: she deserved it. This must have help to boost her self-esteem, which had been bruised by the events surrounding the baby's illness, as mentioned before. Marta had "done the fighting" to save her daughter, and, through requesting and obtaining the help of such a respected and benevolent *crisito*, the child had recovered.

Marta might have, thus, perceived that she had secured her little girl's survival and recuperation through her own actions and interactions. Her own central participation in the whole affair could have improved her confidence in her own abilities and value, both as a person and as a mother. This, in turn, must have had an effect on her relationships with others. For instance, the realisation of her own worth might have lent her the impetus she needed to rebel, however subtly, towards her situation in her in-laws household, and towards her mother-in-law's unfair, uncaring control. Doña Yola had not helped much during her daughter's sickness, and had not shown much consideration to Marta's grave predicament. Marta's attitudes towards Doña Yola afterwards, her aloofness and antagonism, spoke of her anger towards, and loss of respect for, her mother-in-law. Furthermore, Marta's personal bond with the Señor, and the material obligations that it entailed, had to be respected by Doña Yola, Héctor, Don Alfredo, Doña Lupe, and everyone else around her. Her personal, special relationship with Señor de Carácuaro had the consequence of forcing everybody, and particularly her controlling mother-in-law, to consent to a new degree of autonomy in her life. Marta had promised to go to visit the Señor in Tierra Caliente, and whether Doña Yola liked it or not, she had to go. Indeed, Marta did go to Carácuaro a few months later, with Don Alfredo and myself, travelling far from the island without her mother-in-law for the first time since she got married. It was a trip which she enjoyed greatly, in which she rejoiced at her relative freedom, and about which she reminisced long after her return. In fact, I think that her daughter's illness, her personal relationship with Señor de Carácuaro, and her journey to visit him, marked somehow a point of no return in her relations with her in-laws, and pushed her forwards towards a life on her own with her husband and children. Three years later, when I returned to Jarácuaro to visit my friends, she and Héctor had built a humble house in the outskirts of the village, and were living there with the children and new, healthy-looking baby girl.





Photograph 23: Marta and her little daughter bathing in Carácuaro river.  
March 1996.

## Chapter 5

### LIFE IS SUFFERING

#### Introduction: A visit to the church in despair

During the last weeks of my fieldwork on the island of Jarácuaro, Doña Lupe, who was usually a cheerful, lively person, appeared to be downhearted and strained. I noticed it for the first time one day when I arrived at the house to find her sitting down at the passageway, bearing a pained expression in her eyes. She had a tired, dispirited air about her. As soon as I started speaking to her, she broke crying. Her words came tumbling down amidst her tears:

“It is going to be very sad when you go away, I am going to be so lonely! I have grown very attached to you (*me engrié mucho contigo*). I always get very attached to people. My son Feyo has been telling me: ‘You’ll miss Susana when she is gone’. And I will be all lonely, so lonely, because nobody is here, and I am all alone! And I never did anything wrong to you, did I? I never treated you badly, or in a different way [from others] (*nunca te traté de otro modo*), I never belittled you (*nunca te hice de menos*). “

She made a pause, and looked away, absent. Then, she continued:

“I am really tired, and I feel sick. They never treated me right, they never take me into account. My sons, both of them, were alcoholic, you know? The one in Lerma, Tano, he cured himself by going to Alcoholics Anonymous; but this one, Feyo, he was very difficult! First he went to Alcoholics Anonymous here in Jarácuaro, and then he stopped drinking for a while, but started again after some time. He was just out in the street drinking all day, and then came home and made trouble. He even hit Machí sometimes. We got really worried about him. Then we took him to a clinic in Pátzcuaro, he was so bad! A woman from here told me that San Ramón was very good for curing alcoholics, so while Feyo was in the clinic, we went to see San Ramón in Pátzcuaro. We asked him to help us, cure Feyo. And it worked! San Ramón did listen, he did help us. Feyo started to recover in the clinic. It was San Ramón who made Feyo recover. And Don Alfredo, that one too drank a lot, he used to come home drunk many times, you know, and he was not good to me, not good at all!...Sometimes he hit me (*me daba sus trancazos*) and I didn’t say anything, I never complained. But now Don Alfredo is much better. He doesn’t drink as much, he stays more at home, and he treats me better. But he was not always like this. He really gave me a bad time!

And I got ill. I worried so much, I got an illness. The doctor said I have *bilis* (bile). It is not cured, it never got cured. Sometimes I feel very bad, I feel this pain inside, in my gut, like burning, and my mouth tastes so bitter, it is like *amargor* (“bitter taste”). But nobody cares about me, Don Alfredo doesn’t take me to be cured. What do they care! Sometimes I take pills or a

mixture that I buy in the pharmacy but it doesn't work. I just worried and worried with all their problems and that made me ill. It made me so tired!"

I was quite surprised to hear Doña Lupe's distressed and anguished revelation, for I had taken for granted that her life had improved notably from the poverty-stricken days of her childhood, and the difficult times she had spent as a young daughter-in-law and mother<sup>1</sup>. As far as I could see, her existence was now, at her maturity, much more comfortable economically, devoid of the violence of the past, and free of the worries and troubles of bringing up children. Not only that, but her four surviving children seemed to be doing fine. They were all married, three of them lived in the village with their families, and the fourth, Tano, was due to arrive on a visit within the next couple of weeks. Then, why was she seemingly so depressed? Why was she feeling so lonely, and so ill-respected?

A few days later, Tano and his wife Ina arrived. They lived with their little daughter in Lerma, a town in the neighbouring state of Guanajuato, where both worked in a factory. They only came to Jarácuaro once or twice a year, so they had been expected with great trepidation, and received with much happiness by my exultant hosts. Tano was the youngest son, and Don Alfredo and Doña Lupe wanted him to return with his family to the island, to live with them permanently in the house which he would inherit soon. They expected him and Ina to take over from them in the running of the household, as it was customary on the island<sup>2</sup>. Yet Tano, and particularly Ina, appeared hesitant to leave their current lifestyle. Meanwhile Feyo, the oldest son who lived next door, and his wife Machí, felt they had been taking up many obligations which, according to them, "belonged" to Tano and Ina. These obligations, Feyo claimed, had been stopping him and Machí from attending to their own business and interests<sup>3</sup>. As days went by, Don Alfredo and Doña

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 4 for a more extensive explanation of the predicaments of being a young married woman in Jarácuaro.

<sup>2</sup> This form of inheritance of the youngest son occurs similarly in other Purhépecha and mestizo communities in the region. See Foster 1972 [1967]: 63; Beals 1992 [1945]: 224. It is also found in some areas around the Mediterranean; see Du Boulay 1986: 147. In Jarácuaro, it was also common for the youngest son to inherit the house and other property before the death of the parents. However, although this was, for many people, the most desirable arrangement, many households had opted for other solutions. I knew of many houses where the person who was going to take over from the elderly couple was a daughter, or an eldest son.

<sup>3</sup> In among other things, Machí and Feyo had recently become "keepers of the church" (*encargados del templo*; see Chapter 2). Their new responsibilities were many, and much of their time was now tied up at the church. Feyo and Machí, thus, felt that their performance as keepers could be affected by obligations which should not pertain them at all.



Lupe's frustration, Feyo and Machí's resentment, and Tano and Ina's reluctance to accept the others' wills and expectations, became more and more manifest. Arguments and petty quarrels started to take place among the different members of the household, and I could feel a mounting atmosphere of tension arising within the house.

The conflict really burst open after my farewell party. As was usual at the island's revelries, we consumed vast quantities of alcohol that night, and the drink seemed to act as a catalyst for people's simmering emotions. Doña Lupe got very drunk, and tearfully repeated her fears of being left "completely alone" after my departure. Ina, on the other hand, confessed to me that she did not want to move to Jarácuaro, as she found the place ugly, and the situation for married women too oppressive<sup>4</sup>. The morning after, Don Alfredo disappeared from a very early hour. A noticeably upset Doña Lupe informed me: "He is out drinking". I left for my daily visits and, when I came back to the house, I found a drunk and irate Don Alfredo screaming at Tano. "You have no right to tell me anything! You have not right to tell me off! You have no rights here! You are not my son!". Tano was visibly enraged, but was trying to control himself: "OK, then, I will leave. If this is not my house, and I am not welcome here, I will just leave". At that point, a terribly distressed Doña Lupe intervened, speaking to her husband in conciliatory tones: "Look what you are saying to your son! Why are you saying that to him? Look, you're drunk, why don't you go to bed, you don't have to be out there drinking in the street, like a drunkard". At that, Don Alfredo directed his violent wrath against his wife. He shouted at her: "And you get out of here too! Go! You too leave the house!". He then stumbled along the passageway and went out. Everyone in the house was left very agitated. Doña Lupe repeated various times to her son and to me: "Did you see? Did you hear what he said? Did you hear he said this is not my house? This is my house! Did you hear he told me to go? And he said Tano is not his son. How could he say that? How could he say that to me?". She sat down on a chair, still repeating the questions, now more to herself than to us, and started crying quietly.

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<sup>4</sup> Ina was from neighbouring Arócutin and, as she explained, things were different there. "In Jarácuaro", she said to me "as a married woman, you have so many obligations, and you cannot do anything. You cannot go to the street when you want, or go visiting your relatives all the time, like we do in Arócutin. Here married women are much more locked inside their houses, and they do not complain, and they have to ask for permission from their husbands all the time. In Arócutin you don't ask for permission, my married sisters don't ask for permission, only for important things. They just go out whenever they fancy". In addition to this, she liked Lerma, and did not want to abandon the advantages that urban life offered her.



Five days later, I was due to leave the island for good. Doña Lupe and I had decided to go the church, so that I could pay a last call to the *santitos* there. Doña Lupe had instructed me to ask them to take care of me, and to light a candle for them. She thought I could not possibly go away without saying goodbye to them, and without requesting them that last favour. "If you ask the *santitos* to help you, they will protect you in your journey back to your home". We walked in a gloomy silence along the familiar unpaved streets on the route to the church, under the luminous grey-purple sky and suffocating heat of the rainy season. Doña Lupe looked sorrowful, and she had covered herself completely with her *rebozo*, to hide the angst and heartache reflected on her face. Her walk was slow and heavy, and I felt that, had it not been for my imminent departure, she might not have left her house at all.

We reached the atrium, crossed the church door, and entered the shadier, fresher interior. It was empty except for us. Doña Lupe walked in respectful silence along the right benches, the usual place for the women<sup>5</sup>. She got closer to the altar, genuflected and made the full sign of the cross in salutation, then kneeled on one of the benches. I kneeled besides her. She bowed her head slightly, tightly wrapped in her *rebozo*, and started murmuring quietly, hands clasped together, greeting the *santitos*. Then, she sat back on the bench, and silently looked ahead. A *virgencita* was standing right in front of us, on the steps of the risen altar area, on a wooden box decorated with embroidered napkins and laced clothes. It was May, the month of the Virgin in the Catholic tradition, and this particular *virgencita* had been moved recently by the keepers of the church from her usual secluded position to her current prominent place. She was surrounded by vases full of colourful flowers, and there were several candles burning away at her feet. There were, as well, a few other *virgencitas* just behind her. Doña Lupe whispered to me: "Put the candle down for the Virgin". When I returned to the bench, she spoke softly again: "Did you ask the *virgencita* for her help? Talk to her (*pláticale*), ask her to take care of you (*pídele para que te cuide*), so that nothing happens to you in your trip". I diligently followed my host's advise, kneeled down again, and silently asked the Virgin to keep me safe during my flight. Doña Lupe remained sitting, and looked ahead again, quiet, her

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<sup>5</sup> Inside the church, most women tended to sit on the right hand side as you looked towards the altar. The left hand side might have been originally intended for the men, but it was also usually occupied by some women, and young people of both sexes. As I have observed, this distribution of the seats inside churches is quite common in many parts of rural Mexico as well as Spain.

*rebozo* tight around her face, her expression hard and pained, her gaze fixed on the *santitos* in front of her.

Suddenly, she started murmuring again. Her lips moved visibly as she emitted whistling, whispering sounds. The sounds became louder and louder, until I began to understand some of the words she was articulating, for she was speaking in Spanish, not in Purhépecha:

“*Ay*<sup>6</sup>, *virgencita*, help me! *Ay, San Pegrito*, help me, don't leave her! Dear mother (*madrecita*), protect her, make her trip safe, so that she arrives well where she has to go, so far away! *Ay, Señor*, my father, help me, protect me, you are so big-hearted, you can help me! Oh my Lord, my Jesus, help me...!”

I looked at Doña Lupe, her face illuminated by the dim light of the candles. She seemed oblivious of my presence, and tears were running down her cheeks. When she stopped talking, she kept on looking ahead, absent, for a while. Then, after a moment, she turned her face towards me. She still looked sad, but I realised that her expression was now somewhat calmer, more resigned. Moreover, her whole body posture seemed to have changed, and she appeared now more collected. “What were you saying to the *santitos*, Doña Lupe?”, I enquired boldly, feeling immediately guilty for my disrespectful curiosity. However, to my surprise, Doña Lupe responded placidly, seemingly not offended by my intrusion. “I was asking them to take care of you in your travel, so that you are safe. Did you ask them, as well, to take care of you, as I told you?”. “Yes, but... I wasn't sure if I should have asked any of them in particular, should I?”. “No,” she answered in a knowing tone, “you can ask any of them. Any *santito*, all *santitos* will help you. You only have to have faith in them”.

### A woman's “prime”

In the Introduction to this thesis, I mentioned that the scarce anthropological literature which has touched upon religious issues in daily life in Latin America has not explicitly focused on women. That is, authors have tended to talk about “people”, without making gender-specific distinctions. Similarly, researchers have looked at “beliefs”, “practices” and “ideologies” without reference to people's, and most precisely women's, ages (for examples in Mexico, see Beals 1990 [1945];

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<sup>6</sup> *Ay!* is an expression of pain common in colloquial Mexican Spanish.



Photograph 24: Doña Lupe, sitting at the front benches of the church, talking to the *santitos*.

Brandes 1988; Cancian 1967; Carrasco 1952; Gimenez 1978; Ingham 1986; Ruz 1995; Chiñas 1973; Tapia Santamaría 1986, 1987; Van Zantwijk 1974; Vogt 1990 [1970]; Wolf 1967; in Panama, Gudeman 1976; in Peru, Sallnow 1981; in Brazil, Gross 1971). In particular, those scholars who have alluded, however briefly, to women's dealings with saintly beings, have not reflected their connections with saints, Virgins, and Christs at different times of their lives (for instance, Norget 1993; Foster 1972). One exception to this is Bourque, who has noted that, in Ecuador, the "networks of Saints" with whom women relate, as well as the petitions they put to them, vary "as an individual grows and develops new needs or problems" (1993b: 184). Yet, she has not expanded more on the matter<sup>7</sup>. Hence, generally speaking, it could be said that women's links with holy beings have been portrayed in many Latin American ethnographies as somehow monolithic and homogeneous, unaltered by personal growth, and unaffected by changing situations and circumstances.

Through my fieldwork on the island, however, I realised that this was not the case for my Jarácuaro female friends and acquaintances. My friends' relationships with the *santitos* were dynamic and fluid. Their bonds developed and changed through their personal and shared histories (see Chapters 1, 2 and 4), through the particular events in their lives, and through the mutable contexts and circumstances which pertained their different ages and states. Thus, as seen in the previous chapter, Marta, a young mother living with her in-laws, was preoccupied with her children's health and with her own situation as a daughter-in-law, and her promise to Señor de Carácuaro was directly linked to these concerns. On the other hand, Doña Lupe, her middle-aged mother, had passed childbearing age, and, after the death of her mother-in-law, lived at her own house. Yet, she had other kinds of problems with her adult offspring and her husband, and, again, her visit to the *santitos* in the church had happened within that context, and bore a relation to that situation. This is not to say that Jarácuaro women's personal relationships with the *santitos* fluctuated exclusively in connection with their varying instrumental necessities. That is, most women on the island did not go through life "picking" or "dropping" *santitos* to match their needs, as suggested in the case of Ecuador

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<sup>7</sup> Another notable exception, although in the context of Spain, has been William Christian, who has explored in depth the relationships of women with saints at different points of their life-cycle (Christian 1972: 133-161). It is also worth mentioning du Boulay (1986), who has suggested that Greek women, as they progress through motherhood and age, identify more with the Virgin Mary, although this identification remains mainly symbolic.



(Bourque 1993b)<sup>8</sup>. Nor was the nature of their petitions the only thing in their interactions that developed and changed. As Jarácuaro women went through life, their circumstances shifted, but so did their self-perceptions and perceptions, their expectations and affections, their experiences and interpretations, their actions and interactions with others. Thus the whole way in which they related to others - including saints, Virgins and Christs-, the ways in which they communicated, exchanged, and understood those interactions, were affected and informed by their personal motions and developments. In short, their relationships with others evolved dynamically with their own personal progress through life<sup>9</sup>. It is not my intention to make a comparative examination of how things might change at different stages of a Jarácuaro women's life, for this could be the subject of an entire thesis on its own. What I merely wanted was to indicate the connection I saw between the experience of most Jarácuaro women at the diverse, age-related points of their existence, and the relationships and modes of relatedness they had with the *santitos*. It is precisely this connection that I will turn to examine later on in this chapter, not in a general, abstract manner, but empirically, in the particular case of Doña Lupe, and in the specific moment of her mature life as described in the opening episode.

Before I move on to that task, I would like to make a last comment about anthropological approaches to the issue of women's age. First of all, whilst numerous works have touched upon women's life cycles in different places, few ethnographies have been entirely devoted to the lives of middle-aged women (Sacks 1992: 1). Then, when scholars have turned their attention to this subject, most of them seemed to have reached the consensus that women's lives around the world improve significantly with the advent of middle-age (du Boulay 1986; Sacks 1992; Brown 1992; Lambeck 1992; Vatu k 1992; Raybeck 1992; Carsten 1995; for examples in Mexico, see Beals 1990 [1945]; Chiñas 1973). For instance, many of these authors suggest that senior women in diverse places have less obligations and thus "greater geographical mobility" (Brown 1992: 19), and might also get to exert

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<sup>8</sup>In this sense, it was curious to note that not even in the case of religious conversions the *santitos* were alienated. For instance, in the nearby Purhépecha village of Puácuaro, the women who had become Evangelists still communicated with their well-known *santitos*, despite the pressures on them by Evangelist preachers to "abandon such beliefs" (Aída Castilleja, personal communication). When I, bemused, raised this issue to Doña Cecilia, she seemed to find it unproblematic: "How can you forget the *santitos*? How could you possibly ignore them?"

<sup>9</sup>I use the terms "evolve" and "progress" to indicate movement forward, but not necessarily positive outcomes.

more authority over particular others. It would be easy to reach this conclusion with respect to Jarácuaro mature women. It is true that many of my older female acquaintances had considerable less work after co-resident daughters-in-law had taken over most house chores; that they spent more time outdoors, in the street, at distant markets, or at festivals; and that they could and did, in varying degrees, control the lives of their son's young brides. However, this positive vision carries, paradoxically, several negative connotations which inform the ethnographic representation of mature women's lives. On the one hand, it portrays success in female middle age as the norm, and thus turns failure into an anomaly, and, by implication, the sole responsibility of those who get a rough deal at that stage (for example, Lambeck 1992: 77; Myerhoff and Simic 1978). This has problematic moral undertones. On the other hand, a blanket vision of maturity as an improvement over previous periods, as a relief from former constraints, obscures the depth and complexity of the realities experienced by middle aged women, and also neglects to examine the variations and conflicting interpretations of personal contexts that might, and do, exist. That is, it fails to explain what happened to someone like Doña Lupe who, despite the apparent advantages one might assume she had because of her age, was nevertheless suffering pain, frustration and disappointment. It also fails to explain why many other mature women I met on the island were equally feeling despondent, and why their bitter complaints conveyed a sense of experienced injustice.

In short, throughout the remainder of this chapter I will explore, as mentioned above, Doña Lupe's relationship with the *santitos*, *crisitos* and *virgencitas* in the island's church, at a particular moment of her life, and from the perspective of her age. I will not, though, discuss this matter from an abstract point of view, categorising her as a "senior woman", and making theoretical assumptions about the perceptions, experiences, or circumstances "characteristic" of her age group. On the contrary, I will explore empirically her own personal feelings, actions, and interpretations, in the context of the specific situation she was going through, and *vis-à-vis* the perceptions, behaviours, and understandings of others around her. In this way, what I intend is to reflect, through the specific example of her experience, the intricate ways in which Jarácuaro women's personal histories informed their relationships and modes of connectedness with the *santitos*, as well as their perceptions of and interactions with them insofar as they are agents in their lives.

**Contexts: absences**

Doña Lupe was, at the time of the episode described above, fifty-three years old. However, she looked much older, like most other Jarácuaro women, due to the tolls of poverty, childbearing, worries, violence<sup>10</sup>, and heavy work. Her four surviving children were all married<sup>11</sup>; her daughters lived with their respective in-laws nearby. Her eldest son Feyo and his wife Machí had lived with her and Don Alfredo for the first few years of their marriage. Machí had been, according to Doña Lupe, a good-natured, quiet, and docile co-resident daughter-in-law, eager to learn from her relatively benevolent mother-in-law. Yet, following the common progression of things on the island, Feyo, as the eldest son, had eventually moved to his own house with his wife and children. They had settled in a few rooms Feyo had built in the backyard (see Chapter 3), which to me seemed as if they still lived with my hosts. In fact, Machí and Doña Lupe still did many of their household activities together, and the children were in our house more often than not, even sleeping in their grandparents bed. So, from my own perspective, both “households” operated very much like one on many issues, and I found it difficult to think of them as separate<sup>12</sup>. Yet Doña Lupe had become accustomed to the constant presence and physical proximity of her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren, and she had been greatly affected by the change in their living arrangements, however small they seemed to me. Now and then, she expressed a sense of physical and emotional distance from them:

“Since Feyo and Machí moved over there, it is not the same. They are there, in their house, and we are here, and they come in a bit, for a chat, but that’s all. Machí has her own work to do in her own house, to attend to her husband and children. And Don Alfredo and I are here on our own, all alone”.

Whilst eldest sons in Jarácuaro usually got, sooner or later, their own houses, the youngest sons were expected to stay at the parental house, and this was often the case. However, Tano and Ina had not lived with my hosts long when they decided to migrate to a relatively distant town. Don Alfredo had been baffled, but

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<sup>10</sup>I use the word here to refer not only to physical violence from relatives or husbands, but also to the more general violence implicit in a life of indigence, racial discrimination, and institutional abuse (cf. Scheper-Hughes 1992: 16), which is common to many Indian women in Mexico.

<sup>11</sup>She had lost two little girls, her first offspring, when they were under two, and their deaths, still affected her.

<sup>12</sup>Similarly, neither Doña Lupe nor Don Alfredo, Feyo or Machí ever talked about themselves as “separate units”.

had given his permission. Doña Lupe was still genuinely perplexed and hurt at their choice. She was very attached to Tano, who was possibly her favourite child, and always spoke of him with visible tenderness. She missed him and his family deeply. She told me she cried when she thought of “the ones in Lerma”, and, when they came visiting, she found it very difficult to see them go. After the Christmas holiday, she explained to me:

“Tano, Ina, and the little girl were here for just two weeks, and you should have seen how I cried all the way from Arócutin after I said good-bye to them! I accompanied them there to get the bus. Then, when the bus arrived, I thought: ‘Poor children of mine! They are going so far... *Ay, Diosito!* (Dear God!), take care of them and protect them! Let them arrive safely. And I was crying and crying when I saw them going away in the bus. I felt horrible, like very heavy, very tired, all limp (*bien flojota*). [...] I really feel horrible because my children are not here. I told Tano: ‘What are you doing there? This is your house!’ and he said, ‘I am going to be back after four years in Lerma’. But he has been there for five already!”.

The absence of Tano, the beloved youngest son, had thus deep emotional implications for Doña Lupe. Yet his absence had other fundamental consequences as well, for it meant that my host was also being deprived of Ina’s presence. Ina had her own obligations mapped out for her: she was meant to be Doña Lupe’s live-in daughter-in-law. My hosts expected that, when Ina returned to live with them, she would take over from her mother-in-law in most of the household tasks. Doña Lupe explained to me on many occasions that, ideally, a daughter-in-law should show consideration and respect for her mother-in-law, and should be “conscious with her” (“*ser consciente con ella*”), an expression that means offering affectionate deference or consideration to someone. A good daughter-in-law would willingly follow a mother-in-law’s directions, recognising the older woman’s seniority and wisdom. Moreover, Doña Lupe was clear that it would be Ina who, one day, would take care physically of Don Alfredo and herself in their old age. Yet, Ina seemed to have a different agenda in mind. Thus, although she was hard-working and good-natured, and appeared to be well-liked by both her parents-in-law, she had decided to stay in Lerma for the time being, and not in their house, fulfilling the position she was meant to occupy.

### **Contexts: life without a daughter-in-law**

As a result of Tano and Ina’s decision, Doña Lupe was being deprived of a live-in daughter-in-law. What were, then, the consequences of Ina’s absence? In which ways did this affect her mother-in-law’s daily life? To start with, Doña Lupe



had not been relieved by a daughter-in-law of most of the strenuous tasks that constituted the daily work of a married woman (see Chapter 1). This meant, that the sheer length of time to complete all her chores did not leave her much free time. Doña Lupe was still mostly house-bound, much like a young married woman, and therefore unlike other women of her age and even younger. Her mother Doña Cecilia, for example, had daughter-in-law Glafira to take over from her in her household obligations, even though Glafira worked in the mornings as a teacher in the local school. Because of this, Doña Cecilia spent much time outdoors, talking to people, attending the meetings of a local NGO to learn about herbal medicine, travelling to the Pátzcuaro market, or participating in every festivity, celebration, and event that took place on the island. Much of this dynamic lifestyle could be attributed to Doña Cecilia's forceful, positive personality<sup>13</sup>. However, she would not have been able to spend so much time involved in other activities had it not been for Glafira's relentless, yet good-humoured, labouring at home.

Moreover, as a consequence of her lack of time and energy, Doña Lupe did not have real access to paid activities. Almost all mature women in Jarácuaro went sometimes to the regional markets to sell hats, embroidered napkins, and other crafts, which provided them with some cash, and thus a degree of independence. Doña Lupe could hardly plait enough palm to obtain a few pesos "for her own little things", something she said she missed. Without her own pocket money, and without the ability to earn it, she was completely financially dependent upon Don Alfredo, as she had been as a young bride. My stay in her household had, in fact, allowed her to come across some money, but, although she had relished this, it was a short term advantage. It became evident to me that some money, and the autonomy that this brought, would have contributed to a more self-assertive attitude on Doña Lupe's part (cf. Raybeck 1992: 178, with reference to Malay women).

However, the significance of not having a co-resident daughter-in-law was, for Doña Lupe, more personal and more profound, for it affected not only material arrangements and outcomes, but also her self-perceptions, feelings, actions, experiences, and relationships in day to day life. First of all, Doña Lupe experienced at a complex emotional level the consequences of Ina's physical absence from her house. My host did not have the constant presence of a close female

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<sup>13</sup> For instance, she once told me: "Many people live like piglets: only sleeping and eating. But I don't want to live like them: I want to know things, to learn things".

relative. She did not have, like Doña Cecilia had in Glafira, a helping hand, a companion for the time-consuming tasks, and a friend for leisure moments. Many times, when I visited Doña Cecilia, I found her, Glafira and Reyna sitting in their courtyard, making wheat *tortillas* with *piloncillo* (cane syrup), and gossiping or having a laugh. In the meantime, Doña Lupe sat alone in her courtyard in the afternoons, gently falling asleep out of tiredness, seeing Machí at intervals, and receiving *pasaditas* from Marta, Tila, or her *comadre* Doña Yola. Ina's daughter Vianney was not there either, and, considering how much Purhépecha people loved little children, not having a live-in grandchild, specially a little granddaughter<sup>14</sup>, must have been perceived as a great loss by Doña Lupe. All these elements contributed greatly to her deep experience of loneliness, so often expressed in her conversations to me. Her feelings were further compounded by a fear of solitude in her later years. Doña Lupe confided to me that she was scared of ending up isolated, not only because she, like most people in Jarácuaro, disliked aloneness, but also because she was concerned about her well-being. She had counted on her daughter-in-law to take care of her in her old age, but this active care had not materialised so far. Thus for her, solitude also meant the dread of abandonment and helplessness. Her experience of loneliness was, perhaps, one of the reasons why she grew so attached to me during my stay at her house, and why she valued my company so greatly. My departure must have brought her apprehensions back with renewed intensity and painful clarity.

Most importantly, Doña Lupe's difficulties in spending time outside the house also jeopardised her possibilities of establishing meaningful, satisfying relationships with many others. Most older women in Jarácuaro had friendly relations with others through their activities outside houses. Doña Cecilia had female friends who went with her to the NGO meetings, and whom she invited to her parties. Doña Yola was almost always visiting people and attending reunions and weddings. Doña Lupe, on the other hand, knew everyone in the island, yet did not have close, affectionate relationships with women other than a few close relatives and a couple of *comadres*. Seeing others having a more appealing and freer lifestyle than herself must have provoked feelings of jealousy, frustration, and isolation. Referring to her sisters, she said: "They never take me into account, they never call me to go anywhere with them". This was, as far as I could see, true. Her

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<sup>14</sup>As mentioned before, Doña Lupe did not feel that Feyo's boys lived "with her" anymore, although they spent much time with us. Besides, as she confessed, she preferred little girls to little boys because "boys are all over the place, and girls stay with you, they sit besides you".



Photograph 25 (above): Doña Cecilia and her daughter-in-law Glafira, making tortillas and having fun.

Photograph 26 (below): Doña Lupe, alone in her courtyard, plaiting palm



sister Amelia justified their behaviour by saying: "We never invite her because she never goes anywhere. She is always at home, she says she has many things to do, she is forever stuck to Don Alfredo!". In a sense, Doña Lupe's lack of availability seemed to have filled some of her relationships with female peers with suspicion and resentment. Furthermore, most older women like Doña Cecilia, Doña Yola and Doña Hermila attended many rosaries, processions, ecclesiastical celebrations and saints' festivals in the village and outside it. Many also went often to visit neighbouring *santitos*, such as Santo Santiaguito in Asajo, or Virgencita de la Salud in Pátzcuaro, or even distant ones, such as Virgencita de Guadalupe in Mexico City, or Señor de Carácuaro. For these women, this meant that they experienced a close and privileged relationship with certain *santitos*, for they had the time to establish and continue such relationships through frequent personal contacts and interactions (see Chapter 3). Doña Hermila, for instance, was a "keeper" of the church. Watching her affectionately place flowers at a *virgencita's* feet, I realised that her daily physical contact with the *santitos* who lived there had given her a degree of familiarity, intimacy and complicity with them that was, perhaps, unattainable for Doña Lupe. As well as this, Doña Hermila enjoyed, as she herself told me, the camaraderie and friendliness that existed amongst the keepers, the fun of sharing activities, and the sense of pride of belonging to a special, defined and respected group.

Finally, the lack of daily, positive interaction with female relatives, *comadres*, friends, and neighbours might have had an impact at other levels as well. Robinette Kennedy, referring to friendships amongst Cretan women, believes that "female friendships allow women a context in which they can experience self-esteem with an equal, free from the pressure of other role definitions" (Dubisch 1986:34). Doña Cecilia, Glafira, Amelia, Reyna, and sometimes Lupita, Chabe, Doña Hermila, Doña Felicitas, and a variety of others got together and talked, worked, gossiped, exchanged confidences, and joked. In doing so, they realised self-perceptions, self-images and understandings of the surrounding world, from their shared perspective as Jarácuaro women (see Chapter 3). They constituted their own emotional and intellectual contexts and realities, in which they could often feel comfortable and supported, and in which their thoughts and actions were understood, and perhaps even justified and condoned. This must have had a positive effect on the women's self-esteem. Moreover, quotidian positive and reinforcing relationships with other close female relatives and friends could also have an enormous therapeutic value. Yet Doña Lupe, trapped in her own predicament, was deprived of all this, and thus



her own development and progress as a mature woman from the island was being hindered.

Resuming, Ina's absence affected Doña Lupe's life at many personal levels and in complex ways. It was not just a matter of lacking practical help or nice company, but it had an impact on Doña Lupe's existence as a whole. Because of this absence and this loss, my host was, in her middle age, feeling tired, trapped by her obligations, dependent on her husband. Above all, she experienced, as she said it herself, loneliness, abandonment, isolation and the rejection of others. I think those personal circumstances, which she perceived outside her control, had made her genuinely depressed.

### **Contexts: experiencing life as "suffering and sacrifice"**

After the episode of Don Alfredo's drunken ire, Doña Lupe's started to show real frustration in her attitudes and behaviours, and her conversations filled with expressions such as "What do I care? I have always behaved well, and look how I get paid!", or "Why bother making an effort throughout one's life, if this is what you get for it?". She started to talk more openly about the bad times of her young married life, and of the violence to which she had been subjected by Don Alfredo, his drunken escapades, her feelings of being mistreated and abandoned. When she talked about all these, she looked sad but determined, as if she now wanted others to know and to witness how much she had endured. This was evident in her reaction just after Don Alfredo's exploit, when she asked her son and I if we had heard her husband's words, for she had wanted someone to side with her. It was clear that the initial despondency had given way to a more intense feeling of dissatisfaction, of not being given what she was due. The impression she conveyed to me was that of an exchange gone wrong: she had contributed her part of the deal, but she had not been reciprocated properly. So, why did she feel the object of an injustice? What, from her point of view, had she "given" that had not been "repaid" justly?

Throughout my stay in the island, I heard the sentence "life for a woman is suffering and sacrifice" uttered on countless occasions by many different women of all ages. They often said this with reference to some work they were doing or were expected to do. As I explained in Chapter 1, women worked incessantly all day long. At first, during the first few months of my fieldwork, I viewed this relentless

labouring as a form of subjugation. I thought the men (and mothers-in-law!) were odious for demanding so much, and I could not understand why women seemed to accept their lot without complaint. Then, little by little, it dawned on me that, despite the exhaustion and sense of servitude, women obtained from their constant activity a certain amount of reward and satisfaction. For instance, young brides seemed to take a certain pride in the very hard work they had to perform for their in-laws. Chabe, after her marriage, talked to her sister and cousins about the amount of *tortillas* she had to make, and the heaps of clothes she had to wash, with a satisfied smile on her face. Many female friends listed their daily activities to me on different occasions, and what at first sounded like a complaint, appeared afterwards to be more an account of one's merits as a woman. It seemed that working hard was not only perceived by my female friends as an obligation. It was also a form of experiencing themselves, and being recognised by others, as good, proper Jarácuaro women. This is why women of all ages in Jarácuaro took tremendous precautions not to be seen as "lazy"<sup>15</sup>. In short, hard work was, for Jarácuaro women, a form of action that, despite its harshness and inconveniences, had a positive effect on their self-esteem. Through their constant labouring, they developed a sense of self-satisfaction that could only take place and be understood in an inter-relational context, that of the recognition and approval of others<sup>16</sup>.

On the other hand, working hard was experienced not only as positive and reinforcing for oneself, but as an active form of giving something to others. As explained in Chapter 4, Jarácuaro women worked for their children not only to keep them clean and fed, but also to protect them and ensure their well-being. Women also demonstrated and effectively gave affection towards other adults by doing constant services for them. Doña Lupe, for instance, prepared special *tortillas* for me, carefully flattening them to make them "nice", and handing them over to me with an intentionally slow gesture full of significance. She herself felt cared for and pampered on the occasions Machí told her: "Sit down, *mamá* (mum), and I will

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<sup>15</sup>This worry was expressed by Chabe again, when, on the same occasion as above, she said: "I was running late the other day, so I couldn't go to the mill. How could I go so late? What would people say? They would think I am lazy! How shameful!". Moreover, such attitude did not seem to be exclusive to Jarácuaro. For instance, a friend of mine in Pátzcuaro, a psychologist, told me that many of her friends and colleagues in Mexico City got up at dawn to clean their houses before going out to work as lawyers or doctors.

<sup>16</sup>This perception of work as a positive behaviour has also been noted by Juliet Du Boulay amongst women in rural Greece, about whom she wrote: "The very duties that were noted earlier, the serving of a husband, the carrying of the water, the preparation of the meals, are [...] rights as well as obligations, revealing the dignity of a woman and her subordination at the same time" (1986:163).

finish the house chores for you". Labouring for others was then not only a way of expressing feelings of affection but also a real and voluntary action which actually bestowed one's care to others. Furthermore, for the women of Jarácuaro, one special form of working for others was to enlist the help of certain *santito* or *santitos*. As explained in Chapter 4, women developed personal relationships with specific *santitos* throughout their lives, and when they experienced problems, they interacted with them in a more personal manner, asking for assistance. Mothers like Marta did that for their children when they were sick, and their petitions, promises, and personal visits were experienced both as a form of real, intimate interaction with the *santitos*, and also as a form of action to ensure the safety of their loved ones.

As well as labouring, worrying (*preocuparse*) was perceived amongst the women in the island as another form of giving something real (see Chapter 4). Like working for them, worrying for one's children protected them against danger and illness, and helped them recover when unwell<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, worrying for other adults was both an expression of one's feelings, and active care with beneficial effects. Doña Lupe worried about Tano, Ina and the little girl all the time they were in Lerma, away from her. She also portrayed Tano's care for her with the expression "he worries about me" (*se preocupa por mi*). Doña Amelia worried for her older son when he migrated to the United States in search of work<sup>18</sup>. Doña Cecilia worried for my partner when he returned to Europe, until she heard from me that he had arrived safely. For all of them, worrying was not only a natural consequence of their attachment, but an act of duty.

Thus women laboured and worried for others, and perceived these actions as very real forms of giving something beneficial. They also expected others to recognise their work and preoccupation in that manner. Yet their experienced acts of giving did not end there. Women strove to keep certain attitudes, behaviours and composure that they felt were appropriate and right for them as the "good women" they wanted not only to be, but to be seen as (see Chapter 2). Particularly inside their houses, and specifically in their capacity of wives and daughters-in-law, they behaved in ways not only to avoid criticism and violence, but also because they perceived it as a duty, its fulfilment satisfactory in itself, and also as an offering to

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<sup>17</sup> Significantly, *ocuparse*, to take care of, and *preocuparse*, to worry about, were used as interchangeable words on many occasions by Jarácuaro people.

<sup>18</sup> In this particular case, her worrying was more than justified. Not long before, United States border police had shot and killed three brothers from Michoacán as they were trying to cross the frontier illegally.

others. Their attitudes and conduct were “given” to others as forms of respect and submission, and being recognised in this way by others had a positive effect on their self-esteem<sup>19</sup>. This could explain why most young brides, such as Chabe, voluntarily obeyed to their mothers-in-law, and deliberately chose to put up with demands and orders, preferring that to complaining. This could also explain my female friends’ submissive attitudes towards their husbands, their constant solicitousness and deference towards them, and their reticence to disclose their bad behaviour or their beatings. Most of my female friends, for instance, talked to their husbands in soft, unassuming tones, always allowing them to have the last word. The women fed the men always before themselves, and usually hurried between the kitchen hearth and the table in a frenzy, carrying hot *tortillas* and mashed chillies. When distant relatives, neighbours or strangers visited, the husbands occupied chairs, whilst my female friends generally sat down on the floor and kept their eyes cast down, as they carried on plaiting palm, in silent, constant motion.

In short, the hard work, the preoccupation for the loved ones, and the attitudes of submissiveness and deference<sup>20</sup>, were deliberately, voluntarily and explicitly offered by Jarácuaro women to their significant others: to in-laws, husbands, and children. In this context, their usual utterance “life is suffering and sacrifice” could be seen as encapsulating and expressing their perceptions and experiences in that respect. It conveyed their experience of labour felt as a duty; their experience of the worries of married life and motherhood; their experience of the incessant “giving” to others, and “doing” for others; their experience of displaying an obedient and submissive attitude. Yet, their commonly used phrase did not only signify their lived experience as Jarácuaro women, wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law. By using it often, by presenting themselves and their existences to others in the form of “suffering and sacrifice”, they were, somehow, “packaging” their attitudes, actions, and behaviours into understandable, valuable, and exchangeable notions. Interacting with others in those terms forced those others to recognise effectively the reality of the women’s work, and its impact in others’ lives, thus giving the women a sense of self-worth. Not only that, but it forced the others to reciprocate, to repay the women for their life-long, tangible efforts. That is, my female friends on the island felt it was expected of them to “suffer and sacrifice”

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<sup>19</sup> Abu-Lughod notes that, among Bedouin people, “those [women] who are coerced into obeying are scorned, but those who voluntarily defer are honorable” (1988: 105).

<sup>20</sup> This is not intended to be as an exhaustive list, for there were many other things that women gave, such as love, affections, company, training or sex. However, I cannot, in the context of the present chapter, expand on all these other matters.



for others, but they expected to be rewarded for this. By confronting others with the hard currency of “suffering” and “sacrifice”, by quantifying and qualifying their own labour and dispositions, they were reminding the others of their part in that tacit deal.

All the issues presented above become clearer if we look at the particular case of Doña Lupe. Throughout her life, she had worked hard, attending husband, children and house. She had always taken care of Don Alfredo dutifully, and continued to do so. She had accepted his drunkenness, violence and abuse without complaint or at least without retaliating openly (“sometimes he hit me and I didn’t say anything”)<sup>21</sup>. She had also taken abuse from her mother-in-law and, despite this, she had taken care for her when she had become old and sick, even though Doña Lupe was not the youngest son’s wife<sup>22</sup>. She had laboured and worried for her children, even as adults, as she herself explained when she talked about Tano and Feyo’s alcoholism (“I worried and worried with all their problems...”). She had asked the *santitos* for assistance with their health when they were children, and had even visited San Ramón in Pátzcuaro recently for an adult son. She had given a lot of herself to them, so much so that she had become unwell for it (“I worried and worried [...] and that made me ill”). And she had most definitively expected to receive something from them in exchange, which, as it was clear from her sorrow and frustration, she did not feel she had got (“They never treated me right, they never take me into account, [...] but nobody cares about me, [...] what do they care!”).

So, what exactly had Doña Lupe expected to obtain for her labour and troubles? What could have compensated her for her work, worry, submission, and loss of health? It could be argued that her aspiration had been to achieve “authority”, “power”, and “status”, as suggested in much of the anthropological literature about middle aged women around the world (cf. Brown 1992:3-4; Vatuk 1992: 156; Raybeck 1992: 181). Yet, after listening to her own complaints and confidences, and after talking to many other women on the island about this matter,

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<sup>21</sup> Penelope Harvey (1994) has also noted that Peruvian Andean women tolerate a degree of violence from their husbands, and that this aggression is often related to alcohol consumption. However, in the case of the Peruvian Andes, the women seem to accept domestic violence as legitimate within the dynamics of marriage. Whilst in Jarácuaro, women took beatings as predictable, yet vexatious, distressing, and unfair. Thus, they endured them as a form of submissive “sacrifice” which would be rewarded later.

<sup>22</sup> Marcos, Don Alfredo’s brother, was the youngest son in their house, but Doña Carlota did not get on with her mother-in-law. So, when the old woman became a widow, she moved in with eldest son Don Alfredo and daughter-in-law Doña Lupe, until her death only seven months before my arrival.

I realised that perhaps Doña Lupe, like most other Jarácuaro women, expected and desired something slightly different in her mature years<sup>23</sup>. As indicated previously, she had wanted to be relieved of part of the heavy work that had to be performed by a woman in the house, so that she could rest after years of incessant labour and preoccupation. At least, she had hoped she would be fulfilling her duties with the help of a well-behaved daughter-in-law. She had wanted company, the physical and continuous presence of younger people and little children, which was so important in Jarácuaro for people to realise intimacy, warmth, and closeness (see Chapter 1). She had wanted care, as she herself had made explicit when she told me:

“I treat my daughters-in-law well, I am considerate with them’ (*soy consciente con ellas*), and I leave them alone, because it is better this way, it’s better to get alone fine. This way, even if I am old and sick, even if they feel like this [she gestured as someone vomiting, conveying revulsion], they will still take care of me”.

Above all, I think Doña Lupe, like most other mature women I knew on the island, had desired affectionate appreciation, recognition and respect. In fact, most of my older female friends and acquaintances seemed to worry much about these matters. They discussed them often in their conversations, using expressions such as “*mi hija no me hizo el aprecio*” (“my daughter did not show deference to me”), “*mis hijos no me toman en cuenta*” (“my children do not take me into account”), “*el marido no la respeta*” (“her husband does not respect her”), or “*la nuera le hace de menos*” (“her daughter-in-law is insolent with her”), to which the other women listened with knowing empathy and commiseration. The important thing that I inferred from the women’s comments was that recognition and respect were not automatically achieved by “doing the right thing”. Working hard, worrying, caring, submitting, suffering, and sacrificing throughout life did not guarantee a form of intrinsic “respectability”, automatically acknowledged by others<sup>24</sup>. Respect was, as far as Jarácuaro women saw it, and spoke about it, an inter-relational accomplishment,

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<sup>23</sup> Dubisch points out that, when assessing women’s aspirations in life, one must be careful not to gloss them as a simple quest for “power”, for what they desire might well be something entirely different (1986: 27). It is true that many Jarácuaro women enjoyed and even abused the control they exercised over young daughters-in-law. Yet, it would be very limiting to see their expectations as restricted to that particular prerogative.

<sup>24</sup> This idea of women achieving an incontestable “respectable position” merely by growing older, or becoming mothers, mothers-in-law, etc., comes across in the work of many of the authors cited above. See, for instance, Brown (1992); Raybeck (1992).

that had to be deserved as much as actively given by others<sup>25</sup>. When husbands, children, daughters-in-law, and also sons-in-law, gave respect to older Jarácuaro women, the latter experienced it as a just, legitimate reward for their life-long “suffering and sacrifice” for others. Not only that, but when those others “were conscious with them”, “took them into account”, and “showed deference to them”, the women experienced themselves in a more positive way, because it meant that others were actively realising their value, and according them the recognition and appreciation they deserved as “proper women”. Furthermore, when Jarácuaro women felt they were being treated with respect, they felt cherished, cared for, and protected, for they perceived the voluntary and deliberate respect of others as an expression and an action of love on their part.

However, Doña Lupe did not feel respected, valued, or cared for, as she explicitly said in her tearful confidence to me. She had expected Tano to give her respect by acknowledging her needs and rights, abiding to her desires, and offering his deferential affection and attentions. Instead, he had rejected her, and had denied her his presence and that of his family. She had expected Ina to give her respect by voluntarily submitting to her benevolent control and coaching, by recognising her seniority and wisdom, and by treating her with affection. Yet Ina, although kind and warm towards her, resisted the idea of returning to the island, and refused to behave fully as a dutiful daughter-in-law. Moreover, she had expected Don Alfredo to respect her by abandoning all violence against her, by acting in a protective and considerate manner, and by finally “giving her her place” (*“darle su lugar”*), that is, appreciating her life-long efforts, and showing deference for her as a mature wife and a mother of grown up children. Still, her husband had behaved aggressively and contemptuously against her, had ignored her complaints of ill-health, and had told her to leave her own house. I do not know exactly what Doña Lupe felt at that precise moment, but it is not difficult to imagine that she might have experienced an intense sense of frustration and hopelessness. After all, what could have been, for her, the meaning of a whole existence of suffering and sacrifice?

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<sup>25</sup> Some inter-relational aspects in the notion of respect have also been noted by Lynn Stephen among Zapotec women of Mexico (1991: 29, 184). Also see du Boulay (1986) for similar perspectives in the context of Greece.

### Relating to the *santitos*: company, validation, respect

As seen throughout the previous discussion in this chapter, Doña Lupe was feeling despondent and disappointed about what she perceived was an undeserved situation in her life. She was also feeling profoundly hurt at the unfair treatment she received from others. Her emotions had probably being aggravated by the arrival of Tano and Ina, whose attitudes and actions had such an impact on her life at the time, and also by my imminent departure, for she had become very attached to me. In fact, as my own position in her house as a kind of surrogate daughter, even if I was an outsider, had made me an ideal depository of her confidences about her fears, sorrows, and desires. She was to loose both my company and my sympathetic attention.

However, Doña Lupe's despondency was not passive. She did not just sit in her house, and complain about her lot. She did not suffer in silence, but, indeed, displayed her pain in emotional and moving ways. She talked to me, talked to her son and daughter-in-law, talked to her husband, and made her sorrows and dissatisfactions clear. Her moving testimonies were not only an expression of how she saw and experienced things, but also an attempt to change them. By speaking to her close relatives involved in her predicament, she was trying to touch their hearts, to make them understand her legitimate demands of care, recognition, love, and respect. Her actions were not some form of emotional blackmail, for, in Jarácuaro, it was very common for men and women to appeal to others' compassion and seek their sympathy when they approached them for assistance or support<sup>26</sup>. Thus Doña Lupe was doing, as far as she was concerned, the only thing she felt she could do to alter the actions and behaviours of others, which were hurting her, and which she felt were outside her personal control. In this sense, it could be speculated that her illness, which she experienced in a real, acute, physiological way, could have had a psychosomatic origin, and was therefore an expressive symptom of her personal distress<sup>27</sup>. Yet, on the other hand, it could also be seen as a physical, tangible form of making others react about her concerns and act upon them. In short, as Wikan has suggested in the context of Bali,

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, see the episode of the visit of Doña Lupe's lonely old relative in Chapter 1. In general, when people approached relatives, *compadres*, or friends for help in times of trouble, their pleas tended to be quite emotional, and it was not unusual for both men and women to cry during their petitions.

<sup>27</sup> Kleinman, Brodwin, Good and Good suggest that pain, and particularly chronic pain, is associated with social and interpersonal problems, and add that "physical pain complaints therefore express painful relations and experiences: (1992: 5).



“Communicative acts, even in the form of minor displays of emotion, do not merely communicate, they also serve ends. People express themselves because they have something to say, but also because they wish to make an impact, to affect the course of events and change undesired circumstance. [Emotional expressions are] also intended to change feeling and perception, to act upon the world”. (Wikan 1990: 135)

Doña Lupe’s attempts to alter and improve her own circumstances were not restricted to her interactions with her husband, son, and daughter-in-law. In her search for empathy, support, and perhaps, active help, she interacted with many others, such as myself, Machí, her two daughters, and her mother. Yet I do not think that she obtained the response she wanted from any of us. I did my best to console her, but I was very much powerless in that situation. Machí was nice to her, but she did not have any influence over her brother-in-law, nor had it been appropriate for her to intervene in such grave matters. Marta and Cheli could mention things to their brother, but they could not and would not pressure him into changing his mind. Her mother was, in Doña Lupe’s own words, unsympathetic and distant, and did not offer her any comfort or wise advice. Apart from those, she did not have any other close relative, *comadre*, or neighbour in whom to confide, partially for the reasons explained above. So, when others failed, Doña Lupe turned to the *santitos*.

Doña Lupe probably talked about her troubles with some of the *santitos* who lived in her house, since she had told me she spoke to some of them every morning (see Chapter 1). She then went to the church with me, and although this was ostensibly to accompany me to say farewell to the *santitos*, she could not but communicate with them about her painful predicaments. In her distress, she found herself in their house and in their presence, momentarily away from the pressures and the conflictive atmosphere of the house. The church, as I noted in Chapter 2, was a nice place in which to get a respite from the burdens of everyday life, and Doña Lupe probably needed some space for herself. Yet the important thing was that she was not alone there, for she was surrounded by *virgencitas* who looked at her tenderly, by those *santitos* who were so familiar and close to her (Señor de la Misericordia, Virgencita de la Salud, San Pegrigo), and also by those others whom she only vaguely knew. All of those *santitos* had been in her life since she was a child on the island, and they had seen her growing, getting married, baptising her children, and burying some of them. Her life was intricately linked to their unfailing presence in the local church. She had celebrated with them in joyful occasions, and accompanied them in less happy ones (see Chapter 2). Moreover, she had probably

learned to know how good, kind, benevolent, and generous they were, through their intervention in the lives of her close relatives. She had also personally experienced their magnanimity and their reliability through the favours that they had granted her. She trusted them because they had responded in real, tangible ways when she had asked for their assistance. In times of trouble, the *santitos* had been the ones who had helped her swiftly and uncritically, and she knew they were trustworthy and that they cared about her. As she herself had put it more than once: “When I have a problem, I’d rather talk about it to *Diosito* or the *santitos*, instead of going around telling others. I do that so that the *santitos* help me, because they really help you”.

Thus she had communicated with them, interacted with them in the ways she had always done: she had sat near some of them, looked at them, and had verbally expressed her pain and sorrow in heart-rendering tones. She had expressed her feelings straightforwardly, displaying her grief through her body and crying openly. However, it could be said that there was something different in her interaction this time. Throughout her life, as she had told me many times, Doña Lupe had gone into the church often to ask for specific things from some of the *santitos* with whom she had more personal relationships: help with a child’s illness, protection for a trip, assistance with money. Yet, at the time of the episode described at the beginning of this chapter, she did not seem to have requested anything in particular, or at least, she did not tell me about it. Her plea to the *santitos*, as far as I knew, seemed to have been of a more general, undefined nature: “Help me, protect me!”. In addition to this, she had not approached any concrete *santito*, but some of them in a succession, and all of them as a group. It appeared to me that she was addressing them as a collective, and that what was important to her this time, as well as their individual agencies and capacities, was the strength of their number.

So, what exactly did Doña Lupe want from the *santitos* in the church? Why was she addressing them in those vague, undefined terms? How did she sense and experience their help at that particular time? I would suggest that Doña Lupe had engaged with the *santitos* from the existential perspective of what she was living through at the time, and of her own self-perceptions and feelings. In this sense, it could be said that there was not one single problem, one punctual intervention that was needed to resolve her troubles, for they were complex, deeper, more personal and far-reaching, and not just of a material nature and clear cut. Thus, it could be

argued that what she needed at the time, what she wanted, was not a specific favour, a concrete and immediate solution for a defined difficulty. What she wanted might have been precisely what she was not obtaining from many of the significant others in her life. This is, perhaps, what the *santitos* could give to her. She was feeling lonely, for she lacked the company of co-resident relatives. The *virgencitas* and *crisitos* in the church offered her willingly their benevolent presence, which she could experience physically in the familiar context of the local church. They could thus be a source of warm, close and intimate company and comfort<sup>28</sup>. She was feeling isolated and rejected by close ones, but Doña Lupe might have been able to feel the *santitos* kind-hearted and active attention, for they were listening, accepting her in their midst, and bestowing on her their warm, almost motherly, care. Above all, she was feeling ignored and undervalued by those who, in her view, should readily reciprocate her life-long efforts and preoccupations for them. Yet the *santitos*, all of them, had been enduring witnesses of her personal history, of her hard work, constant worries, suffering, and sacrifice, and their silent knowledge was testimony to the reality of what she had given to others, and to the great value and importance of it. Moreover, the fact that such good, capable beings were willing to listen to her distressed complaints and dissatisfactions, and to give her their generous help, was a proof of her worth, for it meant that, in their view, she deserved their patience and comprehension. Their uncritical involvement in Doña Lupe's predicament was thus a legitimisation, justification and vindication of her long struggle; as a result of it, she might have been able to make sense of her life again. It could, in short, have helped her to see herself in a more positive light, and might have, therefore, helped to boost her strength and self-esteem.

Resuming, Doña Lupe's approach to the *santitos* in the church, in the context of her predicament, and of her ongoing relationship with them, could be seen both as an action and as an interaction. As an action, it was perhaps a deliberate attempt to effect a change over circumstances perceived as outside her control. For instance, the *santitos* could see her plight and her physical pain, and that could touch their hearts and move them to do something for her, whatever was needed. As an interaction, she asked them for something vague and unclear, for support, sympathy, and commiseration, and she then experienced their concrete responses in the form of willing, uncritical company, acceptance, approval, justification, appreciation, and respect. Thus her mode of relatedness and communication with

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<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Christian has noted that, for older women in the Spanish Valley of Nansa, "a turn to the church is a solution to a sudden sense of aloneness" (1972: 160)

the *santitos* at the time had been directly related to her particular perceptions and experiences, but, in my view, had not merely been an instrumental “devotional” act, or a “symbolic action” to achieve specific ends. Her appeal to the *santitos* had been another real, genuine form of interacting with them, perhaps more vague, less precise and personal, but nevertheless one which reflected the dynamic, processual character of her relationships with the Virgins, saints, and Christs in the church. Her connectedness with them changed through time, as it changed with many others on the island, not only depending on specific situations at given times, but on the more general contexts that applied to her different ages and positions, and on the changing perceptions, understandings, and experiences that she had as she progressed through her life.

\* \* \*

A final note: when I returned to Jarácuaro for a visit, almost three years after I had completed my fieldwork, I found that Tano and Ina had returned. They had decided to settle back on the island, probably pressurised by the family’s expectations and by economic constraints. Both Tano and Feyo had migrated temporarily to the United States, Feyo to be able to offer a future to his five children, Tano to rebuild the parental house and perhaps open a business. Ina was now a co-resident daughter-in-law, and together with Machí, who was under the care of her in-laws in her husband’s absence, did all the work in the house, and attended to her parents-in-law and her two little daughters. She was not looking particularly pleased or happy, but I did not have the chance to talk to her about her new life. However, I thought Doña Lupe was positively blooming: she had put on weight, had new clothes on, her hair was carefully arranged, and her attitude was more confident and self-assertive. She resumed her new life when, after we had been served a meal by Ina and Machí, she told me:

“You see? Now I have two daughters-in-law! Remember when I was all alone in the house? Now I am not alone anymore, because Ina and the girls are here. And Tano is going to pull the old house down and is going to build a new one for all of us to live there. You can stay with us when you come back! Now, I am really being taken care of”.





Photograph 27: Ina, making tortillas, in her new role as co-resident daughter-in-law.

## CONCLUSION

In the Introduction to this thesis, I described the main theoretical positions, practical realisations, and ethical and epistemological considerations that have informed the present research. I also explained how the focus of my work came to be the personal experiences of Jarácuaro women, and their relationships and interactions with significant others, including the *santitos*, in the context of their daily lives, and from their own existential perspective. I commenced by exploring Jarácuaro women's perceptions, feelings, and understandings in quotidian contexts. I looked at how they experienced themselves and others, how they interacted and related with a variety of others, and how, through all these dynamic aspects of their experience, in context and in interaction, they constituted their personal, yet shared, realities. I paid particular attention to the modes of relatedness of the women with others, and specifically with the *santitos*, and how, through varied forms of relatedness, they created and re-created different relationships with different others. Thus Part One attempted to convey a general sense of everyday life as lived by Jarácuaro women, and of their experiences of and in relation to many others. My examination did not attempt to be exhaustive, as portraying all the complexities of quotidian existence would be an impossible task. I merely tried to communicate a perception of, and a feeling for, the movements, processes, and dynamics that are at the core of women's experiential realities.

However, it is very difficult to convey process and movement through a medium relatively static and contrived as is the written word, particularly in the cases of scholarly texts. Texts cannot substitute life, nor can explanations of experience stand for the dynamic experience itself<sup>1</sup>. In order to counteract somehow these limitations, I took a different perspective in Part Two. Here, instead of describing perceptions, feelings, thoughts and actions in abstract terms, I explored particular cases of real people grappling with real concerns<sup>2</sup>. The idea was to portray, insofar as this could be possible, not the emotions, thoughts and actions of Jarácuaro women, but a woman feeling, thinking, and acting upon, and in the context of, her experienced reality at the time. I also chose the examples of two

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<sup>1</sup> As Bourdieu suggests, there is something fundamentally paradoxical in trying to explain through linguistic concepts a dynamic that could be, to paraphrase him, "pure practice without theory" (1997: 2)

<sup>2</sup> This perspective has been advocated by Wikan (1990), who adopted it in her own work.

Jarácuaro women of different ages, to convey the sense of a person's change and movement through life. In this way, I hoped to contribute not only to the understanding of dynamics and processes of experience in daily contexts among Purhépecha women, but also to offer an alternative representation of women as agents in and of their own lives, and as living persons who loved, hated, suffered, enjoyed, changed, and grew.

So, what have been the main arguments that have come across in the present thesis? It would be complicated to construct a whole explanatory conceptual framework to account for everything that has been said in the text. It would also be rather irrelevant, since precisely one of the aspects about Jarácuaro women's experience and relationships that I wanted to present is their dynamic, fluid, changeable, processual character, and the epistemological inadequacy of defining them in terms of "concepts", "categories", "systems", or "models", isolated from the agents who produce them, and through whom they ultimately exist. However, it is possible to offer a few guidelines, a few speculations related to the ways in which Jarácuaro women perceive, understand and create and re-create their own realities, to the manner in which they constitute relations with others, and, in particular, to their experience of their relationships with *santitos*, *virgencitas* and *cristitos*.

First of all, and as mentioned in the Introduction, Jarácuaro women did not perceive life as partitioned in "dimensions" or "spheres". For them, there were not separate forms of experience: for instance, "religious" versus "ordinary", or "sacred" versus "profane". There were not elaborate rituals, or expressed conceptual divisions of "domains", which could have pointed in this direction. Neither were there significantly different activities, or different behaviours which pertained, for example, "religious celebrations", or what could have been considered "sacred spaces". On the contrary, from what I saw, heard, and felt through my fieldwork, from the many hours spent in the company of my female host, friends, and acquaintances, and from what they themselves said and did, I inferred that women experienced their daily lives as a continuum. In this continuum, in this existential mode of being, they perceived things, felt things, thought about things, came to conclusions, took decisions, and acted and reacted about issues, and, most importantly, interacted with others, in diverse contexts, and moving through space and time.

Moreover, Jarácuaro women's relationships and interactions with others were a focal point of their lives in general and their daily experiences in particular. How were their relationships with others? How did they experience them? I argue that the relationships of Jarácuaro women with others cannot be portrayed or explained in terms of categorical prescription. Their worlds were not neatly classified in conceptual categories of people, or of places, as it has been suggested in the cases of other Latin American groups. As I saw it, and as I interpret it from the women's explanations and attitudes, their relationships with others were the result of complex dynamics of perception, interaction, and experience. In other words, women related to, and interacted with, others in ways that created and re-created different experiential contexts, which in turn informed the perceptions and experiences of the particular relationships, which then informed subsequent interactions and modes of relatedness. There were, of course, connections and coincidences in the ways they related to specific others. For instance, it was easier for a woman to interact in closer ways, and thus constitute relationships of intimacy with co-resident female relatives than with total strangers. Yet, my point is that, whilst women's relationships might have been influenced by notional understandings of people, these were not prescriptive, and thus a total stranger like myself did end up being intimate with a woman who would hardly talk to her own sister. In short, and from my perspective, relationships with others were constituted in interaction, rather than established by rules, norms, customs or obligations.

Who were, then, those others with whom Jarácuaro women had relationships? Who were the significant others in their lives? Throughout the thesis, I have described the different relationships that women had with many others, from their close relatives, males and females, *comadres* and *compadres*, friends and neighbours, to all the other residents on the island. Yet, as explained above, it would be difficult to represent their connections in terms of a clear taxonomy, for the women had constellations of relationships with many others at different levels and for different things, their modes of relatedness could vary from person to person, independently of their position, and things were fluid and changing. Yet, in general terms, it could be said that it was more common for women to have intimate and warm relationships with other closely related or co-resident females, with a cluster of friends, and also with *santitos*, *virgencitas*, and *crisitos*. On the other hand, their links with the majority of others were usually distant, full of suspicion and mistrust, or at least quite intermittent, although that could change at any time.



How did the women from the island relate to the *santitos*? What were their perceptions of them? How did they experience their interactions? After having shared many a conversation on the topic with my friends in Jarácuaro, after witnessing their actions, attitudes and behaviours, and after having been gently coached in certain relevant matters by my kind host, I realised that women related to *santitos* in much the same way they did with their significant others on the island. There were not significant changes in their behaviours towards the saints, nor complex rituals or devotions. *Virgencitas* and *crisitos* were part of the women's quotidian contexts. The women grew up with them in their houses and in the local church, felt their physical presences, and learned from their close relatives, and from childhood, that the *santitos* were good, trustworthy, capable, and reliable. The women interacted with them in ways that created and re-created personal relationships of intimacy, warmth, closeness and trust between them: they talked to them, touched them, spent time in their company, worked in their presence. Most importantly, Jarácuaro women did not experience their communications with the *santitos* as unilateral, but they felt and perceived real exchanges with them. The women asked for help, and the *santitos* responded with actions; they did little favours for the *santitos*, and these bestowed their benevolent, uncritical care over them. This did not mean that their relationships were exclusively instrumental; on the contrary, women established bonds with the *santitos* which were personal, deep, complex, and ongoing.

Thus *santitos* were an active part of Jarácuaro women's daily lives. Women did not approach them, or talk about them, as "supernatural" or "sacred" beings; their attitudes, conducts, and demeanours did not change significantly, or necessarily, in their presence. Their modes of relatedness with saints shared the perceptual, behavioural, and experiential elements of their other relationships. In short, the *santitos* were perceived by women as significant others, as agents in their existences. The women interacted with *virgencitas* and *crisitos* in ways that constituted relationships of intimacy, closeness, and most importantly, trust. Their communications and exchanges were perceived and experienced as real, and informed the continuing relatedness and interactions. This dynamic constituted experiential realities in which the *santitos* acted, felt, responded, heard, were moved, got angry, and, in general, as far as the women were concerned, existed. The important thing about the *santitos*, as about people, was not their categorical nature as such, but their experienced agency. Finally, through their personal relationships with *santitos*, Jarácuaro women could realise many aspects of their quotidian

perceptions and self-perceptions. For instance, as seen in Chapter 4 and 5, bonds with *santitos*, and their intervention in one's life, could help to boost one's self-esteem, or could provide the impulse to achieve change in one's existence.

### A final note: categories, symbols, agents, and the question of belief

At various points throughout my thesis, I have referred to the ways in which saintly beings are represented in the anthropological literature of Latin America. Saints are described as "supernatural beings" (Foster 1972: 212; Carrasco 1952: 23; Norget 1993: 51; Brandes 1988: 62; Gimenez 1978; Gross 1971), "deities" (Allen 1988: 93; Van Zantwijk 1974), "images" (Carrasco 1952: 24; Beals 287-386 *passim*; Bourque 1993b: 181), "symbols" (Carrasco 1952: 24; Ingham 1986: 99; Gudeman 1976; Norget 1993: 53; Sallnow 1987; Wolf 1979; Turner and Turner 1978)<sup>3</sup>, "objects" (Gudeman 1976; Vogt 1990 [1970]: 21)<sup>4</sup>. The impression is that saints are, according to many authors, either entities or objects which belong to defined categories separated from ordinary experience, or they are symbols, material representations which stand for something else. However, as I explained above, Jarácuaro women did not perceive *santitos* as being outside their daily experience, nor did they think of them or interact with them as objects. *Santitos* were agents in their quotidian realities. Why is there this difference between what people said, felt, and did back in Jarácuaro, and what scholars have interpreted with reference to holy beings? Why do anthropologists see saints as "things"? Why are saints denied agency in ethnographic representation, despite the fact that people could be indicating the contrary?

One possible answer to this conundrum is that, as with "religion", saints are objectified for their anthropological analysis. What might have originally been an agent in an interaction, ends up in the ethnographic text as an autonomous object for scholarly examination and manipulation. This could be a result of the external position of the researcher with reference to the people he is "observing" and their experienced realities, as Bourdieu has indicated (1977). Or it could be a consequence of the prevalence of visuality in Western modes of cognition (Classen 1993).

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<sup>3</sup> Also, outside Latin American contexts, Christian (1972: 100).

<sup>4</sup> See also Dubisch (1995: 68) in Greece; Mitchell (1997: 84) about Malta.

Alternatively, it could be suggested that saintly beings are portrayed as objects and denied agency in the anthropological literature for the simple reason that the ethnographers do not “believe” in them as agents. Furthermore, the term “belief” seems to appear in many texts to indicate that the anthropologist does not share the vision of the people she is “studying”<sup>5</sup>. People “believe”; the ethnographer knows. She knows that the saint is really a wooden statue, which represents “divinity” or “sacred power”. She knows that people’s actions towards the statues are not real, but “ritual” or “symbolic”. She knows that holy beings do not exist, they are not true, and she also knows the true meaning behind them: power, domination, need. Some anthropologists, however, intend to incorporate men and women’s testimonies of their own experience about the saints, and produce texts full of paradoxical representations, which oscillate between what they think and what others say: saints are symbols, but they grant favours, or they are images, but they are treated as human (see, for example, Carrasco 1952; Norget 1993; Bourque 1993b; Allen 1988, just to cite a few). However, in other, more extreme cases, the result is that people are portrayed, possibly unintentionally, as backward, gullible creatures, who are the victims of their own false beliefs (see Gimenez 1978; Tapia Santamaría 1986). In the end, people, that is, actors themselves are, in one way or another, marginalised in the ethnographies, dispossessed of their own perceptions, denied their own realities. This poses a serious problem of ethnographic authority, because one could easily question why our realities, as anthropologists, as agnostic scholars, and as Westerners, are more real than theirs. Asad has referred to this in a very poignant manner:

“The privileged position that [an anthropologist] accords himself for decoding the *real* meaning of what the [people] say [...] can be maintained only by someone who supposes that translating other cultures is essentially a matter of matching written sentences in two languages, such that the second set of sentences becomes the ‘real meaning’ of the first -an operation the anthropologist alone controls, from field notebook to printed ethnography. In other words, it is the privileged position of someone who does not, and can afford not to, engage in a genuine dialogue with those he or she once lived with and now *writes* about” (Asad 1995: 155)

This brings me back to the beginning of this thesis, and to the epistemological, methodological, and ethical concerns which have informed my work. I do not think that it is necessary for the anthropologist to believe the same

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis has noted something similar with reference to magic: “In the end the only common characteristic of the many things we have called magic is our own disbelief. Their practices require assumptions that go against the ones we use to interpret the world” (Lewis 1986: 421).

things as the people among whom she lives for a while. Yet, it would be necessary for her to genuinely engage with them as human beings, to respect their perspectives and opinions, and to give their voice a space in the finished ethnographic text. In this sense, an anthropological enterprise that focuses on people's own experiences, that is, an anthropology of experience which tries to convey people's worlds and existences as seen and lived by them, can contribute greatly not only to the understanding of the dynamics behind people's realities, but also to the production of anthropological knowledge not as "extracted" from others, but in interaction with them. I hope that, in its own humble way, this thesis has added something in that respect.



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