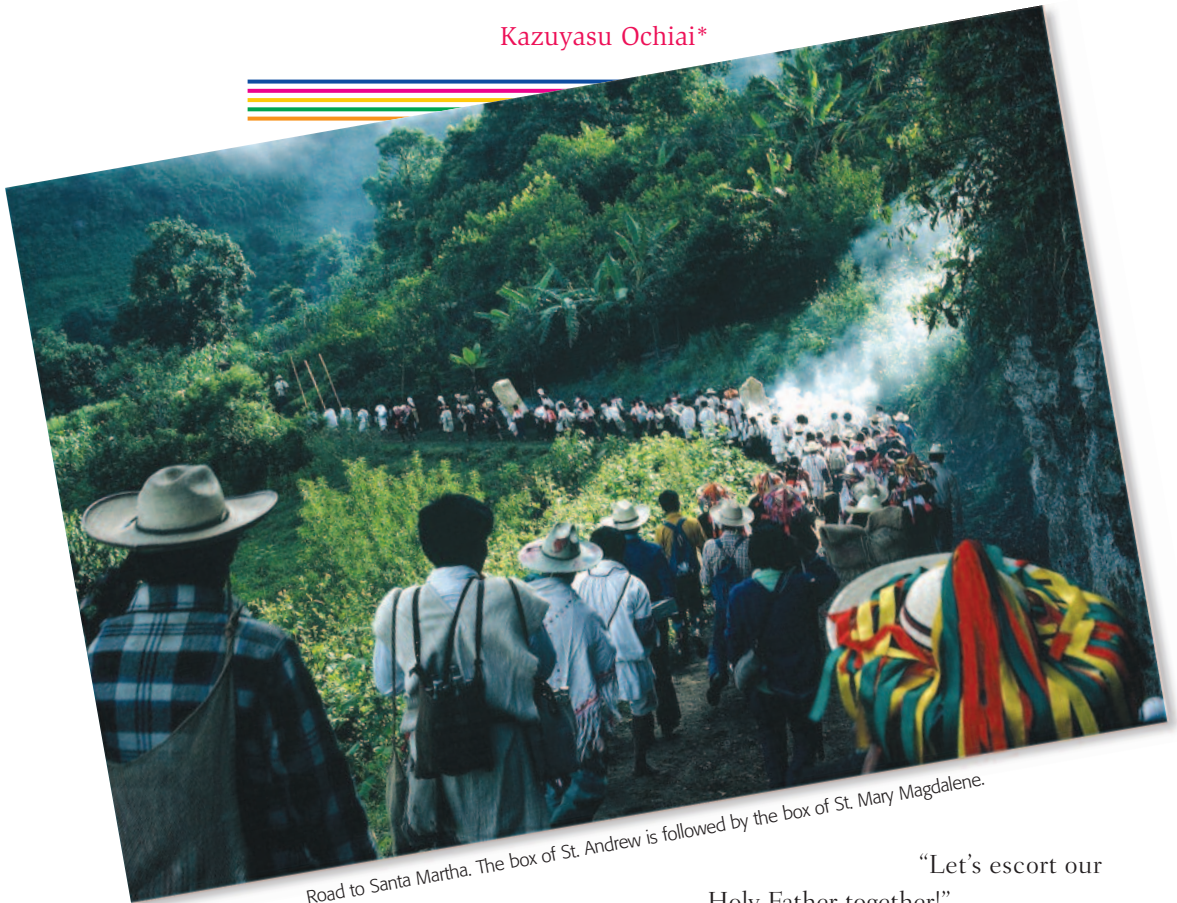


When the Saints  
Go Marching  
In the  
Chiapas Highlands

Kazuyasu Ochiai\*



Road to Santa Martha. The box of St. Andrew is followed by the box of St. Mary Magdalene.

“Let’s escort our  
Holy Father together!”

The shout of the head church caretaker sinks into the darkness before dawn. From here and there come the replies of his colleagues: “Let’s escort him together!” Their families, officials and volunteers stand at the roadside with net bags full of supplies for the coming overnight trip. Flashlights in their hands are lit and begin moving like fireflies. Skyrockets and firecrackers suddenly rock the dreaming cool and humid air over 7,000 feet above the sea. The smoke comes floating on the night mist. But the village is still asleep.

Under a big wooden cross by the roadside, an elderly church caretaker is helping a young man secure the leather forehead strap of a large box wrapped with a reed mat and a rope.

\* Professor of anthropology at Hitotsubashi University, Tokyo, Japan.

Photos courtesy of the author.

The box is heavy, and not only physically. The responsibility of carrying it is weighty for the young man, since in the box is carefully stored the protagonist of the day: a wooden image of St. Andrew, the patron saint of this town, San Andrés Larráinzar, a Tzotzil-Maya-speaking community of Chiapas, the southern-most state of Mexico.

Why is there a saint's image in the box? And where is it going? *Andreseros*, as the inhabitants of Larráinzar are known, would answer with just one word: *kompánya*! *Kompánya*, a Tzotzil word derived from the Spanish *compañía*, means the relations between the patron saints of neighboring villages who visit each other on festival days. If you still look nonplussed, they might explain a little bit more, "Our Father, the Apostle St. Andrew, goes to see the festival of his younger sister, and Our Mother comes to see the festival of her elder brother." The younger sister, or Our Mother, means either St. Mary Magdalene or St. Martha and her elder brother St. Andrew, Our Father. They are the patron saints of the adjacent villages, Magdalenas, Santa Marta and Larráinzar. St. Andrew also has a little brother, St. James, patron saint of the village of Santiago, and he visits the festival of his little brother and vice versa. The exchange of saints' images is thus an opportunity to enact the mythological sibling relations among the patron saints of neighboring communities.

*Kompánya* is not unique to these communities: in the 1980s I found that more than 100 communities of northern Chiapas were practicing it or had practiced it. *Kompánya* is not a permanent institution. It reflects sensitive and dynamic political and diplomatic relations among villages. It might be suspended temporarily or definitively when friction arises between communities, and a new *kompánya* might be established to strengthen the ties between villages.

*Andreseros* remember that in October 1978, they decided to ban the sale of alcoholic beverages in the town on Sundays. Although the aim of this

measure was to exert pressure on the mestizo bar owners in order to expel them from the township, it also affected the vendors of *yakiko'*, a fermented drink made from raw sugar that is mostly produced in nearby Magdalenas. The people of Magdalenas began to say that their patron saint, St. Mary Magdalene, was angry about the *Andreseros'* decision and that she might not come to visit the forthcoming festival in Larráinzar. After negotiations, *yakiko'* vendors from Magdalenas were allowed to continue their business at the Sunday market in Larráinzar. When the visiting saint from Magdalenas arrived on the morning of the St. Andrew's festival, people exclaimed with relief, "Oh, our Holy Mother is not angry!"

According to anthropologist Marta D. Turok, a fairly serious land dispute raged between Magdalenas and Santa Marta in the early 1970s. The people of Magdalenas decided not to invite their neighbors' image of St. Martha to their festival in 1973. St. Martha came anyway, however, since, in the eyes of the people of Santa Marta, she was not to be blamed and had no

reason to stay home. The mood at the festival was tense. Nobody from Magdalenas got drunk, which was quite unusual on such a festive occasion. Santa Marta was represented only by the official delegation, not the usual friendly throngs. Santa Marta, in return, sent Magdalenas an official invitation to the forthcoming festival. Magdalenas declined, at which point Santa Marta proceeded to diversify its *kompánya*. Images of St. James and Our Lady of Charity, from Santiago and La Caridad, a nearby mestizo-owned ranch, respectively, were invited to attend, in addition to St. Andrew from Larráinzar, to solidify Santa Marta's position and isolate Magdalenas. It was not until the dispute was finally settled some years later that *kompánya* between Santa Marta and Magdalenas resumed. The two newly invited saints' images continue to be *kompánya* of Santa Marta.

Oh my! With all this talk of *kompánya* diplomacy, we have fallen behind the procession of St.



*Kompánya*, a Tzotzil word, means the relations between the patron saints of neighboring villages who visit each other on festival days.



Andrew that left the village at dawn. We should be escorting our Holy Father! Pyrotechnicians lead the procession, musicians follow playing drums and flutes, the box is surrounded by church caretakers or *martoma* (Spanish *mayordomos*) and their wives with incense burners in their hands. Since the box is heavy, its carrier changes every half a mile or so. When the procession arrives at the meeting place of the host community, the box is first placed on a reed mat lying on a bed of pine needles. After offering a prayer, the caretakers untie the rope of the box and open various packages of paraphernalia. A scarlet velvet canopy is extended and tied to the four poles. A white palanquin is placed on the reed mat, and onto this the image of St. Andrew is placed and carefully secured.

After a while, the church bells clang and the host saint, also mounted on a palanquin, comes to the meeting place with a large escort and many spectators. The visiting and hosting saints on palanquins shouldered by respective *martoma* are face to face with each other. At the signal of a high *martoma*, every *martoma*, whether host or visitor, genuflects three times, crossing himself and advancing one step each time. This movement makes it look as though the host saint and visiting saints on palan-

quins are drawing near to each other, each bowing three times:

“Welcome, brother, I am happy to receive you!”

“How are you, my sister? I have come to pay tribute to you!”

After host and visiting officials and *martoma* exchange courtesies for about an hour, the host saint leads the visiting saints to the church. When the procession enters the crowded plaza, the church bells start up an incessant clanging. Going at the head of the saints, dancers and musicians perform on and on and pyrotechnicians excite the festive air with generous amounts of skyrockets and firecrackers. This is the high point of the day. The saints proceed with much pomp into the nave of the church, where they are placed and receive candles, prayer and offerings from worshippers. After a while, the visitors are invited to the host officials’ houses and are entertained with drinks. In the evening people enjoy yet more fireworks, drinking and chatting until midnight. The visiting delegation sleeps in houses allotted by the local officials.

Early next morning the visiting officials gather in the church to prepare for the return trip. A Catholic priest says mass, in a regular ceremony that makes no reference to the *kompánya*. For the



Saints and officials marching from the church of Larráinzar to the meeting place to bid farewell.



The image of St. Andrew in Larráinzar holds an X-shaped cross, decorated with peacock feathers, on which the saint was martyred.



A saint's day market place is where people from different villages meet.



Saint exchanges between villages played a role in the indigenous uprisings of 1711 in the Chiapas Highlands.

Catholic Church *kompánya* is a rather dubious practice, but the priest tactfully turns a blind eye.

The plaza is packed with vendors from early morning. At around eleven o'clock the church bells clang vigorously and the saints' images are taken out of the nave of the church. Salvos of firecrackers again make the air of the plaza tremble. The saints and the escorts then proceed to the same meeting place as that of the day before to bid each other farewell. They bow face to face three times as they did the day before. The bow is different from the earlier one, in that only the host saint advances three steps and the visiting saints move backward three steps.

The movement of the saints on the palanquins makes it seem as though they were saying: "Don't go, my dear brother!"

"Alas, my sister, I must go!"

After the exchange of greetings and drinks, the host saint returns to the church with its escort. St. Andrew's image is carefully put back into the box and starts its way home. The return trip tends to take more time, since the road is uphill and people are generally drunk. Musicians play drums and flutes throughout the trip. At some sharp curves and roadside crosses, fireworks handlers shoot sky-rockets and explode firecrackers as offerings to the Earth Lord. The fireworks echo into the mountains and announce from afar the return of the delegation to the people of Larráinzar, their hometown.

Due to its heavily Catholic appearance, *kompánya* might be imagined to have originated in

Spain. Apparently, however, there was and is no custom of visiting saints either in sixteenth-century or modern Spain, although processions and pilgrimages (*romerías*) do take place frequently on a grand scale. We have yet to learn the origin of *kompánya* in Chiapas. To the best of my knowledge, the earliest recorded account of saint exchange in Chiapas was between Socoltenango and Comitán, now mestizoized towns, in 1688. According to Father Francisco Ximénez, an image of St. Nicholas of Tolentino in Comitán miraculously stopped a fatal epidemic in the town, and thankful townspeople dedicated a festival to St. Nicholas, inviting a saint's image renowned for its miraculous power, Our Lady of the Rosary of Socoltenango. Saint exchanges between villages played a role in the indigenous uprisings of 1711 in the Chiapas Highlands and the archives contain detailed historical records of saint exchanges there all through the nineteenth century.

*Kompánya* is diminishing. It is not only mestizoization that brings an end to saint exchanges between communities. Rather, it is a change in the whole cultural eco-system composed of ethnic affinity, political situation, socio-economic development and religious change, among other elements, which cause *kompánya* either to be abandoned or to flourish. How has the cultural eco-system in Chiapas changed since the Zapatista uprisings in 1994? New research is needed to shed light on the hidden dimensions of community relations in the Chiapas highlands in the twenty-first century. ■■■