

**OUTLINE: NIWAN CHAMEL – “THE BIG ILLNESS”**  
**PREGNANCY AMONG TOJOLABALES OF CHIAPAS, MEXICO**  
**Master’s Report, Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona**  
**Namino Glantz, 2003**

**PART I: CONTEXT**









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Maternal mortality statistics in Mexico, Chiapas, and the Border Region  
The Comitán Center for Health Research (CISC)  
CISC’s ethnographic research among Tojolabales of the Border Region of Chiapas  
CISC’s research-action project on maternal mortality in the Border Region of Chiapas  
Location of this report within CISC’s formative research on health (methods)

**PART II: CONCEPTUAL SHIFTS IN THE MATERNAL MORTALITY FOCUS**

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Conceptual shifts in the maternal mortality focus (1985-present) resulting from biomedical–anthropological collaboration

1.  Maternal mortality, once seen by researchers as a natural, normal event, unworthy of attention, is now perceived as a unique and pressing problem.
2.  The biomedical focus that predominated earlier work on maternal mortality has been broadened to include perspectives from multiple disciplines.
3.  Research on maternal mortality, previously limited to quantitative, epidemiological, evidence-based data, has recently embraced qualitative methods.
4.  In addition to the direct obstetric causes of maternal mortality, the significance of the causes behind these obstetric causes – things like structural factors and gender relations – has been increasingly recognized.
5.  Similarly, while interest was once aimed only at maternal mortality, increasing attention has been paid to the consequences beyond the direct obstetric consequences, for example long-term morbidity and repercussions in familial, community, and national contexts.
6.  Work on maternal mortality that once focused on children and on women exclusively in their capacity to bear children has adopted a gender perspective, from which women’s health is seen as important regardless of reproductive status.
7.  Primary care and population control, the past mainstays of maternal health intervention, have been supplemented with the strengthening of emergency services, support for development, and promotion of women’s rights.
8.  While the West was once seen, or we once saw ourselves, as the sole source of authoritative knowledge on pregnancy and childbearing, knowledge that we then exported as The Truth, researchers now encourage thinking of the gamut of Western techniques and knowledge as just one of many cultural systems.

### **PART III: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE TOJOLABAL POPULATION UNDER STUDY**

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- Location, ecology, and population
- Historical background
- Agriculture and economy
- Alcohol production, consumption, and regulation
- Religion
- Political organization
- Family structure
- Daily life
- Marriage
- Domestic violence
- Infrastructure
- Health resources
- A note on deep, layered social relations

### **PART IV: THEMATIC SUMMARIES**

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Part IV contains eight sections, each consisting of a summary of information provided by study informants regarding a specific theme related to maternal health.

#### **SECTION A: PREGNANCY**

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- Fertilization and gestation
- Pregnancy as a serious illness and period of great risk
- Danger of first pregnancy
- Life during pregnancy
  - Work
  - Diet
  - Domestic violence
- Problems and precautions during pregnancy
- Men's roles and presence during pregnancy
- Family members' roles during pregnancy
- TBAs' roles during pregnancy
- Unwanted pregnancies and pregnancies with social complications

#### **SECTION B. BIRTH**

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- When labor pain starts
- Birth
- Preferences for birthing care: TBAs and doctors
- Risk of witchcraft
- Fear of birth
- Who is involved with birthing
- Complications during birth
- Maternal mortality during birth
- Referring patients from TBA to doctor
- Sick babies, stillbirths, and babies born as animals

### **SECTION C. AFTER BIRTH**

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Birth celebration  
Taking care after birth  
Possible complications after birth  
Post-partum tubal ligation

### **SECTION D. VALUE OF CHILDREN**

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“Unachieved children”  
Value of children  
Shifting value of children

### **SECTION E. INFERTILITY**

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Forms of infertility  
Causes of infertility  
Preventing infertility  
Curing infertility  
Consequences of infertility  
Welcome infertility

### **SECTION F. MISCARRIAGE AND ABORTION**

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Miscarriage (causes, symptoms, care)  
Abortion (motivations, alternatives, strategies)  
Consequences of miscarriage and abortion (in woman, child, family)  
Recovery from miscarriage and abortion

### **SECTION G. ASSISTING WITH BIRTHS**

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Assisting with relatives’ births only  
Abilities of people who assist in births  
Benefits of providing birthing assistance  
Number and popularity of TBAs  
How TBAs come to be  
Collaboration and competition between TBAs

### **SECTION H. BEING A DAUGHTER-IN-LAW, HAVING PARENTS-IN-LAW**

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Living and suffering with in-laws  
Supportive in-laws

### **PART V: NARRATIVES**

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The following narratives were reconstructed from conversations and interviews with participants. Many of the details they contain are included in the previous sections, which were organized thematically, such that not all of the details “belonged” in the section. The goal of the narratives is to make these lived experiences – some unique and some shared – more real and contextualized.

A tough pregnancy while living with in-laws, difficult birth, long-term morbidity  
Pregnancy and birth on a farm  
A domestic servant pregnant by her employers' son  
A surprise birth in a field of sugarcane  
An undesired cesarean  
Fallen bladder from a long-past birth  
Woman worried about her childless granddaughter  
Infertility from witchcraft  
Have a baby, or else...  
TBA talk about infertility  
Abortion in the city  
Seeking abortive medicine  
Ten miscarriages  
Abortion assisted by a TBA  
Assuming the role of TBA for the first time

## **PART VI: DISCUSSION**

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### **A. Conceptual shifts in maternal mortality focus in the Tojolabal context**

### **B. Medical anthropology-oriented insight into Tojolabal maternal mortality**

Secular change  
Seasonality  
Meanings of place of care  
Social complications of pregnancy and conflict resolution  
First pregnancies and births  
Maternal morbidity  
Understanding women's own priorities

## **GLOSSARY**

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## **WORKS CITED**

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