

A Mexican Town That Transcends All Borders

By Deborah Sontag

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In the dark before dawn, when the priest bumped his pickup truck through town to wake everyone up, Monica Cruz groaned and put her pillow over her head. In New York City, as the assistant manager of a store in SoHo, she enjoys daylong access to cappuccino. Here in her dusty little hometown, there is not a cup of coffee to be had.

Still, on that not quite morning, Monica, who is 30, gave in to the priest's exhortation by loudspeaker, eased on her black sateen jacket and headed toward the town cemetery with her oversized candle. Other New Yorkers were slipping into the predawn stillness, too -- a busboy from the Friars Club, a nurse from St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center, a maid from the Warwick Hotel. Under a crescent moon over adobe, they felt blissfully far from their daily grind, their bilingual negotiations with the place Chinantla calls simply "over there."

Accompanied by a wheezy brass band and firecrackers, the New Yorkers formed a candlelit procession, in Knicks jackets and Black Sabbath T-shirts, between old women wrapped in shawls and toothless men pounding their canes into the dirt. Lifted outside themselves, they cleared their minds of everything but their town's patron saint, Padre Jesus of Chinantla, purveyor of miracles that transcend borders. This was his day; he had brought them back from New York by the hundreds, as he does every winter, for a week of fiesta. Up the steep hill to the blue church, they sang a birthday song to Padre Jesus, who was festooned with gifts from "over there": \$50 bills, expired immigration documents, a chunky gold name necklace. "Padre Jesus of Chinantla," they sang, "please send your blessings to the so many of us in New York." And with that, Monica, a native New Yorker, felt like weeping, indulging in an operatic release of the tangled emotion that binds her to this pueblito. But she held it in.

"Sometimes I think we all have too much love for this tiny town," she said later, as she lounged with her three younger sisters -- Elizabeth, Melissa and

Antonia -- at their parents' grand brick and marble house, paid for by tens of thousands of floors mopped, orders cooked and garments sewn in New York City.

Almost every migration story is the psychodrama of a family, its aspirations and frustrations, its separations and reunions, its traditions and compromises. For some Latin American and Caribbean immigrants, as for the Cruz family of Chinantla, Mexico, it is also the story of a town, a global village in the most literal sense.

Like many modern immigrant families, those from Chinantla straddle a border, abetted by newly inexpensive air fares, international phone cards, and, now, by a new Mexican law that allows them to retain their Mexican nationality as American citizens and even confers it on their American-born children.

But since their town, too, transcends a border, the Chinantecans' connection between here and there is particularly vibrant. They live divided between Chinantla and New York, but consider themselves one group, 2,500 here, 2,500 there. It might seem paradoxical that a tiny immigrant group could remain intact while assimilating into the life of the city. But, like other Mexicans, and also some small-town Dominicans, Haitians and Ecuadoreans in New York, they have negotiated a double life grounded in the intimacy of their community.

The story of Chinantla is an especially magical one, the multigenerational saga of a pueblito that has been bled of its working-age population through a half-century of emigration to New York. Yet Chinantla has not faded but flourished, a would-be ghost town kept alive by emigrants who consider the place a state of mind, an affair of the heart and their spiritual anchor.

"We couldn't let the town die," said Ramon Cruz, Monica's father, who recently retired to Chinantla 30 years after he first set out for New York. "It would be like spitting in the mirror."

For centuries, the Chinantecans were migratory, wandering from Mexican state to state until they settled under the amate trees in the mountains south of Puebla. And so the modern townspeople, too, consider their town portable. Even as they dwell in the basements of Borough Park and the row houses of Windsor Terrace, the town anchors their psyche. Here or there, their world is Chinantecan, a swirl of baptisms, sweet 15 parties, soccer games and transcontinental town meetings -- all recorded by the town videographer,

Vidal Ramos, who travels back and forth, filming and selling their communal history.

In New York, the first-generation Chinantecan immigrants are waiters and garment workers and bus mechanics. Back home, they are big shots. They are the ones who, working out of a basement in Brooklyn, collected the money that built the town's schools and rebuilt its church, who financed and designed its potable water system and illuminated its streets.

The sons and daughters of peasants who sign their names with inky thumbs, they are also the ones whose American children are almost all headed to college, in college, or graduates. Every January and every summer, their children and grandchildren fill the town square with English, baggy shorts sweeping their knees. Cries of "Wassup?" float through the hot, dry air.

Second-generation, even third-generation New Yorkers learn to be faithful to this scrappy town in one of the poorest regions of Mexico. Teen-age girls from Brooklyn compete every year in the annual pageant to be Senorita Chinantla, Queen of the Mass. And, with their superior gowns and footwear, they usually win, like Monica's friend Patty Ramirez this year.

After a four-hour spectacle complete with multiple costume changes and undulating dance routines, Miss Ramirez, a senior at Franklin D. Roosevelt High School in Brooklyn, got to wear a tiara, carry a scepter and ride a feathered float through town for a week. Beaming pride, she was a world away from the city school with a population bigger than Chinantla's where, by her reckoning, she is "a nobody."

Many older Chinantecans keep their children's connections alive by moving back permanently to the one place where they can be somebody. After 30 years of dislocation, Monica's parents, Ramon and Zoila Cruz, returned triumphant, to an eat-in kitchen, a backyard henhouse and the sweet, bone-deep satisfaction of familiarity.

On their return, Mrs. Cruz, who spent decades folding fabric in a Brooklyn sweatshop, hired a maid. She opened a bodega, from which she dispenses rice and advice. Wearing elegant suits from Macy's, she teeters along the town's rutted roads in high heels, her hair perfectly coiffed.

Mr. Cruz, who dropped out of eighth grade to work the fields, bought his own land, on which he dabbles like a gentleman farmer. In crisp tailored shirts and Bermuda shorts, he is Don Ramon to all, no longer a cook at One Penn Plaza but a candidate for mayor of Chinantla.

When their granddaughter, Samantha Bizarro, a third-generation New Yorker, turned 3, she was sent "home" to Mexico. Grandma was supposed to fatten her up with chicken mole and bean dishes enriched with lard. But it didn't work. She returned as skinny as ever, still devoted to rice cakes and Cheerios. But she had had a taste of something far richer: Chinantla. Another generation was hooked.

Life in Brooklyn

Working Hard, Saving for Chinantla

By early summer, the fiesta had moved north, to the Brooklyn waterfront.

On languorous weekends, gritty Red Hook Park comes to life with picnics and ball games straight out of small-town America -- or, more precisely, Mexican New York. On blankets, women spoon beans and rice onto tortillas. Vendors scoop coconut ices from hand-painted carts and pour tamarind juice into baggies with straws. A ragtag band, cousin to the musicians in Chinantla, clangs its way through classics like "Cielito Lindo."

Furious soccer occupies center stage at the park, home to the newest of the city's nine Mexican leagues, which comprise 262 teams (including two representing Chinantla) and 5,000 players. All of this soccer reflects the mushrooming of New York City's Mexican population, which has quadrupled since 1990, making the Mexicans the fastest-growing immigrant group in the city.

They are also the fourth-largest over all, after the Dominicans, the Chinese and the Jamaicans. There are 230,000 Mexicans in the city, and an additional 100,000 in the metropolitan area.

Under each shade tree at Red Hook Park, a different town gathers, sketching a map of Mexico. One recent Saturday, a Chinantecan player arrived and shouted, "Oye, where's Chinantla?" Another pointed toward the East River: "Over there, to the west of Atencingo, and the south of Ahuehuetitla."

With the warmth of summer, the Chinantecans' spirits had risen considerably since their return in February. At that point, having spent all their money on plane tickets and presents, on lavish goat roasts and cockfight gambling, they faced a sobering reimmersion in work.

By Memorial Day weekend, the dapper Cosme Bermejo was beaming when the soccer jerseys he had manufactured were voted Best Team Uniform by the

Mexican League of Brooklyn/Red Hook Park. But in February, he was not thrilled to plunge into round-the-clock production at his Brooklyn T-shirt shop. By June, the Professor -- Arturo Simon, a former teacher -- was shouting himself hoarse at the soccer finals, but in February, he was morosely pocketing the key to his estate in Chinantla to work double shifts at the Friars Club.

And by July, Melissa Cruz, 26, was re-energized by a summer trip to Mexico, contemplating medical school, with a gust of ambition. But in February, right after the rush of carrying a flaming torch in an all-night devotional run for Padre Jesus, she had grumpily donned her nurse's whites and resumed checking heart monitors at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in Manhattan.

When they first returned, the townsfolk scattered to their homes in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Long Island and New Jersey, where they complained about feeling "locked in" and grew wistful about the town square, which sits in a bowl of hills dotted with saguaro cactus.

Before long, though, they were gathering again in the alternative town centers they have created in New York: their social club in the back of the Garcia Superette on Church Avenue in Brooklyn, and "the cave," a cellar near Prospect Park that features a shrine to Padre Jesus, complete with burgundy draperies and flowers refreshed before every Sunday's devotional service. The Cruz sisters live in yet another center, a little Chinantla amid the Hasidim in Borough Park. Almost all the tenants in their graffiti-scarred building are Chinantecan; they shop for tortillas around the corner at La Chinanteca, the only store in the ultra-Orthodox Jewish neighborhood that sells photographs of Padre Jesus.

In Chinantla, which the sisters visit at least once a year, they have their own rooms, with queen-size beds and frilly comforters. In Brooklyn, where their parents visit them every six months, three of the four split a \$700-a-month one-bedroom apartment.

Monica and Melissa, grown women, share a flimsy mattress on a metal frame in a makeshift room separated from the kitchen by a curtain. Pictures of Padre Jesus, Karl Marx and Mexican balladeers adorn the walls. (Marx -- on sale for \$2 -- was an impulse purchase when Monica was studying Marxism in college.) Books and papers are piled high; both women are studying for master's degrees, Monica in political science, Melissa in advanced nursing.

The real bedroom, which used to be their parents', now belongs to Antonia, 24; her husband, Claudio Bizarro, a busboy; 6-month-old Brandon, and Samantha, a kindergartner with perpetual pigtails.

Fifteen blocks away, the fourth sister, Elizabeth, 29, a bilingual education teacher, her husband, Cuauhtemoc Tlatelpa, a cook who aspires to be an architect, and their 2-year-old son live in the renovated basement of an Orthodox family's house.

Bilingual and college-educated, the Cruz sisters work better jobs than their parents ever did, with paid vacation, sick leave and health benefits. But, American citizens all, they still live like new immigrants, crowded together, pooling their incomes, sharing cooking, cleaning and child care. They are hard-wired to scrimp on comfort and squirrel away money for the future.

It is no wonder they remain attached to Chinantla, a place of winter fiestas and summer vacations, of comfort and pride.

"In New York, Daddy was a cook," Monica said. "In Chinantla, he's 'the man.' And we're his daughters."

The Beginning

Hitchhikers Set Off A Vast Migration

Chinantla's migration started as a lark 53 years ago, when Pedro Simon and his brother, Fermin, hitched a ride to New York City with an Italian-American tourist they met in Mexico City.

Mr. Simon, who agreed grumpily to a quick interview in January, is now an elderly resident of Chinantla who owns the gracious house next door to the Cruzes. His father was a quartermaster in Zapata's army, and his daughter is a major in the United States Army. In his world, he is a historic figure.

The leading expert on Mexicans in New York, Prof. Robert C. Smith of Barnard College, believes Mr. Simon personally spawned the chain of migration from the Mixtec region, which spans the states of Puebla, Guerrero and Oaxaca and whose immigrants account for the bulk of the Mexican population in New York.

Mr. Simon and his brother really wanted to go to Texas to pick fruit. New York, so far from the border, was not on their map. But they were unable to bribe their way into a bracero, or guest-worker, contract. So they turned for help to a friend, who introduced them to the tourist, who volunteered to drive

them across the border. Warm and generous, the man took them all the way to Times Square, put them up in a hotel and got them jobs mopping floors at a restaurant.

The day they decided to stay in the city, Mr. Simon said, they left their hotel feeling celebratory, only to be showered by confetti in Times Square. It was V-E Day.

Relative by relative, the kinship network followed them northward. But the first wavelet did not come until the 1960's, when Mr. and Mrs. Cruz were young sweethearts.

Mr. Cruz had been working in the fields in Texas, but kitchen work in New York sounded far more appealing. (Still, he never forgot Texas; when he opened a short-lived restaurant in Elmhurst, Queens, in the late 1980's, he called it "The Bracero.")

Like most Chinantecans, the Cruzes did not cross the border like so-called wetbacks, but flew in on tourist visas. Still, their intention was to work, and they quickly found menial jobs. Before long, they had two American-born daughters, Cecilia and then Monica. Based on Cecilia's birth, they applied for legal residency, which used to be granted routinely in similar circumstances.

It was supremely important to the Cruzes that the girls be baptized in Chinantla, so, while their residency application was pending, they flew home. They stayed with Mr. Cruz's parents in their squat adobe house by the ravine. The concrete floor was sprayed with a strong fumigant, probably DDT, to combat mosquitoes and scorpions. Little Cecilia ingested the poison in play; she fell violently ill. Mrs. Cruz swept up the girl in her arms, and ran sobbing through the streets to find the priest. Her dying child was baptized at the very final moment.

Cecilia's death was an unshakeable trauma, particularly for Mrs. Cruz. Then, after Cecilia died, the American Embassy in Mexico City made matters worse. It denied the Cruzes' application for residency, suspecting fraud because they could produce neither the child nor a death certificate.

This embittered Mr. Cruz, who felt he was being punished for the death of his child. Three months later, he and his wife struck out for the United States again, with forged documents. "We defied them," he said.

It was the beginning of 15 years of back and forth. Three more girls were born, Elizabeth in Chinantla, Melissa and Antonia in New York. They were all taken

home and left with their grandparents; their parents worked round the clock, there was no day care available and they didn't believe in it anyway. They felt their little town was far saner for children.

That the nuclear family had to be separated was grim fact to most Chinantecans. The present had to be sacrificed for the future, they felt. The family was working toward a better life, and they had no doubts that their bonds would remain strong.

The Cruz sisters remember their childhood in Chinantla with great affection. They played jacks with rocks, and sold lemonade in the town square. They dug holes in the dirt road and covered them with plastic to trick the burros, who stumbled, sending the girls into peals of laughter.

On one trip home, Mr. and Mrs. Cruz bought a small house of their own. The next trip was involuntary. Mr. Cruz, to his everlasting humiliation, was picked up by immigration agents, jailed for 15 days, and deported. The Cruzes decided enough was enough. They were tired of being illegal, tired of working so hard. They opened a small store in Chinantla, and swore they would never return to the United States.

Then, as fate would have it, they got the call that, after so many years, they were to get their green cards. Mrs. Cruz didn't want to return. "I had lost my New York head," she said. But Mr. Cruz felt they couldn't turn down the opportunity "to elevate our life style even further."

It was 1979, and Monica was 13. Her parents sat her down and delivered earth-shattering news: she was American, born in New York City. She refused to believe it. "Look at this face, this brown face," she shouted. "Is this not a Mexican face?" She ran away into the hills and hid under an amate tree.

Her youngest sister, Antonia, who was only 6, bubbled over with excitement. She announced that the next time she returned to Chinantla she would be blonde. (And indeed she was.)

"I remember it was a green van that came to take us away," Melissa said. "I remember driving off and a long line of dogs following us, barking. We were all crying. My father said something like, 'Look forward, not back.' And then it was like fingers snapped and we were landing at Kennedy. The chapter in Chinantla was closed."

Or so they thought.

The Divisions

One Community, But Tensions, Too

On a Sunday morning in her Bensonhurst apartment, Elbia Cruz, the sisters' aunt, wore curlers and an "I Love Chinantla" T-shirt. She welcomed a reporter she had never met with kisses on each cheek, and homemade tostadas. Then she worked herself to tears expressing a disdain shared by many Chinantecans for those immigrants who don't love New York.

"People say New York is a pigsty," said Ms. Cruz, a retired housekeeper. "They say we work like slaves here. I say my thanks to God and to New York every night. We made ourselves here. And we remade Chinantla. Were it not for New York, Chinantla would be dead, like a corpse."

By the 1970's, it was clear that the only way for a Chinantecan to survive financially was to leave Chinantla. This reality produced a collective pang of conscience, and a kind of unspoken social contract emerged. Leaving could not be solely for the betterment of the individual but for that of the town as well.

"The Chinantecan defines himself by what he gives to his town," said Adan Lazaro, 44, a bell captain at the Princeton Club and president of the Mexican-American Athletic Club.

From the beginning, Chinantecans tithed a portion of their earnings to their town. They formed the New York Committee, which developed a census of Chinantecan immigrants. When they were raising money for a specific project, they divided up addresses and crisscrossed the metropolitan area on what they called "la colecta."

Their first present was a brick floor for the town square so feet would not get muddy during the winter fiesta. The immigrants offered it, Professor Smith said, as "humble expatriates simply wishing to do something from New York for their hometown." Over the years, however, the committee grew into a kind of shadow municipal government, which believes its "cave" in Brooklyn to be the town's real center of power, said Professor Smith, who has studied Chinantla for a decade.

The committee consists only of men, by now in their 50's, but it has spawned at least five subcommittees that are more inclusive. One raises money for and plans the annual 300-mile torch run from a cathedral in Mexico City to the

church in Chinantla. Another plans the simultaneous torch run that takes place in Manhattan.

The committee meets on Sundays, its members snaking an extension cord down into the cave so they can watch soccer on television. As if it were a uniform, the men wear blue jeans and black leather jackets. Sometimes they gather around a cellular phone for conferences with the municipal government; sometimes they videotape their meetings and send the tapes south.

For the potable water project, the New Yorkers raised \$100,000 in small donations, and breathlessly tracked the work through teleconferences with contractors and weekend trips to Chinantla.

"Our priority has been to give this little town its most basic needs," said Abel Alonso, the committee's president. "We have changed the physiognomy of the town." The committee's motto is immortalized on an ink stamp: "To Chinantla and its future: The absent ones are always present."

To the official government of Chinantla, the motto has the faint ring of a threat. But that has to be ignored, said Dr. Francisco R. Calixto, the Mayor, because, "We have no other source of income besides New York."

The New Yorkers send about \$2 million a year home to Chinantla, according to Professor Smith. Scores of American pension checks and Social Security checks also arrive every month to help support retirees.

Still, Dr. Calixto obstinately describes the relationship between the town and its expatriates as if it were a simple cultural exchange and not a mutual dependency. "We send tacos there," he said, "and they bring hamburgers here."

At the behest of the Governor of Puebla state, Manuel Bartlett, Dr. Calixto traveled to New York in 1996 to embrace the immigrants -- and give them a shopping list of municipal improvements they might consider financing. But there are tensions between those who live here and there about what should be done.

The New Yorkers want to preserve the town's charm, and the locals want to modernize. The expatriates grew furious when some cobblestone streets were paved, and when the church's antique pews, with their rippled wood, were smoothed so they would supposedly be more comfortable. (When several of

Dr. Calixto's relatives were hired to do the work, the relationship between the Mayor and the New Yorkers soured.)

There are also tensions about who should have power, who should get credit and who really needs help, the town or the immigrants. Dr. Calixto said he intended to sponsor Mexican Spanish classes for the expatriates' "poor children," who are being "infected" by Caribbean Spanish. He lamented the teen-agers lost to gangs and the respiratory problems developed in sweatshops.

Everyone who lives in Chinantla knows about failed trips to the North. There is a sad sack of a homeless man who has barely budged from a park bench since his return, and a young couple who contracted AIDS and came back to die.

Amid the cellular phones and satellite dishes that have plugged the town into the outside world, the Mayor thinks that they should be the silent advocates of caution to those who would sell their little houses and venture north unprepared for hardship.

The Compromises

Small-Town Girls Trapped in the City

At Chinantla's one hotel, where rooms cost \$8 a night and the management promises "nothing will sting you," two young men dressed like Brooklyn homeboys discussed their flight from New York. Richard Calixto was mockingly indignant. The American woman sitting beside him on the plane had asked what he did for a living, interrupting herself to say, "Let me guess! Dishwasher!"

Mr. Calixto, 30, is a cost analyst for a real estate firm in Chelsea. He and his wife, who is also Chinantecan, own a travel agency in Brooklyn, too, catering to Mexicans.

The Calixtos belong to an elite of Chinantecans whose businesses help those in New York maintain connections with home. Mr. Calixto, the American-born son of Manhattan hotel workers, credits his parents for taking him back to Mexico for high school. Like many Chinantecan parents, they wanted to protect him from the vices of New York, and he believes they did just that.

"I think it changed my whole life coming down here," he said. "It centered me. If I stayed in New York, I don't know what would have become of me."

The Cruz sisters, though, were following a reverse route when they returned to New York in the late 1970's.

At first they savored the luxuries of the developed world. They reveled in indoor showers after a lifetime of crouching beneath upturned pots of bracing well water.

But they also mourned the loss of their small-town freedom. They bounced off the walls of their family's first apartment, outdoorsy girls trapped in a Brooklyn efficiency.

While their parents worked, they looked after one another. They were so close, and so accustomed to cramming into one tiny room with their two bunk beds, that when they briefly lived in a five-room apartment they refused to split up.

Before day broke, their mother would leave for work at a garment factory on DeKalb Avenue whose name she has erased from her memory. Their father would sleep late because he always worked a late shift as a cook, first at the former Copacabana, then at the One Penn Plaza restaurant, cooking Buffalo wings and spaghetti.

The sisters competed to get 97's and 98's on tests. Their father hovered and lectured, drilling them in geography and world politics. He did not tolerate television watching. He did not let the girls date. They were very good girls, and remain loyal to this day.

"Our parents gave us everything, and they gave up everything for us," Melissa said. "All they wanted us to do was go to school and make a better person of ourselves, and not end up doing the jobs they're doing."

For the first eight years, they could not afford a single trip to Mexico. Then, when their father landed the One Penn Plaza job, which paid union wages, they began the custom of regular visits home. On one of those trips, Elizabeth met her future husband, Cuauhtemoc, a Chinantecan.

But it was Antonia, the youngest and always the rebel, who married first. She met her husband, Claudio, then a new immigrant from the state of Morelos, at a volleyball game organized by a Chinantecan youth group. Antonia had infuriated her parents by dropping out of high school when she got engaged. Still, her wedding party was a declaration of just how far the family -- and the community -- had come. Mr. Cruz rented the Roseland Ballroom and invited le tout Chinantla, as well as half of neighboring Piaxtla and some of nearby Tehuitzingo.

Elizabeth, the most studious sister, waited until she completed her master's degree in bilingual education to marry Cuauhtemoc. Befitting the very serious bride, it was a more subdued event, although the groom did dress like a gaucho. After their wedding, Elizabeth, the only daughter born in Mexico, forced herself to become a United States citizen. Raising her hand for the pledge of allegiance, she panicked at what she considered a betrayal of her identity. She mouthed the words while thinking to herself, "I'm doing this for my husband," who obtained a green card through their marriage.

Monica and Melissa joke that all the Chinantecan boys are taken and that they'll have to range farther afield. But they are in no hurry, for their ambitions, if at times scattered, are great.

Monica, an on-again, off-again graduate student in political science at the CUNY Graduate Center, wants to go to law school and practice public interest law, either in New York or Mexico. But lately she has been drifting from her goal, sucked into her social life and the routine of her job as assistant manager of a health food store.

Melissa, the nurse, intends to write her master's thesis on rural public health issues in Chinantla; then, she wants to go to medical school. "Imagine," she said, "a doctor in the house!"

At the same time, both fantasize about returning to Mexico and opening a cafe/bar in Puebla; next fall, in between academic subjects, they will be studying bartending.

As she sat on a crate between bottles of hot sauce and bags of rice in her bodega in Chinantla, Mrs. Cruz was asked if she was proud of how far her family had come in a generation.

She pursed her lips.

"Two are still single, and they don't have all their diplomas yet," she said.

For a demanding immigrant mother, the jury is still out.

The Legend

Finding Comfort In Padre Jesus

Every Chinantecan home in the New York area has a photograph of Padre Jesus, and some have wooden replicas of the statue. The legend is passed on as a bedtime story to children in Winnie the Pooh pajamas.

In the 1700's, missionaries carrying a wooden statue of Jesus passed through Chinantla heading south. They laid the icon down beneath a tree, ate salt-encrusted tortillas, and took a nap. When they were ready to continue their journey, they could not budge the statue. But when they sought help from the townspeople, they were stunned to discover that the Chinantecans could lift Padre Jesus with ease.

This inexplicable phenomenon was considered a sign from above that the statue should be left in the blue church on the hill. And from that time on, Padre Jesus, now of Chinantla, was considered the town's patron saint, and the town put itself in his hands.

Arturo Simon's wife, Rosalba, now an ace garment worker at Sweaters of the World in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, cut off her shimmering knee-length hair and gave it to Padre Jesus before she and her husband emigrated.

And Elizabeth Cruz, belly bulging with her first child, lowered herself to her knees in her Brooklyn apartment and crossed herself before his photo. It had been a difficult pregnancy and she was confined to bed. "If we survive," she promised, "I will bring my baby to you in Chinantla to be baptized." By early this year -- "miracle of miracles," she said -- Elizabeth was sending out engraved invitations, inviting all of Chinantecan New York to the biggest baptism party of the season, on her parents' terraced patio in Chinantla during the winter fiesta.

Rites of Passage

'Does Time Move More Slowly Here?'

On the morning of the party, skinned goats swung from the trees in the backyard. Old women were sifting through bags of rice, plucking out dirt. The four Cruz sisters were stringing the patio with baby blue streamers and setting out long banquet tables and plastic chairs bearing the Corona beer logo.

"Is it just me, or does time move more slowly here?" Antonia asked her husband, Claudio, who shrugged. Claudio was a one-man exercise in contrasts, wearing a cowboy hat, boots, a tooled belt that said Mexico and a Baby Bjorn baby carrier, with baby Brandon, straight from yuppie New York.

A half-dozen college-age women arrived to help with the preparations. Leticia Lopez, a business major at Berkeley College in Paramus, N.J., turned her face to the sun, and sighed, rubbing her Fila sneaker in the dirt.

"I wish the sky back there was like this, nice and blue," she said. "It's so nice and quiet here, too. People don't go through the same crazy routine: wake up, go to school, go to work, go home, eat dinner, go to sleep. Down here, life has time to breathe."

Down the street, the boy of honor, 2-year-old Christian de Jesus, was plunked into the official town barber's chair, at the Esthetic Clinic, for a \$1 baptism-special buzz cut.

At 2 P.M., the ubiquitous town band showed up to parade Christian and his parents through Chinantla. Christian was dressed in a white captain's suit with gold braiding. A toy saber hung from his side. Holding his parents' hands, he climbed the steep, rocky path to the church.

Exhausted by the anticipation, Christian fell sound asleep just as the ceremony began. As his godfather, his Uncle Claudio, held him in his arms, the priest, in green robes, poured cups of water over his closed eyes. His parents' faces crumpled; tears spilled.

"Now my promise has been fulfilled," Elizabeth said.

When they arrived home with the first party guests, Melissa was still in jeans and T-shirt, grungy from a marathon cleaning. "You better go take a shower," said a Mexico City cousin. "You look like an American."

Melissa waited until the cousin had moved on, then wrinkled her nose and said, "Well, I am an American!" She hesitated, then added, "Sort of," and her friends, the college-age women, smiled knowingly.

"We're -- what are those dogs called? -- mutts," Leticia said.

The New York-born Chinantecans are not conflicted about their identities. They know instinctively that their attachment to Chinantla is healthy, that it gives them a rich identity, and a keen, even enviable sense of community in New York City.

But they do maintain a kind of jokey banter that reflects some tension. When the sisters' uncle settled into an armchair with a bottle of tequila to narrate the tale of their grandfather's role as messenger for Zapata, Antonia rolled her eyes. "I hate it when he gets so Mexican," she said. And when Antonia's husband, at her request, wore the Baby Bjorn to the cock fights, their uncle rolled his eyes. "All this kowtowing to the wives, it's so un-Mexican," he says.

While they all idealize Chinantla, most of the young people know in their guts that it would be difficult to live permanently in such a small, conservative society, where eyebrows are raised when a female office worker at Town Hall lights up a cigarette.

For the baptism party, Monica felt compelled by her parents to stuff herself into a short, tight black dress, pantyhose and high heels. But she was terribly uncomfortable and looked it. She stood apart from the party, venturing forth to hug her father once in a while. She felt a little out of place.

"This is my favorite spot in the world," she said. "I count the days until my next trip down here. But I'm afraid I've outgrown it a little."

Earnestly, her sister Melissa says that if she had to make a choice, she would rather live a tranquil life in Chinantla. In the next breath, though, she acknowledges that her loyalty will never have to be put to the test.

"We're lucky," she said. "We really don't have to choose between here and there."

In their father's will, the family house in Chinantla is left to all the sisters, and they are forbidden to sell. So they will have a key to Chinantla forever, and the freighted privilege of two homes, two worlds.