

# From Global Decisions and Local Changes The ceremonial dance of the Voladores becomes UNESCO intangible cultural heritage

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse le pouvoir de transformation que peut exercer l'inscription d'une pratique culturelle sur les listes du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l'UNESCO. Il prend pour étude de cas la cérémonie rituelle des Voladores, une danse rituelle pratiquée dans plusieurs régions du Mexique depuis l'époque précoloniale. En 2009, elle a été déclarée deuxième des sept pratiques culturelles immatérielles listées par l'UNESCO au Mexique. Cet article examine, à partir du point de vue des acteurs, en quoi les perceptions et l'exécution de cette danse se sont modifiées après cette déclaration. L'intérêt des touristes et des institutions s'est accru au niveau national et international ; par conséquent, les danseurs ont pu gagner des sommes d'argent importantes et obtenir une reconnaissance sociale par le biais des représentations publiques de cette danse, qui ont fait du rituel une ressource économique et sociale. D'un côté, cette nouvelle fonction a fait changer la cérémonie de manière à la rendre plus attractive pour les touristes ; de l'autre côté, une tendance à la revitalisation et à la préservation d'éléments traditionnels est également entrée en jeu. Cela s'est en partie déroulé par l'intermédiaire des Directives de sauvegarde de l'UNESCO, mises de l'avant également par de nombreux danseurs qui redoutaient de « voir leur culture bradée aux touristes ». À première vue, ces deux aspects pourraient sembler mutuellement exclusifs, mais cet article montrera que le modèle binaire de « culture contre commerce » ne peut pas procurer de cadre conceptuel adéquat pour bien saisir les complexités du fonctionnement culturel.

# FROM GLOBAL DECISIONS AND LOCAL CHANGES

*The ceremonial dance of the Voladores becomes UNESCO intangible cultural heritage*

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## Introduction

...the sun is the father and the earth is the mother; we are sent to the heights and we carry this energy; and we carry this seed which fertilizes the earth. This is how we see it; this is how we feel it.<sup>1</sup>

The *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador*, also known as *Danza del Volador*,<sup>2</sup> is a ritual dance or ceremony, today mainly practiced in Mexico. Its origins can be traced back to the Mesoamerican pre-classic period (Nájera Coronado, 2008: 51ff). It is not only known because it is spectacular but also because of its rich symbolic meaning as an expression of Mesoamerican indigenous culture in ancient, as well as in present times.

About fifty years ago, the ceremony was primarily practiced in indigenous communities of a few ethnic groups in eastern Mexico, such as the Otomí, Nahuatl, and especially the Totonac people, who comprised most Voladores-dancers in Mexico and are still known best for this dance. It was usually practiced as a fertility ritual at festive activities, as well as a syncretistic ceremony to honor God and the saints, for example on

1. Translation by the author; direct quote: "...el sol es el padre la tierra es la madre nosotros somos enviados a las alturas y traemos esa energía y traemos esa semilla que fertiliza la tierra, así lo vemos así nos sentimos." – statement of a Volador explaining the meaning of the *danza del Volador*.
2. My informants generally preferred the name *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* referring to the full ceremony. Since the ceremony is understood as a traditional dance among other important ritual dances, occasionally the term *Danza del Volador* – "dance of the flying man" was also in use. With the term "ceremony" I denote a spiritual act which is carried out within a specific pattern (see van Bremen, 1995: 3).

*fiestas patronales* — annual celebrations dedicated to the patron saint of a community (Bertels, 1993: 96). Outside the indigenous communities the ceremony was seldom seen in public places. With the rise of “culture” as a significant factor for international tourism, (see Timothy and Boyd, 2003), the dance became increasingly popular among cultural tourists from Mexico itself, but also from all over the world. Because of the growing popularity and its potential as an impressive symbol for a multicultural nation (Bertels, 1993: 299), the State of Mexico applied in 2008 for recognition of the ceremony as representative of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity at the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization* (UNESCO) and was officially listed in 2009. Due to its international importance, recognition by UNESCO of a cultural element as “official heritage” always provokes supranational impacts that local actors have to deal with one way or another. This impact often leads to different changes of the inscribed element and it applies especially to intangible heritage, since under the given circumstances the performing people as “bearers” of the respective element are in focus. Instead of naming a static object, the attribute “intangible” refers to practices in constant recreation, which are carried out by the people performing them and shaping them differently in every new context (Tauschek, 2010: 32ff, Hauser-Schäublin and Klenke, 2010: 25f).

This paper is going to analyze some of the impacts that the UNESCO declaration had on the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador*, focusing especially on the notable changes in the executive process of the dance. The findings presented in this paper are based on data the author collected during four months of research in Veracruz, Mexico among Voladores of the Totonac people aged between 17 and 86 years. At the beginning of the research the hypothesis was stated that the declaration as UNESCO Intangible Heritage initiated a transformation process in different aspects of the ceremony, which led to an increasing commodification of this cultural element. The methodology during the research included biographic and semi-structured interviews, methods from the cultural domain analysis such as freelists and a consensus analysis, as well as a standardized questionnaire.

### **The *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador***

The entire *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* consists of four different episodes, which include the selection, preparation and positioning of a pole 25-30 meters in height, made from the trunk of a special type of tree, as well



Figure 1. Photograph of a *vuelo* taken by the author.

as the main part of the dance known as *vuelo* – flight. The latter is the most important part of the ceremony and is often perceived as the actual dance. Because the dance is currently so popular among tourists, it is presented many times a day on numerous occasions. Thus, the performance is usually limited to the *vuelo* part. In its implementation, four young men secured by ropes launch themselves upside down from a wooden pole while a fifth sits on top of the pole playing a reed flute and a drum. A rotary drum is mounted at the upper end of this pole where a rectangle of wooden beams is attached with the ropes. Between this square and the rotating drum, four ropes of equal length are rolled up, the ends of which the four men tie around their waists. The fifth man, called the *caporal*, scales the rotary drum, stands up on top of it and plays a small drum and a bamboo flute while performing some dance steps. Afterwards he sits down on the rotary drum, occupies a stable position and the other four men let themselves fall over backwards. Now the rotary drum begins to rotate and unwind the ropes, so that the men are orbiting the pole, “flying” until they reach the ground. At a height of about two meters, they turn up to land on their feet. When the fifth man has scaled down the pole and all men have performed some dance steps accompanied by the sound of flute and drum, the *vuelo* is over and so is the ceremony.

*The famous "Voladores de Papantla"*

Nowadays a performance of the *vuelo* is a popular attraction in many parts of Mexico, where it can be attended in public spaces such as plazas, festivals, and in parks as well as, for example, the UNESCO's world heritage site *Xochimilco* and the National Museum of Anthropology and History, in exchange for a few pesos. The growing fame of the ceremony as a touristic attraction in the last decade has also led to an increasing popularity of the Totonac People as an ethnic group, widely known mainly for the archaeological excavation *El Tajín* and now also for the *Danza del Volador*. Most Voladores groups who travel through the country performing the ceremony in public places are originally from the *municipio*<sup>3</sup> Papantla (Bertels, 1993: 96). This fact might be the main reason why the dancers are equally known by the name *Voladores de Papantla*, even though the ceremony is practiced among various other ethnic groups in different places, as previously mentioned.

Most Voladores from Papantla perform the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* for a touristic audience as a part-time job and few of them rely completely on it as a livelihood. Today a total of almost 450 Voladores from Totonacapan are organized in associations that facilitate the internal coordination of the dancers. Two representatives of each association form the *consejo para la protección y preservación de la ceremonia ritual de voladores AC*, the "general council of the Voladores" which coordinates activities of the dancers in the whole region.

As mentioned above, the ceremony nowadays is often limited to the *vuelo*, which means that in order to preserve the complete ceremony, the general council organizes at least one full performance a year, normally on the occasion of *Corpus Christi* in which especially the young generation of Voladores participates to get to know the less often practiced parts of it. In this context they also have to learn a commonly shared version of the myth of the tradition's origins. It tells the story of a drought that the god of the sun initiated because the people stopped heeding and thanking the gods for their gifts, becoming increasingly arrogant. This punishment could only be ended by five young men who had to climb up a high tree, that the sun god had selected, to receive the seed of fertility from the sun god himself as a channel to bring it down to Mother Earth. One of them stood on top of the tree and led the dialogue between the sky and the earth, while the other four, who represented the four cardinal points, received

3. *Municipio* is a term for an administration unit for land subdivisions. It could be translated as municipality.

the seed of fertility with which they sank down to the ground to fertilize the earth and end the drought.<sup>4</sup>

This myth shows the central role of the *vuelo* for the performance of the ceremony, but also indicates the importance of the act of choosing and preparing the right pole in advance, as well as the expression of gratitude for the spiritual world.

#### *Performance cycle of the ceremony*

While the presentation of the *vuelo* takes approximately 15 to 20 minutes, the complete implementation of the ceremony takes several days and around 200 men have to be involved in order to complete it. In the following paragraphs, this process will be summarized to provide an overview.

At first, the group of dancers, in the presence of other men from their community, looks for a suitable tree. The type of tree traditionally used is called *Tsakatkiwi* and has to be preferably tall and with a straight growth. The men are led by the *caporal* of the Voladores group, who represents an intermediary between the supernatural beings and humans, playing his drum and flute to ask the supernatural beings of the forests through his melodies for permission to cut the tree. If an adequate tree of the right height and figure is found, the men bring different offerings such as liquor from sugar cane, tobacco, eggs and flowers and adulate the guardian of the forest known as *Kiwikgolo* whilst five of the group continue dancing. Afterwards all the men withdraw from the place leaving the offerings for the *Kiwikgolo* and other spirits of the forest, represented by masks placed under the chosen tree.

Four days later all participants from before gather again around the chosen tree and, while the *caporal* plays a melody, it is cut down by each participant in turn. When the tree has fallen down, the next step — the so called *arrastre* or “dragging” begins for which the branches are chopped off and a rope is wrapped around the trunk. Now up to 200 men have to participate, partly lifting it up and carrying it on their shoulders, partly dragging it to its destination point. All this work is understood as meant to be done by men only. Women aren’t strictly forbidden to be present during the ceremony, but traditionally they don’t take part in it.<sup>5</sup>

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4. This story was told by various informants during the field study and is reported above in a shortened version in the author’s own words.

5. So while women belonging to the Totonac community normally wouldn’t even

In the following step the part of the *siembra* – “sowing” is initiated. For this stage, a deep pit has already been dug into which the pole is placed, after a living black hen is thrown in followed by the pouring in of a bottle of liquor. This offering serves to satisfy the supernatural spirits’ thirst for blood, so that the men to later dance on the pole won’t be harmed. After the offering takes place, the pole is lifted up to a straight position and is equipped with the rotary drum and the wooden rectangle so that the final part, the *vuelo* can be performed.

#### *Historical background*

From the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century ritual dances are mentioned which coincide with the modern *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* in so many aspects, that it is very likely those dances are contemporary forms of the same ceremony. Those dances are mainly described by Spanish chroniclers, but can also be found in some codices dated shortly after the Spanish conquest. Most illustrations and references originate from today’s central Mexico, which, for this and other reasons, leads some anthropologists to the conclusion that the ceremony’s origin can be traced back to this area from where it was spread by the Toltec people extending its popularity (Bertels 1993: 50ff, Stresser-Péan 1989: 116).

Many authors presume that this dance originated from a fertility or sun ritual (see Chenaut, 1995: 202; Gipson, 1971: 272; Krickeberg, 1918-1922: 53f; Tudela, 1946: 73; Stresser-Péan, 1989: 114). While the first assumption is poorly documented by ethno-historical data, the second one can be justified by the illustrated costumes of the Voladores as birds or more specifically, eagles, which are closely linked to the sun god in Mesoamerican mythology (Bertels, 1993: 60f). The famous chronicler Torquemada interprets the number of turns the Voladores need until they reach the ground as related to the Mesoamerican calendar. He states that every man does exactly 13 turns, which he links to the Aztec time cycle of 52 years to complete one period (4 Voladores performing 13 turns = 52) and by doing so he indicates a mythological purpose of the dance as well. This element can be found in various sources though admittedly, it is very likely that many authors from different times refer to Torquemada’s account (45ff).

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Forbidden as a blasphemous practice during the Conquista, the show up, through the increasing interest taken in the ceremony, more women from different cities or even other countries have come to watch as visitors, or women as part of a press team have joined the ongoing action.

*Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* has a long history of being ostracized as a heathen and backward tradition. Even after the Mexican revolution, many ancient indigenous cultural elements were frowned upon as anti-modernistic and therefore not fitting in the idea of a modern Mexican Mestizo-nation. To sustain the dance during times of religious persecution, some dancers presented it as a harmless attraction performed for entertainment purposes only. This way the ceremony was kept alive, but much of the related knowledge about its purpose and spiritual meaning was not passed on to future generations (Bertels, 1993: 301f).

### **The ceremony on its way to becoming UNESCO Heritage**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* has become increasingly popular as an indigenous cultural element representing autochthonous Mexico and presented in a spectacular and public form. In the late 1970s the state began, for the first time, to support more participation by indigenous people and at the same time acquired indigenous cultural elements as symbols for multiculturalism and diversity within the nation (Korsbaek *et al.*, 2007: 204f; Meentzen, 2007: 49ff). Mexico named the ceremony as a “national treasure” in 1980, so that it became a public symbol for national identity (see Bertels, 1993: 297). Ever since the State of Mexico showed a strong interest in nominations to UNESCO, it seemed only a matter of time until the ceremony would be proposed to the secretariat of the Intergovernmental Committee (IGC) as a contender for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage when the category of “intangible cultural heritage” was added to the already existing labels “cultural heritage” and “natural heritage.”

The acknowledgement of intangible culture as possible elements for a UNESCO title began officially in 1992 with the program *Intangible Cultural Heritage*, which was followed by the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity* in 1997 (Smeets, 2004: 139). This category was mainly criticized for its scope. A masterpiece generally names a product at the end of its formation process, but one of the aims of the program was to include the process itself, as well as the formatting “masters” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004: 53). So, in October 2003 the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage* was approved and came into effect on the 20<sup>th</sup> of April 2006. This convention set forth new standards for safeguarding intangible culture and finalized the concept of intangible cultural elements, so that today it is understood as the main orientation point for defining intangible world heritage (Tauschek, 2010:



65). It includes the following five domains for classification:

- i) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage;
- ii) performing arts;
- iii) social practices, rituals and festive events;
- iv) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe;
- v) traditional craftsmanship (UNESCO, 2012a).

Not only in terms of intangible heritage, but also with respect to material heritage, Mexico is the nation with the most UNESCO declarations on the American continent. Since 1985 it is a member of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee and today it counts 32 World Heritage Sites, not including intangible heritage (UNESCO, 2015).

When it came to apply for nominations of intangible cultural elements, Mexico had already set a precedent with the indigenous celebrations dedicated to the deceased, known as the *Día de los Muertos*, becoming part of the program *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*. This was later transferred to the representative list of Intangible Cultural Heritage after the Convention of 2003 was implemented. Today Mexico counts seven elements on this list and one more on the Best Practice list. The ceremony of the Voladores was officially put on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 as the second element after the *Día de los Muertos* (UNESCO, 2012b).

### The aftermath of the declaration

As a direct consequence of the UNESCO declaration, several changes are observable within the procedure of the ceremony that are closely linked to a transforming view on some interpretative aspects of the ceremony as well. One of the most obvious components is its increasing touristic use as I was told in many interviews: “*And more tourists come to see us because we are declared now, and more tourists come to Papantla... or Mexico in general. We hope that there will come even more. There is more publicity now. That’s why.*”<sup>6</sup>

6. Translation by the author; direct quote: “*Y vienen más turistas por como le digo como somos declarados y vienen más turistas si aquí en Papantla... bueno por lo que es México. Esperamos que vengan todavía más. Hay más publicidad. Y por eso.*” – original statement from a Volador answering the question on what has changed since the UNESCO declaration.

This should be seen as part of a continuing process, which was already visible before the declaration (see Bertels, 1993: 277ff) and is now catalysed by the UNESCO-Title. In fact, most of my interviewees (75.8% of the Voladores questioned) were convinced that public interest had increased since the declaration.

Doubtlessly in general, the increasing international attention that a UNESCO certified element is endowed with following a declaration is often linked to a growing touristic interest in the cultural element (see Bendix und Bizer, 2010: 2f; Bonet, 2013: 389). This trend can be witnessed for intangible as well as for material UNESCO heritage. The numerous cultural heritage sites in Mexico attract more tourists, who come to visit the country wishing to participate in the “national culture” which usually means eating the typical food, visiting various archeological sites and, of course, witnessing some traditional rituals and celebrations (Chhabra, 2012: 499). For these so called “cultural-tourists” the “authenticity” and “originality” of a cultural element is considered to be relevant, although these criteria are sometimes hard to meet for the practicing group of the element in question (see Feifan Xie, 2011: 67ff). These tourists often see this demand for the “real” experience of culture as guaranteed by the UNESCO label, which explains why the nominations also have a significant economic impact (Bendix, Hemme and Tauschek, 2007: 9). In any case, this type of tourist is known as an important factor for the Mexican economy, which doubtlessly is one of the reasons why many states are eager to get cultural elements listed as UNESCO heritage in the first place (Coffey, 2010: 266). It is one of the main reasons that many Voladores hope for a significant improvement in their economic situation and a growing number of dancers dedicate themselves to public presentations for tourists.

However, the increasing number of presentations for touristic purposes is also viewed with skepticism by some Voladores who expressed the misuse of an identity-generating aspect of their ancient culture as their main concern. Presentations for money, especially, are often condemned and seen as the exploitation of a sacred act for the cheap amusement of tourists.

*“A lot of people see it as a show, a game, as something arbitrary. And that’s not the case. It’s a tradition.”<sup>7</sup>*

So while on one hand the touristic commodification of the ceremony is welcome as an opportunity to gain income, as well as an (international)

7. Translation by the author; direct quote: “*Muchos lo ven como un show, como un juego, como cualquier cosa. Y no lo es. Es una tradición.*” – original statement from a Volador explaining the negative outcomes of the UNESCO Declaration.

reputation, on the other hand there are also concerns about the alienation and the degradation of the ceremony's original purpose. This has led to the demand for preservation whereby the "authentic" ritual shall be saved and not sold to tourists. Therefore, many of the Voladores strive for an "original" use of the ceremony in order to safeguard it as a revival of the ancient values that the dance represents for many Totonac people.

There are many factors that can be linked to changes in an intangible cultural element, but the main influences for recent transformation in the ceremony provoked by the UNESCO declaration can be broken down into two driving forces: on the one side the increasing touristic interest and thereby possibilities of gaining money and reputation with touristic presentations, and on the other side the strong plea made by many Voladores for the safeguarding of the ceremony as a traditional sacred act. Both forces have considerably influenced the performance cycle of the ceremony since the UNESCO declaration and will be outlined in the following chapters.

### **Consequences of the use for touristic purposes**

Nearly every active Volador of the region of Papantla performs the dance before a touristic audience. This should not be interpreted as a completely new factor, but can also be seen as a continuing process. After all the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* was part of celebrations from its beginning and in this context was supposedly always presented in front of people where the dancers generally received remuneration in one form or the other (see Stresser-Peán, 1989: 115f). Even in today's performances, for example during *fiestas patronales* in neighbor communities, which are considered "traditional," they are presented in public and the dancers are compensated for their effort through free food, accommodation or often even money, albeit in small amounts. So the tendency to open up to a vaster audience is often considered an opportunity to earn more money as well as to get international recognition.

The growing demand for presentations of the dance led to some changes in the performance cycle. This was not just an impact of the UNESCO declaration but it has had a longer history as a response to the use of the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador* as a spectacle for the previous two decades. The declaration can be seen as an important driving force for the touristic interest though, and therefore it has contributed considerably to deepen these alterations in tendencies.

Ethnographer Ursula Bertels, in her detailed descriptive field study

about the Voladores dance in 1993, came to the conclusion that the traditional performance practices of the ritual were progressively lost, while effective advertising for tourists became one of the main goals for many dancers (Bertels, 1993: 290f). The declaration of the ceremony as Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO has undoubtedly increased interest in the Voladores even further and therefore has also reinforced those tendencies for commodification. Not all of these performance changes can be ascribed to the UNESCO declaration, but they can be understood as parts of a process of transformation, to which the UNESCO title, as well as its enhancement as a touristic attraction, contributes.

### *Shortening of the ceremony*

Due to the high touristic demand for presentations of the *Danza del Volador*, as well as for reasons of feasibility, in public performances the ceremony is often limited to the *vuelo*. Many teams today use metal poles instead of the traditional wooden ones, because they are more robust and don't have to be renewed every once in a while. So it isn't necessary to perform the whole ceremony including the search for a suitable tree and its conversion in a *palo del Volador*. But beyond this very obvious and drastic way of shortening the ceremony for touristic purposes, Bertels already describes other aspects of abridgement in her study, for example, that the Voladores no longer thanked the gods before a nearby altar prior to and after the *vuelo* as would be done in the traditional version (see Bertels, 1993: 290). During the field study of 2012 on which this paper is based I also observed the absence of this practice. The most obvious reason to omit these prayers seems to be the location of the posts in present times. Normally they are installed near the community church at *fiestas patronales*, but today they are positioned wherever they might attract tourists, as in the middle of main squares or other festival areas. On the other hand it would be easily possible to install an altar near the post located at the entrance of an archeological site like *El Tajín*, for example. This, however, doesn't seem to be deemed necessary or even desirable by the dancers — a fact which is becoming more common even at performances in Papantla City during the weekends. The ceremonies take place next to the church of Papantla and even while an altar is available, the dancers who are performing the *danza del Volador* for a touristic audience do not use it. During *fiestas patronales* on the other hand, or during other performances with some kind of “traditional touch”, such as the annual ceremony performance initiated by the Voladores council, the thanksgiving prayers before and after the *vuelo*

are essential parts and should not be left out. This can be explained by the lack of attraction of this aspect of the practice for casual visitors who are mostly attracted by the spectacular performance of the “vuelo” itself and would perhaps walk by if they saw only some men in costumes praying. Consequently, the acrobatic aspect of the dance clearly dominates during touristic performances, while the other parts take a back seat and are not enacted to save time.

### *Niños Voladores*

Another aspect which can be interpreted as an adaptation to fit touristic interest is the participation of children between the ages of 6 and 15, which was very unusual some generations before. Normally only young men who had already reached adulthood were considered suitable to learn and practice the dance. More recently, in order to create even more attraction, the new generation of dancers had learned the performance by an average age of 14 whereas the Voladores above 40 had learned it at the age of 20 or more. Performances by young children are much more impressive to audiences meaning that children as young as six can be seen performing the dance today. Naturally, this comes with certain risks for the children; because of differing weights, even when sharing the same age, there is a high risk of disturbing the balance while flying. Moreover, it is more difficult for children to climb the high posts because of lack of strength and also because they have to struggle more against the wind at a certain height than their heavier, adult colleagues (see also Bertels, 1993: 292).

Due to the economic incentive, a growing number of children (and their parents) want to practice the dance in spite of the risks, leading the general council to make an effort to implement a more formal educational system for the ceremony as well as some guidelines for the performances of children. The first official school was founded in 2005 with the financial support of the state of Veracruz. Here the children are trained on poles suitable for their size and also taught about the values considered as traditional, such as the creation myth or the performance of the whole ceremony and not the *vuelo* in isolation. After the UNESCO declaration the interest in children practicing the ceremony grew immensely and today all four of the mentioned Voladores' associations located in the lowlands maintain their own schools. A *consejo educativo* - educational council, was also founded in order to support the general council and organize the emerging school system.

### *Group composition*

Nowadays many Voladores teams are recruited from the members of one family. This helps to maintain and foster trust within the group, which is indispensable because of the risk the dancers take during the act of the *vuelo*. Furthermore, this helps to avoid conflicts between the members concerning the distribution of money that the group earns — as it stays within the family. A few Voladores' generations earlier, this practice was very uncommon since in one community there was rarely even one complete Voladores team; and many communities didn't even have one (see also Bertels, 1993: 290). Since the growing touristic popularity, the number of Voladores in the area has increased so rapidly that almost all communities have more than one team now, and since the competition can be harsh, it became common practice to build a team from the members of one family and even better from a single household.

Besides this, there is another, even more recent change that seems to have occurred because of the UNESCO declaration since there is no mention in previous ethnographic sources. Despite the traditional five-member teams — one *caporal* and four flyers, a sixth one is now commonly integrated in contemporary touristic performances. While the *caporal* descends the rope after a successful presentation, a sixth person dressed in the Voladores costume collects tips from the audience around the pole. Usually this person is one of the flyers and takes turns with one of the other dancers in the next presentation. In performances considered as traditional, only five Voladores continue to make up one team. Additionally, teams of dancers who make their living with presentations of the *danza del Volador* can sometimes consist of even six *caporales*. Normally the role of the *caporal* is the most difficult and riskiest and usually a team has only one Volador who can perform the role. But for dancers who often travel around and give various presentations per day it is important to take turns to avoid putting all of the risk on one teammate.

### **Back to the roots – Safeguarding and Revitalizing**

Many of the above described changes are regarded as a loss of traditional values by some Voladores. On the one hand most of the dancers seem to agree that constant recreation and creativity are essential characteristics of the ceremony as a cultural practice. On the other hand many Voladores in the study expressed concern about the decay of traditional values along with growing touristic popularity. About 40% of the 60-some Voladores

I interviewed agreed with the statement “the ceremony already lost a lot of its authenticity.” In order to address this concern, the general council prioritized the revitalization and safeguarding of the traditional elements of the *Ceremonia Riual del Volador* as one of its main goals. At this point it should be mentioned that the realization of safeguarding and revitalization measures is often linked to a demand for material as well as human resources, which will be shown in the following chapters. This means that the heritage bearers have to request financial support from external stakeholders, such as public and private institutions that are interested in investing in such endeavors. The UNESCO title and the consequent reputation gained through the declaration, proved to be a helpful tool to obtain grants for implementation of safeguarding measures.

In line with the UNESCO declaration, the council has developed a safeguarding plan with the support of external bodies including the local and federal governments, a local university and a private center for the promotion of indigenous culture and traditions. This plan targets, among other things, the implementation of an educational system to teach young Voladores the traditional significance of the ceremony, as well as organizing meetings with Voladores of the older generations to retrace some of the ceremony’s already forgotten elements. Through this safeguarding plan, the council designed an idealized version of the ceremony, as well as guidelines for its performance, costumes and functioning of the teams. This also led to a canonization of the ceremony in the region, which can be clearly seen by comparing recent performances with the description of their 1993 counterparts from Bertels, who analyzed the *Danza del Volador* in 20 different communities in the *municipio* Papantla. Both the presentation for touristic purposes of the vuelo alone and the performance and perception of the whole ceremony for traditional occasions differ in some aspects from those recorded in 1993 (see Bertels, 1993: 96ff.).

#### *Integrating and reproducing Totonac cosmology*

One of the changes in terms of perception is the noticeable integration of elements from the traditional Totonac spirituality into the ceremony. While some years ago the Voladores referred mainly to elements from a Christian belief system perspective during the performance, some older practices and spiritual beings have since found their way into the performance in present times.

The traditional celebration of the ceremony during Christian *fiestas*

*patronales* and the intonation of melodic Christian prayers called *rezos* accompanying the acts of *corte* and *siembra*, as previously mentioned, demonstrate the connection to Christian mythology. However, there is now a strong tendency to reintegrate more elements of the Totonac cosmology. Bertels, for example, describes that while the Voladores asked for permission to cut the tree chosen as the future dancing pole during the act of the *corte*, they also called on the Christian “Dios Señor,” usually with the help of a Christian priest (Bertels, 1993: 98, 127). In today’s performance the “spiritual being of reference” is the *Kiwikgolo* – also known as the “Old Man of the Forest” in the Totonac tradition. He is called upon by the caporal in his function as the intermediating element between the spiritual and the terrestrial worlds. The *Kiwikgolo* himself is represented by masks depicting an old man, often with a white beard. In today’s performances these masks are put on the floor or an altar to receive the offerings brought by the people who ask for permission to cut the tree and remove it from the forest. Bertels also mentions these masks, which she found described in reports from the 1950’s, though states that she herself couldn’t confirm the use of masks during her fieldwork (see Bertels, 1993: 129). Consequently, this feature can be deemed to be a direct result of the revitalizing tendencies that have occurred since the UNESCO declaration. With the implementation of the school system, these traditional elements are now passed on in an organized manner to future generations. Bertels lamented the lack of knowledge that the younger generations now have regarding the indigenous origins and religious meanings, but since the nomination, the young Voladores learn this in school alongside the formal “council-approved” performance of the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador*.

#### *Taboos – women and alcohol*

The ceremony, being a sacred ritual, traditionally includes some taboos as part of the preparation for the performance. The two main components of this are abstinence and sobriety for a certain period of time before the beginning of the ceremony. This period is defined differently for Papantla and can comprise from some days to several years. In the 1990s this period varied from 12 to 14 days depending on the community, but was hardly practiced because most Voladores claimed not to know of them or dismissed them as antiquated (Bertels, 1993: 92, 119, 171).

In modern times, the dancing team is required to observe this period of abstinence for 12 days before initiating the whole ceremony. This can be considered as a notable contradiction to the touristic presentations of



the *vuelo*, which is practiced far too frequently to comply with the taboo. Therefore, it is only requested when the entire ceremony is performed — and is then considered a crucial part of the preparation and therefore a part of the revitalization tendencies.

Secondly, older ethnographic descriptions suggest that there were no women involved in the ceremony (see Gipson, 1971; Krickeberg, 1918-1922; Tudela, 1946; and Stresser-Péan, 1989). In 1993 Bertels witnessed various women also practicing the dance alongside the men. She interprets this innovation as a measure to raise the attractiveness as well, just as she did regarding the participation of children (Bertels, 1993: 274f). Although additional reasons for the inclusion of women were not given to me, there are other possible explanations for the new role of women within the ceremony. For example, changing perceptions on the role of women in society in modern days or even on the general physical capabilities of women could have had an impact. Furthermore, the high number of male migrants to urban areas or the U.S. in search of better job opportunities left mainly women in the rural parts of the country, making them increasingly instrumental in keeping cultural practices alive in some areas where perhaps only a few male dancers were left. With the continuing participation of children, however, women are now excluded again from performances of the *danza del Volador*. This fact has been justified by the general council by stating that women are not considered suitable as symbolic representations of the “seed carrier” role that the Voladores fulfill when they descend from the sky and the sun god to fertilize Mother Earth.

#### *Effort and extent of the ceremony*

The complete performance of the ceremony requires considerable personal and financial effort. A group of several people scout for a suitable tree days before the initiation of the *corte*. During this time they are unable to carry out their usual work and this is the reason why the ceremony was significantly shorter two decades ago. The *corte* and *arrastre*, for example, were practiced on the same day, involving fewer people and where cheaper or fewer offerings were brought. Having said this, the active Voladores mostly confirmed that the offerings were more abundant in the olden days (Bertels, 1993: 96ff).

Currently, the opulent version of the *Danza del Volador*, which is annually performed, is financially supported by the general council that requires that the necessary resources be presented in advance, placing

the offerings at their disposal, which then facilitates proper payment for the participants. As mentioned above, the financial resources are mainly provided by independent or governmental institutions interested specifically in the promotion of the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador*. In many ways, this interest in promoting a cultural element often depends on a UNESCO title.

## Conclusion

With the UNESCO title in 2009 new possibilities for marketing the ceremony led to enthusiasm on the one hand, though on the other, many Voladores criticized the use of the sacred ritual as a degrading show for tourists and warned against a possible “sellout” of their culture. This conflict is strongly reflected by the two main driving forces behind the transformation process since the declaration. The first one is the aforementioned influence of growing touristic interest which was intensified, though not formed by the declaration. The other force can be identified as the desire for revitalization. The safeguarding measures were implemented as part of the nomination process of UNESCO itself, but were also enforced by the Voladores as an expression of the desire to preserve their tradition. This controversy gives the impression of a clear antagonism between “commercialization” and “safeguarding”; however, this bilateral classification falls short of illustrating the entire scene.

Since the UNESCO declaration there has been a strong tendency and preference for the traditional performance of the ceremony, including elements that weren’t even practiced in the last few years. This contributes to the re-establishment of some traditional values and the formation of a more defined and proud “Voladores identity.” There are also ongoing projects to support the dancers such as insurances and salaries for teachers and administrative workers. An implementation of these measures, however, is impossible without additional human and economic recourses, and in this aspect the UNESCO title is very useful because it promotes the ceremony as a cultural practice of national value worth preserving and safeguarding.

Therefore, not only the touristic use of the ceremony, but also the implementation of safeguarding measures can be used for economic benefit and could therefore be considered as a commercialization or more accurately as a *commodification* (see Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) of the *Ceremonia Ritual del Volador*, in addition to its touristic use. The members of the

general council, as well as the teachers of the Voladores schools and the numerous participants in different preservation projects, receive salaries, or at least allowances, sometimes higher than the amount they would earn with touristic presentations. These projects and the resulting publicity help to raise the popularity of the ceremony even more, which leads to a magnification of touristic interest. This shows that the two tendencies that seemed to be mutually exclusive at first are actually closely interlinked.

*“Commodification does not necessarily destroy culture”* (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 9) — but contrarily can even contribute to the preservation and/or formation of cultural identity (9). This can be observed, similarly, in the case of the Voladores. In this paper it was shown that the carriers of a cultural element can potentially benefit in very different ways from endorsements such as the “UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.” However, in either case, as shown by the evidence of my and others’ research, the UNESCO label triggers transformation processes that can affect the cultural element in question on different levels and in various ways.

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