

# The Voladores-Spectacle in Mexico – The ‘Ritual Ceremony of the Voladores’ as Intangible Cultural Heritage

El espectáculo de los Voladores en México – la ‘ceremonia ritual de los Voladores’ como patrimonio cultural inmaterial

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**Abstract:** The Mexican state is an active player in the construction of cultural heritage on all state levels as well as within the supranational heritage regime of UNESCO. Employing the ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*’ as a case study, I will demonstrate how Mexico implements the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The analysis focuses on how the Mexican state orchestrates the nomination process, in order to enable the production of symbolic capital, especially by incorporating Indigenous groups.

**Keywords:** ritual ceremony of the Voladores; intangible cultural heritage; ritual; forms of capital; Mexican state.

**Resumen:** El estado mexicano está tomando un papel activo en la construcción del patrimonio cultural en todos los niveles estatales, así como dentro del régimen supranacional de la UNESCO. Con la ‘ceremonia ritual de los Voladores’ como estudio de caso se demostrará cómo México implementa la Convención para la Salvaguardia del Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial. El análisis se centra en cómo el Estado utiliza y transfiere diferentes formas de capital en un proceso de nominación minuciosamente dirigido, para permitir particularmente la producción de capital simbólico, especialmente mediante la incorporación de grupos indígenas.

**Palabras clave:** ceremonia ritual de los Voladores; patrimonio cultural inmaterial; ritual; formas de capital; Estado mexicano.

## Introduction

This article analyzes how the Mexican state constructs the ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*’ as intangible cultural heritage in the context of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICHC) of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).<sup>1</sup> I first outline the ritual practice, practicing groups as well as variants and meanings. The implementation and concrete application of the convention is then analyzed as a state-orchestrated process that began in 2005 with the adoption of the convention by the Mexican state and ended in 2009 with the UNESCO inscription of the ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*’ on the Representative List of

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1 The article is adapted from the author’s master thesis (Melzer 2013).

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the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. I will show that, during this process, the Mexican state uses a multiplicity of resources on all national political levels as well as in the supranational context. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of capital, I will illuminate how the state manages to appropriate, transform and leverage different forms of capital to accomplish the ritual's declaration as intangible cultural heritage.

### The ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*

The ceremony of the *Voladores*<sup>2</sup> is a ritual that involves different phases over several weeks. Yet it is mostly known for its spectacular performance phase. Often it is embedded in other local festivities, such as patron saints' days or *ferias*, as is the case in Cuetzalan del Progreso in the state of Puebla.<sup>3</sup>

#### Ritual practice



Figura 1. *Voladores* prepare for the flight (photo: Markus Melzer, 2012).

During the *feria*, locals and tourists alike gather in the *atrio parroquial* several times a day to watch the *voladores*' spectacular flight performances. In the center of the *atrio*, in front of the local church, four *voladores* and their *caporal* approach a wooden pole and the performance begins. They climb up the pole one by one and the audience gathers to watch. The *caporal* climbs even higher while the *voladores* tie ropes around their waists to prepare for their descent.

Once on top, the *caporal* begins fluting songs of devotion into the sky. Once the *voladores* are ready, the *caporal* signals to them, and they suddenly drop backwards. This is the moment that all spectators on the ground have been waiting for: the four *voladores* begin 'flying' down, circling upside-down around the pole, slowly descending towards earth. It is a spectacular sight, acrobatic

2 The ritual is known under a variety of names throughout Mesoamerica, e.g. "Eagle dance" among Huasteca people (Stresser-Péan 2005, 23) and "Dance of the flying monkeys" among K'iche' Maya (Nájera Coronado 2008, 64), *tsogqósnu* and *kogsni* among Totonac and *rataxñoni* among Otomí, which can be translated in both cases as 'those who fly,' as well as *cuaubpatlanqui* among Nahuatl, meaning 'they who fly with the help of a pole' (Ichon 1990, 377; Stresser-Péan 2005, 23).

3 Based on personal observations during the local *feria* of Cuetzalan in October 2012. For ethnographic reports on the ritual's practice in the Totonacapan region of Veracruz, see Bertels (1993, 1-5, 68-143), Ichon (1990, 377-389), König (1982, 31-38), Krickeberg (1918-1922, 51-54), Stresser-Péan (2009, 247-280) and Zaleta (1998).

and intriguing. The effect is enhanced when they fly with arms open wide, drumming and fluting upside down. After many rounds and shortly before they touch the ground, they turn around to 'land' on their feet. While the *voladores* are untying their ropes, the *caporal* climbs down the pole. Once they gather around the pole, the performance, and thus the spectacle, ends. Most of the audience has already ambled off to other sights.

Often the *voladores* approach the audience after the performance to ask for financial support. As a main social event in the region, the annual *feria* is also a high season for tourism. Many locals and foreign visitors come to town for the occasion. It represents a major opportunity for the practitioners to raise awareness for the ritual as well as raise funds and generate income.

The contradiction between wanting an 'authentic' ritual performance and a purely staged spectacle for commercial purposes at the same time also emerges in discussions about safeguarding measures. The potential threat of 'distorting' and economically overexploiting the ritual has been a major argument for declaring it as cultural heritage. Yet the ritual's commodification and commercialization are not new, having been reported since the end of the sixteenth century, when the ritual became increasingly performed in the context of Christian and secular festivities (Chenaut 1995, 200; Nájera Coronado 2008, 61-68; Stresser-Péan 2009, 264, 554; Torquemada 1969, 306). Similarly, Krickeberg (1918-1922, 52) states at the beginning of the twentieth century that: "[t]he volador festivity has degenerated into a game in modern times and is celebrated in most Mexican places for mundane occasions" and Gallop



Figure 2. *Voladores* descending towards earth (photo: Markus Melzer, 2012).



Figure 3. *Volador* fluting and drumming while flying (photo: Markus Melzer, 2012).

(1963, 87) quotes an Otomí *volador* concluding: “We are the sacred birds that fly with the four winds to the four cardinal points, but nowadays six of us make a finer show.”

### Origin, distribution and the diversity of the ritual

While it is certain that the ritual existed long before the *Conquista*, its exact origin remains unclear. Along with Totonac, also Huastec, Mixtec, Maya and Toltec people have been considered as potential founders of the ritual (Bertels 1993, 53, 59; Dahlgren de Jordan 1990, 223-233; Krickeberg 1918-1922, 53; 1925, 75; Stresser-Péan 2005, 22-23; 2009, 257-259; Termer 1931-1936, 22; Zaleta 1998, 15). Urcid (2006, 70-74) suggests that it originated around 600 BCE in West Mexico. Yet none of these hypotheses has been confirmed.<sup>4</sup>

Today, Totonacapan is the area where the majority of currently active *voladores* live (Bertels 1993, 68-143).<sup>5</sup> Another area is the Sierra Norte del Puebla, where Totonac, Nahua and Otomí practice the ritual (Bertels 1993: 181-213; Galinier 1990, 383-403; Rodríguez Blanco 2011, 115-143; Stresser-Péan 2009, 257-280).<sup>6</sup> Since the middle of the last century, it has evolved into a tourist attraction, for example, in front of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City, at archaeological sites, such as Teotihuacan, and tourist destinations, such as Acapulco or Cancún, throughout North and South America, and even in Europe and Japan (Bertels 1993, 285-287; Conaculta 2007b). Often the performing *volador* groups originate from the Papantla region.

In light of the diversity of contexts, the ritual is dynamic and diverse with respect to procedure, performance elements, type and number of actors as well as the meanings ascribed to it. The oldest documented version of the ritual is the one with two *voladores*. Oviedo y Valdés (1855, libro XLII, cap. x) describes the ritual among the Nicaraos in 1528 with two seven to eight year old boys as *voladores* and further sixty male actors. It was practiced annually at the cacao harvest in honor of the cacao god.<sup>7</sup> However, based

4 Based on comparisons of the Codices Borbonicus (1974, 28) and Magliabechiano (1996, 38r) with the Codices Porfirio Díaz (Doesburg 2001a, 35, 40-41) and Fernández Leal (Doesburg 2001b, 58-59, 62), as well as considering reports by Spanish chroniclers from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, similarities with the ritual Xocotl huetzi are apparent (Bertels 1993, 55-59; Graulich 1989, 43-71; Termer 1931-1936, 17). This ritual is therefore also called the precursor of the ‘Danza de los Voladores.’

5 In contrast to all other groups, there is a corresponding census, according to which approximately 500 *voladores* live in the Totonacapan region (UNESCO Mexico 2009, 5).

6 Stresser-Péan (2005, 20; 2009, 263-264, 279) reports the revitalization among Huastec groups in the state of San Luis Potosí. He describes that some communities have been performing the ritual since 1938. Nájera Coronado (2008, 51-60) explains that the ritual was practiced by K’iche’, Kaqchikel, Achi’ and Tz’utujil in the highlands of Guatemala until the twentieth century. According to Termer (1931-1936, 13-23), the ritual has only been practiced by the K’iche’ in Chichicastenango and Joyabaj since the 1920s. At least in Joyabaj it is still performed today (Anonymous 2012).

7 Termer (1931-1936, 17-19) reports for the 1920s, and Nájera Coronado (2008, 63-66) and García Escobar (1990, 184-186) for the 1980s that the K’iche’ still performed the ritual with two *voladores*,

on Urcid's hypothesis, the variant with four *voladores* represents the oldest version and took place to honor deceased relatives. For Krickeberg (1918-1922, 54), the ritual is a symbol for the fertilization of the earth while Ichon (1990, 444-451) sees the flight phase as representing how the stars travel around the sun as the central life-giving force. According to König (1982, 34) and Zaleta (1998, 38-45), the four *voladores* represent the four cardinal points or 'four winds.' Further interpretations refer to the Aztec calendar, which is supposed to be reflected in the 52 rotations that result from 13 rotations of the four *voladores* (Ichon 1990, 389; König 1982, 31-34; Stresser-Péan 2009, 264; Torquemada 1969, 305-306).

If we take into account the variants with six and eight *voladores* as well as additional and different actors (e.g. Malinche), the interpretations multiply further. Rodríguez Blanco (2011, 115-143) describes how meanings have changed in the context of socio-economic developments over the last thirty years. This lends credence to Bertels (1993, 60) and Stresser-Péan's (2005, 27) suggestion that the practicing groups probably ascribed several different meanings to the ritual in parallel and continue to do so.

The variety within the ritual and the extent to which diverse dimensions are taken into account in the UNESCO nomination are pivotal points in the cultural heritage construction process, which is discussed in the following sections.

### **The construction of intangible cultural heritage by the Mexican state**

In order for the ritual to be constructed as intangible cultural heritage, the Mexican state mobilizes, utilizes and leverages a multiplicity of resources, both its own and of other actors. The requisites for the implementation of the convention and the concrete nomination are provided, coordinated and guided mainly through institutions on a national level or through their regional and local counterparts. In contrast, the concrete identification, documentation and registration of cultural heritage within this top-down framework evolve bottom-up as will be shown shortly.

### **State actors and the foundations of intangible cultural heritage (2005-2009)**

Mexico has adopted all six UNESCO conventions that address the protection and safeguarding of cultural heritage, including the ICHC (Carducci 2008, 363-397; UNESCO 2005; 2010a, 23-24; 2010b). Article 2 of the convention defines intangible cultural heritage as:

[...] the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural

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including further actors dressed in monkey costumes and with masks that were supposed to caricature Spanish *conquistadores*. Additional *voladores* involved, who were called 'archangels,' symbolized the descent of gods or demons from the heavens.

heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO 2003, Article 2.2).

Moreover, it defines ‘safeguarding’ as:

[...] measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage, including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education, as well as the revitalization of the various aspects of such heritage (UNESCO 2003, Article 2.3).

The safeguarding measures at UNESCO level are subsumed by drawing up and maintaining one register and two types of lists, of which the Representative List is the one which will: “[...] ensure better visibility of the intangible cultural heritage and awareness of its significance, and [...] encourage dialogue which respects cultural diversity” (UNESCO 2003, Article 16.1). In order for it to be inscribed on this list, the nominating state party has to identify and register ‘their’ intangible cultural heritage on the national level.

Through its representative in the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage from 2005 until 2009, the Mexican state has actively shaped the initial framework for the construction of intangible cultural heritage, in particular the Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage and the evaluation of the state nominations for the initial Representative List (UNESCO 2007; 2008a; 2008b; 2009a; 2009b; 2012a).

Following ratification by the Mexican Senate in 2005, the ICHC became state policy, after which the state implemented the convention. The legal foundations are Articles 2 and 4 of the Constitution (Blin 2006; Iturriaga 2004; López Morales 2004), which define Mexico as a pluricultural nation committed to protecting, preserving and promoting Indigenous groups, including their culture and identity. The *Ley de la Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas* and the *Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas* provide a basis for the main state institutions that have been involved significantly in the construction of intangible cultural heritage.

Among the key players are the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) and the former Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (Conaculta). INAH is the main institution for the protection and safeguarding of national cultural heritage and is responsible for all Mexican nominations for (intangible) cultural heritage at UNESCO (UNESCO 2012b, B.1a, B.4.). Its representatives are the intermediaries between the supranational and the national heritage regimes. They are involved throughout the construction process on all political levels, from the set-up of the UNESCO framework down to the local agency and participants in local workshops. From 1988 until its dissolution in 2015, Conaculta was Mexico’s key state entity for coordinating the development, promotion and implementation of national cultural policy. The council’s main



task was to align the activities of numerous state organizations in different cultural-political areas with the guidelines of national cultural policy (Conaculta 2007a, 24-26; UNESCO 2012b, B.1a). Its entity Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas (DGCP)<sup>8</sup> was placed in charge of securing the participation of all the social groups in Mexico that are relevant for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage during the construction process (DGCP 2013a; 2013b; UNESCO 2012b, B.1). In particular, the DGCP was responsible for the bottom-up approach of identifying, documenting and registering the intangible cultural heritage, as well as for preserving the corresponding inventory.

While INAH and Conaculta are institutions which are focused on the safeguarding of cultural heritage, the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) is responsible for the social development and protection of Indigenous groups and communities and, thus, of the cultural bearers themselves (CDI 2005, 9; UNESCO 2012b, B.1a). Its activities include funding major projects and activities for the preservation of cultural heritage (CDI 2005, 52-53; 2009, 34, 156; 2010, 233).

Further state actors on the federal, state and local levels become part of the evolving regime on intangible cultural heritage and the concrete nomination of the ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*,’<sup>9</sup> as we will see in the following section.

### The national inventory of intangible cultural heritage

The creation of a national inventory of intangible cultural heritage is pivotal to the convention’s implementation and represents a prerequisite for all UNESCO nominations. It documents the participation of the practitioners and communities, current meanings and social function, artifacts associated with the practice, its current geographical distribution and its historical context. In 2006, a working group under the central guidance of Conaculta laid the foundations of the inventory, claiming that it should be “gathering all the expressions and representative manifestations of the cultural groups of the country” (DGCP 2013a, cf.; Anonymous 2006, 1, 4; UNESCO 2012b, B.2). As a first step, intangible cultural heritage was to be identified via a call for proposals by the DGCP towards “Mexican society” (Trejo 2008, 8). To support this approach, the DGCP appointed “cultural agents” (UNESCO 2012b, B.1.c), whose main task was to support practicing groups in identifying and registering ‘their’ cultural heritage. In practical

8 DGCP has been reorganized, renamed Dirección General de Culturas Populares, Indígenas y Urbanas (DGCPIU) and is now an entity of the Secretaría de Cultura which itself was created in 2015. Supporting the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage is stated to be a pivotal task of DGCPIU (see <https://www.culturaspopulareseindigenas.gob.mx> [13.06.2024]).

9 The main state actors are the governments of the state, the municipality of Papantla, the Dirección del Centro Coordinador para el Desarrollo Indígena (CDI Papantla), the Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo de Familia (DIF Estatal Veracruz), Gobiernos-Estado-Municipios (GEyM), the Secretaría de Turismo y Cultura (SECTURC) and the Instituto Veracruzano de Cultura (IVEC) (Gobierno de Veracruz 2009; UNESCO 2009c, 4.b; 2009d; UNESCO Mexico 2009, Addendum 2).

terms, this meant gathering information on-site in collaboration with the practitioners and their representatives. Afterwards this information was processed centrally and made public via the Sistema de Información Cultural (SIC).

The ritual has been registered as '*ceremonia ritual de Voladores*' and classified in the category for social practices, rituals and festive events (Conaculta 2012).<sup>10</sup> A brief historical outline and explanation of the meaning and the different phases are included in the accompanying documentation, while the hypotheses of its origin, the evolution of the variants, and the corresponding meanings are absent. There is a clear focus on Totonac groups, describing their practice in detail, including the symbolism of individual elements and actions. While the commercialization of the ritual is emphasized as having contributed to its survival, it also potentially threatens the (spiritual) meaning of the ritual, as it is increasingly 'shortened' to its acrobatic, spectacular element (Conaculta 2012). Another factor threatening its survival is the ongoing deforestation in the Totonacapan region, which also means that the species from which the poles are made is slowly becoming extinct. The wooden pole is therefore increasingly being replaced by metal poles, which shows that important elements of the ritual and the associated meaning are vanishing or have already been forgotten (Bertels 1993, 79-83, 144-153; Rodríguez Blanco 2011, 121-124; Stresser-Péan 2009, 265).

The design principles of the inventory and how the ritual has become part of it significantly affect the nomination process. Intangible cultural heritage at UNESCO level can be nominated by and for a single as well as multiple state parties. Mexico, on the other hand, registers cultural heritage exclusively on behalf of one of its thirty-two states (Conaculta 2012; DGCP 2013c). For the '*Ceremonia Ritual de Voladores*,' this is Veracruz. The ritual could not be registered simultaneously under the states of Puebla, Hidalgo, Michoacán and San Luis Potosí, where it is also practiced. This principle contradicts the ICHC's intention to acknowledge and foster cultural diversity by supporting its visibility. Moreover, apart from one specific mention of three codices, no other sources on the historical context are listed. It also remains unclear what information from practicing groups and communities have been taken into account. As a third point, while practitioners and communities provided 'their' cultural heritage as content for the inventory, the further processing of the obtained information and data was carried out in accordance with the guidelines of the DGCP and the national working group, without representation of the cultural bearers themselves.

The efforts of drawing up the national inventory represent an extensive and systematic objectification of cultural capital. Often, until this point, it is accessible primarily

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10 Four alternative names of the ritual are given, all in the context of Totonac practice. Huastec, Nahua, Otomí and Tepehua practicing groups are mentioned as well, while Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua are listed as further areas of current geographical distribution.



locally and predominantly in the incorporated state. According to Bourdieu (1979, 11-47, 333-357; 1983, 197), the acting parties seek to conceal the costs of converting economic capital into cultural capital, its potential re-conversion and the correlations associated with it. Analogously, it remains unclear how much economic capital was invested to set up the national inventory. The conversion is realized by using information technology for processing and disseminating the recorded data as well as through investments in social capital within and among (different) political levels. A majority of these relationships already exist and are reproduced as part of the transformational work and conversion processes, including the coordination of state entities by Conaculta. In some cases, social capital relationships have yet to be established or transferred and institutionalized in a new context, for example, the local and regional DGCP cultural agents who collaborated with the practicing groups and communities in the field. In this context, there is also a transformational exchange of different cultural capitals in the incorporated state. With the help of the DGCP cultural agents' methodological expertise, the knowledge of the practitioners and communities is transferred to another state. This means that in order to achieve the necessary objectification of the cultural bearers' incorporated capital, the state has to get access to and mobilize (or appropriate) the incorporated cultural capital of its own agents first. The following section shows how the design principles of the inventory, the capital investments and conversions affect the nomination process.

### **Negotiating the inscription on the Representative List**

Apart from being registered in the national inventory, the ritual must meet four other criteria in order to be inscribed on the Representative List (UNESCO 2008a, chapter 1.2). The first criterion relates to the classification into one of five domains. In the nomination, the ritual's name is 'ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*' and it is classified into the domain for social practices, rituals and festive events (UNESCO 2009c, B, 1.e). This matches the name and classification in the national inventory. The nomination also adopts the narrow ethnic attribution and meaning from the national inventory:

*The Ritual Ceremony of the Voladores* is a true work of art, one that summarizes the meaning of *li tutu nakú*: "being Totonac." It reaffirms group identity and the awareness of continuity of practicing ethnic groups, given that it is linked to the cycle of life, expresses a vision of the past and present world, and manifests the need to maintain a harmonious and respectful relationship with Nature (UNESCO 2009c, 1.a.).

It is remarkable that this principle is subsequently extended to almost all dimensions of the ritual, being justified with a proclaimed guardian function of the Totonac:

It is, however, in the Totonacapan zone, and more specifically in the region of Papantla and other areas neighboring El Tajín, where the center of confluence lies. There, the *Ritual Ceremony of the Voladores* has become a solid, identifiable icon; the Totonac have assumed

the paternity of the element, protecting it –as the essence of their identity– from multiple risk factors in the past (the conquest, colonization, the Inquisition, etc.) and in the present (migration, excessive commercialization, economic impoverishment of the campesino dancers, homogenizing educational models, the acculturation of new generations, deforestation, etc.) (UNESCO 2009c, 1.d.).

In the course of the nomination, information on Nahua, Otomí, Huastec, Kaqchikel and K'iche' who are also practicing the ritual is neither referenced nor integrated into this narrative. In essence, the description of the ritual represents an English translation of the national inventory record with only minor adaptations (UNESCO 2009c, C, D).

The ritual's appropriation as primarily Totonac heritage and the latter's hegemony over other groups, regions, variants and meanings is also reflected in the way the state involved practitioners, groups and communities in the nomination process, which is another UNESCO requirement (UNESCO 2009c, 5.a-b; UNESCO Mexico 2009, Addendum 5). The nomination team included representatives of Totonac *volador* organizations and self-governing bodies in the Totonac region, the director of the Parque Temático Takilhsukut (PTT) and representatives of the local CDI and INAH. In addition, a coordination council was established, which consisted only of *voladores* and their representatives. The latter's primary task was to raise awareness of the UNESCO nomination to the locals and promote it.

The negotiation process comprised several workshops and was framed as “constructive dialogue” (UNESCO 2009c, 5.a). It took place at the PTT in October 2008, where the representatives of the nomination team, the coordination council and further participants from Papantla's tourism department and a scientist from Universidad Veracruzana in Xalapa met. The workshops dealt with the meaning and social function of the ritual for the Totonac, the problems associated with its preservation and protection as well as defining which goals needed to be achieved with the rituals' safeguarding. Measures were drawn up and organizations, programs and institutions were listed that could contribute to achieving these goals. I will return to the topic of safeguarding measures shortly.

The PPT was a prominent location for the negotiation process. The park plays an important part with respect to cultural and economic activities in Veracruz (Gobierno de Veracruz 2008, 151-153). It is located at the archaeological zone of El Tajín – an UNESCO World Heritage site – and is home to the Xtaxkgakget Makgkaxtlawana Centro de Artes Indígenas (CAI), the most important Totonac cultural center (UNESCO Mexico 2009, Addendum 4). The CAI facilitates education, training and transmission of Totonac cultural practices, especially training Totonac children to become future *voladores*. The CAI is also involved in the annual festival Cumbre Tajín. During the festivities, *volador* groups from other Mexican states, Guatemala, as well as groups from the Papantla region practice the ritual and share their experiences in organized and moderated sessions.

In addition to comprehensively involving practitioners, groups and communities, the state is requested to ensure: “[...] their free, prior and informed consent” (UNESCO 2008a, Chapter 1.2). To prove this, more than thirty letters of support (*cartas de apoyo*) were attached to the application documents (UNESCO 2009d; UNESCO Mexico 2009, Addendum 6). Almost one third of these letters were from individual *voladores* as well as from representatives of *volador* organizations and Totonac cultural entities, which indicated a strong local support from the practitioners and their representatives. However, two thirds of the *cartas de apoyo* came from representatives of state institutions, including the governor of Veracruz and representatives of local governments.<sup>11</sup>

If we look at the way the state includes the practitioners in the nomination process on the one hand and how the state imposes safeguarding measures on the other hand, we can discern a clear power imbalance in favor of the state. Through the support letters, the state actors are able to leverage social capital relations. In addition, they benefit from the “multiplier effect” (Bourdieu 1983, 192). The combination of social capital relationships with those of the other actors, for example the practicing groups and communities, increases the effectiveness of the state agents’ social relationships, beyond a direct access to those actors’ capital. Due to the multiplier effect, the state anticipates a higher degree of legitimation for the conversion, which UNESCO also affirms in its decision to inscribe the ritual on the Representative List (UNESCO 2009a).

The situation seems less favorable to the practitioners. Social capital relationships are intrinsically risky in that they can be lost (Bourdieu 1983, 197). This is particularly true for the *voladores* and their representatives, as it is uncertain whether and to what extent the state will fulfill its declared commitments in the future. Yet the state can reproduce and convert the relevant capital directly by obtaining the consent and legitimation of the groups and communities required by UNESCO. In Bourdieu’s sense, these commitments represent an indebtedness of the state and are intended to guarantee a favorable exchange rate for converting social into cultural and symbolic capital.

As part of the application, the catalog of safeguarding measures meets another UNESCO criterion (UNESCO 2009c, 4.b; UNESCO Mexico 2009, 31). It comprises items in the categories assessment, preservation, dissemination, transmission, and revitalization. State actors are involved in all of the activities, projects and programs listed. More than half of all measures are prioritized and cover a wide range of topics. Three aspects will be mentioned here. Firstly, the catalog refers to funds for the promotion of performances abroad. Yet it remains unclear to what extent this is focused on tourist-oriented performances and it seems unlikely that all phases of the ritual can be performed in

11 The representatives are the mayors or treasurers of Coahuilán, Coatzintla, Coxquihui, Coyutla, Espinal, Mecatlán, Papanla and Zozocolco de Hidalgo, where the ritual is currently practiced and/or where *volador* groups are located (UNESCO 2009d; UNESCO Mexico 2009, Addendum 6).

these places. Secondly, there is a remarkable emphasis on institutionalized knowledge transfer through the school at the CAI and organized exchanges. The school for dances and music located here has the stated aim of teaching the ritual with all its phases, meaning the “complete dance” (UNESCO Mexico 2009, Addendum 4). Other schools and a transmission of knowledge, skills and meaning in the families, as is still the case in many municipalities, are not addressed at all. Thirdly, note that the Cumbre Tajín festival consists of a variety of commercially oriented leisure activities as well as performances by international music groups.<sup>12</sup> As the festival takes place in the PTT, which is partly administered by the state, it follows that the state has an economic interest in maintaining and expanding these activities. Analogous to the efforts for drawing up a national inventory, additional capital is invested here as well, through the transformational efforts of state agents with the aim of legitimizing the construction process as such. The catalog of safeguarding measures documents the state’s willingness to invest economic capital in the survival of the ritual and reflects – to a certain degree – the state’s commitment to delivering these investments, which itself can be verified through subsequent reviews.<sup>13</sup>

The integration of the ritual into a festival of national significance relates to the UNESCO requirement that calls on state parties to explain how the declaration can increase the visibility and awareness of intangible cultural heritage, and how it contributes to promoting the dialogue on cultural diversity. For the Ritual Ceremony of the *Voladores*, it is asserted that especially the spectacular flight phase contributed to its persistence, so that the ritual is now regarded: “[...] both nationally and internationally, as one of the icons of Indigenous traditions of Mexico” (UNESCO 2009c, 3). However, the spectacular elements neither imply that the meaning of the ritual is known nor understood: “[O]n the other hand, these very factors may expose the Ceremony to being perceived of as merely commercial or recreational, thus affecting its survival, or contributing to it not being valued, or perhaps even its authentic and essential meaning becoming distorted” (UNESCO 2009c, 3). The main contribution of inscribing the ritual on the Representative List is considered to lie in “[r]ecovering and strengthening the perception of the Ceremony and its array of meanings within practicing communities [and] reinforcing the visibility it already enjoys [...]” (UNESCO 2009c, 3). These statements indicate a clear shift in the reasoning of the nomination, which has been

12 In the year of the UNESCO nomination, the festival generated revenues of approximately one hundred million Mexican pesos (Gobierno de Veracruz 2008, 151; Mendoza 2011).

13 The IC has implemented a monitoring mechanism, the Periodic Report on the Implementation of the Convention and on the Status of Elements inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, where the state parties are requested to inform regularly about the progress of the convention’s implementation and current status of the listed or registered elements and safeguarding measures (UNESCO 2012a, Chapter V; 2008a, chapter 4).

focused on the Totonac so far, their proclaimed guardian function for the ritual and the representation of meanings, social function and safeguarding measures based thereon. At this point, the reasoning appeals to the cultural diversity and different practicing communities, leaving the impression that the existing cultural diversity is leveraged only where it appears useful for the nomination.

Overall, the nomination meets all the requirements that were set by UNESCO. In October 2009, the Intergovernmental Committee decided in favor of the inscription on the Representative List and declared the ritual as intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO 2009a).<sup>14</sup>

### Conclusions

The inscription on the Representative List is the end result of a state-orchestrated construction process. In this context, intangible cultural heritage can be interpreted as a social construct in a double sense, firstly as a category of UNESCO in general and secondly as the element ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*’ in particular. The state orchestrates this process and thus determines what constitutes (national) intangible cultural heritage, how it is identified and documented as well as how the information is processed and disseminated. As state party of the ICHC, Mexico is also able to introduce the definition of (national) intangible cultural heritage into the given supranational framework, as the classification of the ritual is largely based on the contents of the national inventory and the construction principles manifested there.<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of Bourdieu’s forms of capital, the ritual represents cultural capital in an incorporated as well as objectified state. Its declaration as intangible cultural heritage is an act of “collective magic” (Bourdieu 1983, 190), meaning an institutionalization of cultural capital manifested in a title sanctioned under international law. In the case of the ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*,’ it is even inscribed on the first Representative List, which means it is of particular exclusivity. Both the title and the exclusivity represent high symbolic value for the state. In other words, the reproduction of symbolic capital is the profit that the state actors strive for in return for their investments made in the course of the construction process. The

<sup>14</sup> Reports, photographs, movies and maps are added as documentation (UNESCO 2009c, 7.a).

<sup>15</sup> To date (September 2020) the design principle of incorporating intangible cultural heritage into the national inventory exclusively on behalf of one state remains valid. In 2018, the ‘Ceremonia ritual del Volador en Pahuatlán, Cuetzalan, Tenampulco, Huauchinango, Naupan y Honey’ was registered on behalf of Puebla while for San Luis Potosí another variant was documented under the name ‘Los Voladores Bixom T’iivw de Tamaletom’ in a different inventory, i.e. Patrimonio de la Humanidad instead of Inventario del patrimonio cultural inmaterial (SECULT 2020b; 2020c). The record of the ‘Ceremonia ritual de Voladores,’ i.e. the initial registration relevant for the UNESCO nomination and declaration in 2009 has not been updated since 2012 and remains unchanged up to date (Conaculta 2012; SECULT 2020a). The three records exist independently of each other with no cross-references. To date there is no inventory record of the ritual for Michoacán and Hidalgo.

new supranational context of the ritual expands its convertibility into symbolic capital. Furthermore, the Mexican state has been able to consolidate and expand its position within the UNESCO heritage regime.<sup>16</sup>

With the inscription of intangible cultural heritage on the Representative List, the contracting states are requested to report regularly on the respective status of the implementation of the convention and the status of the elements (see UNESCO 2012a, Chapter V). In 2012, the first of these status reports, known as Periodic Report, has been handed over to UNESCO (see UNESCO 2012b). According to this report, around sixty percent of all agreed safeguarding measures were implemented within the first three years after the declaration (UNESCO 2012b, C.4.). With regard to the investments of different forms of capital, it can be stated that economic capital is required for almost every one of the promised measures, but in fact, hardly any concrete capital conversions are reported despite the announced implementation. According to Bourdieu, all actors strive to optimize their capital investments, that is, to convert their investments into profits at the lowest possible transformation costs. In the specific case discussed here, the measures declared as implemented show that the state focuses primarily on the reproduction of social capital relationships.

The state activities have been criticized by communities, practicing groups and their representatives (Arellano Mora 2013; Cerezo 2012; Garduño 2010; Zaleta 2011). The criticism put forward refers to a lack of capital investment by the state or an insufficient funding of measures for improving the living conditions of practitioners and their families, particularly with respect to social security and life insurance as well as medical care (e.g. after accidents). Regarding concrete measures for the safeguarding of the ritual itself, the groups criticize a lack of support for training and education, financing of transport costs and equipment, as well as insufficient remuneration for performances abroad, and a lack of clarity about the whereabouts of corresponding income on the part of state actors.

The discrepancies between the statuses provided by the state on the one hand and the criticism from the communities, the practicing groups and their representatives on the other hand result in a rather contradictory picture of the status of individual measures and actual contributions by state actors. Consequently, the degree of legitimacy of the symbolic capital, which is associated with the designation of the ritual as an intangible cultural heritage, decreases. However, this legitimation was and is imperative for the declaration of the ritual as intangible cultural heritage. Future analyses will need to review further the evolution of the state's commitments and assess how this is perceived by different communities, practitioners, and their representatives. Specifically,

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<sup>16</sup> These profits can even be quantified through further inscriptions on the Representative List. Until September 2020 the Representative List comprises ten elements on behalf of Mexico (UNESCO 2020).



it remains to be analyzed if and to what extent the measures and state actions have been supportive in the safeguarding of the ritual in the long-term.

### **Afterword by the coordinators of the dossier:**

In the meantime, 15 years have passed since the UNESCO inscription of the ‘ritual ceremony of the *Voladores*’ on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity – time for a brief review and a reflection on the current status. Markus Melzer critically analyzed in his contribution how the Mexican state managed to appropriate, transform and leverage different forms of capital to accomplish the ritual’s declaration as intangible cultural heritage in advance of the UNESCO’s decision. Travelling through Mexico today, one is surprised at how many places the ceremony of the *Voladores* is offered to national and international visitors for a small fee, be it the forecourt of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico-City or at the entrance to the archaeological site of Tulum on the Yucatán Peninsula. The formerly declared religiously motivated ritual ceremony, has turned into a spectacle of global tourism business. It does not seem right to attribute this development solely to the process of entitlement of the *Voladores* as Intangible World Cultural Heritage awarded in 2009. However, the awarding of the title surely has given a special impetus to the spread of the ceremony.

The democratization that is supposedly associated with this is only apparent, because driven by state interests. While the trivialization as a tourist spectacle is tolerated or even encouraged in the vicinity of Secretaría de Cultura/INAH-managed archaeological sites, the corruption by international companies (the Moneyman case 2022) is publicly reprimanded by state authorities (Anda Corral 2021). In 2009, the narrow focus on the Totonac tradition of the ceremony led to disappointment because of the exclusion of numerous other regions that would have equally deserved the title. Various initiatives are still trying to oppose this, such as the Consejo de la Sierra Nororiental del Estado de Puebla del Ritual de la Danza de los Voladores, which also sought to have its *Danza de Voladores* recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2022 (Anonymous 2022). One critical aspect has not changed in the past 15 years: With the exception of a few high-profile *voladores*, the majority of communities, practitioner groups and their representatives continue to suffer from poor coverage in terms of social security, medical care or even life insurance.

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