CASE STUDY 22

Developing safeguarding measures to address risks and threats to a ritual ceremony in Mexico[[1]](#footnote-1)

#### Name and brief description of the element

The Ritual ceremony of the Voladores (or ‘flying men’), inscribed on the Representative List in 2009, originated in pre-colonial times and was once practised by various Mesoamerican communities and groups over a wide area in Middle America. Today it is still practised by the Totonac in Mexico. In the Totonacapan region there are 33 groups of registered Voladores, 3 Schools for Volador Children, three Associations of Voladores and about 500 identified Voladores.

In preparation for the ceremony itself – if the full traditional ritual is performed – a tree is cut down, transported, ritually prepared and erected in a central area. Preparatory rituals, including offerings to Mother Earth, are performed and those who will participate in the ceremony undergo physical and spiritual preparation. During the ceremony, five men climb the pole, which is 18–38 m high. While one of them dances at the top, playing the flute and drum, the others swing from the pole on ropes, turning around the pole and mimicking flight. Although there are many variations to the ceremony, it was, and often still is, in essence, a ritual to establish communion with the gods and ensure the fertility of the earth. It is therefore held during various celebrations and festivities, such as patron saint festivities, carnivals, solstices and equinoxes, festivities surrounding the Day of the Dead and in ceremonies associated with the sowing and harvesting of crops. The most spectacular part of the tradition, flying around the pole, is also often presented outside the traditional community setting, increasingly by groups of professional Voladores using permanently erected steel poles.

#### Viability

The beauty and visual spectacle of the flight stage of the Voladores ceremony has contributed to its status as one of the iconic indigenous traditions of Mexico. The ceremony is still regularly practised and the requisite skills continue to be transmitted to Volador children. In spite of massive migration out of the region, the Totonac community is very eager to preserve this tradition. The elder Voladores in the community are unhappy that many ceremonies are now performed for tourists in a truncated form, omitting the cutting, selection and ritual preparation of the pole and the ritual preparations of the ‘flyers’. The Council of the Totonacapan region has supported the creation of various associations of Voladores and Schools for Volador Children to aid in transmission. Volador practitioners, as well as the Totonac community, have welcomed these efforts and the number of students enrolled at the Schools for Volador Children has increased in recent years, demonstrating an interest in the continued practice of the element.

#### Threats to viability

* *Declining availability of wooden poles*: The pole used in the ceremony has traditionally been made from the Tsakáe Kiwi tree (‘Flyer’s Pole’). Deforestation in the region, caused by extensive cattle grazing, has led to a decline in the availability of the tree. In many places, fixed metal poles are being used instead. The use of fixed metal poles affects the meaning of the ritual because spiritual communion is established between the natural and the supernatural world through the ritual selection and preparation of a Tsakáe Kiwi tree for the pole.
* *Loss of the ritual and spiritual dimensions of the ceremony*: Although the full Ritual ceremony of the Voladores is supposed to take place at specific times of the year and on special occasions, the flight stage of the ceremony is now performed at any time, as an acrobatic act for tourist audiences. Performing only the spectacular flight stage, isolated from its ritual context, underplays its spiritual dimension and leads to a shallow appreciation of it as commercial or recreational, by participants and audiences, within and outside the community concerned. The performers in the ceremony are supposed to mediate ritually between deities and human beings, so the Voladores and the community as a whole used to go through a period of personal spiritual preparation prior to the ceremony to ensure a positive outcome. As ‘professional’ performers emerge to serve the tourist market, they focus on the flight part of the ceremony and hence on physical rather than mental preparation. They may therefore fail to learn some of the traditional techniques for avoiding injury.
* *Insufficient information available about the ceremony*: Young people who live in the area lack reliable information on the ceremony and its traditional function within their communities. In addition, many young people are migrating from the region. If the ceremony is to be safeguarded, ways should be found to encourage those people who remain to support the ceremony, appreciate its value and function within the community and learn to participate in it as audience members or performers.

#### Previous safeguarding measures

Associations of Voladores have been communicating with each other and with State officials, discussing the problems they face and possible solutions, to help safeguard the ceremony. Voladores elders and practitioners have been actively involved in transmitting their skills through traditional apprenticeship mechanisms and through new initiatives. The Centre for Indigenous Arts, established as a result of State investment in the region, promotes Totonac culture by encouraging elders to share their passion, knowledge and experience with adults, young people and children from the area. The Centre has opened a School for Volador Children in Papantla to teach the full traditional ritual and its background. Other schools have also been founded: a Kgosni School for Totonac Volador Children at the Centre for Indigenous Arts of Papantla and a community School for Volador Children in the community of Chila, Municipality of Honey.

State investment to promote the economy and culture of the area around the archaeological site of El Tajín has had benefits for the promotion of local cultural practices like the Voladores ceremony. The Tajín Summit, for example, was introduced in 2000 as a new festival in which artists from various countries around the world come to perform and share their local customs, practices and rites with national and foreign visitors. This multifaceted festival has significantly increased tourist revenue in the area and highlighted Totonac culture, although it may not have contributed specifically to the safeguarding of the Voladores ceremony. There are other festivals where Voladores from various parts of Mexico meet and perform one after the other and where they share ideas about how to continue the ceremony.

The State has funded an Information and Documentation Centre, specializing in Totonac culture, with special emphasis on compiling diverse reference and audiovisual collections of work featuring the Voladores. State-funded environmental agencies have sponsored a pilot reforestation programme to plant the Tsakáe Kiwi tree; this is soon to be expanded.

#### Developing safeguarding measures with strong community participation

Associations of Voladores have actively participated in the development of a safeguarding plan. A Coordinating Council was set up during the preparation of the nomination file for the Representative List and it will help to coordinate implementation of the safeguarding plan.

A multidisciplinary team including community representatives, informed by a series of stakeholder meetings, has developed safeguarding measures. These meetings involved Voladores (both as individuals and representing associations), the Supreme Totonac Council, various civil associations, intellectuals, public and private universities, town hall organizations of the Veracruz region of Totonacapan and several federal institutions devoted to culture, in addition to the State Government of Veracruz. The following issues were discussed at the meetings:

* participants’ views on the meaning and values of the ceremony;
* problems faced, including threats to the ceremony’s viability; and
* possible safeguarding measures.

#### Some of the main safeguarding measures proposed

Ensure that poles are available to enact the element:

1. Produce an inventory of the existing poles (both wood and metal) and a diagnosis of their condition.
2. Provide access to appropriate trees as flying poles for Totonac communities.
3. Organize reforestation drives with communities to plant the Tsakáe Kiwi tree to ensure that wooden poles are still available for the ritual in the future.
4. Create protected areas in several Totonacapan municipalities to protect Tsakáe Kiwi tree plantations.

Ensure that the ritual dimension of the ceremony is not lost:

1. Ensure that in addition to any tourist performances, the entire ceremony is performed by tradition bearers at appropriate times, including the rituals associated with raising the pole, and offerings to Mother Earth.

Promote transmission of the element in appropriate ways:

1. Support the Schools for Volador Children financially and increase enrolment in them.

Promote information gathering and sharing for safeguarding and awareness raising:

1. Promote research about the element, encouraging communities to participate in the research and to use new technologies such as video-recording to pass on important information about the ceremony.
2. Produce a list of places and occasions where both full and truncated ceremonies are celebrated.

Create an enabling legislative and administrative environment:

1. Ensure that the legislative and policy framework at regional and national levels assists in acknowledging the importance of the element (e.g. as Regional Cultural Heritage) and encouraging the safeguarding of the element (e.g. through State support).

Raise awareness about the element:

1. Distribute publications about the ceremony in indigenous languages.
2. Include information about the ceremony in the school curriculum for the region.
3. Share information about the ceremony locally, nationally and internationally.

1. . The information given in this case study draws on the nomination file for the above element as submitted to UNESCO but is not an exact replica of the safeguarding plan in that nomination file:   
   http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/RL/00175 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)