

## The Ritual Ceremony of the Voladores and Jacinta, an Unusual Flyer

This ceremony has transcended time. With pre-Hispanic roots, it is still celebrated today and recently, in 2009, it was added to UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Surely you have seen this ceremony outside the National Museum of Anthropology or maybe in some tourist place like Cancun, Playa del Carmen or in some restaurant in Taxco, Guerrero. This practice has become a popular way to welcome visitors to Mexico. However, it is necessary to put this ritual ceremony in its right context and to know that its meanings and importance center around fertility and the renewal of life.

Eight years ago, I was amazed by an interview with Jacinta Hernández who shared her story of how she decided to follow in her father's footsteps and became the first flying woman in Cuetzalan, Puebla. The tradition of the voladores is inherited from father to son. However, having no siblings, Jacinta saw the need to continue her father's legacy and therefore asked him to teach her how to be a flyer, even though this required breaking many traditions, among them considering women capable of participating with their knowledge in this ritual ceremony.

Since 2016, I have visited Cuetzalan constantly. My particular interest has been to learn more about the tradition and to understand this new generation led by Jacinta as a woman who is motivating other women to join groups of flying women.

The appointment to meet Jacinta was in the atrium of the Church of San Felipe de Jesus where the flying stick stands. There she explained to us how the stick is chosen as the main element for the dance and the ritual that is followed to put it up in the main square of Cuetzalan.



Jacinta commented that the choice of the flying stick (Tsakátkiwi) is one of the most important elements of the ceremony. It is a tree trunk that must be straight, high, and made of resistant wood. Before cutting it down, a ritual is followed where an offering is made to its foot. Incense is offered and liquor is sprinkled on it before it falls. This is an invitation to the tree to be part of the dance. The four cardinal points are also asked for permission to cut it down, during this process flute music is played. In total there are five melodies, one for each cardinal point and another for the center of the world.

The transportation of the stick to where the dance will take place requires the effort of the whole community. The help of up to one hundred men is required and they are also accompanied by musicians. Once the destination where the dance will take shape is reached, a hole is made. Jacinta shared with us that this procedure must be accompanied by a ritual as well because at that moment the earth is being wounded. First, a circle is traced, on which liquor is poured at the points corresponding to the four cardinal points and the center, while at the same time asking forgiveness of Mother Earth for being hurt.

The trunk is gradually straightened, using cross supports, and pulled with ropes into an upright position. However, before putting it upright, a hole is made one and a half meters deep. At that moment, a turkey or chicken chick is deposited as an offering to Mother Earth, and is thrown into the hole live just as the stick is about to touch the bottom. In order to secure the stick, as many stakes as necessary are placed as a wedge.

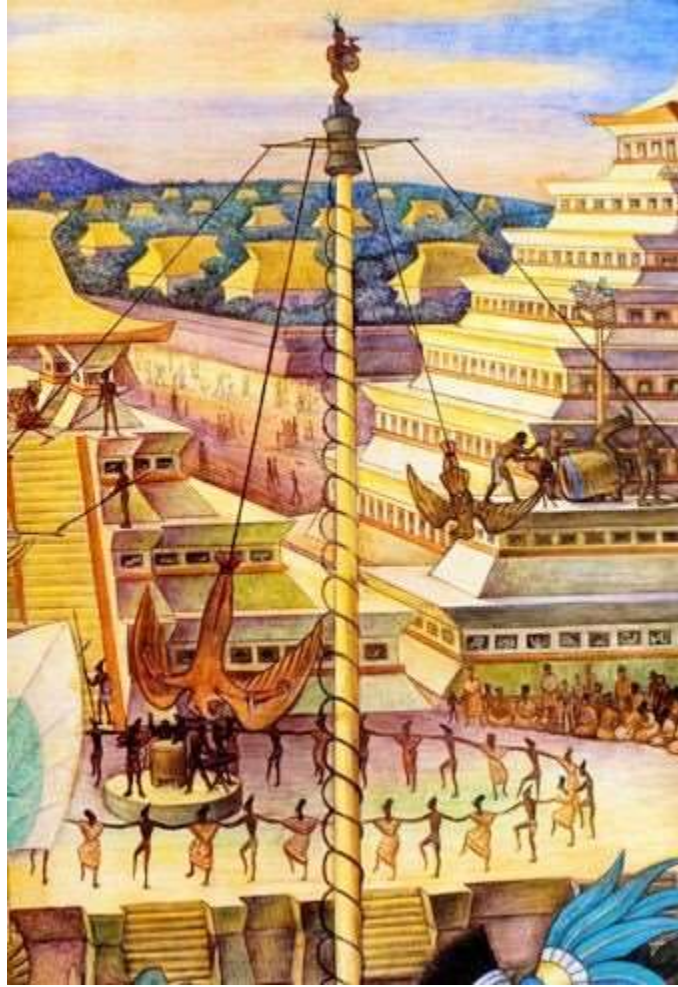
The meaning of the ceremony is related to several living aspects in the indigenous communities in Mexico. This celebration can be given to celebrate a patron saint, at carnivals, at the solstices, at the festivities of the dead, and in the ceremonies associated with harvest.

There are five participants. Four of them represent the four cardinal points and the fifth represents the center. While descending from the highest part of the pole, the flyers do it with thirteen exact turns. The four flyers will reach the ground to represent with it the new century of fifty-two years. ( $13 \times 4 = 52$ ). Composed of four periods of thirteen years each. Let's remember that in pre-Hispanic times the century was made up of 52 years.

The action of the flyers represents the decrease of the rains which is fundamental for the cultivation of corn. At the same time, if the community is experiencing a drought, it may represent an imploration for water.

Although this practice is related to the Sierra Norte of Puebla, the tradition is alive and well in the north of Veracruz, an area known as Totonacapan. Other places where there are representations of the flyers are in Hidalgo, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Tlaxcala and even in Guatemala.

In the murals of the Palacio de Gobierno in Mexico City, Diego Rivera recreated the flyers in the context of Totonac culture and the city of Tajín.



Diego Rivera (Government Palace mural detail)

This tradition is alive today. There are 33 groups of registered flyers, 3 schools of flying children (Nahua, Totonac and Otomi) and more than 500 identified flyers and three associations.

There is only one flying woman, Jacinta, who takes flight to continue a tradition with a subtle but profound change which seeks gender equality in a context that has been led by men. This cultural change allows the inclusion of knowledge to an old tradition that is enriched day by day and that has been favorably recognized on UNESCO's List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

There are archaeological vestiges of the Voladores ceremony in sites such as Guachimontones and El Tajín, both of which we will discuss later.



Jacinta Hernández (first left) with her flying group in Cuetzalan, Puebla

The Sierra Norte of Puebla where Cuetzalan is located is wonderful with unique landscapes. The area will not disappoint you when you visit, with the smell of aromatic coffee in the air and the stories that are woven around a deep sense of love for their cultural roots.



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