

Los Voladores, The Flyers of Mexico

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LOS VOLADORES, a Mexican Indian ceremony which dates from before the Conquest, has endured with little change till the present time. To the ancient Indian, the celebration of Los Voladores expressed the immutable rhythms of his universe, his sacrifice to a mythological deity, and his human desire to overpower a bitter struggle for existence (*V10*). With the invasion of Christianity, Los Voladores, with its remnants of pagan ritual, was reluctantly given room in the ceremonial calendar of the Church. Today, Los Voladores survives in the rugged country along the eastern fringes of the Sierra Madre Oriental, straddling the modern Veracruz-Puebla border, and in the lowlands of Veracruz. In this relatively inaccessible stretch of land are Indian villages which even today are untouched by modern life and whose culture retains many ancient customs.

In April 1969, a troupe of Voladores performed in Tucson, Arizona, sharing in the town's annual celebration of Fiesta de los Vaqueros (figure one). A pole about eighty feet high was set up in a parking lot next to a little downtown park, where brightly decorated booths displayed showy paper flowers and vendors announced tacos, frijoles, and tamales for sale. The pole was looped with heavy rope to facilitate climbing, and on the top was fixed a windlass, a cylinder upon which was wound four lengths of rope. About three feet down, a square, wooden frame or outrigging connected with the windlass. Five men, wearing red and black costumes trimmed with yellow fringe and pointed hats decorated with small mirrors, danced around the pole to a haunting tune played on a reed fife and small drum. The men mounted the pole, four of whom seated themselves on the sides of the frame, while the fifth performed a short dance on top of the pole. Suddenly the four cast themselves off, arms outstretched, a rope tied around the waist and held by

the feet. The weight of their bodies turned the frame around and around; the force and speed of each progressive turn increased as they whirled in ever-widening circles to the ground. The fifth man played the fife and drum during the descent and afterwards quickly slid to the ground by one of the ropes (V0).

The survival of this ancient ceremony from Aztec times into today's space age is, indeed, somewhat miraculous. However, it has been questioned several times as to whether or not this ceremony originated in pre-Spanish times. Aztec chroniclers Sahagún, Tezozomoc, and Chimalpain do not describe it, nor is it discovered in the notices of the Conquistadores. In fact, a first notice does not appear until the writings of Fray Juan de Torquemada in 1612.¹ But Los Voladores is an ancient ceremony, for it appears in pictograph in two pre-Spanish Aztec codices: *Codex Porfirio Díaz* (figure two); and *Codex Fernández Leal*.²

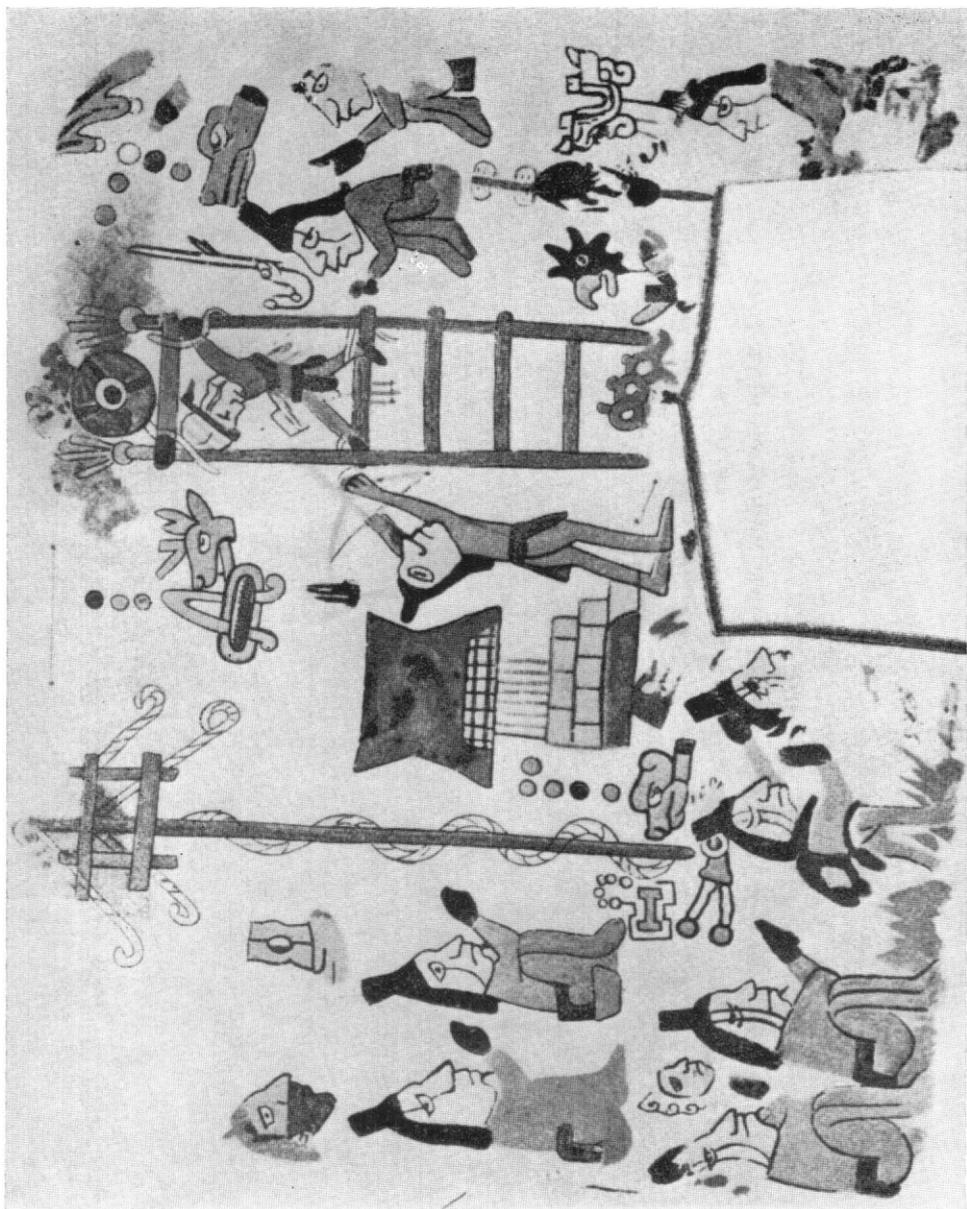
In both codices there are striking similarities, and in both codices the staging of the Volador is found united with the sacrifice by arrow. The pictographs display the tall post looped with rope, with a rotating mechanism and a square-sided wooden outrigger on top. At the foot of the pole are seated the chiefs of the tribe and the priests with bags of copal. Next to the volador's post is a ladder-like structure onto which a victim is tied and raised to the sacrifice by arrow. In *Codex Porfirio Díaz*, the victim is pierced by the arrow of the warrior standing below (V10). Pictured in *Codex Fernández Leal* are four men seated on the outrigger and dressed to give the appearance of birds. They each wear a simulated bird's head complete with beak, eyes, and crest; feathers are fastened to their arms to give the shape of wings; and attached at their lower spine are feathers representing a bird's tail.

In 1612 Torquemada described the voladores as four principal participants who dressed up in different costumes as birds, some taking the form of royal eagles, others as griffins or other birds which repre-

1. Torquemada, a Spaniard by birth, lived in Mexico for 50 years. His record of Los Voladores is "Del Palo Volador, de que Hablan estos Indios, en sus Fiestas Principales," chap. 38, bk. 10, vol. 2 of *Los veinte y un libros rituales y monarchia Indiana*, 3 vols. (Madrid, 1723), 305-7. All sources in Spanish used in this article were translated by the author.

2. Los Voladores pictographs in *Codex Fernández Leal*, ed. Antonio Peñafiel (Mexico, 1895); and *Codex Porfirio Díaz*, ed. Junta Columbina de México (Mexico, 1892) are reproduced in Walter Krickeberg, *Los Totonaca*, trans. from German to Spanish by Porfirio Aguirre (Mexico, 1933), illus. 24 and 25.





sent grandeur and valor. They wore extended wings to imitate the appropriate and natural flight of birds.³ In an attempt to explain the disguise of birds and the seemingly effortless flight through the air, Walter Krickeberg states that through the bird dress of the flyers, the four men impersonated the souls of dead warriors and sacrificial victims who, after they had finished their services to the sun-god, returned to earth in the form of birds and butterflies to take the honey from the flowers.⁴ Another, and more probable, explanation offered by Krickeberg is that the flyers represented men destined to be sacrificed, and, as potential victims, they fell from the sky.⁵ Krickeberg bases his theory on an ancient Aztec legend that sacrificial victims fell from the sky into the midst of pricklypear cactus and brambles of the northern plains of Mexico in order to be sacrificed by the Aztecs; thus the stars were identified with the men sacrificed.⁶ Therefore, according to Krickeberg's theory, the flight of the Voladores immediately preceded the sacrifice by arrow, and, in this manner, sacrificial victims were provided.

The idea of sacrificial victims descending from the sky was translated into action in a most realistic manner in other ceremonies in the Valley of Mexico. In Tenochtitlán, during the feast of Ochpaniztli, prisoners were thrown headlong from a high wooden pedestal after they were flayed.⁷ During the feast of Izcalli in Quouhtitlán, victims were tied to a high scaffold, shot with arrows, and then thrown headlong from the scaffold, in order to be sacrificed in "a regular manner" (*S260.1*).⁸

The purpose of the arrow sacrifice, according to Alfonso Caso, is that on the feast days of Xipe, a prisoner was tied to a kind of frame, set upright, and shot with arrows until dead; the blood of the prisoner, falling upon the earth, made it fertile.⁹ The feast day of Xipe, the Flayed One and god of agriculture, was celebrated during Tlacaxipe-

3. Torquemada, 305.

4. Krickeberg, 74.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva-España y Islas de Tierra Firme*, ed. José F. Ramírez (Mexico, 1867, 1880), 2:189.

8. Motolinia (Fray Toribio Benavente), *Memoriales*, ed. Luis García Pimentel (Mexico, 1903), 62.

9. Alfonso Caso, "Los Sacrificios y Otras Ceremonias," *México Prehispánico: Antología de Esta Semana, 1935-1946*, ed. Emma Hurtado (Mexico, 1946), 360.

ualixtli, on the beginning day of the second twenty-day period (February) of the Aztec solar year (Xiuhmolpilli).¹⁰ "This god symbolized the necessity of death and burial and breaking through the old skin for renewal of life. The maize seed died and was buried until, in this month, the green shoots broke through the old skin."¹¹ Hence, the arrow sacrifice to Xipe was calculated to preserve human existence: the arrow pierced through the skin, causing the sacrificial blood to flow to the ground; the fertility of the soil was thereby renewed, ensuring the growth of maize (*V17.1*).

The sacrifice to Xipe was separated from Los Voladores by 1612, for Torquemada, a most conservative and punctilious padre, would have, from sheer horror, given notice to it. For even the performance of Los Voladores was somewhat distressing to Torquemada:

This device was invented by the Devil in order to incite a more lasting and fervent memory of his devilish and abominable services, because it was in commemoration of the fifty-two years, which they counted in their century, at the end of which, they regenerated with new fire, the pact and agreement which they made with the devil to serve him an equal number of years in the course of time to come. This is confirmed by the thirteen turns they made, and considering the four ropes, they made fifty-two, or giving each one of the flyers thirteen turns, then thirteen multiplied by four makes the aforesaid number of fifty-two.¹² (*V11*)

The fifty-two years, which composed the native's solar "year-bundle," was intimately bound up with the complex Aztec religion and system of deities. Burland says that "the beginning of the new calendar every 52 years was a basic unit in the rhythms of fate"; regarding this significance he states:

Great importance was attached to the period of 52 years, which is the time it takes for the 365-day agricultural year and the 260-day Tonalpouhalli to go through their complete series of combinations and return to their original position relative to each other. The Aztecs used the 52-year period as the unit in all long counts of time.¹³ (*Z72*)

10. The solar year was divided up into eighteen periods of twenty days each, with the remaining five days (*nemontemi*) neither named nor counted because they were useless days.

11. C. A. Burland, *The Gods of Mexico* (New York, 1967), 74.

12. Torquemada, 306.

13. Burland, 81-82. Also symbolic of the 52-year period is the gambling game called *Patolli*, which is played on a board shaped like a cross with beans for markers; Alfonso Caso, *La Religión de los Aztecas* (Mexico, 1936), 45.

Tonalpohualli, the calendar by which the Aztecs determined their religious ceremonies, was made up of a series of 20 days, each with its symbol, in combination with another series of 13 days, simply numbered 1 to 13. "The number thirteen, however, does not seem to have had any special significance to the Mexicans apart from its use in the Tonalpouhalli. The choice of it remains a mystery, although some accounts list thirteen heavens in the Aztec cosmology" (Z71).¹⁴

The number four, a most significant number, appeared not only in the Aztec calendar system but in their conception of the universe (Z71.2). The great Calendar Stone in Mexico City, on which is represented the history of the world, "is arranged in concentric circles, at the center of which is the sun set within the sign Four Motion, the date of the present era. The dates of the preceding eras are given in the four arms of the Motion sign."¹⁵ Zelia Nuttall states:

The native's all pervading philosophical conception of the Cosmos as a "Four in One," conveyed by the four rays attached to the circle, is conspicuously carried out in the four year-signs of the native Calendar, each of which also symbolizes one of the four elements. [Z71.2.2] The combination of one of the four year-signs and one of the symbolical rays, to a complete circle, clearly expressed the fourth part of the quadruplicate whole.¹⁶

The ancient Indian conceived his universe as being divided horizontally and vertically, in a religious manner rather than geographically. The universe was divided vertically into thirteen heavens and horizontally into five directions, the four cardinal points and the center. The central zone was controlled by the god of fire, the east was presided over by the rain god, the north was ruled by the god of death, the south was designated to the god of agriculture (Xipe) and the god of flowers, and the west was associated with Quetzalcoatl.¹⁷ The four cardinal points were also assigned colors: red to the east, black to the north, blue to the south, and white to the west.¹⁸ Not only were the gods and colors grouped in this manner, but animals, trees, days, and birthdates were all assigned to one of the four regions of the world.¹⁹ Thus, the

14. Burland, 83-84.

15. George C. Vaillant, *Aztecs of Mexico* (New York, 1944), note to plate 52.

16. Zelia Nuttall, "Introduction" to *Codex Nuttall: Facsimile of an Ancient Mexican Codex* (Cambridge, Mass., 1902), 7.

17. Caso, "Los Sacrificios," 10.

18. Caso, *Religión de los Aztecas*, 10.

19. *Ibid.*

numerical significance of Los Voladores: four sacred birds flew from the four cardinal points of the universe in thirteen circles, equivalent to the rhythmic calendar number of fifty-two (Z71.2.1).

However, as Los Voladores moved into colonial times, it lost its numerical tradition, as well as its attachment to the arrow sacrifice. Torquemada says:

The flight did not cease with the Conquest nor with the introduction of the Faith to the Indians but continued until the clergy discovered its secret meaning and then it was strictly prohibited. However, once the first of the idolaters who had received the Faith were dead and the sons who followed them had forgotten the idolatry the flight represented, the flights resumed. The flights were performed on many occasions, and, like those who take advantage only of the sport and not of the intent which their fathers had, were no longer concerned that the flying frames be square. Sometimes the frames are made six-sided, especially when used on very high poles. Six ropes are suspended and they are used with great exuberance and celebrating. No one cares that the turns be only thirteen, because it depends on whether or not the poles are large or small that many or few turns are made.²⁰

During the time of the Vice Royalty of Don Martin Enríquez, Torquemada witnessed a flight in the Plazuela de Palacio (in Mexico City), which, he says, for a long time was called *del Volador*, but at that time, in 1612, was called *las Escuelas*. The occasion, according to Torquemada, was some fiesta that the Indians were forced to celebrate commemorating the days of Fernando Cortés. During this performance, one of the flyers fell from the top of the pole to his death, and the pole was ordered to be removed. Torquemada relates that many other Indians had been killed performing this sport, and, for this reason, he was instrumental, along with the Spanish Viceroy, in having the flights prohibited in Mexico City. With a feeling of disgust, Torquemada records that the flight was revived during the feast of Santiago, celebrated in the past year of 1611, in the vicinity of Tlatelulco.²¹

Although Los Voladores was prohibited and its primitive sacrificial meaning altered, its tradition persisted through the centuries. Almost as Torquemada described it, Los Voladores was witnessed by Carlos Nebel in 1829–1934. In Nebel's painting, entitled "Indios de la Sierra de Guauchinango," at a distance behind the center group of Indians,

20. Torquemada, 306.

21. *Ibid.*, 307.

are depicted six voladores in mid-flight.²² The pole, according to Nebel's written account, was fifty to sixty feet high. Upon climbing the pole, the flyers sat upon a movable hoop supported in the air by ropes hanging from the knob or cap which topped the pole; other ropes, also fastened at the top, were rolled up. The Indians grasped an end of the rope, and, after tying it around their waists, dropped backwards outside the hoop. Shouts and *vivas* from the spectators expressed their approval.²³

With the advancement of Christianity, the outward form of Los Voladores together with remnants of its ancient pagan sacrifice was adjusted into the ceremonial calendar of the Indian's Christian religion. This religion, characterized by ceremonies of cyclic saints and miracles, agricultural and seasonal ritual, pagan rites and magic, was bound together and covered over with a veneer of Roman Catholicism. However, whatever the particular event or combination of events, Los Voladores served to intensify the religious significance.

Christmas Day of 1839, in Rio Frio, located about forty miles east of Mexico City, was celebrated by a performance of Los Voladores. Concerning the occasion, Madame Calderón de la Barca recorded: "some Indians were playing at a curious and very ancient game—a sort of swing, resembling 'El Juego de los Voladores,' 'The game of the flyers,' much in vogue amongst the ancient Indian."²⁴ In 1899, at Coyulta, situated in the district of Papantla, "on November 30th, St. Andrew's Day, and on the nine following days, the Volador ceremony was performed. . . . The pole about 70 feet high with a cross-bar on top was erected in front of the church, evidently on the platform of the ancient temple."²⁵ According to Erna Fergusson, Los Voladores is sometimes celebrated in Papantla on the feast day of Corpus Christi in June.²⁶ In 1936, Rodney Gallop witnessed a flight "at Metep, just over the border of the State of Hidalgo," celebrating the fiesta of the Cristo de Metep.²⁷

22. Carlos Nebel, *Viaje pintoresco y arqueológico sobre la parte más interesante de la República Mexicana en los años transcurridos desde 1829 hasta 1834*, Librería de Manuel Porrúa (Mexico, 1963), illus. 13.

23. *Ibid.*, 17.

24. Frances Erskine (Inglis) Calderón de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (London, 1963), 39.

25. Adela C. Breton, "Survivals of Ceremonial Dances among Mexican Indians," *Internationaler Amerikanisten-Kongress* (1910) 16:515.

26. Erna Fergusson, *Fiesta in Mexico* (New York, 1942), 160.

27. Rodney Gallop, "Aerial Dances of the Otomis," *The Geographical Magazine* 4 (December, 1963): 73-88.

In modern times, as in the centuries before, the Indian's subsistence depends on the maize crop. "In the Papantla zone, land is abundant and there are two [maize] harvests a year. Cane and vanilla provide cash crops. . . . In contrast in the Sierra available land is inadequate; the growing season is long; and crops are confined pretty much to maize, beans, and squash."²⁸ At the several times of the year when the agricultural crops are gathered in, the close of the harvest is celebrated with a feast, usually in concurrence with autumn saints' days, and occasionally with Los Voladores. In Papantla, the vanilla center of the state of Veracruz, Krickeberg says that Los Voladores was celebrated during the August Festival, a harvest ceremony for which the doorways of churches were decorated with arches of artificial flowers.²⁹ At a harvest ceremony held in 1933, in Coxquián, an Indian village located near Zacapoaxtla, the flyers were the main event of the fiesta of San Mateo, held the last week in September (*V17.1*).³⁰

Pagan ritual combined with Christian ceremony involves the modern Indian from birth to death to after death. "Magically-caused illnesses include particularly fright, the evil eye [*D2064.4*], and contact with ghosts [*E265.1*]. Favorite cures are censuring, or stroking with candles or with an egg; Roman Catholic ritual may be used to counteract the influence of ghosts."³¹ Certain taboos must be observed in important ceremonies. For example, "that of avoiding women before an official dance performance takes place."³² In the above mentioned Coxquián performance of Los Voladores, for eight days before the flight, the flyers lived "in the house of the mayordomo, apart from their wives."³³ Fergusson reports that the Indians "are afraid if one not a Volador touches the pole."³⁴ In 1903-1904, Jessie Fewkes witnessed a performance of the flyers in Papantla. Concerning the ceremony, Fewkes said: "an old woman, the so-called *bruja* (witch), makes offerings of copal, aguardiente, and a fowl, which are placed in the hole when the pole is put in position, and various minor rites are performed during the several days the ceremony continues."³⁵ In Pahuatlán, lo-

28. Isabel Kelly, "The Modern Totonac," *Huastecos, Totonacos y Sus Vecinos* (Mexico, 1953), 176.

29. Krickeberg, 161.

30. Fergusson, 160.

31. Kelly, 182.

32. *Ibid.*, 184.

33. Fergusson, 166.

34. *Ibid.*, 170.

cated in the northern tip of the State of Puebla, "about every three years, when the old pole warps, rots at the base or otherwise becomes unsafe, a new one is set up. On this occasion a turkey, the sacrificial bird of the ancient Indian is first placed in the hole and the new pole is planted on top. This bird . . . represents an offering in order that their [the flyers'] lives may be protected from the dangers of the dance and flight" (V12.4.11).³⁶

Although the performance varied from time to time and from village to village, the Voladores ceremony was basically the same, with differences in detail. In the costume, regardless of variance, the intent was always the same: the impersonation of birds. The wings of a bird, represented by the feathered arms of the pre-Spanish Indian in the codices, were simulated in modern times by a crossed bandana handkerchief or by long golden fringe attached to the sleeves; and the ancient Indian's feathered crest evolved into a high pointed hat with ribbon streamers and finally into a bright-red beret. The four flyers whose performance in 1899 was witnessed by Breton in Tepexco, a small village about ten miles north of Zacatlán, wore high pointed caps with ribbon streamers.³⁷ Of the four voladores at Coxquihui, Fergusson says: "their tall peaked caps, light vests, and shorts and stockings were red and green, yellow and blue."³⁸ The six flyers at Pahuatlán, "over the white cotton pajamas which are the usual Indian dress, pulled scarlet knee-breeches with lace fringes and fastened little aprons of the same color. Over both shoulders and across the chest and back they tied bandana handkerchiefs bandoleer-wise, and on their heads they wore scarlet berets."³⁹

Whether the Indians have forgotten the significance of Los Voladores can be judged from a remark made by one of the flyers at Pahuatlán: "We are the sacred birds that fly with the four winds to the four cardinal points, but nowadays six of us fly to make a finer show" (A132.6).⁴⁰

35. Jessie Walter Fewkes, "Certain Antiquities of Eastern Mexico," *Twenty-fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution (1903-1904)* (Washington: GPO, 1907), 249.

36. Gallop, 88.

37. Breton, 516.

38. Fergusson, 175.

39. Gallop, 87.

40. *Ibid.*

If the Pahuatlán volador were to look backward into time, he would see his Aztec counterpart placidly sitting on the outrigger ready to throw himself down from the sky; if he were to look forward into time, he would see his astronaut counterpart walking on the moon, for man has always dreamed of soaring through space.

University of Arizona

California Folklore Society 20th Annual Meeting

The twentieth annual meeting of the California Folklore Society will be held on the campus of the American River College, 4700 College Oak Drive, Sacramento, 28–29 April 1972. Registration will be at American River College, 12–2:00 P.M. 28 April. The annual banquet and program will be given on 28 April, and the business luncheon 29 April. Optional tours of Old Sacramento will be available 30 April.

In charge of the program is Professor Roland Dickison, English Department, Sacramento State College. Professor Dickison requests papers of ten–twelve minutes reading time, to be sent him before 1 February. Papers of interest to ethnic groups and those dealing with governmental topics are especially encouraged.

Professor Marjorie W. McLain, English Department, American River College, is in charge of local arrangements. Queries concerning housing, scheduling, meals, transportation, etc. should be addressed to her at the College or at 679 El Dorado Drive, Folsom, California.