

ABSTRACT

This research project details one of ancient Mexico's most influential sacred ceremonies—*La Danza de los Voladores de Papantla* and how its reed flute has reflected the ritual's changes in response to Spanish colonization (1521). The originators of this ritual were the people of Totonacapan, who primarily resided in ancient Mexico's lost city of El Tajin from 600-1200 AD. While *La Danza de los Voladores* is notably composed of 5 distinct sub-ceremonies and has since adopted various realizations by other indigenous groups in Mexico, this study only examines the ceremonies which have contributed to the reed flute's musical, religious, and artisanal properties within the socioregion of Papantla. This study assesses these elements utilizing Azcatitlan and Spanish codices and independent documentation, as well as by transcribing and analyzing records of reed flute performances. This paper also aims to discuss the studies that have been previously done on *La Danza de los Voladores* and its music, noting the limitations that native English speakers may have when conducting research. Scholarship in both the English and Spanish languages were used to create a resource for scholars who may take an interest in examining the Totonac reed flute in the future. By observing Totonac culture in the city of El Tajin throughout its shift from pre-Columbian to post-Aztec society, this study identifies the significant cultural changes that the Totonac reed flute has reflected within the region of Totonacapan; located between indigenous areas of Veracruz and Puebla, Mexico.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to expand on the scholarship available on *La Danza de los Voladores* and its reed flute. Notably, the discrepancies between the actual origin of the flute itself, the flute's relevance to Totonac folklore, and the Totonac language barrier are just some of the reasons as to why efforts to expand on the ritual's history are especially crucial. Efforts to document this tradition have only been made since its addition to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2009, after being named as a key identifier of Totonac society and its preservation.

METHODS

- Review English and Spanish literature on the mechanics of *La Danza de los Voladores*
- Develop a list of significant events important to the reed flute's role in Totonac cultural and religious identity
- Compare Spanish and Azcatitlan codices that document Totonac lifestyle and religious practices
- Transcribe and identify motives present in major performances of *La Danza de Los Voladores* near Papantla, Mexico (1952, 1980, and 2005) using the Western music theory system.

Methodology: *Chikomexochitl*

- Utilizes orality, syncretism, rituals, community work, centredness of cycles, interconnectedness, and stories of creation/ being in order to make informed analyses on the indigenous communities represented.

La Danza de Los Voladores



Figure 1. Caporal (musician) playing the reed flute and drum used for *La Danza de los Voladores*.

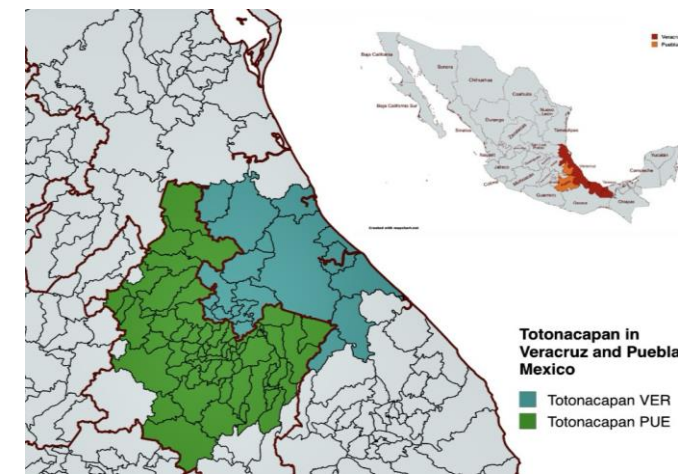


Figure 2. The 75 municipalities which comprise Totonacapan; split among Veracruz and Puebla, Mexico.

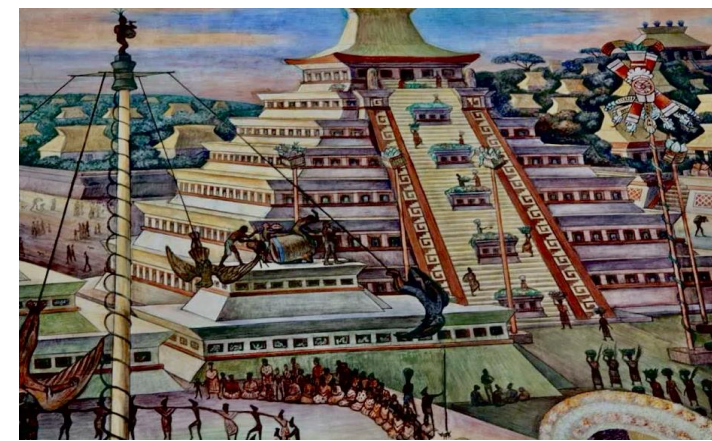


Figure 3. Diego Rivera. *The Totonac Civilization or the Jaguar People in Veracruz, 1950*. Depiction of *La Danza de los Voladores* at El Tajin's central arena.

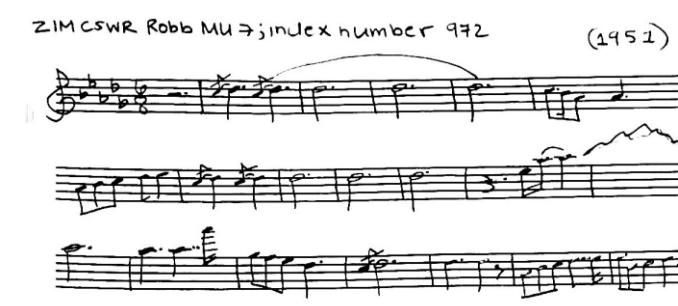


Figure 4. Transcription of John Donald Robb's flute recording of "Los Voladores" in 1951.

La Danza de los Voladores is an Ancient Mexican ritual ceremony performed by the Totonac people as an offering to the sun gods in exchange for good fertility and protection among their community.

The Caporal (Figure 1) plays the reed flute and small drum, which represent the sounds of birds and thunder. Along with the caporal, 4 men climb to the top of a 114 foot pole. Then, the 4 'flyers' lunge themselves from the top, tied only by a rope around their ankles.

The Totonac reed flute (Figure 5) is played throughout the entirety of the 'ascending' portion of the ceremony. Its melodies are present in 3 other stages of the ritual. This includes the dragging of the tree, the setting of the tree, and the final descent.

There are many versions of this ritual performed today which vary in the number of participants involved, in religious meaning, and in spiritual preparation.



Figure 5. The Totonac reed flute used to play the ritual music in *Los Voladores de Papantla*.

RESULTS

The results of this study identify a significant number of discrepancies and gaps between literature, emphasizing the need for stronger Totonac cultural authenticity as a whole.

Discrepancies/gaps include:

- Inconsistent dates available for the events which have impacted the Totonac flute's role in the economic, societal, and tourism trends near Papantla, Mexico
- The meaning of the ritual after Spanish colonization
- The origins of the flute utilized in 4/5 of the sub-ceremonies

While studies exist on the general overview of the ritual, only a few exist in which musical elements are discussed as a primary theme. Although it was previously thought that the flute melodies found in the ritual were entirely improvisatory, this study found that certain motivic phrases are present in all 3 of the recordings which were transcribed. I identified this melody as a portion of the *Son de Vuelo* category of ritual ceremony.

Additionally, topographic and archeologic studies on the land in Veracruz and Puebla were examined to complete a visual map of the 75 municipalities of Totonacapan in which the ritual originated in.

Finally, this study identifies the limitations that currently exist for native English speakers who wish to conduct research on Totonac culture in the future.

Limitations for research include:

- Recording technology before 1950
- Translation errors: ex. Totonac—Spanish—English
- Secondary documentation biases
- Artifact materials and their perishability

CONCLUSION

This study was necessary to maintain the cultural and religious properites of the ritual alive for years to come. Additionally, it will serve to guide the second phase of this project, which will be carried out in Summer 2025. I will conduct one-on-one interviews, gathering personal insights on the music and practice of *La Danza de Los Voladores* from active participants who have trained physically and spiritually for the ritual. From these experiences, I will seek to understand how the flute music performed may have direct influence on the musicians and flyers that carry out its performance both spirituality and through artistic expression.

Questions that still need addressing: When was the Totonac flute introduced into this ritual? What material was the flute made out of before the 20th century? Are the melodies identified in this research project a more recent addition? What melodies were used before advances in recording technology occurred?

Compiling an English guide to the English and Spanish literature present on *La Danza de los Voladores* will serve scholars in taking the next steps to preserving a tradition which holds crucial significance to the entirety of a culture's identity.

REFERENCES

