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Unesco Committee Awards Special Recognition To Flying-dancers Ritual In Mexico

by LADB Staff

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Several historical and cultural regions in Mexico have received special designation from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in recent years, but only two ceremonies have been recognized in this fashion. The latest recognition came in late September, when a special UNESCO committee designated a ritual ceremony that originated with the Totonaca and Otomi Indians of Veracruz as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The decision to present the special designation to the Danza de los Voladores de Papantla came from the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which met in Abu Dhabi in late September. Also receiving the designation during the same session were the tango dance tradition, which originated in the Rio de la Plata area of Argentina and Uruguay (NotiSur, October 09, 2009), and the Candombe carnival in southern Colombia.

In the complex Mexican ritual, five men dressed in traditional outfits climb to the top of a wooden pole. One man remains at the top of the pole playing a flute and dancing, while the other four descend the pole tied by one of their feet in a motion that makes them appear to be flying. The ritual is strong in symbolism, with each participant depicting various aspects of nature. The four flyers represent the four winds, the four corners of the Earth, the four elements, and the four seasons. Additionally, the rope unwraps itself 13 times for each of the four flyers, symbolizing the 52 weeks of the year. The Danza de los Voladores de Papantla is the second Mexican ceremony to receive the ICH designation from UNESCO. In 2008, the UN agency awarded this distinction to the indigenous Festivity of the Day of the Dead in Michoacan.

The pre-Hispanic city of Tajin, home to the culture where the dance originated, was previously recognized as a World Heritage Site. Other Mexican sites to receive that particular UNESCO recognition recently are the Monarch Butterfly Biosphere (SourceMex, July 09, 2008) and the agave-growing region in western Mexico (SourceMex, July 19, 2006). Ceremony originated in Veracruz, but spread elsewhere. Although the ceremony originated in the Papantla region of Veracruz, the ritual spread throughout central and southern Mexico and into Guatemala.

The Aztecs designated a special square in their capital of Tenochtitlan for the ceremony to be performed. A variation is also performed by the Quiche Maya in Guatemala. Salomon Babaz Lapidus, who helped put together the application to the UNESCO committee, said the recognition validates all the communities in Mexico and Central America where the dance has evolved. "The nomination was promoted from Veracruz because we have the most dancers at about 600," said Babaz Lapidus. "But we also did this on behalf of all the dancers from San Luis Potosi, Puebla, and even Guatemala." "This is a very important designation," said Babaz. "It represents the culture of a people and a communitarian expression that connects human beings with nature and the cosmos." Others expressed similar sentiments. "We are very happy about this recognition in the Totonaca world," Narciso Hernandez, who teaches the dance at the Parque Tematico Takilhsukut in the

community of Tajin in Veracruz state, told the Mexico City daily newspaper Excelsior. "But we are also aware that that ritual is not exclusive to Veracruz." "Our commitment now is to keep promoting this ceremony to give continuity to the heritage that our ancestors left us," said Hernandez. "What moves us is the spiritual emphasis that each dancer places on the ritual." "There might be many people who want to be flyers, but the desire is not sufficient," added Hernandez. "You have to have a divine intention to fly, to try to come closer to our Father Sun." The Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) concurred with this mission. "As specialists, it is necessary for us to take on this challenge to provide future generations the confidence to preserve our common heritage," said INAH director Alonso de María y Campos.

Veracruz Gov. Fidel Herrera, who with his wife Rosa Borunda de Herrera was instrumental in convincing the UNESCO committee to consider the Danza de los Voladores for the ICH designation, has planned a major event on Oct. 12 to celebrate the designation. The ceremony will take place at the Parque Takilhsukut in Veracruz, with the participation of voladores and their families. Simultaneous ceremonies are planned at other sites in Mexico where the ritual evolved.

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