

# A DIAGNOSIS OF CIRCUS ARTS IN MEXICO:

ruptures and continuity in the  
past and present

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## Abstract

The current state of the Mexican circus is the result of specific historical, cultural, and social processes in Mexico. A journey through the history of Mesoamerican and Novohispanic acrobatic practices and circuses in independent Mexico reveals the context in which the current Mexican circus has taken place. Nowadays, four main types of circus arts coexist: classical circus, contemporary circus, social circus, and a series of indigenous dances that have been exogenously associated with circus, particularly, 'la Maroma'. Among these forms, both collaborations and tensions have emerged, opening a debate on the particularities of the Mexican circus, the efforts of some of its representatives to constitute it as a cultural heritage of humanity, and its projection to the future in a world where the use of animals and aesthetics are daily transformed.

*Keywords: circus arts, Mexico, history, Maroma, heritage*

Mexico is a megadiverse country, both culturally and linguistically, a federal republic with thirty-two federated states. Each state has its cultural policies, which depend on national institutions. There are sixty-two indigenous communities, sixty-eight languages with more than three hundred variants, and a population of approximately fifteen million indigenous people. In addition to them, there are also Euro-descendants, mestizos, Afro-descendants, Asians. Today, different indigenous communities are reconfiguring their place in the Mexican society, through a myriad of social negotiations. To offer a diagnosis of the current state of circus arts in Mexico, it seems necessary to delve into history and to go back to pre-Hispanic times. For this reason, I plan to explore this subject in what it was Mesoamerica, New Spain, and what we know today as Mexico, accounting for the cultural, aesthetic, and social transformations that contextualize the Mexican circus.

## Mesoamerican acrobatics

Antipodism, dance on stilts, contortion, and *Volador*<sup>2</sup>, are acrobatic practices that attest to the importance and antiquity of the homo acrobaticus. In Mexico, found archaeological remains have revealed representations of

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<sup>2</sup> Aerial ritual dance consisting of climbing to the top of a pole, tied to the end of a rope and from there, using a rotating device, descending to the ground by describing a circular path.

contortionists from 800 BC. Mesoamerican acrobatics was closely related to ritual practices and the agricultural cycle. Moctezuma, the last *Huey tlatoani* Mexica (ruler of the Aztec empire), enjoyed amusements performed by clowns and foot jugglers amidst luxurious and refined feasts. Many Spanish chroniclers described the sovereign's feasts, also captured in some images in the Florentine Codex<sup>3</sup>. Christopher Weiditz's drawings made in 1529, during the presentation of Mesoamerican foot jugglers at the court of Carlos V as an offering by Hernán Cortés — who sought

to consolidate his fame, — reveal the significance of this acrobatic practice. In regards to the dance of maromeros, Alonso de Molina (1571), translates from the Nahuatl the term *mecatitech tlamati* as « the one who knows how to be on the rope » and yet, Théodor De Bry (Duchet 1987: 258) is the first one who provides the first visual evidence of an indigenous maromero on a rope. De Bry never traveled to America, but he made his drawings based on chronicles of the time, feeding Europe with an imaginary of these characters. We could find more references to these practices in pre-Hispanic and colonial codices, or in the Spanish chronicles in which these Mesoamerican acrobatic games appear as well as in some archaeological remains (Pescayre, 2010 and 2012).

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, Francisco López de Gómara, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, Diego Durán, just to mention the classic chroniclers, they all manifested an interest in Mesoamerican acrobatic games. Their narrations range from expressing admiration for these indigenous practices to censoring them in the name of eradicating idolatries. The taste that Spaniards had for these “games” of strength and balance could have been a critical factor to continue or to disappear. The ball game (*ullamalitzli*) was abolished almost entirely from the New Spanish territory as well as the divination game *patolli*, and the collective night dances. In contrast, foot-juggling, ‘La Danza de Los Zancudos,’ and ‘El Volador’ have endured. Another permanence

factor is the Christianization of some of these acrobatic practices. The indigenous strategy of surviving in a new order was the erasing of the pagan aspects of some religious traditions, transforming ritual acrobatics into play and spectacle within Catholic or local festivities.

### **The New Spain “Maroma”**

The term “maroma” comes from Arabic origins and refers to thick hemp strings. It is also the name of the tight-wire dance and the later colonial entertainment that included more disciplines. The first *maroma* companies were born in the 17th century and were formed by indigenous people, Spaniards and mulattoes in Mexico City. The Viceroy granted these



Tlatilco Acrobat MNAH Preclassic room Central Altiplano) Provenience Tlatilco State of Mexico Temp. IV Burial 154 Chronology: Middle Preclassic. Photograph of the author, 2010

<sup>3</sup>The Florentine Codex is a manuscript written in Mexico under the supervision of Fray Bernardino de Sahagún between 1540 and 1585. It contains illustrations made by colonial *tlacuilos* inserted in alphabetical texts.

companies with a license to perform their trade throughout New Spain (Ramos Smith 2010; Calzada Martínez 2000 and Vázquez Meléndez 2012). Acrobatic and magic shows, dances of *maromeros*, and *volatines* were featured in the city at particular *maroma* patios accommodating these events. The most skillful groups were able to perform in the Colosseum. Notwithstanding, these were considered marginal groups and were often faced with denunces to the Court of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, because “any skill outside normalcy prompted suspicion of witchcraft or diabolical pact; the more skilled the acrobat was, the greater the risk of being denounced” (Ramos Smith 2010: 238).

In the early 19th century, European circuses arrived to Mexico. The first one was Philip Lailson’s circus in 1808 (Revolledo Cárdenas, 2004: 52). At first, circuses coexisted with *maromas*, but little by little, circuses pushed *maromas* to the outskirts of Mexico City, a fact that reveals the Europeanized taste of townfolk at the time. El Circo Olímpico, founded in 1941 by José Soledad Aycardo Don Chole, has been recognized as the first Mexican circus. During the Maximilian Empire (1864-1867), the Chiarini circus met with great success, followed by the Orrin, Fénix, Treviño circuses, and the famous Circo Atayde Hermanos, founded in 1888 and which continues to this day. In the 20th century, the carpa theater became prominent and witnessed the debut of the talented Mario Moreno Cantinflas. These pioneers shaped the form of the circus persisting in our country until today. As for the Maroma, even when Armando de María y Campos (1939) declared it extinct in the 19th century, the indigenous dance of *maromeros* (whose central element is the tight-wire dance) kept developing in the rural regions of southern Mexico. In Zapotec, Mixtec, Mixe, Nahuatl, and Chinantecos populations, each developed its distinctive style, whether as a ritual or as a kind of entertainment remarkably different to the Maroma that thrived during the Viceroyalty.



Orrin Circus, newspaper clipping from the end of the 19th century, courtesy Ricardo Orrin González

## The Mexican circus today

In what is known as Mexico today, diverse expressions of circus arts coexist: the classical or traditional circus; the new circus and the contemporary circus emerging at the dawn of the 21st century, primarily, as a creation-oriented circus, and also the social circus that has focused on the inclusion of people considered at social risk, an increasingly popular approach for the Mexican cultural policy in the Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) administration. The contemporary indigenous *maroma*, a spectacular, ritual, and festive expression integrating elements of balancing, comic characters, and flyers, has been misnamed as “indigenous circus, *circo campesino*, *circo comunitario*, or the circus of the poor”, among other exogenous meanings. While its practitioners do not consider it as part of circus arts, the contemporary indigenous *maroma* has interacted with both classical and contemporary circuses, a subject that deserves further investigation.

The lead protagonists of the classic Mexican circus are the Suárez, Fuentes Gasca, Vázquez, Atayde, and Esqueda families, who, in addition to building a long-standing tradition, they also toured their shows across all Mexican regions and abroad. Juggler Rudy Cárdenas was called the “little Rastelli”, about one of the best European jugglers. Miguel Ángel Vázquez performed for the first time in the history of the world circus

a quadruple somersault on the flying trapeze, appearing on the Guinness record of 1982. The entire Flying Vázquez troupe received the Gold Clown award from the Monte-Carlo Festival in 1990. The best-known social circus project in Mexico is the Machincuepa, sponsored by Cirque du Soleil and located in Mexico City. Recently, social circus projects have been booming in Mexico, such as Circolo, Circología, among others. In this text, I will not focus on this type of circus but rather, on the relationships that social circus interweaves with our main concern, namely the contemporary Mexican circus.



Migrant hen in Tijuana Cía Atanasia © Marisol Soledad, 2019

## The contemporary circus in Mexico

The contemporary Mexican circus was born out of the questioning of circus tradition itself and from adopting a movement that emerged in France in 1968 (Maléval, 2010) and then in Québec in the 1970s. The gaze of Mexican circus companies looks at Quebec and Europe. Clearly, creation leans towards the entertainment industry, and while has yet to be confirmed, there is a remarkable hegemony of the most prominent Canadian international companies and a scarce presence of European circus on the Mexican territory. Even though the National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA) provides economic grants to circus artists<sup>4</sup>, the Mexican government offers little sup-

<sup>4</sup> El programa Creadores Escénicos abrió una categoría de Artes circenses a raíz de que los pioneros del circo contemporáneo mexicano aplicaban en categorías de danza y teatro. La primera en obtenerlo fue Andrea Peláez en el año 2004.

port to them, turning creation into a luxury that few companies can afford. Indeed, contemporary circus companies make a living from the income earned in workshops organized by themselves or shows, as well as private events in which they participate (weddings, parties, etc.). This type of work pushes them away from their artistic goals, insofar as it is mostly part of the show business industry. While it is true that circus companies have managed to make their way into the Mexican circus landscape, their situation is still precarious.

Since 2000, numerous launched initiatives seek to transcend the concept of a family-based transmission of circus arts, including Otro Circo, Cirko de Mente, Circo Sentido, Tránsito Cinco, among many other spaces and trainers. In 2003, the International Circus and Street Arts Training Program (PIFACC) was launched by the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CONACULTA), hosted at the National Center for the Arts (CENART). This program suffered severe cuts from the Enrique Peña Nieto administration since 2012 up until today. Undoubtedly, the *Circonvencción Mexicana*, which held its first edition in 2004, marked a transitional moment that paved the way to numerous spaces and festivals. In 2008, the Bachelor of Contemporary Circus and Performing Arts was inaugurated at the Mesoamerican University of Puebla (UMA), under the direction of Julio Revollo Cárdenas, followed more recently by the Bachelor of Contemporary Circus Arts from the Cirko De Mente Company and the Latin American School of Circus (ELCIRCA) in Guadalajara. All of these schools are private and charge a tuition cost per student. In the absence of an actual national circus school, contemporary circus artists have no option but to train by themselves or to migrate to other countries in an effort towards consolidating their professional training. The creation of a public space for artistic practice, creation, and research would open its doors to all those talented people, and not only to those who can afford professional training in the private sector.

Even though circus training is still under construction, Mexico has witnessed the rising of numerous circus companies in the last fifteen years. The proof can be found in Les Cabaret Capricho, Circo Alebrije, Mermeji-ta Circus, Transatlancirque, Fuoco di Strada, among others, who joined the founders of the contemporary Mexican circus mentioned above. We should note here that Guadalajara has become the “Tierra de Circo,” next to the operation of Foro Periplo and Circo Dragón. Also, there are festivals programming circus such as FiCHO, Escenarios Suspendidos, Ozomatli, Festival de Mazunte, just to name a few.

Even when each one of the types of circus holds particular motivations and spaces, they have fostered collaborations between each other, which are worth highlighting. The first is the Encuentro de Circo Joven organized by the Circo Atayde, opening the stage to young artists, including those coming from the contemporary circus. In 2008, a group of Zapotec maromeros from Veracruz also partook in it. As both cultural institutions and circuses know about each other, some initiatives have sought to “cirquizar” the indigenous Maroma (to make it more circusy), in the context of projects such as the Laboratorio de Acrobacia Indígena de la Cumbre Tajín, among others<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>I do not have the space to expand on this topic, but further bibliography of my authorship is available in this regard (cf Pescayre 2015 and 2017).

## The circus of today and cultural policy

The National Fund for Culture and the Arts is the Mexican agency providing the most opportunities for circus artists. Particularly, through its *Creadores escénicos program*, which awards three scholarships per year to circus artists, and the *México en Escena* program that has benefited well-established companies and venues. More and more public programs are available for circus arts (PECDA, PADID), and yet, these are still insufficient. On the other hand, there seems to be an imbalance regarding the international circulation of circus shows. For example, France provides support to export cultural products and circus productions, while Mexico offers support to bring French artists into the country. The question is, what about the promotion of Mexican artistic work abroad? With the upcoming of AMLO's fourth transformation, the implemented *Cultura Comunitaria* program aimed to "promote the exercise of the cultural rights of individuals, groups and communities; primarily those that have been left out of cultural policies", which has



Maromero of Santa Teresa Veracruz, © Adriana Raymundo, Correspondencias maromeras, 2017.

endeavored to bring circus as a central part of its activities. A series of critical and urgent problems arose with it, such as the reduction of circus to the social sphere, and an inevitable confusion between the social circus (on this year, focused on the prevention of addictions) and indigenous dances such as Maroma. An example of this is the recent call "Juntos por la Paz", focused on municipalities with a high violence rate, which anachronistically uses the term "*patios de maroma*" without taking account if those municipalities hold a *maromera* tradition. Waving a banner saying that everything is communal now, society has misinterpreted circus arts. Now, it seems that to benefit from government support, everyone must do social circus. This situation can lessen the value of circus companies' creative works and other initiatives that aesthetically explore various forms of circus. Thus, I insist on the definition of each type of circus that coexists in our country.

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### **An initiative to designate the Mexican circus as cultural heritage**

Following the implementation in 2014 of a law prohibiting the use of animals in circuses, the classic Mexican circus faces a critical situation. After several attempts of moving ahead, and presenting circus shows without animals in theaters alongside many efforts to endure hardship, classic circuses joined forces to propose circus as a cultural heritage of humanity. They worked together for this initiative with the Chamber of Deputies, towards a point of agreement, which could put pressure on the Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (SRE) and the Ministry of Culture to propose to UNESCO the inscription of the Mexican circus on the Representative List of the World Cultural Heritage. The deputy César Agustín Hernández Pérez, of the Parliamentary Group of More-

na, led this initiative. To achieve their goal, the representatives of the classical circus and the Circus Artists and Entrepreneurs Union (UNEAC) attempted an alliance with the contemporary circus people, for the promotion of circus as a culture. And yet, what would be the specificity of the Mexican circus as to include it in a “representative” list of cultural heritage? This issue brought frictions, notably concerning how *voladores* and *maromeros* got portrayed as living circus vestiges and how “Mexicanness” was indexed to static understandings of tradition. Unlike contemporary circus performers, *voladores* and *maromeros* were not consulted for this initiative. Despite numerous and fruitful debates, the Chamber of Deputies approved the point of agreement, without going any further.

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The classic and contemporary circus came to Mexico to stay. At two different times in history, these two types of circus have not ceased to mix with the local ones. We should keep in mind that in Europe, the circus engulfed many artistic practices that used to perform in public spaces (for example, tight-rope walkers). Harking back to Roger Bartra's metaphor of the melancholy cage, which associates the endemic axolotl to the Mexican being for reaching sexual maturity before full development, similarly, the traveling circus in the 19th century and the contemporary circus in the 21st took us by surprise. Indeed, the issue that we should address today would be, after having identified and recognized all the types of circus described throughout this text, how to provide them with the means to endure, but without exacerbating the kind of exoticism and rituality that turns traditions into folklore. Furthermore, how to grant them the freedom to build bridges, to create and present their work in Mexican territories, and in other places.



Artist at the X Circonvención mexicana, © Emanuel Adamez, 2015

<sup>6</sup> As I am part of both the contemporary circus and the Colectivo Plural e Independiente de Maromeros en México “Correspondencias Maromeras”, I consulted with the Board of Directors of the Collective to issue an official statement in this regard. In summary, the report argued that La Maroma does not belong to circus arts. In case of participating in a patrimonial initiative, La Maroma deserves a status similar to el Volador, which is a world heritage site since 2009.