This small earthenware sculpture was used in an important ritual called the volador (VOHL-ah-door) (flying) ceremony, which was enacted by the ancient people of the Nayarit (nigh-yah-REET) region of West Mexico and is still performed by people elsewhere in Mexico today. The ritual concerns the relationship of the people and their spiritual leaders, called shamans (SHAH-mahns), to the world around them, which encompasses both natural forces and phenomena and supernatural powers and spirits. In the sculpture, a shaman balances atop a tall tree in a village, while a singer sits on a lower branch. The event was part of a ritual communication between the earthly and spiritual realms. The tree represents the axis of the universe, which rises from the center of the earth. The shaman ascends this axis and spiritually transforms himself into an eagle, the better to travel between levels of the cosmos. (Eagles were associated with the ability to communicate with the sacred forces of sky and sun and with ancestors and spirits.) Below, village elders and other townspeople attend the ceremony.

Unlike the highly organized Olmec and Maya cultures further south that created monumental architecture, sculpture, and complex writing systems, the Nayarit and other peoples of West Mexico (figure 21) did not build large buildings or leave written records of their cultures. Yet their works of art, architectural remains, and archaeological evidence of village life speak eloquently about their society and beliefs. Excavation of ancient settlements and earthenware works of art like the Pole Dance Scene from the Nayarit show that the societies of West Mexico were agriculturally based and hierarchically structured. Communities were organized as chiefdoms, in which rule passed through family lines. Religion was based around the worship of ancestors and the deified forces of nature, such as the fertility of soil, the abundance of rain, and the heat of the sun. Within this framework, religious rituals were performed to help ensure, by spiritual means, the orderly progression of seasons, the abundance of crops, and the well being of the community from year to year.
The many small earthenware objects that have been uncovered by archaeologists (and sometimes by looters) provide a glimpse into the beliefs, rites, and social systems of the cultures of West Mexico. The most common types of ceramics found are single figures and small-scale groups of figures. Groups are often engaged in festivals, ball games, marriages, and burials, with people and animals gesturing expressively (figure 22). The surfaces of larger figures bear traces of multi-colored paint that indicate the body-painting and patterned textiles worn by these ancient people. For example, in the Pole Dance Scene, the special social position of the shaman and his accompanying singer is visually underscored by their distinguished dress—they wear cone-shaped hats while the figures below wear turbans. They also wear elaborately folded loincloths. Other small details, such as the wing-shaped fan the shaman holds and the raccoon-like animals called coati mundi (coat-eh-MOOND-ee), provide further information about how this ceremonial event was enacted.

The volador ceremony was a central ritual for the Nayarit. The volador tree or pole is meant to mimic the pochotl (po-CHOEtI) tree, a type of tree that held special significance for the peoples of West Mexico. In the dry season, the white silk-cotton of the tree floats into the sky, mimicking the clouds that mark the beginning in the rainy season. Trees were often associated with rulership through the metaphor of protection: like the shade of a giant tree, the "shade of the ruler" protected his people. The ritual may have originally involved climbing an actual pochotl tree. Only later was it replaced by a pole. In the climbing ritual, the pole was a metaphor for the axis mundi, which rises out of the center of a circular earthen platform structure and "extends" through the center of the universe to the apex of the sky. The shaman atop the axis pole temporarily transformed himself into a soaring eagle and func-
tioned as an intermediary between the underworld land of the ancestors, the surface of the world we inhabit, and the sky above. This bird’s-eye view of the earth was an honored perspective, reserved only for those who had knowledge to communicate with the divined elements of nature.

An imagined account of an ancient volador ceremony is provided by Christopher Whitmore in the Art Institute catalogue, Ancient West Mexico: Art and Archaeology of the Unknown Past (see Teacher Bibliography).

Eventually, the lone figure, arms spread, feathers in hand, balances himself atop the pole. The steady pulsating beat of the drums sinks to a deep thunderous roar at an increasing pace. Suddenly he breaks into a shrill, yet rhythmic, chant, not unlike the call of an eagle. He swoops and turns, soaring majestically with a supreme sense of balance... Meanwhile, the eight elders survey the whole event from the top of the central pyramid. Standing at the corners of the world, they face each other and the center pole, the axis of the universe. When the elders have seen that the shadow falls in the correct place, they release an eagle for each direction into the sky. Below in the low patio area, the crowd, joining hand in hand, circles the central pyramid counterclockwise: close kin, relative strangers, even those who seem only to appear when people gather to dance around the pole. Their energetic song and dance matches the pace of the roaring drums... There will be festivities throughout the day. The morning ball-game will soon begin. The day of zenith has come.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Symbol of the Heavens and Earth}

The volador ritual took place on a circular platform constructed of superimposed levels. This was a \textit{symbolic} cosmogram, a physical sign of universal order (figure 23). It is a symbol that commonly appears in the images of many ancient Mesoamerican peoples. Circular (or sometimes square) platforms functioned as openings between this world and the great forces of life and death, and were therefore the setting for ceremonial activities. Those within the circle were linked to the cosmos, and rituals served to reaffirm for their participants their place within the natural and supernatural worlds. Many of the circular complexes were oriented to the east-west axis, which links them to the daily path of the sun and calendrical functions. Like a giant sundial, the pole cast a shadow on the platform based on the position of the sun in the sky in a particular season and at a particular time of day. On the \textit{summer solstice}, when the sun was directly overhead at its zenith, the pole cast no shadow, thus signaling to its community the beginning of a new season. Since seasonal rituals emphasize cycles of rebirth or renewal, the pole took on special significance at the time of the zenith.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure23.png}
\caption{Illustration of Mayan cosmology}
\end{figure}
Classroom Applications
Transparency 7

West Mexico, Nayarit. Pole Dance Scene, 100/800 A.D.

1. Sharing Family Traditions
This pole dance scene reflects the communal nature of the Nayarit they gather to watch or participate in the ritual. Have students make connections to the piece by making their own clay scene of either a community or family tradition in which they participate.

State Learning Standards: 18A, 18B, 27B

2. Archaeological Excavation
This work was created to be buried with the deceased to remind them about life on earth. In a way, burial sites serve as a kind of time capsule that reflect the values and events of a particular time or generation. Using what your students know about the Nayarit, make an imaginary Nayarit burial site and have each student contribute one thing that reflects some aspect of the Nayarit people. These “objects” can be in the form of an illustration, a sculpture, an actual item, or even a written description. Then, have students pretend that they are archaeologists uncovering a Nayarit burial site. As students excavate, have them document and/or draw what they find in the site.

Have your students look closely at the details of the Pole Dance Scene and at the objects that they have created for their reconstruction of a burial site. Students should try and make inferences about the economic, political, and social structure of the Nayarit people. Who or what has power? What is the relationship between humans and nature? What types of jobs might the Nayarit have? What was the climate like? What can you infer about the values of these people? In answer to these questions, have students add these descriptions to the archaeology reports they include with the rest of their documentation of this imaginary burial excavation.

State Learning Standards: 18A, 18B, 11A

3. Creating Our Worlds
The structure of the Pole Dance Scene reflects the Nayarit belief that the world is oriented in a circular manner as well as in five different directions, each connected to different animals, colors, seasons, and characteristics. This conception of space is closely tied to the creation story of the Nayarit people. Have students read and research the creation story of the Nayarit people (see Student Bibliography) and create three-dimensional models of the Nayarit worldview. Read other creation stories and compare/contrast the various worldviews of each culture. Are there common themes that most creation
stories include, such as the significance of local geography, the role of the four natural elements (earth, wind, fire, and water), or the interplay of good and evil? Help students draw parallels between the relationship of creation stories to the way in which the Nayarit people structured their spiritual ceremonies. Compare this to Christian Biblical accounts of creation and religious practice. Compare one or more of the other main world religions with which your students are most familiar. Once you have studied, discussed, and compared creation stories, have students write their own unique story that describes their model of the universe, explains the arrival of people and deities, and outlines a ritual or ceremony in which people would participate in their imaginary universe.

State Learning Standards: 3C, 18B, 2A

4. Status Symbols
The shaman was the religious and political ruler of the Nayarit. He was the only one with the power to ascend to the universe above. He derived his greatest power from his ability to mediate between people and the spiritual world. He was depicted as an elevated figure, "painted with the characteristics of an eagle flying, situated atop a tree, or seated in an elevated chair. This set him apart from the crowd and reflected his status as a leader. How do we visually show the status of our leaders today? Consider clothing, symbols, accessories, position, surroundings, etc. Find images of important figures in newspapers, magazines, artworks, or photographs of memorials. Create a status collage from these images. As an extension activity, look at a photograph, illustration, or artwork that depicts a group of people. Have students redraw this image and use what they have learned about depicting power and status to differentiate the people in the image, either adding details to the setting, repositioning figures, or using elements of art to create desired focal points.

State Learning Standards: 16B, 18C, 27A, 27B

5. How Materials Decompose
The Nayarit funerary objects were made from clay and natural materials, yet they have lasted for nearly 2,000 years. Engage students in a study about the decomposition of materials. Have students find objects made from different materials, such as metal, dough, clay, newspaper, or fabric. Hypothesize about which material will last the longest. Have students bury the objects for a period of time or put them through a series of weathering tests to see which stands up best to heat, cold, water, pressure, etc. Discuss findings. As a class, determine which material is best suited for a funerary burial object like the Pole Dance Scene.

State Learning Standards: 16B, 18C, 27A, 27B