



Day of the Dead by Ricardo J. Salvador



This is an ancient festivity that has been much transformed through the years, but which was intended in prehispanic Mexico to celebrate children and the dead. Hence, the best way to describe this Mexican holiday is to say that it is a time when Mexican families remember their dead, and the continuity of life. Two important things to know about the Mexican Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos) are: It is a holiday with a complex history, and therefore its observance varies quite a bit by region and by degree of urbanization. It is not a morbid occasion, but rather a festive time.

HISTORICAL ROOTS

The original celebration can be traced to many Mesoamerican native traditions, such as the festivities held during the Aztec month of Miccailhuitontli, ritually presided by the "Lady of the Dead" (Mictecacihuatl), and dedicated to children and the dead. In the Aztec calendar, this ritual fell roughly at the end of the Gregorian month of July and the beginning of August, but in the post-conquest era it was moved by Spanish priests so that it coincided with the Christian holiday of All Hallows Eve (in Spanish: "Día de Todos Santos.") This was a vain effort to transform the observance from a profane to a Christian celebration.

The result is that Mexicans now celebrate the day of the dead during the first two days of November, rather than at the beginning of summer. But remember the dead they still do, and the modern festivity is characterized by the traditional Mexican blend of ancient aboriginal and introduced Christian features.

TRADITIONS

Generalizing broadly, the holiday's activities consist of families (1) welcoming their dead back into their homes, and (2) visiting the graves of their close kin. At the cemetery, family members engage in sprucing up the gravesite, decorating it with flowers, setting out and enjoying a picnic, and interacting socially with other family and community members who gather there. In both cases, celebrants believe that the souls of the dead return and are all around them. Families remember the departed by telling stories about them. The meals prepared for these picnics are sumptuous, usually featuring meat dishes in spicy sauces, chocolate beverages, cookies, sugary confections in a variety of animal or skull shapes, and a special egg-batter bread ("pan de muerto," or bread of the dead).

Gravesites and family altars are profusely decorated with flowers (primarily large, bright flowers such as marigolds and chrysanthemums), and adorned with religious amulets and with offerings of food, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Because of this warm social environment, the colorful setting, and the abundance of food, drink and good company, this commemoration of the dead has pleasant overtones for the observers, in spite of the open fatalism exhibited by all participants, whose festive interaction with

both the living and the dead in an important social ritual is a way of recognizing the cycle of life and death that is human existence.

In homes, observant families create an altar and decorate it with items that they believe are beautiful and attractive to the souls of their departed ones. Such items include offerings of flowers and food, but also things that will remind the living of the departed (such as their photographs, a diploma, or an article of clothing), and the things that the dead prized and enjoyed while they lived. This is done to entice the dead and assure that their souls actually return to take part in the remembrance.

VARIATIONS IN THE CELEBRATIONS

In very traditional settings, typically found only in native communities, the path from the street to the altar is actually strewn with petals to guide the returning soul to its altar and the bosom of the family. The traditional observance calls for departed children to be remembered during the first day of the festivity (the Day of the Little Angels, *El día de los Angelitos*), and for adults to be remembered on the second day. Traditionally, this is accompanied by a feast during the early morning hours of November the 2nd, the Day of the Dead proper, though modern urban Mexican families usually observe the Day of the Dead with only a special family supper featuring the bread of the dead.

In southern Mexico, for example in the city of Puebla, it is good luck to be the one who bites into the plastic toy skeleton hidden by the baker in each rounded loaf. Friends and family members give one another gifts consisting of sugar skeletons or other items with a death motif, and the gift is more prized if the skull or skeleton is embossed with one's own name. Another variation found in the state of Oaxaca is for the bread to be molded into the shape of a body or burial wrap, and for a face to be embedded on one end of the loaf. During the days leading up to and following the festivity, some bakeries in heavily indigenous communities cease producing the wide range of breads that they typically sell so that they can focus on satisfying the demand for bread of the dead.

VARIATIONS IN MEANING AND IMPORTANCE

The Day of the Dead can range from being a very important cultural event, with defined social and economic responsibilities for participants (exhibiting the socially equalizing behavior that social anthropologists would call redistributive feasting, e.g. on the island of Janitzio in Michoacan state), to being a religious observance featuring actual worship of the dead (e.g., as in Cuilapan, Oaxaca, an ancient capital of the Zapotec people, who venerated their ancestors and whose descendants do so to this day, an example of many traditional practices that Spanish priests pretend not to notice), to simply being a uniquely Mexican holiday characterized by special foods and confections (the case in all large Mexican cities.)

In general, the more urban the setting within Mexico, the less religious and cultural importance is retained by observant. The more rural and Indian the locality, the greater the religious and economic import of the holiday. Because of this, this observance is usually of greater social importance in southern Mexico than in the northern part of the country.