



# Oaxaca Times

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OAXACA OAXACA

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## DIA DE MUERTOS EN OAXACA

*La calavera valiente* *Todos quítense el sombrero*   
*Hoy acaba de llegar;* *Que así la deben mirar.*

Father Jose Antonio Gay, in his history of Oaxaca, writes of the indigenous celebrations for the dead, which took place on a date coinciding with the date on which Catholics celebrate the same feast - November 2nd. According to Fr. Gay, the indigenous inhabitants of what is now Oaxaca believed, much as Christians do, in an immortal soul. They believed that those who had lived a good life would enter after their final breath into a new world, a beautiful region full of blooming gardens and crystalline springs, where one would never grow old while enjoying one big fiesta. They also believed that the wicked would go to a hell, which they considered to be an eternal abode at the center of the earth. According to these indigenous one arrived at the place of eternal punishment by way of a long tunnel of which the entrance was blocked by a huge rock, only to be opened to deposit the body of one who was executed, or when some poor soul voluntarily offered himself to the frightening punishments of hell in order to expiate his faults.

Mictlan (Mitla), the ruins of which today are seen outside Oaxaca, was a cemetery departed into four departments. The first was a beautiful palace destined to be the eternal residence of very distinguished priests and wise men who were in charge of the funeral ceremonies of rulers and those in power, and who consoled the relatives with thoughts of the beautiful hereafter. The second department was for the graves of the supreme pontiffs and their ministers. The third held the graves of the successive kings of Teozapotlan: When a king died, his corpse was dressed in his best clothes and jewels with a crest of beautiful feathers. On his left arm was placed his shield and in his right hand the spear which he used in war. He was then carried on a litter from the capital of his kingdom to his place of eternal rest, accompanied by musicians and poets who sang of the feats of the monarch. In Mitla a pyre was prepared where the cadaver was cremated.

The fourth department was what was properly called Mictlan, or hell, which was entered, as mentioned above, through an underground tunnel which, it is known, extended longer than 30



kilometers. There were thrown the corpses of those who had committed grievous offenses as well as those who had died violently, or in general those who had led bad lives.

It is recounted that in the colonial era, some monks from Santo Domingo together with some leading citizens of Oaxaca tried to go through the length of that macabre tunnel, aided by torches and a long cord to keep them from getting lost. Amid the stench they found rows of thick columns supporting the roof, and various animals crossed their path. As they pressed on, a sudden gust of wind extinguished their torches, and in there panic they stumbled over each other rushing to leave the place, never to return again. The ecclesiastical and civil authorities decreed that the tunnel entrance be sealed with lime, and thus it remains up to our day.

The other entrance to eternity in the kingdom of Teozapotlan was by way of the cemetery of Teitipac, where nobility were buried. There were also buried military captains who had been trained to give their lives without fear of death, knowing that a beautiful eternal rest awaited them.

Some Mixtec groups believed in the immortality of the soul, and they had their cemetery near Chalcatongo, with the entrance at the end of a valley sown with flowers. That place was a deep cave through which everyone passed to eternity: kings, governors, and commoners. Everyone had a right to paradise, but the higher class were embalmed, with their jewels and rich garments in a niche by their side, just as the Zapotecs used to put food and other objects which might serve the dead along the road to eternity. Those of the rich class were buried at night by torchlight, and as part of the funeral rite one of the man's slaves, dressed in his master's finery and wearing a mask, was sacrificed.

The memory of the dead was celebrated with great pomp. On the eve of the feast turkeys and other fowl were killed to be prepared as was the custom for other holidays, in a dish similar to the "mole negro" of today. Another dish, "nicuatole" was prepared with sauces of violet or red color, signifying sorrow.

On the altar of the dead in a family's home, besides food, fruit, etc., was placed an idol which would preside at the family's ritual, along with other representations, possibly of the ancestors. During the night, by the light of torches of ocote, the family would gather around the altar and pray that only good spirits would approach which could intercede with the gods in behalf of the needs of those here on earth. Through the whole night no one dared to look at the altar, for fear of seeing the dead at the moment in which they were extracting the aroma, taste, and nutrition from the offerings (so goes the myth), and those beings on departing would leave blessings for the relatives there present. The next day people gathered to comment on how their dead were satisfied at the execution of the custom; and the leftover offerings of food were given to travellers or people on the street. Some of the customs of the Valley of Oaxaca were also carried out at the tombs of the dead, accompanied by musicians playing sad melodies. With the invasion of the Aztecs, different customs and beliefs were imposed. The Aztecs know nothing of an immortal soul, or of resurrection, or of rewards and punishment in another world. They also brought multitudinous human sacrifices where Zapotecs and Mixtecs only sacrificed quail, doves, and other birds. The Aztecs deformed the myth of

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# DIA DE MUERTOS...

From page 1

Mictlan, creating a fable which described a devil of two sexes, which seduced wayward youth, leading them to a violent death and ultimately leaving them condemned to hell.

It is worth noting that some historians find vestiges of Christianity in the ancient religions of Oaxaca whose source can only be guessed at. One example is the coincidence of the dates of the feast of the dead - November 2nd. On that date the prehispanic peoples set up their altars and celebrated the ritual described above. This connection of our Oaxacan traditions with roots so remote is truly astounding.

The beautiful custom of remembering our beloved dead each year remains for the people of Oaxaca a source of joy and communion with those who have gone before us. In setting up our "altar de muertos" we call to mind what our dead relatives have taught us, we recall the good times shared with them, and we feel their presence in the family household on this special day. This feast obliges us to pray to God for our dead, that they might enjoy eternal peace; and it gives us the peace of knowing that when our time comes, we, too, will be remembered in celebration.

The Catholic liturgy appoints the first and second days of November for the celebration of All Saints, and All Souls, respectively. Thus the meals for these days are prepared in anticipation, part of which will serve as offerings for the dead on the second, and part of which will be shared with relatives and friends on the First, since it is everyone's saint's day. This two-day feast is a veritable culinary arts contest in Oaxaca, with every housewife assuring that her food is at its most delicious.

After the meal of All Saints, the family prepares to honor their dead, setting up a table with its embroidered table cloth, on which are placed the traditional foods: bread of anise flavor, made with butter and egg, each loaf adorned with the face of an angel; bars of chocolate: black mole with turkey; sweets; nicuatole made from purple and red corn; fruits such as oranges, apples, bananas, nuts and almonds. Various flowers are placed on the table,



giving the smell of the burial ground, along with small skulls (calaveras) of clay or sugar; a cardboard mausoleum with its cross, the casket, and pallbearers; and other artifacts such as skeleton dolls selling bread and fruit, playing music, etc. A glass of wine or mezzal to recall the good times is left, and an arch of sugar cane and leaves covers the whole setup.

The visit to the cemetery on the second is indispensable, to place floral bouquets on the graves of relatives. When darkness falls candles are lit, and the incense of copal creates a mystical atmosphere inducing one to prayer and meditation.

On these special days it is advisable to eat frugally and control oneself, or else on these nights of mystery "one can be bound by the dead."

from an article by Alvaro Abad

All cobranza valor  
Con un vaso de mezzal  
Y con simpáticas calaveras  
De hermosura sin rival.



Porque yo soy de Oaxaca  
Y no hay hombre para mí  
Y ni a los más desalmados  
Las de arriba les pedí.



No tolero que me insulten,  
Charlatanas calaveras,  
Que yo no soy hablador  
Sino valiente de veras.

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# CULTURAL EVENTS

Allí cobrarán valor  
Con un vaso de mezcál  
Y con simpáticas chinas  
De hermosura sin rival.



A mí síngulo me espanta,  
Y yo de todos me río,  
La prueba es que le he brincado  
Al brincador tapatio.

- 14 The Iule Celebrations - 15 minute ride from city - all day
- 17 Concert - 20 of November Market - 5p.m.  
Folk Dances - Santo Domingo patio - 6:30p.m.  
Folk Dances - M. Alcala #302 - 8p.m.  
Concert - Government Palace - 7p.m.
- 18 Classical Guitarist, Nestor Gutierrez - 8p.m.
- 19 Folk Dances - M. Alcala #302 - 8p.m.
- 20 Concert - Bellas Artes School of Art - 8p.m.
- 23 History and music of Oaxaca - Sto. Domingo patio - 6:30p.m.
- 24-25 Latin American music - M. Alcala #302 - 8p.m.
- 25 Folk dances - Alameda de Leon Park - 7p.m.
- 26 Romantic music - Alcala #302 - 6 and 8p.m.
- 27 Concert - Plaza de la Danza - 8p.m.
- 29 Art exhibit - M. Alcala #302 - 7:30p.m.

NOVEMBER  
"Comparsas". Costumed critics in a playful parade of village social and political problems. - San Agustín Etla  
2 - visit the cemeterys  
20 Revolution day - parade (banks will be closed)

## THE MARKET OF THE DEAD

Taking a stroll through the market days before the celebration in pottery row things are much the same as always with vendors selling the green glazed wares of Atxompa, the black ware of Coytepec, and the factory-produced semimajolicas made in Oaxaca City by the Jimenez Company. Yet many of these dishes will appear with the offerings later, and the Zapotec women are shrewdly bargaining for that last bowl or plate to complete the set for the altar.

Next stop is the herb stand with bunches of dried seasonings such as oregano, tymes and marjoram for the traditional mole (a dish of chicken in a chile-chocolate sauce). Small boxes hold cocoa flower, ginger, coriander and fragrant whole nutmeg. Sweet anise for flavoring the bread baked for this season. There are also board games called El Ancla (the anchor) and La Oca (the goose) that are played by the children in the cemetery on the night of November 2. Small dice are used to determine the moves around the board, and the prize for the winner is a handful of pecans which are also used as pavers.

Handmade wax candles hang in graceful rows by their wicks. The finest for an altar or the cemetery are virgin beeswax tapers which come with a religious seal in gilt dust. Tapers in black crepe paper are only used on the cemetery on the second of November, the true Day of the Souls. November 1 is dedicated to the angelitos (souls of little children) and all the saints, then the tapers in colored crepe paper are used on the alters in the homes.

The renowned sugar skulls are set out in twinkling rows in the sun at the market place. They are often ornamented with colored foil and bear a name across the top of the skull.

Over one hundred years ago, it was common practice in parts of Mexico to expose the actual skulls of the dead on the Day of All Souls. Like the sugar skulls of today, they bore the name of the deceased on a strip of cloth or paper spanning the forehead.

In the market there are all the ingredients for fiesta food. Turkey for the mole, home-made tablets of hand-ground chocolate, herbs and spices, squash for conserva de calabaza (a dessert sweet) and many other comestibles are seen in baskets and string bags of the villager and town dwellers. These will find their way to the altars in Indian homes in the form of succulent dishes prepared for the spirits of the dead. They will eventually regale the living, since the dead can inhale only the essence of the food.

If you are interested in pagan and mestizo traditions you should visit the village of Etla on the night of November 1st. to see the different groups, called "Comparsas", dressed in humorous costumes, representing town personalities, who go from house to house verbally criticizing, in a playful manner, the social and political problems of the village.



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Our office is 4 blocks north of the Zocalo at the Institute of Communication and Culture, A.C. Come by and get acquainted.

But, above all, enjoy our beautiful Oaxaca.

Yolanda Garcia C.  
Publisher.

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