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FREE

FIESTA AND DEATH IN OAXACA

The Cult of the Dead in Oaxaca

The ancient Zapotec peoples of the area now known as Oaxaca believed that when a person dies the soul survives. The souls of those people who lived good lives entered a new world of eternal youth. This new world consisted of beautiful gardens with many waterfalls of clean pure water. Life was filled with a succession of grand parties or fiestas. The Zapotecs also believed that 'bad' people would go to hell. Bad people were those who were known criminals or people who had died violent deaths. Violent death resulted from having angered the Gods. It was believed that hell was situated in the center of the earth and its inhabitants were doomed to live there forever. It was believed that a way to hell existed in the form of a long deep cave that was located in the immediate area. The entrance to the cave was located in 'Mictlan' which means hell in the ancient language. Mictlan is known today as the town of Mitla. The cave was sealed by a huge stone and was only opened to toss in a body of a bad person or for a living person wanted to repent by willingly choosing to enter the hereafter.

The area local to Mictlan was the graveyard and was divided into four large areas. The first area contained an imposing palace that housed the Zapotec religious priests and related distinguished Nobles. One of the functions of the

LA CALAVERA OAXAQUEÑA.



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

Nobles was to administer the rites of burial, etc. One can still admire the ruins of this palace today in the archaeological area of Mitla. One of the tasks of the Nobles was to visit the families of the bereaved to console them with tales of the glories and wonders of the life beyond.

The second area was designated as the graveyard for the Zapotec priests. The third area was for the Kings who had occupied the throne of TEOZAPOTLEN. When one of these Kings died the body was dressed in his finest garments and adorned with his finest jewels. An armband talisman of cloth and feathers was placed on the left arm to protect the king from possible harm in the hereafter. The right hand of the king contained his favorite war weapon. The body was placed upright in a chair that was to be carried on the shoulders of the Nobles. The funeral proces-

sion consisted of Nobles, priests, poets and musicians and ended at the site of a huge funeral pyre. The musicians played a slow beat on ancient instruments that produced very low moaning tones. The poets recited the exploits of the king as they marched.

The old people repeat the tale of an attempt to explore the cave of hell in the latter Spanish colonial period. The story has been handed down by word of mouth for many generations. It seems that the priests and ancient principals of the town of Santa Dominco decided to explore the cave to verify the ancient beliefs. They prepared long ropes so as to be able to retrace their way to the cave entrance without getting lost. They opened the cave entrance and entered carrying flaming torches to light the way. As they entered they were assailed

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FIESTA AND DEATH

by very damp air filled with foul smelling odors. As they progressed into the depths of the cave they encountered all sorts of rats, mice and other small detestable animals but these things did not deter their resolve to proceed but deep in the cave a wind sprang up and blew out their torches. In panic they retreated to the cave entrance. They re-sealed the cave entrance with stone and cement. To this day the cave remains sealed.

There were two entrances to heaven. The first was, TEOPOTLAN, the second was called ETERNITY and was located in the fourth area of Mictlan. It was reserved for the burial of Nobles and military officers. They were taught that eternal rest was possible if one were to lead a good life. In addition, the military officers were taught that a brave death on the battlefield was an honorable experience that also led to eternal rest.

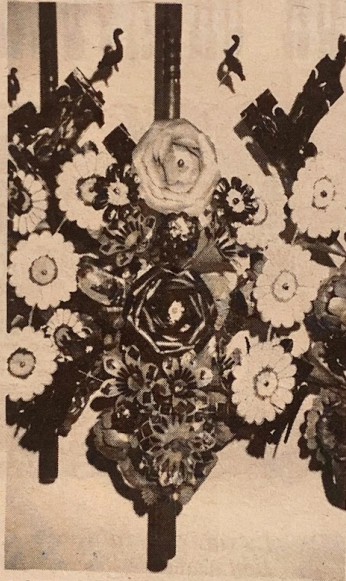
The Mixtec people had their own set of beliefs. Some Mixtecs believed in the immortality of the soul and had their graveyard at the end of a valley close to CHALCATONGO. The graveyard entrance was adorned with many flowering plants. The entrance to a long deep cave was located in the graveyard. The cave was believed to be the path to heaven. The Mixtecs beliefs didn't discriminate between rich, poor or the powerful as all were allowed access to heaven. However, kings or headmen were accorded special burial rites. These were embalmed, dressed in the finest raiments and bedecked with jewels. A faithful servant was killed to accompany and serve the king - headman on his long journey to heaven. The servant was dressed in the kings cloths and also bedecked with jewels. A mask of the kings likeness was used to cover the servant's face. Both bodies were then placed in a niche of the cave. The burial was at night.

In some Mixtec areas, the king or headman was cremated and his remains placed in a vault that was covered by a burial mound. The vault would contain a niche with a statue of the king's likeness. The remainder of the vault was used to hold food and other provisions such as weapons, musical instruments, etc. that were deemed necessary for the long journey to heaven. Some of the statues were made with urns on their backs to hold the cremated remains of the king.

After the dead had been sent on their way to heaven, (i.e. buried), members of the family and friends would hold a fiesta to remember the departed. This was a joyous occasion. Turkeys and other birds were killed and prepared into fine dishes of traditional foods. Other traditional dishes were plataltan, cazegetza and nicuatole. Cazegetza was

prepared from chocolate, chiles, spices, etc. and was similar to the dark mole of today. Nicuatole was made from blue corn and honey and had a gelatinous texture. Blue corn was used as the colors of death were red and purple in the pre-Spanish era. Red has also been observed during archaeological excavations of burial mounds where the subsoil was dyed a deep red to denote sorrow.

It was very important to insure that new souls be assisted on their way to heaven by 'good' spirits and not fall into the clutches the dreaded Mictlacihan from hell. The remembrance ceremony took place immediately after the



* AUTHENTIC WAX CANDLE FOR THE ALTAR.

burial ceremony which took place at night. An altar was set up on the grave. A statue or with the likeness of the dead was placed on altar. Sometimes other figures, possibly representing the dead persons ancestors, were placed on the altar. The leaves of a tree, extinct, and 'copal' were used as incense both purify the area and to help the family into a meditative state. The meditative state was thought to be a preparation for prayer. Prayer was used to implore the 'good' spirits to come. Various foods were placed on altar to entice 'good' spirits to come. The feast consisted of a complete meal of the finest specialties along with the finest beverages, including alcoholic beverages. It was believed that the spirits took only the essence, smells and moisture from the food offerings. During the night people were afraid to look at the altar for fear of seeing a spirit. The following morning, as they awoke, family and friends rejoiced in the belief that the soul was safely on its way to heaven and the dreaded Mictlacihan of hell had not taken them. They greeted each other with words of comfort and rejoicing.

The Aztecs invaded the area of Oaxaca after several years of wars and forced the cities and towns to pay tribute and taxes. The Aztecs also imposed their culture and beliefs on the conquered area. The Zapotecs and Mixtecs were impressed with the knowledge and liturgical ceremonies of the Aztecs. The result was that the Zapotec and Mixtec cultures were merged. The Zapotec concepts of an immortal soul, the resurrection of the body, heaven and hell were unknown to the Aztecs. The concept of the guardian of hell, Mitlacigua who was

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CULTURAL EVENTS

- October 4 - Native Folk Dances - Dance of the Pluma - Teotitlan del Valle - noon.
- October 11 - A traditional religious festival - All day - Tlacolula.
- October 12 - Christopher Columbus day
- October 19 - Traditional neighborhood festival, 'El Bajio' from 5 to 8 pm.
- October 31 - Special market day for the 'Day of the Dead' supplies, see front page story - Mercado Abastos
- November 1 - All Saints Day festival. A family dinner with 'mole' and special trip to be part of 'comparsas' at San Agustine Etla at 9 pm.
- November 2 - The Day of the Dead. Visit to Cemeteries - All Day till 6 pm.
- November 20 - revolution Day - Sports Parade.

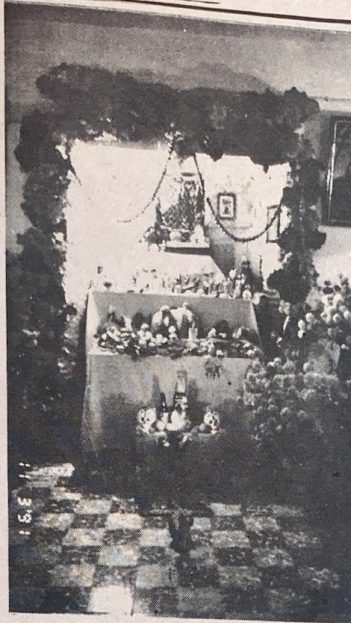


FIESTA AND DEATH



*FROM PAGE 2

believed to be a god, was also new to them. The Aztec religion was based on animal and human sacrifice. The Aztecs took the Zapotec gods, Mitecacihuectli or Gentleman of the Inferno, and Mitecacihuectli or Woman of the Inferno, and related them to the Zapotec god, Matlaciuhua. They changed his name by appending the letter 'I' and attributed all matters of sex to him. They formed a belief that this god was able to transform himself into a colossal monster, animal or beautiful woman. This god was believed to be a genius who could dominate even the strongest and bravest warriors of the Aztec nation. The curse of this god was to seduce the lazy youth who stayed in bed too late in the morning. The god would appear to the late sleepers in the form of a seductive woman and lure them to the edge of the city of the ravines where he would violently kill them. Thereafter the god would vanish like a puff of smoke in the air. All this was generally believed even toward the end of the Spanish colonial period after which the belief slowly began to die out.



The ceremony of remembering the dead has become an annual event in recent times and is quite prevalent here in Oaxaca. On the first day of the holiday, after the evening meal the family prepares the altar in the home. A large table, a family antique if possible, is placed against a wall. The table will hold the special foods, etc. prepared by the family. The special foods are offerings of bread with butter, eggs flavored with anise and decorated with an angels face, chocolate bars, mole made from turkey meat, candied pumpkin, plus red corn and blue corn nicanatole dessert. Many fruits such as oranges, apples, jicama, bananas and nuts, even peanuts are placed around and on the altar. A carpet of flowers covers the area in front of the altar. The carpet flower, ***, is a tradition chosen for its autumn color and smell that reminds people of a cemetery. Skulls, some of clay and some of sugar are placed on the edge of the flower carpet. The center of the flower carpet is reserved for a symbolic burial scene. Puppets made of cotton with skull heads carry a symbolic cardboard coffin. A symbolic grave is made from a piece of cotton bearing a cross design. The pictures of the ancestors are placed on the table or on the wall behind the table. The altar is framed with long lengths of sugar cane that are used to create an arch on the wall behind the altar. Various fruits and flowers adorn the arch of sugar cane. That night the older people throw pieces of burning incense in the hope that the smoke and scent will help people to meditate and pray for their ancestors.

we had and the guided learning experiences they gave us. We foster a family cohesiveness as we worship together on this 'The Day of the Dead'. For Oaxacans this celebration obligates us to pray for the good of the souls of our ancestors asking god for peace and the beautiful light of eternity. We are comforted by the thought that when we leave this world of tears we also will be remembered with happiness and love on the 'The Day of the Dead'.

The second day of the celebration is reserved for visiting graveyards, resting, playing traditional games of chance. On this day to people go from house to house exchanging gifts with a large basket that is beautifully covered with a colorfully embroidered napkin. Giving and receiving presents of food. Great care is taken to make the food as appealing and tasty as possible. On the second day, after the evening meal, the family has met its obligations to the dead.

*** ZEMPOALXUCHIL

The Oaxac an celebration of "The Day of the Dead" bears many similarities to the Christian celebration of "All Souls Day" which is also known as Halloween in the United States. It cannot be denied that the remembering of our ancestors annually is a beautiful tradition. When we build the altar for the dead in our homes we revive intimate moments of happiness that occurred prior to the death of our loved ones. We celebrate the pleasant moments of their life like the deep heartfelt talks



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