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FREE

LAUGHING SOULS

The Zapotecs believe that the spirits of their dead relatives will come to their homes on these days once again.

by Judith Strupp Green

The Days of the Dead as they are kept in Oaxaca are not grim, nor macabre. They provide the opportunity for a warm family and neighborly reunion which includes the well-remembered deceased along with the living. The dead are considered to be part of the family, especially on this day. Those who feel that is sacrilegious to have a picnic lunch among one's ancestors in a flower-strewn graveyard, or to let children play with sugar skulls and cardboard string-puppet skeletons, should visit Oaxaca on November 1 and 2 to understand the familiar and comforting spirit in which the celebration takes place. They should also remember Halloween in the United States with its skeletons, snaggle-toothed witches, and ghosts in which the children take such shivery delight.

In Mexico the whole family takes part in preparing for the celebration. The woman of the household has the greatest responsibility, for she must start to save money for the holiday purchases long before the awaited days arrive. Little by little some of the scarce *centavitos* (pennies) go to buy the new dishes which the family will need. One cannot honor the respected deceased, nor the living guests, with the old crockery!



As the end of October approaches, the carefully purchased plates and howls of baked clay are stored under the altar at one end of the house, if it is large enough. This altar is often the same one that is kept clean and freshened with flowers before the family shrine or holy picture all year around. On the Days of the Dead it takes on a special, additional meaning. The Zapotecs believe that the spirits of their dead relatives will come to visit their homes on these days once again, to celebrate with the living, and especially to enjoy what their earthly descendants have prepared for them. For this reason, no haphazardness in the offering will suffice. Certain types of flowers, foods, and decorations are appropriate, and the conscientious family is aware of exactly what they must do. In the section on the market the items needed for home, guests, and cemetery will be discussed.

home-made stand appear in the market at this same time of the year which are not seen again until the next Days of the Dead season. The pre-Days of the Dead market is not somber or serious. In fact it seems more animated than usual. Sugar skulls with tinfoil eyes glitter from one booth, mountains of gaily decorated *pan de los muertos* (Bread of the Dead) are piled up in another to attract sharp-eyed customers, and women chatter in Zapotec among the yellow marigolds (*semposuchil*) and flame-red cockscomb in the flower stalls.

Imagination is given free reign for the home-made figurines. A skeletal bishop with cotton hair and full episcopal robes and mitre of tinfoil may stand proudly next to a scholarly skeleton reading a book, and mother and a child in a tender pose. Almost every conceivable daily activity is fair game for depiction in skeletal form — from riding bicycles to sitting down to dinner.

For some, the time before the Days of the Dead is especially busy because they are the artisans who make the delicate ornaments for the celebration which find eager buyers in the market place. Tiny

The skeletons are called *calaveras*, although the technical meaning of this term is just "skull". Satirical newspapers, using *calaveras* as cartoon

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4 BLOCKS FROM ZOCALO

LAUGHING

media for lampooning politicians and bureaucrats, appear on the streets on these days. By extension, the mocking verses printed in these

ephemeral papers are also called *calaveras*. This practice is an old one. At the beginning of this century Mexican political cartoonist and artist Jose Guadalupe Posada lithographed marvelous *calaveras* which are now collector's items.

Paper, plaster and beans are not the only materials used for making *calaveras* figures. Mexican children have a sweet tooth like children everywhere, and the tradition evolved of making the skulls of candy as well. In Ejutla, Oaxaca, some of the most delicate and appetizing molded candies are made. The old molds of fired red clay are sometimes rented out to other candy makers for a fee. Exquisitely formed hearts, lyres, tombs, and souls in purgatory made of the whitest sugar and water and embellished with colored confectionery decorations are sold by the Ejutla vendors. The hollow centers of the sweetmeats are filled with liqueurs like *anisado* (anisetite).

Families from Oaxaca city sometimes rent Ejutla molds to fashion these white sugar candies, but also make other types of home-made sweets such as those of squash seeds. The squash seeds are peeled, washed, ground and cooked with sugar. Then the sweet dough is worked with the hands and pressed into a clayed mold. The features on the candies are much more attenuated than the detailed Ejutla ones, and they are solid rather than hollow.

The renowned sugar skulls set out in twinkling rows in the winter sun at the market place attract our attention. They are molded sugar and water confections traditional in this celebration for decades. Some are made in factories in Mexico City and taken to Oaxaca at this time of year; others are made in Oaxaca by local families. They are often ornamented with colored foil and bear a name across the top of the skull.

Over hundred years ago, it was a common practice in parts of Mexico to expose the actual skulls of the dead on the Day of All Souls. John Lloyd Stephens, the renowned explorer of the last century, reports meeting a friendly priest in Yucatan, who showed him some of these human remains. Like the sugar skulls of today, they bore the name of the deceased on a strip of cloth or paper spanning the forehead. (Stephens 1856: I, 419).

we see that part of the market devoted to flowers is also humming with activity. Great bundles of crimson coxcomb (*Borla de santa Teresa*), brilliant sun-yellow marigolds (*semposuchil*), often called the flower of the dead, and wild flowers (*flores del monte*, *stevia*) are heaped upon every side. Any or all of these can be used on the altar in the homes, but the *semposuchil* is the most prominent.



CULTURAL EVENTS

OCTOBER

MOVIES.

All Saturdays and Sundays:

15.

Charles Chaplin - 11 am -
Graphic Art Institute - free admission.
The Wedding - 5:30 Graphic Art Institute - Free admission.

EXHIBITIONS.

29.

Traditional Mexican Masks -
8 pm - Mitla Patio C.C.O. - free admission - 403 Gonzales Ortega st.

MARKET OF THE DEAD - FIELD TRIP - REGISTER IN THE HOME OF THE OAXACA TIMES, Alcalá # 307. \$ 10. US. per person. Dead Line: 27th of October.

Other Cultural Activities.

14-15.

Latino-American Music - 8 pm -
Cultural Center R.F.M. - 302 -
Alcalá. Free admission.

21.

National Folk Dances - 7 pm -
Cultural Center R.F.M. -
Guitar Concert - 8 pm - C.C. R.F.M.
Rumba Music - 6 pm - C.C. R.F.M.

22.

23.

Music

24.

Music Festival, 5 pm - Ciudad
De Las Canteras. - 10 min.
West of the city.

25.

Concert Symphonic Orchestra of Oaxaca
6 pm - C.C.O. Ave. Tecnológico
Admission: N \$ 20. students and
Senior Citizens 50% off. With ID.

NOVEMBER

EXHIBITIONS.

1 To 4.

Exhibit of Altars For The Dead
Alameda Park - all day.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

1.

Folk Dances - 7 pm. Alameda Park.

7 to 13

Theater-Mexico - Colombia - Cuba-
Honduras and Qaxaca

14.

Concert -Oaxacan Rock - Cuidado
Las Canteras - 7 pm.
Revolution Day - Parade - Zocalo
10 am.

20.

LAUGHING SOULS

In the market also, we find the ingredients for *mole*, home-made Oaxaca food. Turkey for the *mole*, home-made tablets of handground chocolate, herbs and spices, squash for *conserva de calabaza* (a desert sweet) and many other comestibles are seen in the market baskets and string bags of the villagers 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 breathe only the essence of the food.

The Bread of the Dead

Another morsel which is indispensable in celebrating the Days of the Dead properly in Oaxaca is the bread of the dead (*pan de los muertos*). Special loaves are prepared by the bakers of Oaxaca for this day. They represent the souls of the dead and often bear a tiny painted paste angel or face (*carita*) to remind people of their significance.

Big bakeries in Oaxaca make massive quantities of these traditional loaves in an oil-heated oven. For this celebration alone they employ young men from Santo Domingo Comaltepec to work day and night kneading, shaping, and baking the distinctive loaves. No bread dough can be wasted, so the young men catch their few hours of sleep above the bakery for the four days they spend plying their ancient trade in Oaxaca's modern bakery. After their contract is over they return to their village, known throughout Oaxaca as the village of the "master bakers". There are still bakers in Oaxaca in the small ward (*barrios*) who use the old fashioned brick oven to bake for local people.

THE MARKET

Let's take a stroll through the market itself on these animated days before the celebration begins in the thirty-first of October. In pottery row, things are much the same as always, with the vendors selling the green glazed wares of Atzompa, the famous black ware of Coyotepec, and the factory-produced semi-majolicas 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 of plate to complete the set for the altar.

Next stop is the herb stand which is replete with tied bunches of dried seasonings such as *hierbita de olor* (oregano, thyme and marjoram) for the *mole* (a traditional dish of chicken in a chile-chocolate sauce), cocoa, clover, ginger, coriander and fragrant whole nutmegs in tiny cardboard cartons. A glass jar holds the sweet anise that surrenders its distinctive flavor in the bread baked for those days. Prominent in the rear of the stand, propped up the bags of herbs and seeds, are the board games. They are the cardboard 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. Some are commercial games and others are hand-painted. Minuscule dice are used to determine the moves around the board, explain the children standing near the small herb stand, and the prize for the



winner is a handful of pecans (which are also used as players).

The mellow colors of hand-made wax candles, hanging in graceful rows by their wicks in the next stand, catches the eye. The virgin beeswax taper is the finest for the altar of cemetery, Sra. Merlin de Martinez tells us. They come from the Colon factory and are decorated with a religious seal in gilt dust. Most of the candles are clothed in strips of colored or black crepe paper which are carefully fastened to the candle at each end with a black wax. Our vendor informs us that the tapers in black our used only in the cemetery on the second of November, the true Day of the Souls. On November 1, which is dedicated to the *angelitos* (souls of little children) and all the saints, the candles with colored crepe paper are used. They are also placed on they altars in the homes.

On October 31, most of the people stay up all night. They prepare tamales for the next days; and it is a long, complicated, and delicate process. The *masa* (corn dough) must be very, very light so that a bit of it will float up in a cup of water instead of sinking to the bottom. Without the convenience of electric mixers this means long and hard hand beating, and many tamales must be made for all guests, living and dead, who will come. The altar must be prepared on this night as well. All the relatives in the household help to set up the display to honor the beloved spirits. All the task had to be done through the night, said our Zapotec informant, for at about 4:00 A.M. the spirits of the children would arrive. At the present time they put the children's miniature things on the same altar that would be used to honor adults, but formerly, in a larger house, they had a separate altar in the corner for the children. Each expected child spirit has its own tiny candle in a miniature clay candle holder. When the little spirits arrive the only evidence may be a fluttering of their candle flames or a bit of fruit dropping from the pile, our informant confided. After they leave at 8:00 A.M., the morning of November 1 (the same morning they arrived), the family snuffs out the tiny candles and takes them off the altar.

The adult spirits then arrive at 3:00 P.M. The family has carefully placed large candles in normally-sized holders for them. Everyone hopes that they will be pleased with the gifts of food and drink set out before them.

Evil fortune falls on humans who dare to eat food on the altar before the spirits come to take its essence, for the feel that the angry adults spirits may come and tie their feet up before they wake.

The visitors, too, receive food from their hosts. When we visited Teotitlan we were offered hot Oaxacan chocolate beaten to a froth with the wooden beater (*molinillo*), *pan de los muertos*, and a little glass of tequila.

On the morning of the second of November, All Souls' Day in the Catholic calendar, there are three masses for those in Xochimilco barrio — one at 6:30 A.M., one at 7:00 A.M., and one at 8:00 A.M. the adult spirits leave for their own world, and the family again snuffs out the candles. Prayers for the dead may go all day, however.

Since the dead are officially gone, people may remove food from the altar and take it around to friends. Before no one dares to....

