



Oaxaca Times

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Free

Day of the Dead

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 a part of the family, especially on this day. Those who feel that it is sacrilegious to have a picnic or lunch among one's ancestors in a flower-strewn graveyard, or to let the 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 would also remember Halloween in the United States with its skeletons, snaggle-toothed witches, and ghosts in which the children find such shivery delight.

In Mexico the whole family takes part in preparing for the celebration. The woman of the household has the greatest responsibility, she must start to save money for the holiday purchases long before the awaited days arrive. Little by little some of the scarce necessities (t-shirts, avios, annies) 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 bowls of baked clay are placed 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 bright 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. 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 home-made stands appear in the market at this time of year which

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Come one! Come all!



The "Oaxaca Times" is sponsoring a Day of the Dead field trip to the village of San Agustín, Etla on the night of November 1 at 7:30 p.m. There groups of heavily costumed people rove and dance along with local musicians. They stop in front of the homes of prominent people and proceed very loudly detail the latest dark secrets of the family within. This is done in flawless verse much to the embarrassment on those inside. The groups well-wishers and on-hangers are periodically fortified with the local fire-water called mezcal. The festivities continue all night long but we will only stay a few hours. This is your chance to blend with the locals, under the cover of the darkness. Take the time to come with us and let yourself enjoy a few hours of fun.

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not seen again until the next Days of the Dead season. The pre-day of the Dead market is not somber or morose. In fact, it seems more festive than usual. Sugar skulls with colorful eyes glitter from one booth, and displays of gaily decorated pan de muerto (Bread of the Dead) are lined up in another to attract sharp-eyed customers and women chatter in Zapotec among the yellow marigolds (Tagetes posuchil) and flame-red gerbera in the flower stalls.

The Market

Let's take a stroll through the market itself on these animated days before the celebration begins on the thirty-first of October. In pottery row, things are much the same as always, with vendors selling the green glazed wares of Atzompa, the famous black ware of Coyotepec, and the factory-produced semi-jolicas made in Oaxaca City. Yet many of these dishes will appear with the offerings later, and the Zapotec women are shrewdly bargaining for that last bowl or plate

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Oaxaca Times

DAY OF THE DEAD FIELD TRIP

INFO ON PAGE 1



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to complete the set for the altar.

A 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, flower, 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 at the rear of the stand, propped up by the bags of herbs and seeds, are the board games.



Public offering in Oaxaca. Photo by Joan Hackett

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are the cardboard games, called *La Oca* (the anchor) and *La Oca* (the *La Oca*), that are played by the children in the cemetery on the night of November 2. Some are commercial and others are hand-painted. Small dice are used to determine moves around the board, explain children standing near the small stand, and the prize for the winner is a handful of pecans (which are used as players).

The mellow colors of handmade wax candles, hanging in grace-rows by their wicks in the next candle, catches the eye. The virgin swax taper is the finest for the cemetery, a lady tells us. They come from a small factory and are decorated with a religious seal in gilt. Most of the candles are clothed in strips of colored or black crepe paper which are carefully fastened to a candle at each end with a black

Our vendor informs us that the figures in black are 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 the saints, the candles with colored crepe paper are used. They are placed on the altars in the homes.

Another interesting craft which is sold almost strictly to individual manufacture. This is the painting of cardboard and paper figures for the altars and cemeteries. Handmade skeleton figures, manipulated with a string at the back, dance grotesquely in a stall.

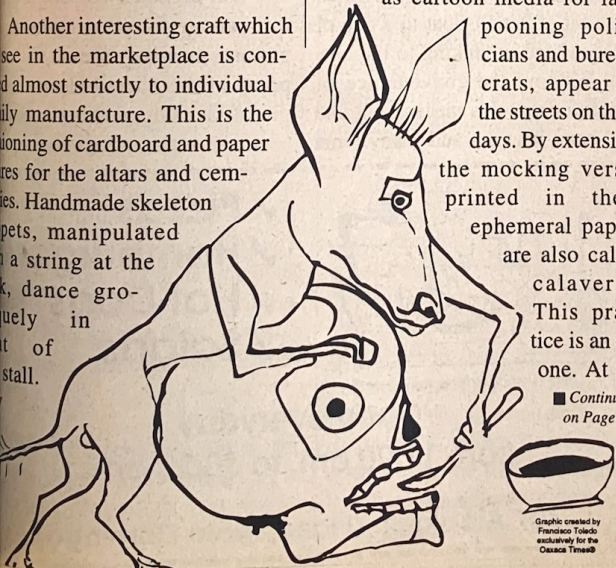
are made of cardboard pasted with gold and silver flakes and a wad of cotton for hair. For the more affluent there are larger ones — almost three feet tall.

Tiny stationary figurines are made too. One type is called the *padrecitos* (little priests) who solemnly carry cardboard and paste coffins, they look as solemn that is, as it is possible to look with a garbanzo bean head and ink-painted face! Both children and adults make these figurines, and the art is passed down the generations. The artisans make the little figures carefully by hand using only colored papers, garbanzos, glue or black-gum and ink.

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 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.

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

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beginning of this century Mexican political cartoonist and artist José 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. 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 (anisetete).

Families from Oaxaca City 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 clay 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 to complete the set for the altar.

We see that the 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 up on every side. Any or all of these can be used on the altar in the homes, but the semposuchil is the most prominent.

In the market also, we find the ingredients for fiesta food. Turkey for the mole, home-made tablets of hand ground chocolate, herbs and spices,



Public offering in Oaxaca. Photo by Joan Hackett

squash for conserva de calabaza (a dessert 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.

The barrio of Xochimilco is a ward of the city of Oaxaca, where many Zapotec Indians live. Most houses are of adobe, and the streets are unpaved and stony like those in the villages. 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 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 tama-

les must be made for all the guests living and dead, who will come. The feather light corn dough is wrapped in individual packages made of corn husks and tied at the ends with a small strip of the husk. Other foods are cooked on that night too, such as the rich, near-black Oaxacan mole red moles, and chiles.

The altar must be prepared this night as well. All the relatives of the household help to set up the table to play to honor the beloved spirits.

It is worthwhile to digress a moment to describe the appearance of the altar itself in this household. A large wooden table had been placed at one end of the room. On the white wall behind the table, some one had arched two long canes to form an arc framing the many pictures hanging there. Cherish prints of the Sacred Heart, the Virgin of Guadalupe (Mexico's patron

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Family at Tombsite. Photo by Shirley I. Fisher.

our Lady and the Child Jesus and other indistinguishable pictures were enshrined. Some had small bunches of yellow semosuchils attached to the frames. Sprays of cultivated marigolds stood in front of it on the floor. As well as flowers, large white tapers, small, fat vigil candles, incense, and a large cardboard lavera, or skull, sat on the altar.

Fragrant fruits such as limes, oranges and bananas were piled here and there; and loaves of bread of the dead and tablets of chocolate gave evidence of the work of the evening. All the tasks 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 center 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 popping 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 8:00 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. They may go away weeping if nothing is offered.

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

In the evening, about 8:00 p.m. the family prays the rosary in front of the altar in honor of the deceased ones. On this night visitors and relatives come by to pray, talk, and offer a gift to the "souls". The visitors, too, receive food from their hosts. As people come by to visit and offer muertos, the talk often turns to the dead ones being honored that evening. By the flickering lights of the altar in an otherwise dark house, the perfect setting is created for

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ghostly stories. Children gather around, shivering with fear and delight to hear their elders tell them. Many tales concern the revenge wreaked by the ghosts on stingy relatives who forget them on the Days of the Dead.

On the morning of the second of November, All Soul's 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.

Promptly 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 on all day, however.

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

In the evening some cemeteries slowly fill with people. They carry flowers and candles to decorate the graves of the dead. At the little cemetery of San Felipe del Agua near Oaxaca City, there is a painted wooden altar in the center of the graveyard.

It is filled with flowers and candles, offered by the faithful on the night of All Soul's. A tiny old Zapotec woman lights copal incense in a three-legged clay burner in front of one flower-decked grave. The most ornamented graves are those of little children. Everything there is in miniature. Among the flowers are tiny ollas, toys, minuscule candles in little holders and cardboard tombs (tumbitas).

At the few unattended grave-stones small children play the traditional board games; el ancla and la oca, by the waning light of a single vigil candle. As we went on to Santiago Ixtaltepec on the night of November 2, we found all behavior



Day of the Dead. Photo by Leticia Arriaga

most solemn and decorous. While clusters of people spoke in quiet tones, and children played El Ancla on the empty stones, others waited patiently near the tomb of a "soul". Close to midnight the musicians gathered in the middle of the panteon to play "Las Golondrinas" (The Swallows) and "Dios Nunca Muere" (God Never Dies). Then slowly the families collected their baskets and candles and left the little cemetery. By the next day, November 3, the Days of the Dead and All Saints is officially over. At Xochimilco barrio, the altar is not dismantled until the fourth, however. Fruits and candies can be enjoyed by everyone since the spirits have left the earthly part they can no longer enjoy. The cardboard games, coffin bearers, and calaveras of paper are stored away for the next year. The grave decorations at Xochimilco cemetery remain until the thirtieth of November. Customs for the Days of the Dead differ in detail in various villages. In San

Antonino Castillo de Velasco, Oaxaca, the graves bear gorgeous decorations of flowers and large painted wooden crosses made by an artisan in Ocotlán. The plots are not usually strewn with wild flowers and candles as in the tiny cemeteries of Santo Domingo Ixtaltepec and San Felipe. In the afternoon of November 3 a San Antonino people came to the graveyard to hear the responses of prayers for the dead that the priests from Ocotlán had come to say. Outside the cemetery, food stands selling cooked tamales, empanadas (kind of turnover), and fresh fruits of the region appeared, and on the other side of the street refreshing beer or mezcál was offered.

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

- Written by Judith Strupp Green
Days of the Dead in Oaxaca.

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