



Inner life of Oaxaca

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Long live the dead of Mexico

BY ALEXANDER HANRATH

After experiencing Mexico's extended family reunion with the dead, Halloween will never be the same again.

At the end of October and beginning of November, Mexicans welcome back their deceased into the family circle.

Far from being a somber, mournful occasion, Día de los Muertos is the one occasion each year when the dead are beckoned directly with earthly pleasures – be that mezcal or mole. For the family inviting their departed relatives, the ceremony is both a pleasure and a duty.

GRAVE OCCASION

Vivid orange and yellow cempasuchiles (marigolds) decorate tombstones and crosses, illuminated at night by the glow of thousands of small candles. The whole affair is made mystical by the blue smoke and scent of the burning copal incense. Both the cempasuchiles and the copal carry important symbolism and serve to lead the dead to and from the realm of the living.

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LIZZY UNGER

Day of the Dead, or Día de Los Muertos, is a holiday at the end of October and beginning of November. During the celebrations, Mexicans welcome their deceased relatives back into the family circle.

Heading into Juchitán : A city like no other

BY ALLENDRIA BRUNJES

The lack of men at the market. The interesting food. The beautiful clothing.

Located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Juchitán has quite the reputation. From their big, strong women to the “muxes,” the people of Juchitán have developed a culture like no other in Mexico.

“The people of Juchitán are full of custom, and they’re a mixture of all that’s possible – of magic.”

Resident Geraldina Santiago Velázquez is the president of the local San Vicente Ferrer Society, a group that helps organize some of the famous parties in May called the Velas de Mayo. She says she wants to share her culture with the world.

“We are Zapotec people, still holding on to our roots,” she says. “We invite everyone who wants to know our customs, our traditions.”

Juchitán is located about 250 kilometers southeast of Oaxaca city, in the state

of Oaxaca.

El presidente municipal Daniel Gurrión Matías says about 150,000 people live in Juchitán and surrounding areas, making it the second-biggest city in the state of Oaxaca after the capital.

Gurrión also says art is important in the city, which has produced such masters as Francisco Toledo.

“There are many artists – painters, poets, singers, musicians,” he says.

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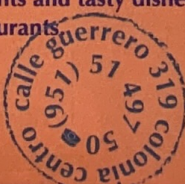


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Celebrating ancestors with food and drink

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Entire families in their Sunday best crowd around their tombs with offers of food, alcohol, snacks, photos and books. It is a full-blown reunion, and many eat their evening meals – picnic-style – on the tombs, sharing with the dead. Music and dancing figure highly in the cemetery festivities; people have been known to bring a band of mariachis to the grave. Throughout the evening, laughter and cheer, and also genuine commemoration light the cemetery grounds.

HISTORY

The Day of the Dead celebration is a blend of cultural traditions – the pre-Hispanic cult of death, the veneration of ancestors practiced by indigenous peoples, and the commemoration of Catholic Saints on All Saints Day.

During the festivities, the country vigorously embraces its dead – drinking, singing and dancing with them. It illustrates the special relationship that Mexico seems to have with death: a laughing, mocking familiarity that is embodied in the portrayal of grinning paper maché skeletons performing life's everyday tasks. Dancing on someone's grave, an action that carries negative connotations in the rest of the Christian world, here represents a reaching out of the living life to the dead.

FAMILY REUNION

At heart, the Day of the Dead is a family affair and much of the ceremony takes place indoors, within the inner-sanctum of the family circle. This is the authentic Mexican Day of the Dead, a sight few foreigners see.

On October 31, the family builds the "ofrenda" (offering altar). Typically, the altar consists of an arch made of reed or corn husks, placed on a table and decorated with flowers, fruit, bread, tins filled with sugar, and decorative tissues or paper. Figures of patron saints, candles and pictures of the



ARCHIVES

Altars like this one are set up around Mexico on Día de los Muertos. Ancestors' favorite foods are laid out for them to enjoy once again.

deceased occupy the center of the altar. Glasses of water are also left on the altar as refreshment after their long journey.

Around noon Nov. 1, the first guests to arrive are the "angelitos," or the souls of dead children. The adults visit at the end of the afternoon on Nov. 2.

FESTIVE FOODS

Naturally, food plays a central role. For breakfast, Oaxacan families often eat tamales de mole, and for lunch chicken is served with rich, spicy mole sauce and rice.

In some parts of Mexico, tables are set for the entire family, including empty chairs for the ancestors. Adults are offered all their old favorites, while the angelitos get candy, soda and even junk food.

The dead, whose presence is felt throughout the celebrations, are thought to consume the essence of the meal and presents laid before them, leaving positive energy as they depart. After the feast, the altar

food is generously shared among relatives, neighbors and friends.

DIFFERENT CELEBRATIONS

The style and form of the celebration varies greatly throughout the country, between social classes, ethnic groups, even from village to village.

In large towns and cities like Oaxaca, open and public displays of revelry abound, in some cases emphasized for the curious tourist population.

Elaborate, costumed processions take place with music, singing and dancing. Weeks beforehand, shop windows are decorated with paper skeletons and skulls.

In the second half of October, markets sell varied merchandise: waxes, incense, paper decorations, candy skulls, special bread, mole, fruit, nuts, tin work, pottery and more.

– From archives

ICC Día de los Muertos Events

OCTOBER 27

9AM-3PM Walking tour of Zaachila market of the dead, Cullápam and the Zapotec royal tombs. Includes lunch. \$45 US/person.

OCTOBER 28

9AM-3PM Tour of Ocotlan Market of the Dead, San Martín Tilcajete alebrijes, Coyotepec black clay pottery. Includes lunch. \$45 US/person.

OCTOBER 29

4PM-8PM Oaxacan tamale cooking class! Includes dinner, hot chocolate and Day of the Dead bread. \$30 US/person.

OCTOBER 30

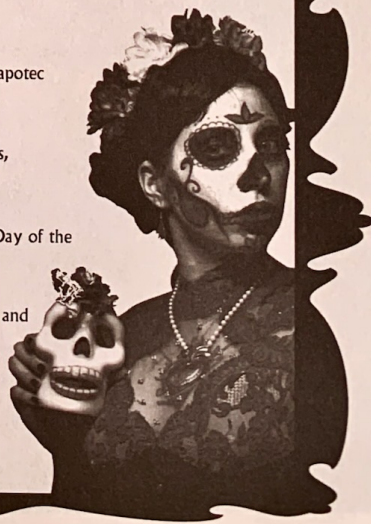
9AM-3PM Market of the dead, Tule's 2,015-year-old tree, Teotitlán del Valle and Mitla, city of the Dead. \$45 US/person.

NOVEMBER 1

7:30PM-9:30PM Walking tour with a visit to the city's cemetery. \$15 US/person.

For more information and registration

www.day-of-the-dead.org • info@iccoax.com • yolanda@iccoax.com



A different culture

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One tradition that people often hear about is muxe culture. Muxes are people who are born as men, raised as women and attracted to men. Unlike most other places in Mexico – where machismo is the norm – muxes are appreciated and celebrated.

Gurrion says muxes are valued in Juchiteco families, where it is helpful to have someone with masculine strength help with the stereotypically female duties.

"I believe that the society allows it and doesn't see it as bad," Gurrion says. "There aren't many problems. Families – mothers especially – like them, because they are hard workers."

Karla Paola Castillo Matus is muxe. She says there are many muxes in Juchitán, noting they even have their own vela celebrations at the end of November.

"I was born muxe," she said. "The truth is that I feel very proud to be muxe. It's really beautiful, because there's no discrimination."

She said there are some things that should change, like the fact that muxes were not allowed to enter the last week of the Velas de Mayo parties as women.

Nevertheless, Paola says she is comfortable in her city and society, noting that there is rarely violence or issues of intolerance.

"Almost never," she says. "All people respect us as we are ... Juchitán is very liberal. Here, I can do all of this and no one is going to say anything."

In addition to the attitude toward muxes, women also seem to be looked upon differently in the Isthmus. For instance, the market is filled with large, strong women managing the stands and sales, and few to no men. More often than not, the women are physically larger than their male partners.

"It's different from the rest of Mexican or Oaxacan society," Gurrion said. "Here, women are a strong force in the family. The women work hard, and contribute a lot to the economics of families."

Things aren't perfect by any means. Despite their increased role in the economy, women still don't have equal representation in the municipal government.

But, as Gurrion says, Juchitán has a lot of good things that people should see.

"We want that tourists and the people who visit are happy, that they know our culture," he said. "We have a lot to show ... A lot of culture."

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