



Oaxaca Times®

The inner life of Oaxaca



BY ALEXANDER HANRATH

Nowhere in the world do the dead receive such a warm welcome back as in Mexico. 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, it is the one occasion each year when the dead are beckoned directly with earthly pleasures—be that mezcal or mole. For the family welcoming back departed relatives, the ceremony is both a pleasure and a duty.

The scenes at the cemeteries are magical. Vivid orange and yellow cempasuchiles

(marigolds) decorate the tombstones and crosses, illuminated at night by the incandescent 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. Entire families in their Sunday best crowd family tombs with offers of food, alcohol, snacks, photos and books. It is a full-blown family reunion and many take their evening meal, picnic-style, on the tombs, sharing with the dead.



MMMMM... Crepes!

TRADITIONAL OAXACAN &
INTERNATIONAL FOOD

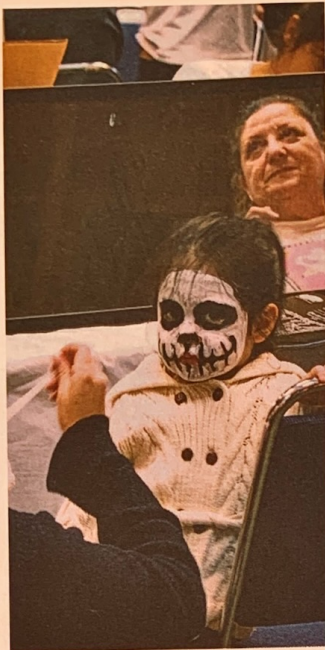
501 M. Alcalá St.
Open from Tuesday to Sunday from 8 AM to midnight.
Fridays & Sat. until 8 AM. For Reservations call 5012126. Credit cards

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.

The Mexican Day of the Dead celebration is a bend of cultural traditions—the pre-Hispanic cult of death, the veneration of ancestors practiced both by indigenous peoples and Spanish pagan groups, and the commemoration of Catholic Saints on All Saints Day. Ultimately though, it is a distinctly Mexican occasion. The country vigorously embraces its dead during these days. It drinks, sings and dances with them. This is the most ostentatious festivity of the year—more exuberant than either Easter or Christmas. 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 mache skeletons performing life's everyday tasks. Dancing on

someone's grave, an action that carries such negative connotations in the rest of the Christian world, here represents a reaching out of the living to the dead, a reunion in the most festive spirit.

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) together. 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 pic-

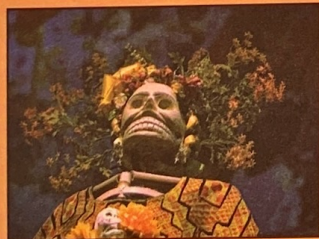


tures of the deceased occupy the center of the altar. Then come the earthly pleasures. Rich helpings of food are set out at the altar for the arrival of the guests (the dead), who arrive in order of sacredness. The first to arrive are the souls of dead children, the angelitos, on November 1, around noon. The adults visit at the end of the afternoon on November 2. Glasses of water are left on the altar as refreshment after their long journey.

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. In their brief return to the realm of the living, the dead eat and drink, basically, whatever they fancy. Adults are offered all their old favorites, as well as cigarettes and mezcal if they were known to partake. Candy, soda, even junk food is brought for the angelitos. The dead, whose presence is felt throughout the celebrations, are thought to consume essence of the meal and presents laid before them, leaving positive energy as they depart again. After the feast, the altar food is generously shared among relatives, neighbors and friends.

The style and form of the celebration varies greatly throughout the country, between social classes, ethnic groups, even from village to village. In many rural and indigenous parts, people view the Dia de Muertos ceremonies as an obligation (with dire consequences for those who fail to attend) and a private matter. In larger 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, much as Christmas decorations take over shopping streets all over Europe and the US. 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. Generally, no expense is spared as people honor the dead and attempt to outdo their neighbors.



To get a wonderful overview of the entire riotous event, the Oaxaca Times is organizing tours to many Dia de Muertos festivities. This year, as is customary, a portion of the proceeds from these excursions will be donated to historical preservation.

FRIDAY OCTOBER 26. 9 : AM

\$60 US per person

Ocotlán Day of the Dead Market- Coyotepec, Black pottery town, San martin Tilcajete, Wooden carved fantastic animals with artist Jacobo Angeles.

Market of the Dead and launch included in Jacobo's tradicional restaurant

SUNDAY OCTOBER 28. 9AM

\$60 US per person

Tlacolula Zapotec market, Teotitlán del Valle, the Zapotec master's weavers town, the 2019 years old Tule tree and the artistic ex convent of Tlacoahuaya.

Oaxacan launch included.

Tuesday October 30

October 31 11 AM

\$50 US per person

Building of the Day of the Dead altar, visit the market Sanchez Pascuas to buy flowers, fruits and everything we need to experience our ancient tradition and our 3 hour cooking class while having tradicional drinks.

NOVEMBER 31 ST 6 PM

\$ 40 US per person

Tour to the city cemetery and tamales and hot chocolate dinner.

NOVEMBER 2ND 6PM

\$65 US per person

Visit to San Felipe cemetery with dinner included at a magnificent XVII Century hacienda.

For reservations contact ,oaxacatimes@yahoo.com • <http://www.day-of-the-dead.org> • Phone, 52-951-4401320

Cloaked lady Death

By CARLOS MARTINEZ

DESPITE its creeping certainty, death is a concept that most of its quarry find startling at the very least. At one superstitious extreme, there are those that consider even talk of it an open invitation to its lengthening shadow. At the other, a cult has recently grown up in Mexico that regards Death as something to be cherished and prayed to for all kinds of good fortune-in life.

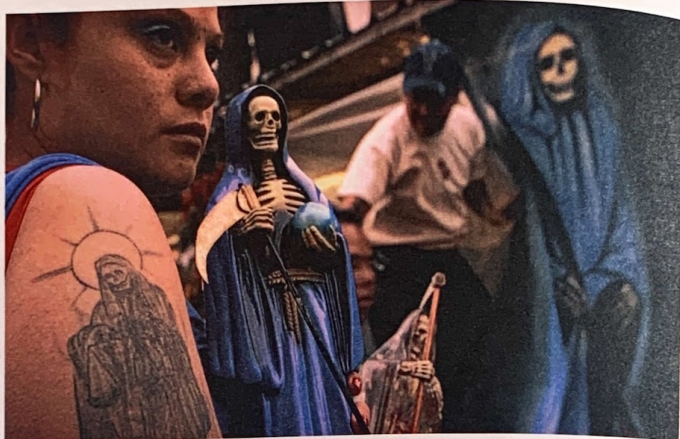
La Santísima Muerte ('Saint Death') is a death-spirit, personified as a female skeleton in a cloak, worshipped by its patrons much like any other Roman Catholic saint. However, unlike other saints, Santa Muerte is an unashamedly material icon, prayed to for money, love and vengeance.

"It's a saint 100 percent material," says Alejandro Caballero, creator of an online discussion forum about Santa Muerte. "It would appear that other saints have lost their influence to Santa Muerte."

The colored cloak of the skeletal Santa Muerte corresponds to the favors asked of her. Although there are over eight different colors, white, red and black are dominant. According to the cult, a white-cloaked Santa Muerte grants protection, luck and money, a black cloak represents power and vengeance, and a red cloak helps in love and affairs of the heart.

Not unlike the practice of upturning the image of the Catholic saint San Antonio in order to win a boyfriend or girlfriend, Santa Muerte is a ritualistic faith that demands certain disciplined, sometimes superstitious, steps for fulfillment. "I have a friend with a business who believes in Santa Muerte," says amateur folklorist Bryant Holman. "Everytime my friend's business is going OK he caresses the skeleton, but whenever business fails, he turns the skeleton around so it's facing the wall."

A candle is lit every day by worshippers to honor Santa Muerte. As with the cloak, the color of the candle depends on the nature of the wish. Like most saints in Mexico, an altar is built to honor Santa Muerte, that is adorned with incense, candles, fresh flowers, assorted foodstuffs, tequila, beer or



"Santísima Muerte, I beseech you lovingly in as much as immortal God formed you with your great power over all mortals (...) I ask of you until the last day, hour and moment in which your divine majesty commands to take me before your presence. Amen."

water in a glass, a couple of cigarettes, and one cigar each day. On waking and arriving home, believers salute Santa Muerte. On departing the house or retiring to bed, they kiss her goodbye.

Traditionally shrouded in mystery, a few years ago it was hard to find anything related to Santa Muerte. Now, however, hundreds of markets across Mexico sell Santa Muerte iconography and merchandise, and prayers and spells are found easily enough on the internet-in both Spanish and English.

One of the most famous markets of them all is El Mercado de Sonora in Mexico City-prominent for the sale of black magic, witchcraft and voodoo memorabilia. Within the market's narrow corridors, Santa Muerte spray, incense, holy water, and explanatory pamphlets sit alongside 10-inch statues of the lady herself. "It (Santa Muerte) sells very well. It's a very popular

saint nowadays," said one merchant at El Mercado de Sonora.

"During the month of July alone, 1,263 people logged onto my Web site looking for information about Santa Muerte," says Caballero. Holman is equally convinced of her rise: "Some people adore her (Santa Muerte) even more than the Virgin Mary."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are no temples to Santa Muerte, who remains unrecognized by the Catholic Church. There is, however, an annual ceremony where followers can attend mass and sing her las mañanitas (happy birthday).

It is unclear when Santa Muerte entered the national consciousness, but it has been suggested that the cult first grew out of the ancient Mexican tradition of paying tribute to Mictlantecutli and Mictecacihuatl, the lords of death and shadow. Others believe that Santa Muerte, herself, appeared in a vision to one Sergio Guevara, 40 years ago in Veracruz. Guevara, for his part, became a dedicated follower of Santa Muerte, as a result of the apparition.

Ultimately, whether she established herself hundreds or only 40 years ago, there is little doubt that over the past few years her popularity has spiralled at a startling rate. According to Holman, a precarious cat and mouse existence has made police, drug dealers and the like, among Santa Muerte's most dedicated advocates. Professional risk, it seems, breeds familiarity.

"It is normally them (drug dealers and police) who fear death the most and feel they need her (Santa Muerte) protection," says Holman, before adding: "Mexico is the most superstitious country of them all."



An Oaxacan tradition since 1926

Located in the Benito Juarez Market

www.aguascalilda.com.mx

aguascalilda@hotmail.com

tel: (951) 514 3379

cel: (951) 192 7536

Casilda
Aguas Regionales

