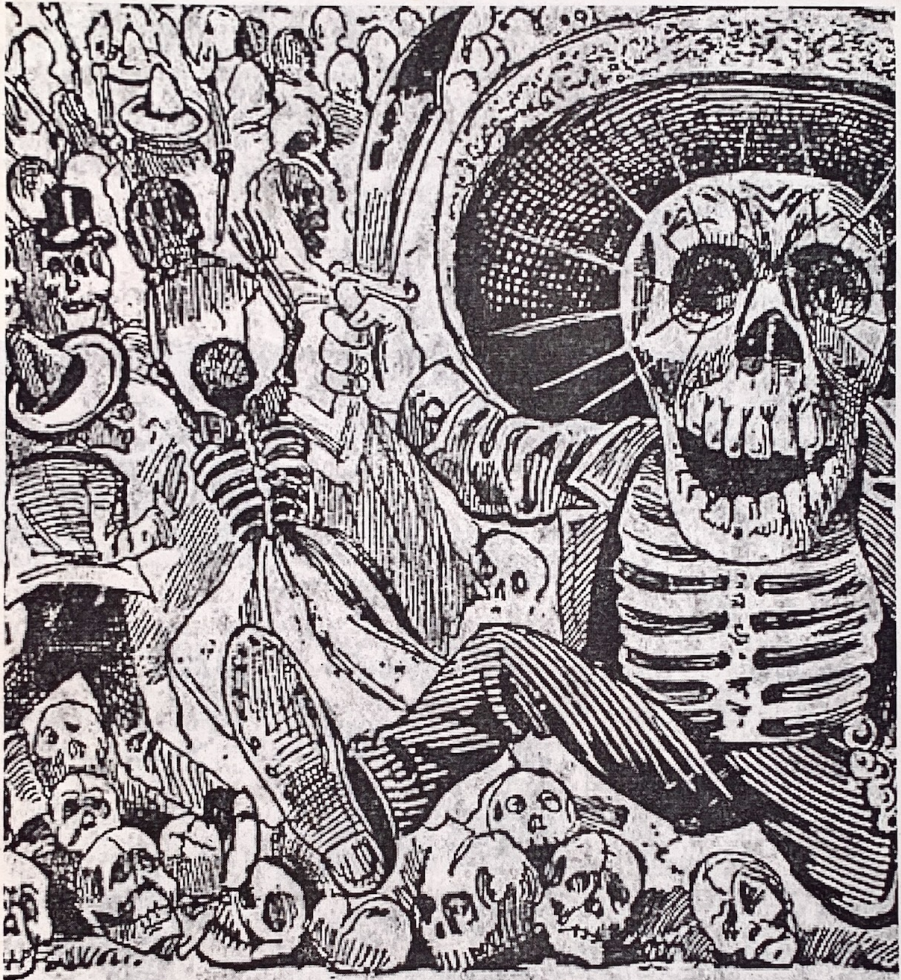




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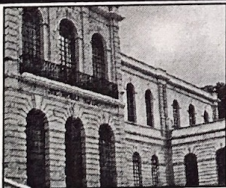


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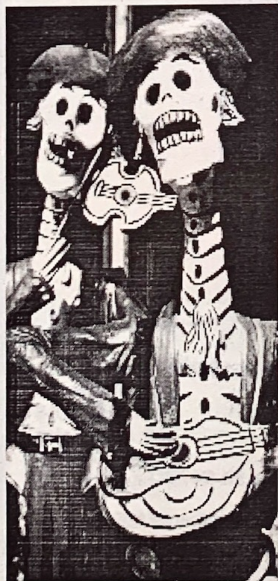
Dancing on their Graves

Mexico's extended family reunion with the dead

By © Alexander Hanrath

NOWHERE IN THE WORLD DO the dead receive such a warm welcome back as in Mexico. During the end of October and the beginning of November, Mexicans festively welcome back their deceased into the family circle. This is not a sombre or mournful occasion; on the contrary, it marks the one occasion per year that the dead can taste the pleasures of the living world, thanks to the efforts of their descendants. It is not just the pleasure but also the duty of the family to welcome its deceased, make a place for them, beckon them into the house, and offer them all the earthly pleasures they enjoyed when they were living—be that *mezcal* or *mole*.

The scenes in the cemeteries are magical. Vivid orange and yellow *cepasúchiles* (marigolds) decorate the tombstones and crosses, illuminated at night by the incandescent glow of thousands of small candles, made mystic by the blue smoke and the scent of burning *copal* incense. More than just decoration, both the *cepasúchiles* and the *copal* carry important symbolism and serve to lead the dead to the realm of the living and back again. Entire families, dressed in their Sunday best, crowd around their family tombs, bringing offers of food, alcohol, snacks, photos, and books. It is a full-blown family reunion that takes place there: many take their evening meal picnic-style on the tombs, sharing their meal 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, but also genuine commemoration,



pervade the cemetery grounds.

The Mexican day of the dead celebration is a blend of cultural traditions: the pre-Hispanic cult of death, the veneration of ancestors practiced both by the indigenous people and by Spanish pre-Christian pagans, and the commemoration of Catholic Saints on All Saints' Day. But above all, it is a wholly Mexican occasion. Mexico vigorously embraces its dead during these days; it drinks, sings and dances with them. This is the most ostentatious Christian 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 maché skeletons performing life's everyday tasks. Dancing on someone's grave, an action which carries such negative connotation 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 *día de muertos* is a family affair, and therefore much of the ceremony takes place indoors, within the privacy of the family circle. This is the authentic Mexican day of the dead, a sight few foreigners see. On October 31st, the family builds the *ofrenda* (offering altar) together. There are many ways a family can build their *ofrenda*, but typically it will consist of an arch made of reed or corn husks, placed on a table with tablecloth, and decorated with flowers, fruit, bread, tins filled with sugar, and decorative tissues or paper. Figures of patron saints, candles, and pictures of the deceased occupy the centre of the altar. And then there are the earthly pleasures. Rich helpings of food are set out in the *ofrenda* for the arrival of the guests—i.e. the dead. They arrive in order of sacredness. The first to arrive are the souls of

dead children, the *angelitos*, on November 1st around noon. The adults visit at the end of the afternoon on November 2nd. Glasses of water are left on the altar, as a refreshment after their long journey.

Food plays a central role on the *día de muertos*. For breakfast, families in Oaxaca will 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 whatever they like: adults are offered their favourite food, as well as cigarettes and *mezcal* to their liking; candy, soda or even junk food will be bought for the *angelitos*. The dead, who are not seen but rather felt, do not eat the food but consume its essence, leaving behind positive energy. After the feast, the food from the altar is generously shared among the relatives, neighbours 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 ceremonies of the *día de muertos* more as an important obligation (with dire consequences for the inattentive) and a private matter. In larger towns and cities like Oaxaca, on the other hand, open and public revelry has taken the upper hand, especially as the presence of foreign tourists has become more prevalent. Weeks beforehand, shop windows are decorated with paper skeletons and skulls, much as Christmas decorations take over shopping streets in Europe or the USA. In the latter half of October, markets sell all sorts of merchandise: waxes, incense, paper decorations, candy skulls, special bread, mole, fruit, nuts,

munities. The Panteon General (Nov 2nd) and San Felipe cemeteries of Oaxaca are impressive sights, as are the processions on the night of November 1st (see box on Oaxaca). Don't forget what you are watching- while people are generally friendly and open to the presence of tourists, it is easy to forget that you are intruding on an important family reunion. Don't be afraid to take pictures, but keep your distance when doing so. With the right amount of respect and courtesy, you will gain a real insight into a beautiful tradition and a very Mexican celebration. Halloween will never be the same again.

DIAS DE LOS MUERTOS IN OAXACA

Oaxaca is one of the most special and expressive places in Mexico to experience the dia de muertos. The state's famed craftsmen creatively fashion images of death in all sorts of forms, be it candy skulls, cardboard graves or wired skeletons. This artwork, along with special food products, is on sale

at the tianguis (markets) which are the most important markets of the year in Oaxaca. The Times is organizing a tour of the indigenous markets in Ocatlán (Oct 26) and Tlacolula (Oct 28) with explanations of the various pieces of merchandise, the symbolism, beliefs and traditions behind them.

Another tradition that has been kept alive in Oaxaca is the village or neighbourhood comparsa (procession). In the Oaxaca barrios of Trinidad de las Huertas and Jalatlco, and the village of Etla, masked dancers go from house to house, chanting, dancing to music and performing pantomime acts, all intended to help the dead go back to their realm, where some apparently are reluctant to return. The processions take place most of the night of November 1st through to the morning of November 2nd, lasting up to 12 hours or more. Programmes are distributed in advance on order to help visitors locate the processions' whereabouts.

Finally, another Oaxacan attraction, the tapetes de arena - elaborately decorated rugs made of sawdust, coloured sand and glittery powder- is on display in the patio of Oaxaca Cathedral. These elaborately decorated works are usually used in burial ceremonies and specially exhibited in Oaxaca City for Dia de Muertos.

For more information about the Oaxaca Times tours, please contact Yolanda Garcia Caballero on (9) 51 6 34 43 or drop by the ICC at Calle Macedonia Alcalá 307.

SPARES

As the cold winter air moves in, locals recognize it as a precursor of the arrival of the spirits of the dead.

In many cities and towns, public celebrations have taken the upper hand, especially as tourists have become more numerous.

A Tradition that Refuses to Die

History

When the Spanish Conquistadores arrived in the land known now as México, they were shocked to discover natives practicing a ritual that seemed to mock death. The Aztecs and many other pre-Hispanic civilizations collected skulls as trophies and used them during the ritual. These skulls symbolized death and rebirth. Unlike the Spaniards who viewed death as the end of life, the natives considered it as a continuation of life.

To the natives, life was a dream and only in death they would become awake.

The ritual had been practiced for over 3000 until the Spaniards decided to impose their Christian beliefs and try to eradicate it. But like the old Aztec spirits, the ritual refused to die the Spanish way and continues to live.

Today the Day of the Dead is celebrated in México and in certain parts of Central America and the United States.

People in rural México pay tribute every year by spending the night in the cemetery where their loved ones are buried. They decorate the graves with Flores de Muerto



(marigold flowerers), toys for the children, and bottles of mezcal for the adults.

In Mexico's larger cities, families build altars dedicated to the dead. They surround

the altars with food, skulls made of sugar, candles, sugar cane, pictures of the deceased, and candles.

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