

The Day of the Dead in Xochimilco

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Today's Xochimilco residents are descendants of the Nahuatl tribe that emigrated from Chicomostoc to settle in the southern part of the Valley of Mexico next to its enormous, beautiful lake.

Xochimilco inhabitants have moved into the mainstream of modern life, but they have not abandoned one of their most deeply rooted Mexican traditions, the homage paid to their

dead, their beloved ancestors. In every town and neighborhood, the Day of the Dead is celebrated with enthusiasm and respect. Offerings to the dead entail elaborate preparation. A month before the festivities of All Saints' Day, the most traditionalist families prepare to pay homage to their ancestors.

The farmers who work the floating gardens, the famous *chinampas*, save part of their earnings from the sale of their crops of flowers, vegetables, legumes and ornamental plants; people who live

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Courtesy of the Dolores Olmedo Museum

Every year, the Dolores Olmedo Museum of Xochimilco prepares a spectacular offering with all the ingredients dictated by tradition.

in the foothills do the same with proceeds from their corn, beans, squash and chayote fields, and with the money they earn from the sale of fowl and a head of cattle or two. Or, they simply save part of their wages if they have jobs elsewhere.

From pre-Hispanic times, and all through Mexican history until today, food has played an important part in the ritual of the Day of the Dead. Foodstuffs are an obligatory part of the offerings, changing according to the differences in regional cuisine.



José Guadalupe Posada revived the figure of death when he created his famous “Catrina.”

Courtesy of the Dolores Olmedo Museum

The offering is usually built on two levels: on a table decorated with the best tablecloths either made at home or by Xochimilca artisans, and on the floor. According to popular tradition, these two levels represent heaven and earth, which is why the images of the dead and the symbols of the faith are placed on the table together with the elements of water and fire, represented by liquids like *atole*, *pulque*, water and other drinks, and both tapers and votive candles that some families order ahead of time from the remaining local candle makers. The items symbolizing air and earth—incense, myrrh, other aromatic substances, seeds and fruit—are placed on the floor.

At midday on October 31, the items used to venerate dead children are placed on the table: white flowers, glasses of water, a plate of salt and candles that, when lit, represent dead children. A charcoal stove is also lit to burn copal and incense.

In the afternoon, a light meal is offered to the dead children, including sweet rolls, *atole*, hot chocolate, sweet tamales and fruit.

In the morning of November 1, the dead children are served breakfast before their souls return where they belong. And a little before midday, the tables are adorned with *cempasúchil* flowers, a species of marigold, indicating the arrival of the souls of the adults. Black candelabra with tapers are also placed on the table with bowls of water and salt. Later, the traditional sweet, leavened “bread of the dead,” or *pan de muerto*, preserves and tamales are added.

At midday November 2, the faithful say goodbye to the souls of dead adults with a meal that includes a wide variety of typical Mexican dishes: rice prepared in different ways, chicken or turkey in *mole* sauce, *pozole* (a soup made with pork and hominy), enchiladas, *huanzontles* (a branch-like vegetable deep-fried in an egg batter and served in a sauce), *romeros* (another branch-like vegetable served in tomato sauce with shrimp patties), tamales of all kinds, simmered spiced beans, tortillas, etc. Fruit like jicama and crab apples as well as peanuts are also

served; traditional sugar or chocolate skulls, coconut candy, candied pumpkin, stuffed limes, sweet potatoes, amaranth, *jamoncillo* (a sweet made from milk and sugar) and guava and peach preserves. Beer, *pulque*, tequila or the dead person's favorite drink are also a must, and, for those who smoked, cigarettes.

As we mentioned, some of the particular foods vary from one offering to another, but others are obligatory.

HISTORY OF AN IMMORTAL TRADITION

In pre-Hispanic peoples' conception of the origins of life, the gods played a determining role. In this conception of "the becoming," the most important thing was to maintain a balance and, by different means, to try to maintain the order of the universe. That is the origin of ritual. In that sense, the life-death duality was an essential concept and was understood as a constant cycle, just as can be observed in nature: the rainy season is followed by the dry season and its result, death, from which life springs anew.¹

The cult of the dead was an essential part of celebrations throughout Mesoamerica. We

will review the first celebrations of the Day of the Dead dating back to pre-Columbian Mexico, concretely to the Aztec culture, and trace their development through the colonial period until today.

Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the Aztec (or Mexica) tradition honored the dead with complex ceremonies. The dead were either cremated or buried, but the dual concept of life-death led them to think that no living being—much less human beings—were condemned to eternal death. They thought that they existed on the nine planes found under the earth.

Each individual's final destination, as the Spanish Friar Bernardino de Sahagún noted in his writings, was determined by the way in which he/she died. When children died, they were considered jewels and for that reason they remained in the house of Tenacatecutli, fed by the *chichiacaualico*, or nurse-tree. The *cuauhteca*, or "brothers of the eagle," went to heaven, where the sun lived, there was no night, day or time, pleasure was unlimited and flowers never wilted. This was the place for warriors killed in combat or sacrificed by the enemy. They were called "the companions of the rising sun." The *cihuateteo*, women who died in



Xochitlalli Michihua Ass.



Courtesy of the Dirección General de Atención a la Comunidad Estudiantil/UNAM

The tables are adorned with *cempasúchil* flowers, fruits and traditional sugar or chocolate skulls.



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"Our lives are the river that goes down to the sea that is death." Jorge Manrique

childbirth, also went to the place of the sun, since birth was considered a war in which the child was a prisoner. Women who died in childbirth were the chosen of the gods, sanctified and buried in the courtyard of the temple of Cihuapiltin. They were called "the companions of the setting sun." It was thought that those who died in these ways were honored by the gods of water and rain and, upon being selected, enjoyed the happiness of sunny palaces.

Dignitaries were solemnly buried in underground, vaulted chambers where the fully-dressed body was seated on an *icpalli*, or small stool, surrounded by weapons and precious gems. Those of their wives and servants who freely chose to were buried with them to follow them into the next world. The souls of mortals not chosen by the gods went to the dark plane of the underworld.

The souls of those who died from drowning, struck down by lightning, from dropsy, pustules or gout, or any other illness related to water all went to Tlalocan, the mansion of the Moon, or the place of Tláloc, god of rain. It is described as a place of eternal summer and green where

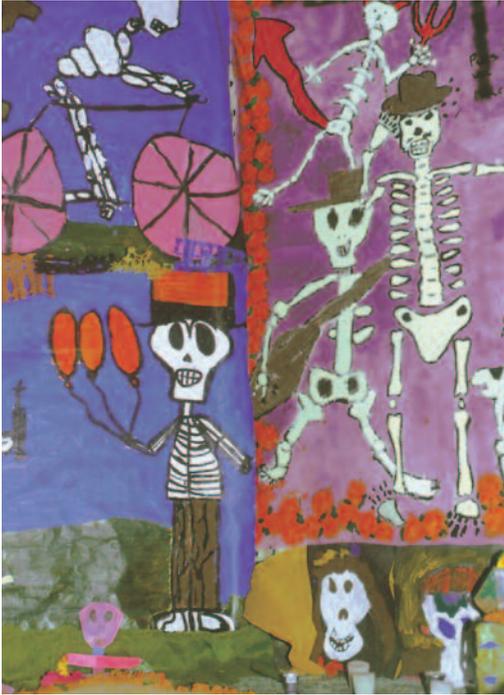
the god of water and his helpers, the *tlaloques*, lived.²

All other dead, including lepers and those who died a violent death, were buried with offerings including food, valuables, personal ornaments and weapons (indicating their social status) to undertake the long journey to the ninth plane of the region of the dead, or Mictlán, guided by a dog, a very important figure in funeral rituals.

For three or four years after the person's death, their survivors continued placing offerings on the grave because they believed that the dead took several years to make their journey and reach their final destination at the ninth level of the underworld.

Mexica poets used to say that life is only a moment, a passing dream, and death a form of awakening that opened the way to the world of the dead, where people could either remain or from which they could return to be among the living again.

The Mexica calendar had two whole months dedicated to festivities for the dead: the ninth month, or fiesta for dead children, and the tenth



Courtesy of the Dirección General de Atención a la Comunidad Estudiantil/UNAM

Death stopped being terrifying and became a friendly figure, and representations of death became icons of the Day of the Dead.

month, dedicated to adult dead. At these times of year, a great many men were sacrificed, imbuing the celebration with solemnity and importance.

In the sixteenth century, to this tradition was added the customs of the conquistadors who honored the dead in accordance with Catholic tradition that considers that the only true life begins after death. However, the European tradition also brought the terror of death and Hell, medieval holdovers, central themes of the Christianity taught by the evangelists. That was when the skulls that decorated the Tzompantli in Mexico Tenochtitlan and the altars of Tlatelolco disappeared, only to reappear later at the foot of altars and on crosses.

During the colonial period, death was represented by a skeleton posed in different ways, which always held a scythe in its right hand. In *Death's Victory*, a painting that hangs today in the Viceroyal Museum, the central figure, Death, holds a scythe in his right hand and a flickering candle in his left symbolizing the life that is about to be extinguished.

In the eighteenth century, death stopped being terrifying and became the central char-

acter in a ballet or a friendly figure. This was the time of funeral pyres (a bonfire for sacrifices), one of which has been conserved at the Toluca Folk Art Museum.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, engraver José Guadalupe Posada revived the figure of death with a humorous touch, when he created his famous "Catrina," a skeleton dressed like the wealthy women of the day under the regime of Porfirio Díaz. He also drew other representations of death, images that have become classic artistic figures and icons of Mexico's Day of the Dead, which continues to be celebrated all over the country with its wealth of regional variations. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, "Los dioses de la muerte," *Dioses del México antiguo* (Mexico City: Antiguo Colegio de San Ildefonso-UNAM/Ediciones del Equilibrista, 1995), pp. 148-149.

² *Ibid*, p. 149.