



Day of the Dead:

A Mexican Celebration

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The unique Mexican celebration of the Day of the Dead or *Día de los Muertos* takes place on November 2. Also called “Todos Santos” (All Saints), this national holiday is a combination of ancient Indian and European religious practices.

Before the firm establishment of Christianity throughout Europe, many native religions commemorated the death of departed relatives. For example, the tradition of All Hallows’ Eve or Halloween in the United States has its origins in the ancient Celtic festival of fire, known as *Samhain* (2). The celebration of *Samhain* took place on the 31st of October, at the end of the Celtic calendar year and harvest season. The Celts believed that during *Samhain*, demons and witches roamed the streets stealing children and ruining crops. Celts also believed that during *Samhain* the spirits of the deceased visited their families in search of warmth and affection. Large bonfires were thus lit to guide the spirits to their respective houses, and *Samhain* became known as the festival of fire.

In an attempt to eliminate or assimilate pagan rites, around 750 A.D. the Catholic Church instituted November 1 as All Saints Day. In the 13th century the Church established All Souls Day on November 2 to honor specifically the souls of deceased Catholic believers. Medieval traditions for both of these holidays included the decoration of graves in cemeteries, all-night vigils, and special church services in honor of the departed. People throughout Europe, including Spain, practiced these traditions. The observances then traveled to the Americas when Spanish colonists and priests arrived and

continued to observe All Saints Day and All Souls Day.

In Mexico indigenous cults dedicated to the dead existed long before the arrival of the Spanish. These cults believed in a continuous cycle of life, death, and resurrection. For example, the Aztecs included in their pantheon a personage known as *Mictlantecuhtli*, the god of the dead. This deity resided in the *Mictlán* (the Underworld) and was portrayed as a skeleton whose protruding tongue had the form of a sacrificial blade. Those who did not die in battle, in childbirth, or by drowning became the subjects of *Mictlantecuhtli*. The soul’s journey to *Mictlán* was arduous, and the soul had to cross eight rivers and travel through eight hells to arrive. At one point the soul had to cross a desert with winds that cut like obsidian knives before eventually reaching Mictlán.

The Aztecs dedicated a series of days in the ninth month to honor children who had died. During this time, people offered flowers and decorated images of the gods in ceremonies that included singing, dancing, and human sacrifice. This smaller festival prepared the populace for the following month’s celebration honoring dead adults. As part of the ritual, participants consumed small breads of amaranth and human blood that were blessed by their religious leaders.

These two pre-Hispanic celebrations persisted after the conquest of the Aztecs and the initial introduction of Catholicism. However, the Spanish altered these observances slightly to assimilate them into the Catholic doctrine and the European calendar. In modern times, November 1 honors departed children, the *angelitos*, and November

2 is dedicated to the departed adults, *difuntos*.

Preparations for these celebrations begin well before November, but on these festival days, the markets in Mexico teem with items specifically used for these celebrations. The marketplaces sell special toys of *papier maché*, candies (*alfeñiques*), and tissue paper cut outs (*papel picado*). Most of these items take the shape of skeletons (*calaveras*) or contain images of skeletons. Vendors also sell *zempasuchitl* (small, bright, yellow flowers similar to marigolds), *pan de muerto* (a special bread), yellow and white candles, and *copal* incense.

To welcome the spirits of their dead relatives, families construct special altars in their homes. These altars are called *ofrendas*, and many anthropologists believe that the construction of these *ofrendas* is related to pre-Columbian rites. Photographs of the departed, statues of favorite saints, favorite foods of the deceased, chocolate, fruits, tequila, *pan de muertos*, toys for children, and decorated sugar skeleton heads decorated the altars. Villages in Oaxaca often feature very large *ofrendas* that may fill an entire room of a home.

In the evening, families gather in the local graveyard all night to visit with the souls. They decorate the graves with candles, flowers, and food, and sometimes a band plays music to please the departed souls. Churches also lay out food for those souls who have no family to welcome them.

Much of the festival has a light-hearted, mocking tone. Couples masquerade as skeleton brides and grooms and cavort through the streets. Satirical death advertisements, mock obituaries, and cartoons loaded with political commentary are widely circulated, and all become involved in the celebration.

Though the skull was an important symbol of death and sacrifice in the pre-Columbian period, the figure of a satirical and comic death is a more recent phenomenon. It was probably in the eighteenth century that artists first depicted death as a comic skeleton. Puppets and masks, figures made of clay and cardboard, toys, and candies began to fill Mexico's popular markets with the image of the skull and the shape of the skeleton, and the *calavera* quickly became a feature of the holiday.

José Guadalupe Posada (1852-1913) contributed greatly to the boom in representation of the human skeleton in Mexican popular culture. Posada was an engraver and artist who did his most famous work during the late 19th century in Mexico City under the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz. Posada provided satirical cartoon illustrations to many popular tabloids that specifically circulated among the masses of Mexico. Posada satirized all elements of society, but especially the upper classes and government officials. This vision of death as the great, mocking, equalizer became increasingly important and popular in this period of repression and social inequality under the dictatorship.

Today in Mexico, the Day of the Dead remains a dynamic tradition, altering with the changes in society. Most recently, Halloween influences from the United States have become part of the celebration, and the trend toward commercialization has also affected the holiday. Tourists come to observe and participate in the festivities, and the Day of the Dead persists as a unique testimony to the resilience of indigenous customs and the uniqueness of Mexican cultural expressions.

Slide Descriptions



1. *Graveyard scene, Michoacán.* An all-night vigil is held in rural Michoacán.
2. *Tarascan girl at vigil.* Close-up of a young Tarascan participating in an all-night vigil.
3. *Ofrenda in Oaxaca.* In the view of this altar, note the display of cut-out paper, statues of saints, food, candied skulls, and other items in the shape of the *calavera*. Also note the arrangement of *zempasuchitl* flowers at the foot of the altar.
4. *Ornaments.* A close-up of papier maché ornaments used to decorate altars.
5. *Ocumicho.* A close-up of a small *ocumicho* ceramic with *calavera*. Regularly used in the *ofrendas*, *ocumichos* can reach 2 feet in height depending upon the size of the altar display.
6. *Candied skeleton.* Made of sugar, these *calaveras* are decorated with sequins and the name of the deceased. This one is dedicated to Sabina.
7. *Alfeñiques.* An assortment of sugar candies used to celebrate the Day of the Dead. Note the candied coffin with the pop-up corpse inside. Note also the rabbits and lambs represent the duality of death. Although death is an ending, it is also a beginning, and the lambs and rabbits represent life, resurrection, and fertility.
8. *Calavera mariachis.* Toy *calavera* mariachi band made of thin, painted wire.
9. *Calavera scene.* Toy devil on bike chases a newspaper delivery boy. Both are made of thin, painted wire.
10. *Small ceramic calaveras.* These two painted *calaveras* would be used on an altar commemorating a deceased child.
11. *Una dama bella.* *Calavera* of papier maché with painted wood backdrop of dresser with mirror.
12. *Forever at work.* This papier maché piece shows a *calavera* hard at work sewing on her Singer machine.
13. *Political commentary.* Death and satire touch all aspects of life, including the pool hall. This reads “we stand firm on the freedom of the press.” Note the use of the mirror to give an added reflection of the duality of life and death.
14. *Wedding reception.* Made of painted marzipan.
15. *Pirate.* *Calavera* pirate made of papier maché.

16. *Hand-painted wooden puppet.* This puppet depicts the “Katrina” *calavera* of José Guadalupe Posada. Diego Rivera later used this image in his mural “A Sunday Walk in Alameda Park.”
17. *Calavera amputee on crutches.* Made of papier mache.
18. *Calavera to market toy ensemble.* Note the skeleton cows.
19. *Large calavera papier mache doll.*
20. *Calavera comb.* Hand-carved and outlined wooden comb. This would be placed on an *ofrenda* for a deceased female.

Questions and Activities



1. Have students make the attached *calavera* cut-out on tissue paper (directions and cut-out are in appendix). This type of folk art is common in Mexico and is called *papel picado*. *Papel picado* is brightly-colored tissue or foil paper that is cut to simulate lace. It is used in almost all celebrations as a form of decoration. Folded and then cut to make a string of exact images (like paper dolls in the United States), *papel picado* is placed on graves and household altars during the Day of the Dead celebrations.
2. Use the attached recipe for *pan de muerto* to make this bread with students, or prepare it at home for students to sample in class.
3. Instruct students to draw *calaveras* inspired by the work of Posada. The figures should be placed in humorous, everyday situations and can also be used to make social commentary about contemporary issues. The finished drawings may be placed on the bulletin board with other Day of the Dead decorations. Discuss the effectiveness of humor and satire in communicating a message to a particular audience. Have students cut cartoons from the newspaper and ask them to comment on them.
4. Ask students to prepare a short oral report on the ritual practices concerning death in another culture. Although the study of the way people approach death may initially seem morbid to students, it provides a wealth of information regarding the way different peoples have organized and structured their lives.
5. Have students prepare a detailed description of Halloween in their communities. What traditions are associated with Halloween? How have they changed? Why? Ask them to interview their parents and grandparents about practices when these were children.

Additional Readings



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Appendix



PANDEMUERTOS

Ingredients

1 cup milk
1/2 cup butter, softened
1/2 cup sugar
1 1/2 tsp salt
1 tsp. finely grated orange peel
1/2 tsp. anise seeds, ground
1 package active dry yeast
pinch sugar
1/4 cup warm water
2 eggs
3 egg yolks
1 tsp. water
5 1/4 to 5 1/2 cups flour
2 tbsp. sugar

Heat milk to just under boiling point. Pour over butter, 1/2 cup sugar, salt, orange peel and anise in a large bowl. Stir until sugar dissolves. Cool. Stir yeast and pinch of sugar into 1/4 cup warm water. Let stand until yeast is softened.

Beat whole eggs and egg yolks in a small bowl. Spoon 2 tbsp of eggs into another small bowl, add 1 tsp. of water, and refrigerate to use later for the glaze.

Stir softened yeast and the rest of the beaten eggs into the milk mixture. Stir in enough flour to make a moderately stiff dough. Knead dough on a lightly floured surface for 8-10 minutes. Add more flour if necessary. Clean and grease bowl, form dough into a ball, place in the bowl, cover and let rise in a warm place until double in size (about 1 hour).

Punch down dough and let rest while greasing 2 small baking sheets. Divide dough in half. Set aside about 1/3 cup dough from each half. Shape dough into two smooth, round loaves. Place on baking sheets. Brush with some reserved egg mixture.

Divide one of the small pieces of dough into 3 equal pieces. Roll 2 pieces into 8-9 inch ropes. Shape ends of ropes to resemble knobs on ends of bones. Cross bones over top of one loaf, stretching to reach bottom of each side. Shape third piece of dough into a ball and place on top of crossed bones, pressing firmly. Repeat with other loaf, and brush tops with egg mixture.

Cover loosely with a dish towel, and let stand until doubled in bulk (about 45 minutes). Preheat oven to 350 F (175 C). Sprinkle each loaf with 1 tbsp. sugar. Bake for 30-35 minutes or until golden brown. Remove from baking sheet, and cool on racks. Makes two loaves.

PAPEL PICADO

Necessary materials (for each student)

Photocopied sheet of patterns

3 sheets of 8 1/2 x 11 inch colored tissue or foil paper

3 straight pins

1 yard lightweight string

Glue

1. Stack the sheets of tissue paper one on top of the other. Fold the stack in half.
2. Cut the photocopied pattern sheet down the center line. Students may choose which of the two images they wish to use. Place one of the images on the stacked and folded paper. Make sure that the cut edge is placed on the fold of the colored tissue.
3. Cut the pattern and tissue around the edges to make the border. Then cut into the tissue, only cutting out the dark areas. To do this, first puncture the center of a dark area and then carefully cut around the interior edges, making sure not to cut any white sections.
4. When the image is completely cut, unfold and separate the tissues. Place them in a row from left to right.
5. Make a small fold (about 1/2 inch) at the top of the image. Apply glue to this flap, and wrap the tissue around the string, pressing the glue into the string to secure it. Do the same for the other two tissue cut-outs. They should be placed in a row along the string and then hung as decoration.

Calavera pattern designed by Kathleen Trenchard.

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