

Ashdown House Cherry Pie Society

Some History and Facts about the Day of the Dead in Mexico

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_of_the_Dead

The **Day of the Dead** (**El Día de los Muertos** or All Souls' Day) is a holiday celebrated in Mexico and by Latin Americans living in the United States and Canada. The holiday focuses on gatherings of family and friends to pray for and remember friends and family members who have died. The celebration occurs on November 1st and 2nd in connection with the Catholic holiday of All Saints' Day which occurs on November 1st and All Souls' Day which occurs on November 2nd. Traditions include building private altars honoring the deceased, using sugar skulls, marigolds, and the favorite foods and beverages of the departed, and visiting graves with these as gifts.

Scholars trace the origins of the modern holiday to indigenous observances dating back thousands of years, and to an Aztec festival dedicated to a goddess called Mictecacihuatl.

Similar holidays are celebrated in many parts of the world; for example, it's a public holiday (*Dia de Finados*) in Brazil, where many Brazilians celebrate by visiting cemeteries and churches. In Spain, there are festivals and parades, and at the end of the day, people gather at cemeteries and pray for their loved ones who have died. Similar observances occur elsewhere in Europe and in the Philippines, and similarly-themed celebrations appear in many Asian and African cultures.

Observance in Mexico

Origins

The Day of the Dead celebrations in Mexico can be traced back to the indigenous Olmec, Zapotec, Mixtec, Mexican or Aztec, Maya, P'urhépecha, and Totonac. Rituals celebrating the deaths of ancestors have been observed by these civilizations perhaps for as long as 2500–3000 years.^[1] In the pre-Hispanic era, it was common to keep skulls as trophies and display them during the rituals to symbolize death and rebirth.

The festival that became the modern Day of the Dead fell in the ninth month of the Aztec calendar, about the beginning of August, and was celebrated for an entire month. The festivities were dedicated to the goddess Mictecacihuatl,^[2] known as the "Lady of the Dead," corresponding to the modern Catrina.

In most regions of Mexico, November 1 honors children and infants, whereas deceased adults are honored on November 2. This is indicated by generally referring to November 1 mainly as "Día de los Inocentes" (Day of the Innocents) but also as "Día de los Angelitos" (Day of the Little Angels) and November 2 as "Día de los Muertos" or "Día de los Difuntos" (Day of the Dead).^[3]

Beliefs



Families tidying and decorating graves at a cemetery in Almoloya del Río in the State of Mexico.



Detail of an "Ofrenda" in Ciudad Universitaria, México.

Many people believe that during the Day of the Dead, it is easier for the souls of the departed to visit the living. People go to cemeteries to communicate with the souls of the departed, and build private altars, containing the favorite foods and beverages, as well as photos and memorabilia, of the departed. The intent is to encourage visits by the souls, so that the souls will hear the prayers and the comments of the living directed to them. Celebrations can take a humorous tone, as celebrants remember funny events and anecdotes about the departed.^[3]

Plans for the day are made throughout the year, including gathering the goods to be offered to the dead. During the two-day period, families usually clean and decorate graves;^[2] most visit the cemeteries where their loved ones are buried

and decorate their graves with *ofrendas* (offerings), which often include orange marigolds called "cempasúchitl" (originally named *cempoalxochitl*, Nahuatl for "twenty (i.e., many) flowers"). In modern Mexico, this name is sometimes replaced with the term "Flor de Muerto" ("Flower of the Dead"). These flowers are thought to attract souls of the dead to the offerings.

Toys are brought for dead children (*los angelitos*, or "the little angels"), and bottles of tequila, mezcal or pulque or jars of atole for adults. Families will also offer trinkets or the deceased's favorite candies on the grave. *Ofrendas* are also put in homes, usually with foods such as candied pumpkin, pan de muerto ("bread of the dead"), sugar skulls and beverages such as atole. The *ofrendas* are left out in the homes as a welcoming gesture for the deceased.^[2] Some people believe the spirits of the dead eat the "spiritual essence" of the *ofrendas* food, so even though the celebrators eat the food after the festivities, they believe it lacks nutritional value. Pillows and blankets are left out so that the deceased can rest after their long journey. In some parts of Mexico, such as the towns of Mixquic, Pátzcuaro and Janitzio, people spend all night beside the graves of their relatives. In many places people have picnics at the gravesite as well.



Catrinas, one of the most popular figures of the *Day of the Dead* celebrations in Mexico

Some families build altars or small shrines in their homes;^[2] these usually have the Christian cross, statues or pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary, pictures of deceased relatives and other persons, scores of candles and an *ofrenda*. Traditionally, families spend some time around the altar, praying and telling

anecdotes about the deceased. In some locations, celebrants wear shells on their clothing, so that when they dance, the noise will wake up the dead; some will also dress up as the deceased.

Public schools at all levels build altars with *ofrendas*, usually omitting the religious symbols. Government offices usually have at least a small altar, as this holiday is seen as important to the Mexican heritage.

Those with a distinctive talent for writing sometimes create short poems, called "*calaveras*" ("skulls"), mocking epitaphs of friends, describing interesting habits and attitudes or funny anecdotes. This custom originated in the 18th-19th century, after a newspaper published a poem narrating a dream of a cemetery in the future, "and all of us were dead", proceeding to "read" the tombstones. Newspapers dedicate *calaveras* to public figures, with cartoons of skeletons in the style of the famous *calaveras* of José Guadalupe Posada, a Mexican illustrator. Theatrical presentations of *Don Juan Tenorio* by José Zorrilla (1817–1893) are also traditional on this day.



"Gran calavera eléctrica" (Grand electric skull) by José Guadalupe Posada, 1900-1913. Digitally restored.

A common symbol of the holiday is the skull (colloquially called *calavera*), which celebrants represent in masks, called *calacas* (colloquial term for "skeleton"), and foods such as sugar or chocolate skulls, which are inscribed with the name of the recipient on the forehead. Sugar skulls are gifts that can be given to both the living and the dead. Other holiday foods include *pan de muerto*, a sweet egg bread made in various shapes, from plain rounds to skulls and rabbits, for celebrating this "fiesta" often decorated with white frosting to look like twisted bones.

José Guadalupe Posada created a famous print of a figure that he called "*La Calavera de la Catrina*" ("*calavera* of the female dandy"), as a parody of a Mexican upper class female. Posada's striking image of a costumed female with a skeleton face has become associated with the Day of the Dead, and Catrina figures often are a prominent part of modern Day of the Dead observances.

The traditions and activities that take place in celebration of the Day of the Dead are not universal and often vary from town to town. For example, in the

town of Pátzcuaro on the Lago de Pátzcuaro in Michoacán the tradition is very different if the deceased is a child rather than an adult. On November 1 of the year after a child's death, the godparents set a table in the parents' home with sweets, fruits, *pan de muerto*, a cross, a Rosary (used to ask the Virgin Mary to pray for them) and candles. This is meant to celebrate the child's life, in respect and appreciation for the parents. There is also dancing with colorful costumes, often with skull-shaped masks and devil masks in the plaza or garden of the town. At midnight on November 2, the people light candles and ride winged boats called *mariposas* (Spanish for "butterflies") to Janitzio, an island in the middle of the lake where there is a cemetery, to honor and celebrate the lives of the dead there.



Pan de muerto, traditionally eaten on the holiday

In contrast, the town of Ocoatepec, north of Cuernavaca in the State of Morelos opens its doors to visitors in exchange for 'veladoras' (small wax candles) to show respect for the recently dead. In return, the visitors receive tamales and 'atole'. This is only done by the owners of the house where somebody in the household has died in the previous year. Many people of the surrounding areas arrive early to eat for free and enjoy the elaborate altars set up to receive the visitors from 'Mictlán'.

In some parts of the country (especially the cities, where in recent years there are displaced other customs) children in costumes roam the streets, knocking on people's doors, for a *calaverita*, a small gift of candies or money; they also ask passersby for it. This custom is similar to that of Halloween's trick-or-treating, and is relatively recent.

Some people believe that possessing "Día de los Muertos" items can bring good luck. Many people get tattoos or have dolls of the dead to carry with them. They also clean their houses and prepare the favorite dishes of their deceased loved ones to place upon their altar or *ofrenda*.