

## Foreword

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In one sense death is not an event which has to do with life for by definition it is something beyond the experience of living. Yet how individual cultures treat this circumstance is variable. In many, death is certainly not regarded as a termination but as an elevation to another level of existing. It is an event initially tinged with uncertain emotion, but ultimately one to be celebrated as the dead are reaccommodated as ancestors. Mortuary rites, in the classic analysis of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, separate out these elements. Actual burial has one set of characteristics and emotional content, subsequent ritual quite another. This book is concerned with the second set of circumstances – the Day of the Dead as it is celebrated in Mexico each year around All Saints' Day (1 November). Though associated with the dead, indeed dedicated to their remembrance, it is quite the reverse of morbid; it is a period full of life, colour and festival.

Some aspects of this contemporary annual celebration are presented by Mexicans themselves as 'traditional', some as unashamedly modern. Yet, in practice, there is no real disjunction: all is interwoven together. How such a range of reference came to be incorporated into a single contemporary event is by no means simple. Such is already implied in the fact that Mexicans of whatever background celebrate the event – indeed, even those who choose not to do so must make a definite decision to the contrary for its observance is a part of what constitutes engaging in popular Mexican culture. Clearly a whole series of accommodations are involved in giving the events the character they have today. The authors of this work, Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer, have been especially concerned to give appropriate weight to both historical and present perception of the significance of the Day of the Dead. Rather than suppress, or interpret in a remote theoretical way, their aim has been direct and documentary. Such an approach is all the more necessary in a field where studies in English are few, and none seeks to reflect the variety of Day of the Dead celebrations whether across time or in its contemporary regional differences.

To that end there are at least three voices

which they have sought to articulate. The 'Skeleton' observed at 'the Feast' of the title might in its most immediate sense be taken to refer to the dead themselves called back at the appropriate season of the year; in a further sense it is also perhaps the spectre of past history and of the complexity of cultural tradition as seen in the Day of the Dead. It is especially timely to stress this link when the whole conspectus of relations of Europe to the Americas are beginning to be re-examined – the quincennial of Columbus' voyage of discovery. The present cultural significance of that voyage can readily escape consideration; yet it is incarnate in the form of the Day of the Dead festival. One voice, then, is of the past, both the pre-Hispanic conception of the relations of the living to the dead and the Christian-inspired view of such essentially Indian forms of celebration. The second is a contemporary voice literally recorded by the authors and offered here in the form of translated interviews for the insight it provides into the more personal and intimate aspects of the contemporary celebration. Many of the interviews are with the artists who make the variety of objects and decoration which are incorporated into the set-piece displays, the *ofrendas* (offerings), that are created in family homes.

A third voice that is present is the personal observation of the authors themselves, for this publication is at once the outcome of historical research and of direct participation in the events described. Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer both have long experience of Latin American studies. Elizabeth Carmichael has had curatorial responsibility for the British Museum holdings from Middle, Central and South America for many years, a responsibility demanding an expertise that ranges across the fields of archaeology and ethnography. Chloë Sayer has undertaken original research on aspects of Mexican culture over a period of nearly two decades and has both organised exhibitions of Mexican popular arts and published extensively in the field. They began their collaboration in Mexico in 1985 as part of a deliberate programme of field research and collecting generously supported by the Trustees of the British Museum. In succeeding years this work extended over the States of Puebla, Mexico and Veracruz gradually focusing in on the events surrounding Day of the Dead celebrations.

Yet the book is also designed to provide an

The Skeleton at the  
Feast: The Day of  
the Dead in Mexico

by  
Elizabeth Carmichael  
& Chloë Sayer

evocation of another kind. The occasion for its publication is an exhibition of the same title opened on the Day of the Dead 1991 at the British Museum's Museum of Mankind, London. Many of the objects displayed are also illustrated here and the fieldwork which lends the authority of personal witness to this publication also included the study of associated artistic creations and acquisition of appropriate materials for the permanent collections of the Museum. The creation of such varied objects and the manner of their display in Mexican homes provides a further, visual commentary on the context within which the events take place.

John Mack  
*Keeper*  
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1. The Day of the Dead in urban Mexico is a time when social comment is expressed in a wry and humorous way, often by means of skeleton figures engaged in everyday activities. Here, a complaints' clerk of the Mexican telephone service appears unable to place his own telephone call. Mexico City. H 34 cms





## Introduction

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Mexicans often say: *somos muy fiesteros*, 'we enjoy a good celebration', an opinion that is abundantly evident in the large number of festivals and ceremonies that crowd their calendar. To these public events must be added the private family celebrations in which the same zestful relish for life finds further expression.

The famous author Octavio Paz has, as so often, placed a knowing finger on the Mexican national pulse when he writes:

Fiestas are our sole luxury. They are a substitute for, and perhaps have the advantage over theatre and vacations, Anglo Saxon 'weekends' and cocktail parties, bourgeois receptions and the Mediterranean café . . .

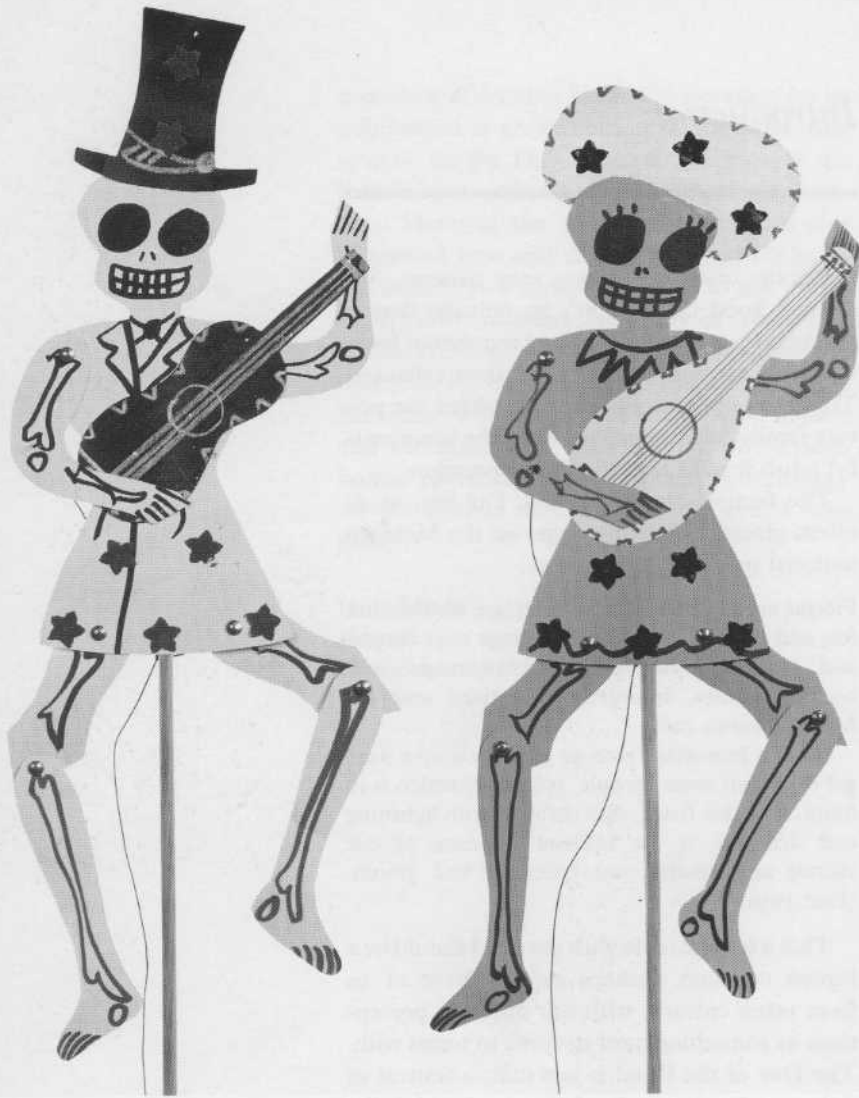
What is important is to go out, open up a way, get drunk on noise, people, colours. Mexico is in fiesta. And this fiesta, shot through with lightning and delirium, is the brilliant opposite of our silence and apathy, our reticence and gloom. (Paz: 1959)

That a festival to do with the dead should be a joyous occasion perhaps strikes those of us from other cultures with our different perceptions as something hard to come to terms with. The Day of the Dead is just that: a festival of welcome for the souls of the dead which the living prepare and delight in. The souls return each year to enjoy for a few brief hours the pleasures they once knew in life.

In the urban setting of Mexico City and other large towns the celebration is seen at its most exuberant, with figures of skulls and skeletons everywhere. These mimic the living and disport themselves in a mocking modern dance of death. It is not surprising that so colourful an occasion should have become a tourist event. Another celebrated Mexican author, Carlos Monsiváis tells us that in Mixquic, a town close to Mexico City, and at Pátzcuaro in the State of Michoacán, both famous for their celebrations of the Day of the Dead, the cameras have come to outnumber the candles in the cemeteries: 'Kodak takes possession', and 'Mexico has sold its cult of death and the tourists smile anthropologically satiated' (Monsiváis: 1970). The dead move with the times in Mexico.

Not far away from the tourist routes there is, however, another Mexico. In the rural areas, in every village or small town, the Day of the Dead





2. Two traditional paper puppets of skeletal musicians as sold in urban markets in central Mexico for the Day of the Dead. Purchased in Toluca, State of Mexico. H (approx.) 49 cms

is celebrated beyond the glare of flash-bulbs and noise of whirring video cameras. Each household prepares its offering of food and drink for the dead to be set out on a table among flowers and candles. The blue smoke of burning *copal* incense sanctifies the ceremony, just as it has done for centuries. Outside, the peace is shattered by the explosions of the rockets set off to mark the fulfilment of an obligation deeply felt. The whole company of the living and the dead share in the flowering and fruiting of the land which both have cultivated.

Whatever distractions tourism brings – the competitions for the best offering, the ‘discos’ for the dead with all their sequins and grotesqueries – there is at the core of it all an old tradition which informs and invigorates every kind of manifestation of the event and which has so far defied debasement. What is astonishing to the visitor is that so many different styles of celebration can co-exist under one sky. Today draculas, demons and Batman mingle with the skeletons and sugar skulls; the cardboard

witches and plastic pumpkins of Halloween are making their appearance alongside the traditional puppets and toy coffins; the great museums and galleries mount set-piece *ofrendas* (offerings) for the Day of the Dead, designed by artists and curators.

A short step away, one seems to be in the midst of something that has endured through centuries, some parts of it perhaps from pre-Hispanic times. In the countryside there are few if any skulls or skeletons; the images of the Christian saints who replaced the old gods stand on the household altars surrounded by the same offerings of food and flowers as were prepared for ancient feasts. The yellow marigolds – the *cempasúchil*<sup>1</sup> or ‘flower of the dead’ – give off their aromatic scent to attract the souls and draw them to the offering prepared in their honour.

Among the Mexicans themselves there is much debate upon the subject of death and the dead. Is there in Mexico a special attitude towards death that differs from that of other nations? Again, Octavio Paz in a passage from *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1959), describes the so-called ‘special relationship’ with death:

To the modern Mexican death doesn’t have any meaning. It has ceased to be the transition, the access to the other life which is more authentic than this one. But the unimportance of death has not taken it away from us and eliminated it from our daily lives. To the inhabitant of New York, Paris, or London death is a word that is never uttered because it burns the lips. The Mexican, on the other hand, frequents it, mocks it, caresses it, sleeps with it, entertains it; it is one of his favourite playthings and his most enduring love. It is true that in his attitude there is perhaps the same fear that others also have, but at least he does not hide this fear nor does he hide death; he contemplates her face to face with impatience, with contempt, with irony: ‘If they’re going to kill me tomorrow, let them kill me for once and for all’.<sup>2</sup>

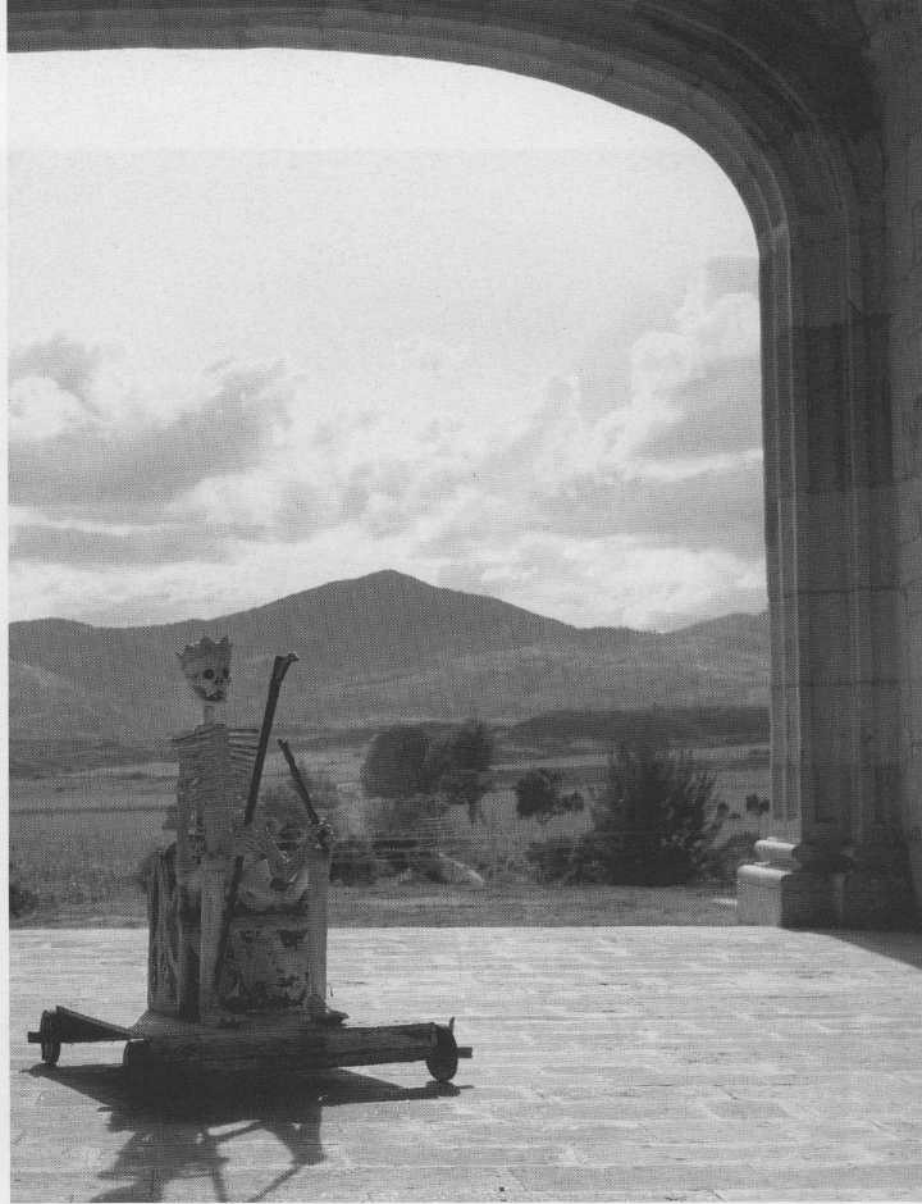
There are many who dissent from the view that the special relationship exists. Scholars such as Carlos Navarrete (1982) scrupulously seek to avoid being drawn into what he sees as the undisciplined morass of description and the ‘long list of generalisations which have been written on the theme of Death in Mexico’. These feed ‘the myth of Death and the Mexican being . . . It is necessary to take in hand the task of demystifying the myth, to question it, and demonstrate its fragility as a component of a premeditated national prototype.’

He makes an important distinction between

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death cults and cults of the dead. The death cults, of which Mexico has its share, centre upon the image of Death as the 'Grim-Reaper', the *Santísima Muerte* (Most Holy Death) associated with the practice of witchcraft. From at least the eighteenth century, and perhaps before then, wooden images of Death personified as a skeleton were carried in procession through the streets, riding triumphant in carts and carriages. These took their descent from the images of Death of medieval Europe, brought to the New World from Spain in the early sixteenth century. Painted on the tiered catafalques associated with funerary rites in Colonial Mexico, the same skeletons ride and prance. They appeared on playing cards, in books and tracts and in the nineteenth century were triumphantly transmuted by the hand of the famous engraver of popular prints, José Guadalupe Posada. By this time, they were less the mocking harbingers of death, but rather wry commentators upon the vanities of life.

As toys, with nodding heads and dangling limbs, they have danced their way into the modern world, where they have not entirely lost their function as vehicles for satire. More often, they are simply amusing playthings which may sometimes produce a slight *frisson*, as felt for a Halloween witch, but never a grim and ghoulish shudder. In the modern world, Carlos Monsiváis suggests, 'death is still the terrible yet amusing entity that establishes a compromise between memory and the sense of humour, and between the sense of humour and the irremediable' (Monsiváis: 1987).



3. Sixteenth-century wooden figure of Death seated on a throne on a dais with wheels. He is shown wearing a crown and holding a scythe and sceptre. Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca.



4. 'The Cry' ('*El Grito*'): performer wearing a skull mask. Mexico City.





## Bases Para el Crecimiento

Por Adolfo PEREZ SANCHEZ

...abilidad ante el exterior, que aunque ahora es menor, todavía subsista".

El jefe del Ejecutivo señaló que ahora, al cabo de seis años de esfuerzos y de inocuables costos sociales, "se ha aumentado la productividad de los mexicanos y hay suficientes reservas de divisas para atender las necesidades de la planta productiva. Hay confianza en los inversionistas, el esfuerzo ha sido fructífero".

También precisó: "Sé que las familias mexicanas no han experimentado, directamente y del todo, estos avances, porque sus efectos tardan en manifestarse. Hemos trabajado para tener los recursos del extranjero, pero hemos

concluido su período el 30 de noviembre pasado, con restricciones crediticias en el exterior, variando de las tasas de interés en los mercados financieros internacionales, fluctuaciones en el mercado de hidrocarburos que nos han afectado profundamente, deterioro de la relación de intercambio entre los productos de los países industrializados y las materias primas que exportamos, y los embates del proteccionismo".

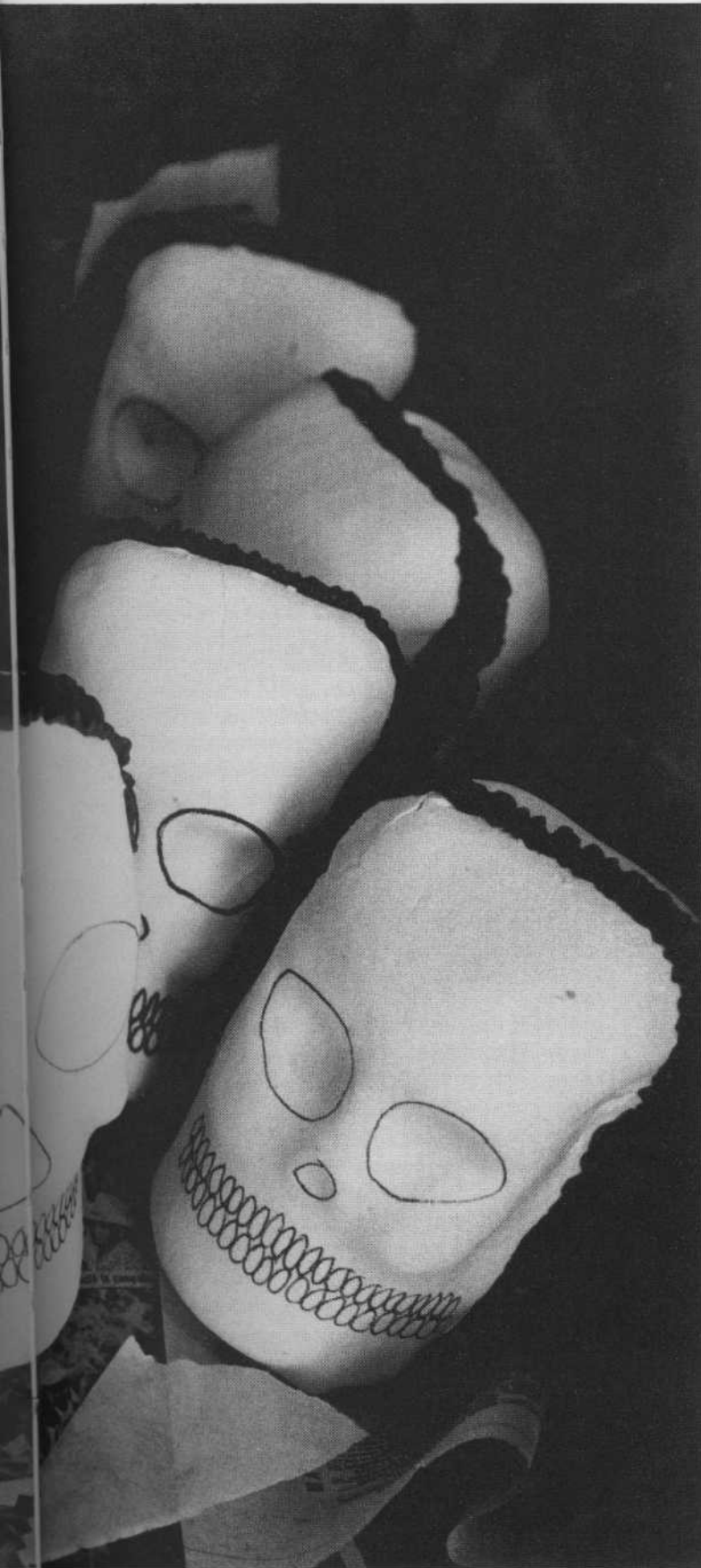
En lo interno, desequilibrios estructurales e inflación mismos, que han sido factores en contra para afrontar los cambios suscitados en el exterior y lograr una nueva inserción de México en la economía mundial en condiciones favorables.

Al recibir la custodia al Armijo Revolucionario que el congreso le otorgó, el PRI, el presidente Miguel Alemán ratificó los principios de su política económica y de deuda externa.

"No queremos apostar a la aventura, ni en el gasto público ni en el manejo de la deuda externa, porque el uso de paliativos efímeros ante la crisis más compleja y profunda que han vivido las generaciones presentes, sólo habrían sido un comodino fugaz sucedido por un futuro más incierto, caracterizado por la cancelación del desarrollo y, en el mejor de los casos, por un desarrollo limitado".

*Part I*

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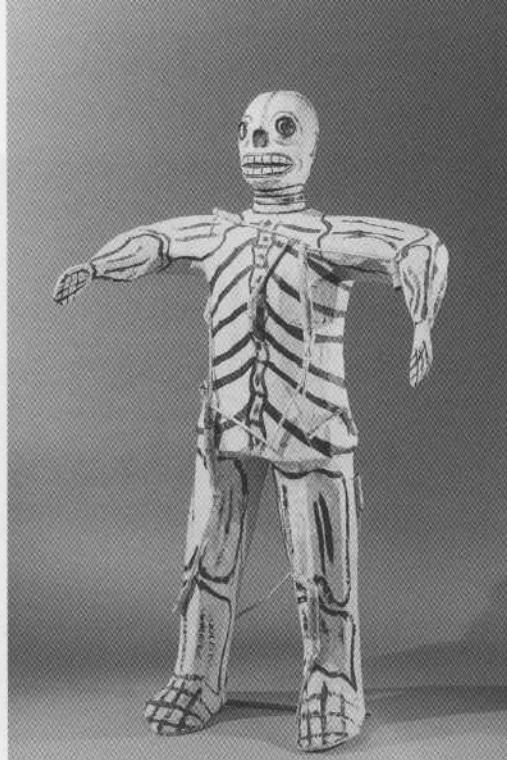


5. Hollow sugar skulls on sale for the Day of the Dead in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato.

## The Day of the Dead

... death revenges us against life, stripping it of all its vanities and pretensions and showing it for what it is: some bare bones and a dreadful grimace ... Skulls made of sugar or tissue paper, painted skeletons hung with fireworks, our popular representations of death always mock at life; they are the affirmation of the nothingness and insignificance of human existence. We decorate our houses with skulls and on the Day of the Dead we eat bread in the form of bones and enjoy the songs and jokes in which bald death has the laughs; but all this swaggering familiarity does nothing to rid us of the question we all have to ask: 'what is death?' (Paz: 1959)

6. Hollow papier mâché figure of a skeleton ('Judas') hung with fireworks. Mexico City. H 180 cms



For the first two days of November a sweet-smelling cloud of copal<sup>1</sup> incense hangs over most of Mexico. The Day of the Dead is being celebrated. Nominally this is the Christian feast of All Saints' and All Souls', but it is celebrated in Mexico as nowhere else in the Catholic world. The Mexican festival of *Todos Santos*<sup>2</sup> (All Saints'), also called *Día* or *Días de Muertos* (Day, or Days of the Dead), is the most important celebration in the yearly cycle. This is especially so in rural areas, where the preparations in anticipation of the event are a major preoccupation for much of the year.

Celebrations at Christmas and Eastertide are also of note but less distinctive in form. Only the festivals celebrated in honour of local patron saints display some of the same intensity and devotion evident on the Day of the Dead, perhaps because the saints themselves are regarded rather as lesser deities who intercede with God. The dead too ultimately achieve this semi-divine status in the folk-Catholicism of Mexico. As intermediaries they can intervene on behalf of the living, either with the Christian God or, as among some Indian groups, with divinities that have their origin in pre-Hispanic religion.<sup>3</sup>

The Day of the Dead in Mexico is essentially a private or family feast. It has a public aspect at community level, but the core of the celebration takes place within the family home. It is a time of family reunion not only for the living but also the dead who, for a few brief hours each

year, return to be with their relatives in this world.

As a time of reunion, there is nothing sombre or macabre about the event: the returning souls do not bring the odour of death and the grave with them, but come as spirits who have returned from another world, which for many Mexican Indians is very like this one.<sup>4</sup> These worlds of the living and the dead exist in a state of permanent interaction.

As celebrated today, *Todos Santos* incorporates elements of pre-Hispanic religious belief and practice, which differentiate it from the orthodox Catholic feast of All Saints' and All Souls'. The origin of the Catholic feasts is obscure. All Saints' (All-Hallows' or Halloween), 1 November, is the commemorative festival of all Christian saints and martyrs known or unknown. Some sources indicate that it was introduced into the festival cycle by Pope Boniface IV in the seventh century in substitution for a pagan festival of the dead. Originally observed in May, it was moved to November by Gregory III in the eighth century.

Amalarius of Metz (c. AD 780-850) in his treatise *On the Offices of the Church* included an 'Office for the Dead' on 2 November because 'many pass out of this world without at once being admitted to the company of the blessed' (Metford: 1991). In the year 998, Odilo, Abbot of Cluny, decreed that all Cluniac monasteries should celebrate an office for the dead, following the feast of All Saints'.



## The Day of the Dead

By the end of the thirteenth century, All Souls' was almost universally accepted in western Christendom as a liturgical day commemorating all the faithful departed, despite the reluctance of the church to establish a specific day for propitiating and honouring the dead. 'The reason for this reluctance was apparently the desire to dissociate the church from the persistent and tenacious pre-Christian rites and ceremonies of the cult of the dead and ancestor worship ... which from the beginning the church regarded as "superstitious"' (Nutini: 1988).

It was, however, found expedient to incorporate the practice of feasting, often associated with the commemoration of the dead in pagan custom, into Christian ritual. Peter Brown, in his excellent account of the way in which the family-centred feasts of the ancient world were transmuted in early Christianity into the 'Cult of the Saints', writes that:

For one generation, a lively debate on 'superstition' within the Christian church flickered around the cemeteries of the Mediterranean. In the 380s, Ambrose at Milan and in the 390s, Augustine at Hippo, attempted to restrict among their Christian congregations certain funerary customs, most notably the habit of feasting at the graves of the dead, either at the family tombs or in the *memoriae* of the martyrs. In Augustine's explicit opinion, these practices were a contaminating legacy of the pagan beliefs: 'When peace came to the church, a mass of pagans who wished to come to Christianity were held back because their feast days with their idols used to be spent in an abundance of eating and drinking.' (Brown: 1981)

The Christian church sought to re-focus the pagan feasting for the dead and establish celebrations for the saints. But family-centred practices associated with the dead showed great strength and persistence and survived for many centuries. When the Spaniards conquered the New World, they brought with them not only the official Catholic religion, but also some of the more popular or folk-religious practices of early sixteenth-century Spain.<sup>5</sup> The European customs of making food-offerings and feasting with the dead found fertile ground in Mexico where superficially similar ceremonies were an important aspect of pre-Hispanic religious ritual.

Because of this and other apparent similarities between the two religions, it is often extremely difficult to determine the origins of particular aspects of celebrations such as the Day of the Dead. It is nonetheless quite clear



that in Mexico, the observation of this feast is a deeply rooted and complex event that continues to be of great significance for many people.

7. Food and drink set out on a tomb as an offering for the souls of the dead. Tancoco cemetery, Veracruz.

### The Celebration of Todos Santos

Everywhere in Mexico, the days between the evenings of 31 October and 2 November are central to the celebration of *Todos Santos*. These are the days upon which the household offerings of foods and drinks are made to the dead. Other dates which may be included vary from region to region. Among the Totonac of Veracruz State for example, the period for the



8. Traditional *ofrenda* (offering) for the souls of the dead in the house of Pedro Laja, in the Otomí village of San Pablito, Puebla. The candles are set into sections cut from the stem of a banana plant; the *ofrenda* is framed with an arch of sugar canes hung with bread figures, bananas, and citrus fruits. The flowers which form part of the offering are the yellow *cempasúchil* ('flower of the dead') and magenta *mano de león* (cockscorb).

commemoration of the dead begins on the Day of San Lucas (18 October) and continues until the Day of San Andrés (30 November). In many places there are further celebrations including household offerings, or feasting in the cemeteries (or both), at the *octava*, on 9 November. The Totonac also celebrate an *octava* for the souls of dead children on 8 November.

Days are set aside for the remembrance of particular categories of the dead. Quite commonly, those who have died in accidents (*los accidentados*) are remembered on 28 November but there is considerable variation concerning these special categories which seem to be largely a matter of local custom. Galinier, writing of the Otomí of the Sierra Madre, suggests that the dates are hierarchical, with the ancient and therefore 'deified' dead and prominent forbears having their cult celebrated in October. Victims of violent death are remembered on the Day of San Lucas in a ritual performed outside the house (because such souls are feared), and the family dead on 1 and 2 November (Galinier: 1987).

The cleaning and dressing of graves in the cemeteries is most typically carried out within the days of *Todos Santos*. Decoration of tombs takes many forms and the nature of the activities in the cemetery again varies a great deal regionally and locally. At Chilac, in the State of Puebla, it is on 2 November that the community goes in procession to the cemetery, carrying armfuls of flowers, candles, incense and new or refurbished crosses to place upon the tombs. There is much music-making of all kinds, but no conspicuous feasting.

In Tancoco, Veracruz, the decoration, offering and feasting in the cemetery takes place upon the *octava*. *Rezanderos* (professional prayer-makers) chant at the gravesides, there is music and masked dancing,<sup>6</sup> and the singing of improvised songs which poke fun at local figures. Both here and in Chilac these are daytime celebrations. In other areas, the visits to the cemetery take the form of a nightlong candlelit vigil, as for example at many places in the State of Michoacán such as on the island of Janitzio on Lake Pátzcuaro and in the nearby town of Tzintzuntzan.<sup>7</sup>





At San Pablito in the state of Puebla the date of the visit to the cemetery as observed in 1985, was adjusted to take account of the availability of the local priest. There the whole community went in solemn procession to the cemetery after a mass in the church, taking flowers and candles. The graves were dressed in a quiet and subdued atmosphere, with no feasting. As often happens, the decoration of the graves was left largely to the women and the older men; the young men were present, but hung back on the fringes of the proceedings. The atmosphere here was markedly different from the examples cited above, all of which were occasions of cheerful enjoyment.

The organised religious content of the fiesta is variable. Where a priest is available special masses will be said and he may, as at San Pablito, lead the activities which take place in the cemeteries but his presence is not essential. It is often among the Mestizo<sup>8</sup> population that the Catholic rites are of greatest importance, while the Indian population may carry out their own observances. Among the Cora Indians of western Mexico, Herrasti and Vargas (1985)



9. Villagers entering the cemetery at San Gabriel Chilac, Puebla. They carry vases filled with flowers to decorate the graves and baskets containing food to offer to the dead. They also bring from home small chairs to use whilst watching beside the tombs.

10. Nahuatl men cleaning and decorating graves for *Todos Santos* in Xochitlán, Puebla. The tombs are adorned with palm leaves and *cempasúchil* flowers.



describe the curate as being 'a few metres away [from the Indians making their offerings in the church], kneeling before the central altar, trying to recite the rosary but failing to attract much attention for his orations.'

*The Offering or 'ofrenda'*

Many preparations for the Day of the Dead take place much earlier in the year. In areas where pottery is made, the production of large cooking vessels (*ollas*), incense burners and other necessary items starts in September or even earlier. Traditionally, everything should be new for the offering, even down to the clothes the family wear; in practice, this cannot always be adhered to. But when needed, this is the time to consider replacing household items such as the enormous round-bellied cooking-

pots used in rural areas to prepare *tamales* (see below) and other festival dishes that are consumed in large quantities.

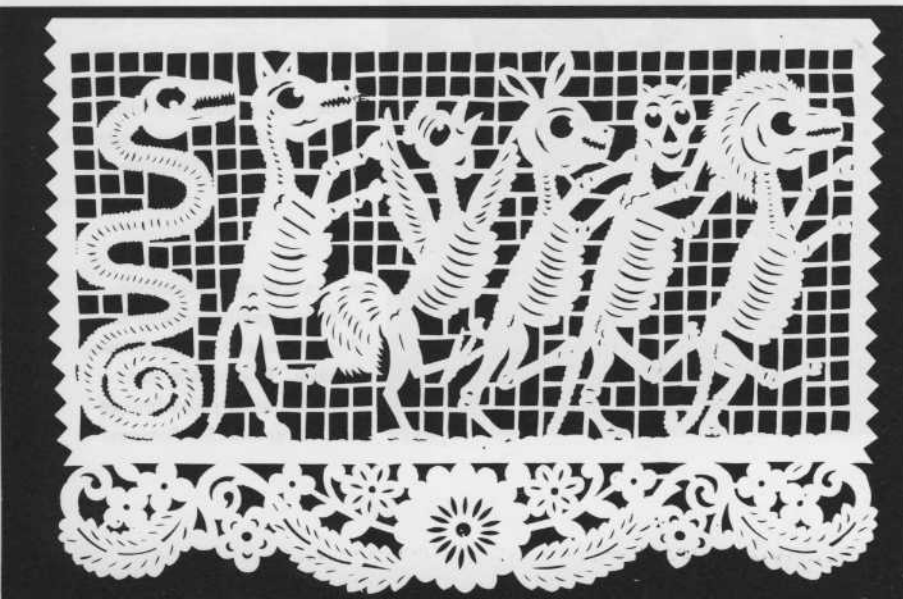
Goods for the offering to the dead may be gradually acquired throughout the year, but the period of intense preparation begins in the period immediately preceding *Todos Santos*. The rural markets in the week or so before the critical date are the finest of the year, humming with colour and excitement. Everything essential for the offering is on sale: the flowers, breads, fruits and vegetables, candles, sugar sweets, pottery dishes and toys and many grades of incense. Traders come from afar to the larger markets, bringing goods not available locally – pottery from other centres, factory-made ceramics, baskets, wooden cooking utensils, tissue-papers with punched or cut-out decorative designs, paper puppets, and so on. While many of these things are quite common in urban markets, they are exotic in many rural areas, as are the plastic toys and masks representing the pumpkins and witches of Halloween, although even these make an occasional appearance. The sense of anticipation and exhilaration is infectious, and excited family groups stand before the stalls debating their choice of plastic sheeting for the offering table or a new vase or pottery candlestick.

The flowers form brilliant mounds of colour. Predominant is the vivid orange and yellow of the *cempasúchil*, the 'flower of the dead', which has been associated with festivals for the dead since pre-Hispanic times. Both its colour and aromatic scent are important for they are thought to attract the souls towards the offering. 'Paths' of marigold petals are strewn from the *ofrenda* to the door of the house to guide the souls to their feast. Sometimes the flower-path also leads from the door of the house out into the roadway in the direction of the cemetery. This is to ensure that the souls will not only find their way to the offering, but also back to the cemetery; should they lose their way, they might remain in this world to trouble the living.

The other most common flower is the brilliant magenta cockscomb, or *mano de león* (lion's paw). Although this and, above all, the *cempasúchil* are the most important flowers for the decoration of offerings, many others are used including a gypsophila-like white flower, *nube*, gladioli and carnations. All purchases are ideally completed before 28 October and the final preparations in the houses will by then be well underway.

11. Domestic pottery in the market for *Todos Santos* at Yecapixtla, Morelos.

12. Banner of tissue paper for the Day of the Dead. The design is punched out using chisels. Animals, a chicken and a snake are shown as skeletons. San Salvador Huixcolotla, Puebla. w 69 cms



## The Day of the Dead

When a family has a bread oven, the baking of the bread for the dead will begin before 30 October; it is a duty always carried out by men, either the head of the family or a close relative. Otherwise, a wide variety of breads in many different forms<sup>10</sup> will be purchased from bakeries or the market. The cooking of the special dishes for the offering, and the making of such items as chocolate figures in many forms, is also begun well in advance.

On 30 or 31 October, according to local custom, if not begun before, the *ofrenda* itself will be constructed. The whole family will probably play some part in this. A table is set up (or, as with the Totonac, a platform suspended from the roof-beams of the house), covered with a white or embroidered cloth or perhaps decorative plastic sheeting. It is usually set close to the permanent household altar for the saints.

Above the table, framing the front of the offering, an arch is constructed using supple canes which is then decorated with palm or other green leaves and sometimes sugar canes. This is then embellished with an arrangement of flowers, fruits and other ornaments. Additional ornaments may be added which will vary from region to region. A cloth or plastic sheet can be draped above the arch to form a 'sky' (*cielo*) over the offering. There may be tissue paper tied into decorative forms adorning the arch and table, or *papeles picados* (sheets of multi-coloured tissue paper with punched or cut-out designs) or *papeles recortados* (layered sheets of coloured paper with cut designs of saints, virgins, churches, birds and flowers). These are hung in front of and behind the offering table.



13. Piles of dried chili peppers for use in cooking on sale in the market place at Pahuatlán, Puebla.

14. *Ofrenda* in course of construction in the Totonac community of El Tajín, Veracruz. Candido Méndez arranges an arch of palm leaves above a hanging board. The designs on the tissue paper banners were cut by Fredy Méndez using a blade.

15. Coloured paper ornament used to decorate the altar for the dead, made in the Totonac community of Cerro del Carbón, Veracruz. L 75 cms







16. Altar for the dead with an arch of palm leaves and *cempasúchil* flowers. The photographs of the family dead are shown among a profusion of crêpe paper flowers. The offering table is covered with decorative plastic sheeting. Ixhuatlán de Madero, Veracruz.

On the table are placed pictures or figures of particular saints, a Virgin or a Christ, of importance to the family. Candles of various types<sup>11</sup> and candlesticks are placed both on and before the offering; the candles are sometimes set into a section of the stem of a banana plant set up on wooden trestles. Before the table will be a new *petate*, a rush or palm-leaf mat upon which the incense burners are placed ready for use.

If the family have portraits or photographs of the deceased, these will be given a central position on the offering, although this is not common in Indian households. More vases of flowers will complete the decorations, leaving only space for the food offerings which will follow.

#### *The Return of the Souls*

The most widely held belief is that the souls of children return first, and food and gifts appropriate to their age and tastes will be set out for them. When the children withdraw, the souls of the adult dead are in turn offered the foods and

drinks that they preferred in life. The child souls are sometimes divided into two categories, those who die before baptism, *los niños limbos* (infants in limbo) who return on 30 October (Nutini: 1988), and the souls of other children who return on 31 October.<sup>12</sup> The foods for children will on the whole be simpler and less highly seasoned than for adults. Breads and water are always included, sweets of various kinds, fruits and perhaps milk or soft drinks. It is sometimes the custom to set out a special offering table especially for children alongside that for the adults, with everything in miniature: cups, plates, and miniature breads and sugar animals.

The adult dead return on 1 November and are, in their turn, given the most splendid offering of foods and drinks the family can afford. In addition to the breads there may be biscuits of various types, sugar figures, fresh and candied fruits, especially *dulce de calabaza* (candied pumpkin) and fruit pastes. Cooked dishes might include chicken or turkey in *mole*,<sup>13</sup> and certainly various forms of *tamales*, the maize dough 'cakes', with various fillings



## The Day of the Dead

both savoury and sweet, which are wrapped in maize husks and steamed. These and other dishes such as *enchiladas* (*tortillas*<sup>14</sup> with red chili sauce) and *chalupas* (fried *tortillas* with meat or cheese) are made ready in abundance, and brought in succession to be placed steaming upon the offering table. The beverages offered in addition to water, range from coffee, chocolate and *atole*, (a drink of maize meal with various flavourings) to whatever form of alcohol the deceased favoured when alive: beer, tequila, mescal, or *aguardiente* (cane spirit).

When the offering table is fully decorated and provisioned it can be a magnificent sight. Everything is very carefully arranged; boxes and packing cases covered with paper or cloth will perhaps have been arranged to form several 'tiers' above the surface of the table for the better display of the goods offered. Some dishes will be covered with brightly embroidered cloths, or piled into painted wooden dishes.

Clothing and personal goods, either favourite possessions of the deceased when alive, or new items specially made or purchased for the occasion, are added to some offerings. These will be placed to the side of the table. For a man, these might include a sombrero, carrying bag (*moral*), *machete*, or *sarape* (blanket); for a woman, possibly a woven belt (*faja*), embroidered blouse or cloth. As with the food offering, these items will eventually be used by the living.

The souls are not usually seen but their presence is sensed. They do not physically consume the foods and drinks, but rather absorb their essence. When the souls have had their fill, it will be the turn of the living members of the family to take their share of the *ofrenda*. Some part of the offering will also be distributed among relatives, godparents, friends and neighbours and some part will be taken to the cemetery to be placed upon the graves of the deceased. The community-wide sharing of the offerings is an important social occasion during which relationships of all kinds are reaffirmed. When all is over, the community settles back into its normal routines; the members of the family who have come from afar leave to take up their lives elsewhere; the dead have already returned to the other world.

In rural communities with a generally more wealthy Mestizo population, the style of offerings may closely resemble the local Indian *ofrendas*, but will include a higher proportion of 'exotic' goods. There may be some commercially produced chocolate instead of the home-made variety, or packets of biscuits, tinned



foods, or other expensive goods. One offering for a child seen in the town of Huaquechula consisted entirely of 'junk' foods. The principal is the same: whatever pleased the dead in life they are to have again. There is also an element in this of impressing one's neighbours – the ability to make an elaborate and expensive offering confers status upon the family.

In larger villages and small towns, Mestizo offerings can differ greatly from those of the surrounding villages. The origins of the style of offerings in centres such as Iguala and Huaquechula (see pp. 66 and 68) are not known but seem to derive from Spanish Colonial traditions. Mestizo families sometimes call upon the help of specialist builders in the construction of their *ofrendas*, especially in those communities where very elaborate offerings are made for people who have died within the preceding year.

In truly urban contexts, the offerings may also resemble those of the surrounding villages but occasionally vestiges of older urban customs are found. This is the case in Puebla where a few people still continue the almost obsolete custom of setting the family dining-room table with a place for each dead relative. On the chairs, or nearby are placed some favourite possessions or clothing of the deceased (see fig. 119).

### Mexico City

In Mexico City there are no limits. People often build an offering in the regional style of the place they originally come from. In quite wealthy middle-class homes there may well be an *ofrenda*, perhaps traditional in form, perhaps consisting merely of a few photographs, flowers

17. *Ofrenda* for *angelitos* (souls of dead children) at La Venta, near Huaquechula, Puebla. Everything is in miniature, including the breads and the vessels in which the foods and drinks are served. This small altar for children was set up alongside an altar for the adult dead in the Huaquechula style.

18. Skeletons painted on a baker's window advertising the special breads for the Day of the Dead. Xochimilco, near Mexico City.



19. Detail from a papier mâché tableau made by the Linares family in 1989. The work, a homage to the artist José Guadalupe Posada, was commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art, Chapultepec Park, Mexico City.



and candles. There are *ofrendas* that are highly idiosyncratic in style, with perhaps coloured neon lights bathing the assemblage of objects, or indeed whatever the ingenuity of the individual suggests in the way of unusual decoration. Food, apart perhaps from some token gesture – an *hojaldra* (bread of the dead) and some fruit – may not feature at all.

And here the skulls and skeletons which only rarely make their appearance in rural areas hold sway. They belong in the urban context: not only in Mexico City but at other major centres (notably Oaxaca City, famous for its craftsmen) every material is pressed into skeleton form, and the grinning skulls, who bear no malice or trace of malevolence, cheerily rattle their bones in the markets and ape the antics of the living.

Today, an addition to the Mexico City repertoire are the dances and discos for *Día de Muertos*; these are now a fixture something like a 'Chelsea Arts Ball' in terms of elaborate costumes – all associated with death, though in this case its more bizarre and macabre aspects.

Many public buildings, museums and galleries, hotels and even shops will set up an *ofrenda*. In the museums, these may be carefully copied versions of rural offerings, or generalised versions of them, or elaborate 'set-pieces', sometimes of great size.<sup>15</sup> Some museums and galleries commission works on a particular theme from artists and craftsmen, particularly from the celebrated Linares family of Mexico



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City who make large skeleton figures in papier mâché. In homage to the artist Posada, the Modern Art Museum made an *ofrenda* in 1989 in which, beneath a giant *hojaldras*, the papier mâché figures of Posada and some of his most famous creations were placed.

It is traditional for bread-shop windows to be painted with scenes of skeletons hugging, munching and savouring *hojaldras*. Beyond this the window displays of many other shops now sport skulls, skeletons and grotesque masks whatever the goods on sale inside. It is a strange notion to us perhaps that skulls and grotesqueries might be a help in selling the latest in menswear, ladies underwear or electrical goods, but at this time of year it is part of the general exhilaration in the City air. And that exhilaration is one of the unifying factors that draws together all the manifest expressions of the Day of the Dead. Whether in rural villages or in towns, there is excitement abroad, and everywhere activity devoted to the preparations and ultimately the celebration of the fiesta.

### Competition Offerings

There are now official competitions (*concurso*) for the 'best' *ofrenda*, both in Mexico City and in other towns large and small throughout Mexico. *Ofrendas* will be built, usually in a civic building, and will be judged for their quality; prizes are awarded by prominent citizens, or members of the government organisations who foster arts and crafts.

In Atlixco, a town in the State of Puebla, the participants in 1989 were mostly schools. Each had prepared an offering, either in a traditional regional style, or upon a particular theme. One was a homage to Mexico's pre-Hispanic past; another commemorated revolutionary heroes. Also present were representatives of nearby Indian communities who had set up offerings in their own styles. For the children this was as amusing as any competition but still they took pride in what they were doing. The Indian participants went about a time-honoured task with loving reverence, as if they were in their own homes.

In the same year, in the city of Puebla, the *concurso* was even more diverse in content, including rural and urban styles of offering, some with atmospheric background music. In seeking to capture attention, some examples had perhaps become a little pretentious, and even obscure, but local enthusiasm was unbounded.



20. Decorative skulls of papier mâché with painted designs and spangles of glitter. Mexico City. H (both) 24 cms

At the University of Puebla, the theme for the Day of the Dead in 1989 was *La Última Movida*,<sup>16</sup> a phrase difficult to translate, encompassing ideas of the 'last dance', but with reference too, to great upheaval, as at the time of earthquakes. Dominated by a large female figure of death in skeleton form and a papier mâché juke-box that Claes Oldenburg might have been proud to have made, costumes of various kinds were set out: an Indian costume, a city-businessman's suit, jeans and other currently fashionable student gear – all left as if

21. Traditional Indian *ofrenda* for the Day of the Dead, erected as an entry in a competition (*concurso*) in the town of Atlixco, Puebla. *Cempasúchil* petals spell out the name of the makers' village: San Juan Tianguismanalco.







22. Detail of an installation for the Day of the Dead in a Colonial building in Puebla City. Entitled *La Última Moviada* (The Final Shake-up), the display showed Death presiding over a modern 'Dance of Death'. Organised by Rufo Alberto Morales Pérez.

in offering to the souls. They looked like the cast-off garments of participants in a modern 'Dance of Death'.<sup>17</sup>

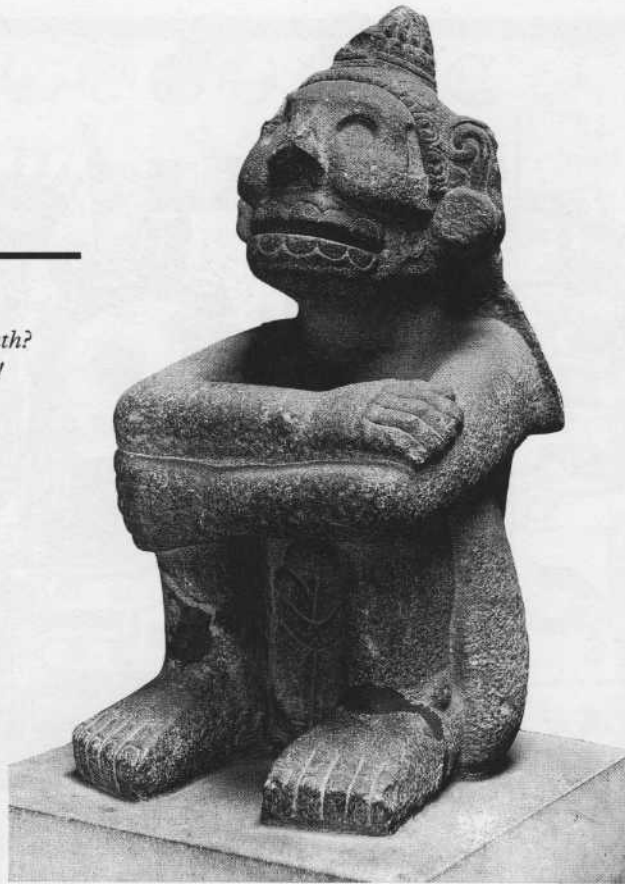
All this diversity is part of the present-day celebration of the Day of the Dead, and the examples cited do not begin to encompass the variety of forms. If in the cities the impulse that prompts the desire to make an offering to the dead is becoming customary rather than obligatory, and is often far divorced from any religious significance the event still holds, in rural areas, especially among Indian peoples, the sense of obligation is still very deeply felt. In substantiation of this, there are the stories told almost everywhere, although with many vari-

ations upon the theme, of the dire consequences of not fulfilling the necessary rites in honour of the dead. In most versions the outcome of failure to conform is sickness or death. In every story someone, who has either through disbelief or sheer neglectfulness failed to prepare a suitable offering, sees the dead returning to their graves (usually only people with special powers can see the dead), delightedly bearing the goods from the *ofrendas*. His or her own dead kin come last, weeping and in distress. Even remorse, in the form of a hasty rush home to make an offering, fails to save the recalcitrant. The making of the offering is then an obligation, a vital part of maintaining good relations with the dead.

## The Pre-Hispanic Background

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*Are flowers carried to the kingdom of death?  
It is true that we go, it is true that we go!  
Where do we go? Where do we go?  
Are we dead there or do we still live?  
Do we exist there again?<sup>1</sup>*



23. Stone figure of a male deity with a crested headdress and skull face, possibly Mictlantecuhtli the Death god. Aztec, c. AD 1300–1521. H 61 cms

Human mortality is the result of an accident. Had Quetzalcoatl, the 'Plumed Serpent', the great Mesoamerican creator god, not stumbled and dropped the bones of our predecessors on earth, we might all be immortal. So tells a Náhuatl<sup>2</sup> creation myth. It was on a journey to Mictlan, the ninth and deepest level of the underworld that misfortune befell Quetzalcoatl. This was the realm of the Lord of Death, Mictlantecuhtli and his consort, Mictlancihuatl. There the precious bones were kept, the remains of the previous beings who had inhabited the earth before its destruction. This was the fourth time that the earth or 'sun' had been destroyed by cataclysmic events.<sup>3</sup>

Poised at that moment after the end of the fourth sun, the gods were troubled for now there was no-one to live on earth. Quetzalcoatl therefore undertook to make this journey, telling the Lord of Mictlan that he had come to collect and take away the precious bones: 'What will you do with them, Quetzalcoatl?' asked Mictlantecuhtli and Quetzalcoatl told him of the gods' predicament. Mictlantecuhtli set seemingly impossible conditions for the removal of the bones which Quetzalcoatl overcame by magical means. Finally, gathering up the bones of man and woman, he left the Dead

Land; but he stumbled, startled by birds (quail). The precious bones fell and were scattered and damaged by the quail who 'bit into them and nibbled them.'<sup>4</sup>

Bundling up the bones once more, Quetzalcoatl finally reached Tamoanchan, the 'paradise' of the Aztecs. There the bones were ground up by the Earth Goddess, Cihuacoatl and fertilised with Quetzalcoatl's own blood. From them there arose a new race of human beings, who were however, fatally flawed: because of the damage the bones had suffered the inhabitants of the earth were mortal. All the gods did penance, and since that time, humankind has owed the gods a reciprocal debt of penance.

In this myth, recorded after the Spanish Conquest when, for the first time, the oral narratives of the Aztecs could be written down,<sup>5</sup> the pre-Hispanic idea of life arising out of death is very clear. It also, as Bierhorst says in his translation, has the theme of 'life's uncertainty.'<sup>6</sup> In Aztec religion (and indeed all Mesoamerican religions) this is the recurrent theme: the interdependency and interaction between humanity and the gods.

The polytheistic religions of pre-Hispanic





24. Page from *Codex Borgia* showing two deities back to back. One in skeletal form is probably Mictlantecuhtli, the Death god, the other is Quetzalcoatl, the Creator god.  
H 26.5 cms

Mesoamerica are labyrinthine in their complexity. Cosmogonic and cosmological concepts have to be reconstructed from a variety of sources which often give differing accounts,<sup>7</sup> presumably reflecting regional and perhaps temporal variations in belief. For the Aztecs, the world in which they lived was conceived as a flat disk of earth, surrounded by water that stretched out to the horizons where it met the sky. This world was set at the centre of the four great cardinal regions of the universe. Sometimes the earth was conceived as a great crocodile-like creature, floating in a sea filled with water-lilies; sometimes as a great toad.

The four world directions, north, south, east and west, each had an associated sacred colour,

a sacred tree, bird and in some sources, an animal. Particular gods were also associated with each sector. Some of these anthropomorphised deities were conceived as having four aspects, each again identified with one of the cardinal world directions and its special colour. A fifth manifestation of some gods was associated with the centre point of the world. In the case of Tlaloc, the god of rain, four *tlaloque*, 'conceived as dwarfish assistants to a pre-eminent Tlaloc, were individualized and known by proper names' (Nicholson: 1971).

Above the earth rose the thirteen layers of the heavens,<sup>8</sup> and below the earth were the nine levels of the underworld. After death, the souls of the deceased had to pass through each of

these nine levels before reaching Mictlan, the realm of the Death god.

As the last in line of a long succession of great cultures that had waxed and waned in what we now call Mesoamerica,<sup>9</sup> the Aztec had inherited much from the civilisations that had preceded them. Their religion and philosophy reflected this cultural complexity. As they themselves rose to become the dominant power in the central regions of Mexico, with an influence which extended over the major part of Mesoamerica, they often found it expedient to adopt the gods of other peoples into their own already elaborate pantheon. At the heart of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlán, these regional gods of peoples subject to the Aztec, even had their own place of worship. Their cults were celebrated in the *Coateocalli*, a place within the Temple of Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec tribal god.<sup>10</sup>

Our knowledge of the Aztec gods of death and beliefs concerning death and the afterlife is derived from the archaeological record, the pre-Hispanic codices (painted screen-fold books) and from the early Colonial manuscripts which contain a great wealth of information recorded by the early Spanish chroniclers, notably Fray Bernardino de Sahagún.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there are the works of native authors who also wrote of the customs of their ancestors following the Spanish Conquest.

The belief in an afterlife was present in Mesoamerica from early times as the presence of grave-goods attests. For the Aztec, the destiny of a soul after death was decreed by the manner of death rather than conduct during life. A person's destiny was decreed by the gods at the moment of birth; it might however be somewhat modified by fulfilment of certain rites divined by the priests.

In Náhuatl poetry there is much speculation concerning the nature of the afterlife; it abounds in references to life's uncertainty and what might be in the hereafter. Miguel León-Portilla, the eminent translator and interpreter of Aztec philosophy and religious belief, remarks upon the frequency of references in Náhuatl literature to life as a dream, and to the question of the nature of 'the beyond, the region of the dead,' the 'place of the fleshless,' the 'region of mystery' (León-Portilla: 1963).

The souls of those who died normal deaths went to Mictlan, the 'place of the dead,' a shadowy underworld ruled over by Mictlantecuhtli. The journey to reach Mictlan was lengthy and difficult. For four years the soul travelled the hazardous path to the 'place of the



ordinary dead', which was beset with perils to be overcome:

[it took the wanderer] through places where mountains crashed together and could crush him, where the winds were so icy they were [as if] edged with obsidian knives, where arrows flew out at the traveller, across a succession of eight deserts, and finally to a great river which he had to cross.<sup>12</sup>

Here the soul met with dogs who would help him cross the river. According to Sahagún, only yellow dogs would serve this purpose, although in some accounts, black dogs were the helpers. This belief has survived into recent times (see p. 104 and Madsen: 1960). In Mictlan the dead lived as they had upon earth, and for this reason were buried with the things which had served them in life. The four year period during which the soul wandered coincides with the period during which special rites were performed after a death.

Warriors who died in battle went to a region in the sky (*Tonatiuh ichan*) where they accompanied the Sun God, Tonatiuh, on his daily journey to the zenith. After four years, they were transformed into humming-birds. Also to the celestial region went the women who died in childbirth. These spirits, the *cihuateteo*, were considered to have died just as honourable a death as the warriors and they accompanied

25. Detail from a page of *Codex Laud*, showing a male deity in partially skeletonised form, probably Mictlantecuhtli, the Death god.



the sun down to the western horizon. Depicted as skull-faced creatures, these 'Divine women' might reappear on earth at certain times and were much feared (Pasztesy: 1983).

Those who died by drowning, by being struck by lightning, or of certain diseases such as dropsy or gout, went to Tlalocan, the 'paradise' of the rain gods (Tlalocs), a place where 'all is ever green, always in growth, always spring,' and suffering was unknown (Sahagún: 1952).

The infant dead went to a place near to Tlalocan, Chichihuacuauhco, where a tree dripped milk from its branches to feed them. There they would wait for the inevitable destruction of the present world and its inhabitants, following which they would be reincarnated as the new human beings (Madsen: 1960). Among the Indian peoples of modern Mexico there are still some remnants of belief in the various pre-Hispanic afterworlds.<sup>13</sup>

Human destiny might not depend upon conduct in life, but the nature of life was strictly governed by the need to propitiate the gods. An elaborate cycle of festivals matched the plethora of deities. 'The active ritual component of the religious system ... was enormously complex. A prodigious amount of time, energy, and wealth was expended in ceremonial activities' (Nicholson: 1971). Among these religious celebrations, the chroniclers of the Conquest period have described the rites concerned with the dead and the gods of death.

The Aztec solar year consisted of eighteen 'months' each of twenty days, and ended with a final five day period, the 'Extra' or 'Useless' days, or *Nemontemi*, which was considered a dangerous and unfortunate time (see Durán: 1971). Each month saw the celebration of festivals, the *veintenas*, in honour of the appropriate gods. Included in this cycle of festivals were several that were associated with cults of the dead.

Two of these are most widely recorded under the titles *Miccaihuitontli* and *Miccaihuitl*.<sup>14</sup> These names may be translated as either the 'Little Feast of the Dead' and the 'Great Feast of the Dead' or, as is sometimes the case, the 'Feast of the Little Dead Ones' and the 'Feast of the Adult Dead.' According to Sahagún in the *Florentine Codex*, the two feasts concerned were also known as the *Tlaxochimaco*, 'The Offering of Flowers' and the *Xocotl uetzi*, 'The Xocotl Falls' (or 'Fruit Falls'). All these variant names help elucidate

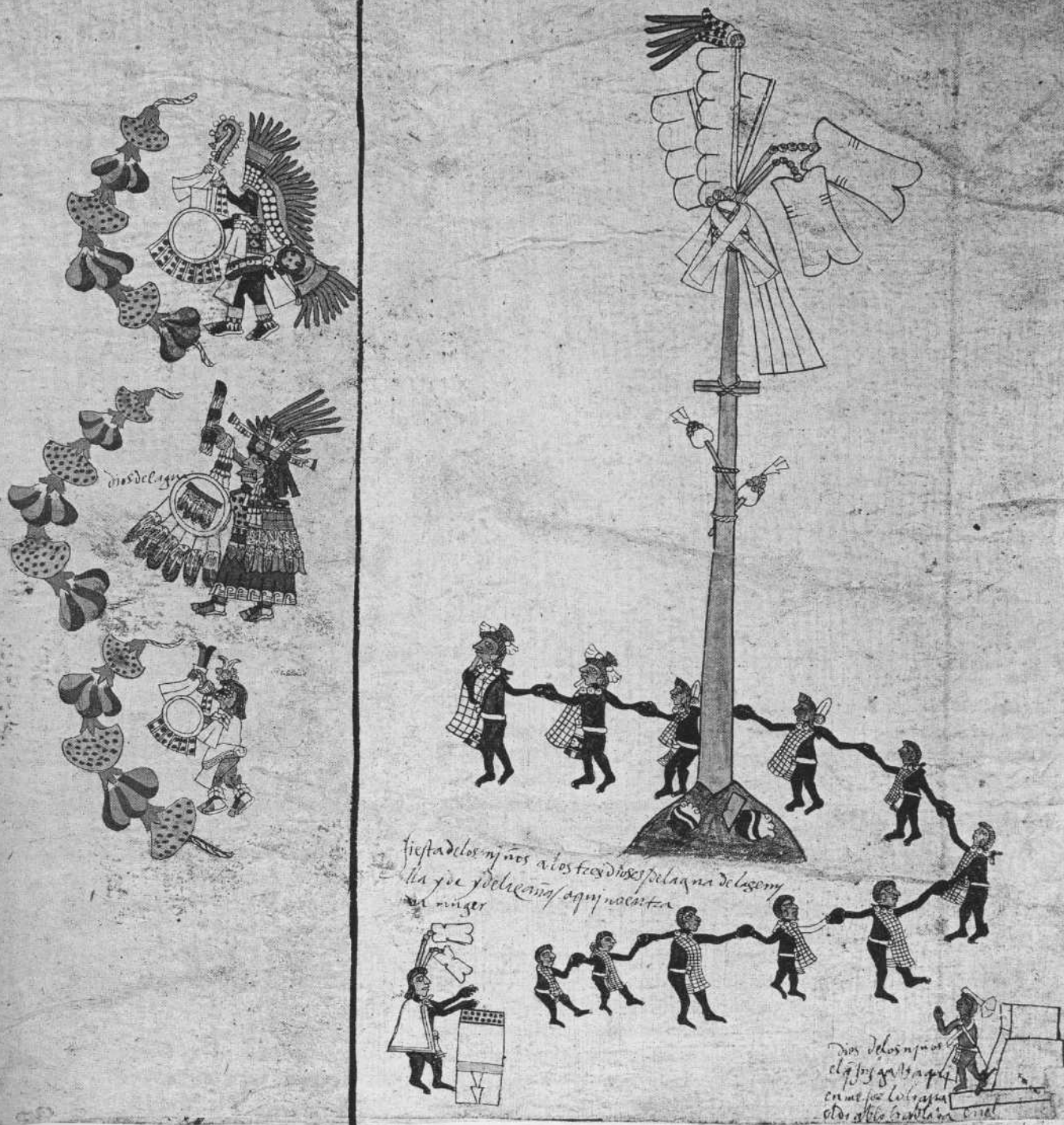
the meanings of the ceremonies held in these, the ninth and tenth months of the Aztec year.

The two feasts seem to form one major ritual festival of offering to the dead (Graulich: 1989). Of the first part, Sahagún tells us that in the ninth month, flowers were sought of many kinds, which were then strung together. *Tamales* were made, and turkeys and dogs plucked and singed for the feasts which were to follow. 'All were busy. All went without sleep ... in festive mood ... making preparations.' The garlands of flowers were used to adorn a figure of the Aztec tribal god, Huitzilopochtli, and were strewn before him and before the figures of other gods. This was followed by feasting and dancing.

From Fray Diego Durán, a Dominican friar writing in the late sixteenth century, we learn that for the Aztec, this was the Feast of the Little Dead: 'According to my information, it was the commemoration of innocent [unbaptised] dead children, and that is why the diminutive [*Miccaihuitontli*] was used. In the solemn ceremonies of this day offerings were made to honour and venerate these children' (Durán: 1971). He goes on to remark that he had himself observed offerings being made on the 'Day of Allhallows' and the 'Day of the Faithful Departed' (All Saints' and All Souls') in the Catholic calendar, and been told that these were in honour of the children and the adult dead respectively. This caused him sorrow since he saw that an Aztec significance was being given to the Christian festivals: 'I suspect that if it is an evil simulation ... the feast has been passed to the Feast of Allhallows in order to cover up the ancient ceremony.' This reference is of importance in associating the transferal of a pre-Hispanic festival to match a feast day of the Catholic Church. He mentions offerings of 'chocolate, candles, fowl, fruit, great quantities of seed, and food' on both days.

Continuing with his description of the Aztec ceremony, Durán recorded that an 'enormous thick tree' was felled and its bark stripped away. It was carried to the entrance 'of the city or town', where it was greeted by the Aztec priests with much singing and dancing. Food offerings were made to this 'pole' which was called *xocotl*, meaning 'fruit' (Graulich: 1989); the ceremonies continued for twenty days and included rituals conducted by a male god-impersonator, in the regalia of Toci-Teteo innan (Our Grandmother, Mother of the Gods).<sup>15</sup>

In the second part of the ritual, in the tenth



26. Page from *Codex Borbonicus*. On the left is shown a goddess with skull-like face and two attendants; in front of each figure is a chain of yellow *cempasúchil* and other flowers. On the right are figures dancing around a *xocotl* pole with decorations of bark-paper banners at its top. The dancers are accompanied by a drummer (lower left-hand corner). H 38.5 cms





27. Detail of a stone sculpture representing a *tzompantli* (skull-rack). From the Maya site of Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, c. AD 1200.

Aztec month, the *xocotl* pole having been raised into a vertical position and decorated by the priests 'with papers', an image was made of a dough of amaranth seeds and maize meal, which was set at the top of the pole. According to some sources, the figure was in the form of a bird, and to others, in the form of a man with wings, dressed in white paper ornaments: 'he had "wings" painted with falcons and held a shield. Three wooden sticks from which hung three tamales of amaranth seeds were set up over the image' (Graulich: 1989; Sahagún: 1951). Dances were held before it and, on the twentieth day, captives were led to the *tzompantli* (skull-rack, where the skulls of sacrificial victims were displayed). When their paper costumes had been burned and other rites performed, they were taken to the top of the temple to be sacrificed. First they were cast into a fire; then their hearts were removed with a knife.

The ceremonies which followed the sacrifice were of feasting and dancing 'the serpent dance' (Sahagún: 1951). The young men climbed up the ropes securing the *xocotl* pole to reach the *xocotl* image and *tamales*, which were

thrown to the ground where the pieces of the image were scrambled for. Offerings were made to the image and then the great tree was pulled down. Whereas before there had been noise and jostling, now there was quiet in the precinct of the Great Temple. The captor of the *xocotl* image was arrayed in special garments and the ceremony was at an end.

Durán records that the dances at the foot of the pole were performed by nobles 'covered with feathers and jewels' and with painted bodies, carrying images and balls of dough. Food and drink were abundant and it was a day of indulgence.<sup>16</sup>

Other sources help clarify the association of these feasts with the dead. In the *Codex Telleriano-Remensis* there is the following description for the feast of *Miccaihuitl*:

The feast of all the dead begins on the third of August. During this feast they made offerings to the dead, placing food and drink on the tombs; this they did for four years because they believed that in all that time the souls did not reach their place of rest. Thus, the dead were buried with all their clothing, because they believed that by the

end of the four years, the souls would have suffered much toil, cold, and fatigue and passed through places where there was much snow and thorns.<sup>17</sup>

From the same source comes the description of the larger feast for the dead which began on 23 August:

... they have another feast of the dead which is much larger than the previous one ... for the last three days of this month the living fasted for the dead and went to disport themselves in the countryside by way of recreation ... Every year at the time of the festival for the dead, while the priests carried out the sacrifices, each person climbed up onto the roof of his own house and turning towards the north, recited long prayers to the dead, - to each dead member of his family, and called out to them: 'Come quickly for we are waiting for you.'

Sahagún also mentions offerings to the dead in the thirteenth, fourteenth and eighteenth months of the Aztec year. In the thirteenth month, *Tepeilhuitl*, he describes the making of images of wood which were then covered with a dough 'which they call *tzoal*.' These images were made in memory of those who had drowned or had died in such ways that they had been buried rather than cremated. 'After having placed these images on their altars with many ceremonies they offered them *tamales* and other foods, and sang songs of praise and drank wine in their honour.' He also describes other activities associated with the dead at this time:

They also placed these images of the dead on these wreaths of grass (*zacate*), and then at dawn placed these images in their oratories, on beds of grass, rush or reed; having placed them there they offered them food, *tamales* and *mazamorra* (a maize gruel), or stew made of fowl or dog meat, and later burned incense to them in a pottery incense burner like a big cup filled with coals, and they called this ceremony *calonoac*.

And the rich sang and drank pulque in the honour of these gods and their dead: the poor only offer them food as has been mentioned.

In the fourteenth month, *Quecholli*, he recorded that 'upon the fifth day, one was concerned only with the dead. For them they made small arrows ... they bound four arrows and four pine torches ... and laid them where the dead lay buried. And they placed there two sweet *tamales*. They remained there all day. And at sundown they burned them for the dead in the same place.'

In the eighteenth and final month of the year,

*Izcalli*, was a feast when *tamales* 'stuffed with greens' were eaten.

Whoever first cooked her *tamal* of greens then went to offer it to her kin. Thus she showed her self-esteem. [When this was done and] she had offered it everywhere to others, [to her neighbours] ... they all sat down to eat their *tamales* ... They were arranged in a circle; they brought ... their children, forming family groups.

And first they made an offering to the fire; they offered five *tamales* ... before the hearth. These were in a wooden vessel. Then they each set in place and made offering for their dead, where they laid buried ... And only during one day were they eaten. By night they were done; all finished. They left nothing for the next day.

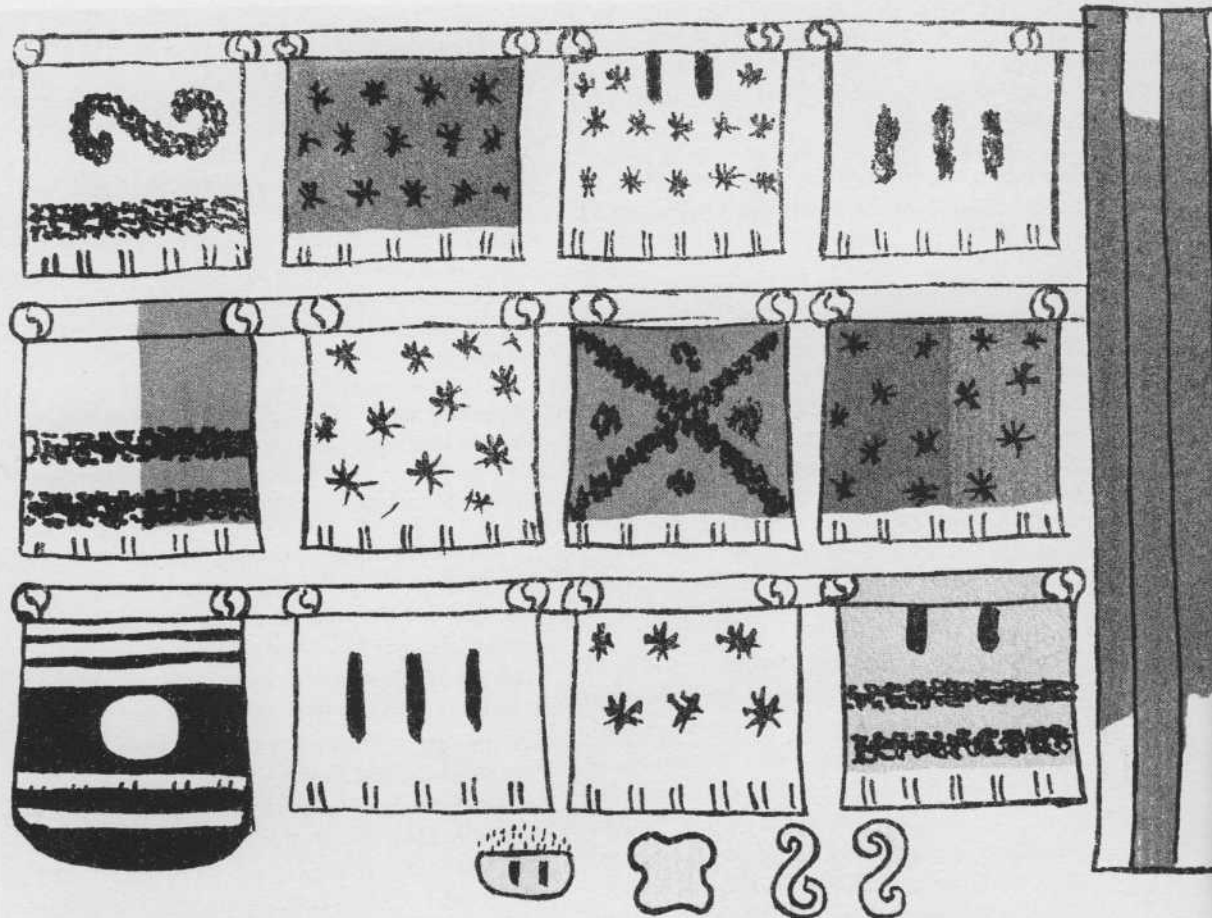
This last description seems not dissimilar to the modern *Todos Santos*: a family-based feast that also involves exchange of foodstuffs in the wider community, offerings first in the house and then elsewhere 'where [the dead] laid buried.' Common to both ancient and modern ceremonial connected with the propitiation of the dead are the flowers, food, incense, paper ornaments, dancing and music. These were not officially elements in the Spanish Catholicism introduced to Mexico in the sixteenth century. The Indians were condemned for continuing their 'pagan' customs of offering food, drink, and candles to the dead in their homes during nightlong feasts (Serna: 1892).

Many of the artefacts included in the descriptions of the *veintenas* were obviously ephemeral: the images of maize or amaranth dough and the paper costumes, etc. Incense burners are found in archaeological contexts and are also a category of object still made and used today, but otherwise we are dependant for information concerning the appearance of the ceremonies upon the codices and other manuscripts.

While not suggesting that any direct descent can be claimed for the tissue paper ornaments of today from the paper of pre-Hispanic religious festivals, there are in present-day Mexico Indian groups to whom the use of bark- and tissue-paper figures remains an important part of religious ceremonial. Notably among the Otomí and the Nahuá of the Sierra de Puebla and Huasteca, tissue and bark-paper images of pre-Christian deities are still a focus of ritual activity. Cut-out figures of these gods are offered and displayed during ceremonies that are carried out to ensure success in agriculture. They are also used in healing ceremonies conducted by the local *brujos* ('witches' both male



28. Page from *Codex Magliabecchiano* showing painted paper banners with decorative designs. Paper banners, painted and splashed with rubber (*amatetehuítl*), were common ceremonial offerings in pre-Hispanic times (Nicholson: 1971; Johnson: 1971).  
H (approx.) 17 cms



and female with shamanic powers) and, among some groups, still play an important part in death rituals and the ceremonies for the Day of the Dead. Among the Nahuatl, for example, paper shawls are placed upon the graves of female relatives 'to keep them warm in the underworld.'<sup>18</sup>

Another practice which is carried out among contemporary Indian groups may have its origin in the pre-Hispanic festival of the eleventh month, *Ochpaniztli*. In this month the feast of 'The Sweeping of the Way' was celebrated with the 'hand-waving' dance (Sahagún: 1951) honouring the goddess Toci, the 'Mother of the Gods.' 'This was the first act of the day: everyone had to sweep his possessions, his house, and all its corners, leaving nothing without diligent sweeping and cleaning. Besides this, all the streets of the town were swept before dawn. This custom has remained in the country ... [and this practice is followed] because it is such an ancient rite' (Durán: 1971). Durán goes on to state how fiercely he has opposed this, explaining that it is 'a superstition, a pagan custom, but I do not know whether this has done any good.'

In the ethnographic literature describing the

Day of the Dead, there are many references to the sweeping and cleaning of streets and houses, as well as the universal cleaning of graves and cemeteries (Cortés Ruiz, et al.: 1988; García García, García Ramos: 1985; Sartorius: 1858). In the literature concerning the Totonac of Veracruz, the point is made that this is also a time for cleaning fields before a new season of planting.

In the festival of the fifteenth month, *Panquetzaliztli*, there is reference to the making of amaranth seed *tamales* and an image of the tribal god, Huitzilopochtli, also of amaranth seeds, which was 'captured' and eaten after being shared between kinsmen and neighbours. (Sahagún: 1951; Durán: 1971). Leyenaar writes of the suppression of the use of amaranth seed for the making of images precisely because it was used for making images of the deities which were an important part of religious ritual (Leyenaar: 1987). The breads of wheat-flour in many shapes and forms used in *ofrendas* of Colonial times and still today, may perhaps have replaced the amaranth-dough 'idols'; perhaps too, the figures of sugar and *dulce de pepita* (pumpkin seeds) absorbed part of this ceremonial.<sup>19</sup>



PLATE I Stone sculpture of a woman with a skull face; this represents one of the *cihuateteo*, the malevolent spirits of women who died in childbirth. Aztec, AD 1300-1521. H 72 cms





Dawn view of the Purépecha Indian cemetery on the island of Janitzio, Michoacán. During the night-long vigil for the dead on 1 November the graves are illuminated with candles.





a. Pottery-tableau of feasting skeletons seated at a table set with a food offering. Made by Adrián Luis González. Metepec, State of Mexico. H (approx.) 8 cms  
 b. Household *ofrenda* (offering) for the Day of the Dead in the Nahua village of Atla, Puebla. Felix and Cecilia Vargas are shown putting the final touches to their offering of fruits, flowers, breads and candles for the dead.





Polychrome painted pottery scene showing two devils and a skeletonised corpse beneath a cross of flowers. They are watched over by a skull and the figures of several *ánimas* (souls). Ocumicho, Michoacán. H 27 cms

PLATE 4

Suspended altar with food offering for the dead in the Totonac village of Cazuelas, Veracruz. The altar is decorated with coloured tissue paper and bunches of fruit. The handtowels and cloths are for the use of the returning souls. On the floor, in front of the offering, is a locally made pottery incense burner.

PLATE 5













Papier mâché figure of a bride with two male attendants, presumably the groom and best man. Mexico City. H 62 cms

PLATE 6

Pottery 'Tree of Life' with figures of Adam and Eve (top); at the centre is the planet Earth, surrounded by figures representing the evolution of man. The scenes forming the outer circle (reading anti-clockwise) show the life cycle from birth to death including baptism, courtship and marriage; an offering for the Day of the Dead is included (top right). Made by Tiburcio Soteno. Metepec, State of Mexico. H 105 cms

PLATE 7



Scene in the cemetery at San Gabriel Chilac, Puebla. On 2 November, families tend the graves of their loved ones, decorating them with flowers, candles and photographs of the dead and renewing the wooden or metal crosses. Some families construct shelters of leaves and reeds above the tombs to give privacy and shelter from the sun.





## The Pre-Hispanic Background

Michel Graulich, discussing the Central Mexican feasts for the dead, also considers the possible association of the *xocotl* pole, and the present-day ceremonies of the *voladores* – the ‘flying dancers’ who swing down on ropes from the top of high poles. That the *volador* ‘dance’ is pre-Hispanic in origin there is no doubt: it is described for example by Durán. Graulich finds that: ‘The meanings given to the [modern *volador*] rituals correspond well to the meaning of the *xocotl* rite.’<sup>20</sup>

To what extent these pre-Hispanic festivals and their associated rituals were transmuted into the Christian festivals remains a matter of keen debate. Before the Spanish priests learned the indigenous languages, and Indians came to understand some Spanish, Christian rituals were poorly understood by the Indians. They sought to interpret them in terms of their own religious beliefs and practices. Later, there were certainly conscious efforts to incorporate the remnants of native religion, and ‘hide’ them beneath the cloak of Christian practice.

There were of course some attempts to maintain the native religions in secret, suppressing only those parts that revolved around warfare and sacrifice which had been so crucial a part of Central Mexican religion. But having no priesthood to conduct the ceremonies, such secret survivals were themselves only partial and reflective images of pre-Hispanic religion.<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless, even in Mexico today, there are areas where religious beliefs of pre-Hispanic origin survive quite strongly alongside Catholic religion; sometimes tolerated, sometimes under attack from the Catholic priesthood.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the accounts of pre-Hispanic religion at the time of the Conquest, archaeological finds provide much information concerning the iconography of death before the



29. Stone with low relief carving of skeletal death deity. Izapa, Chiapas, c. 300 BC

arrival of the Spaniards. Following the Conquest, the sculptures of the native gods were overturned and smashed; the temples were destroyed and the painted manuscripts were burned. Such few objects as survived the zeal of the Spanish Conquistadors to destroy what they saw as idolatrous, were hidden from view, or had already been safely buried in the graves and ruins of earlier times. Sometimes the remains of the smashed ‘idols’ were concealed within the buildings and monuments that the Indians were required to construct for the new (Christian) religion.

From the archaeological record we find concern with death and belief in an afterlife expressed centuries before the Aztecs rose to power. The dead were accompanied in the grave by goods, and sometimes, in the case of nobles, by people who had been sacrificed to sustain and attend them in another world.

In the pre-Classic period (c. 2000–200 BC) when the successful exploitation of plants permitted a settled village life based on agriculture, the use of pottery expanded and decorative wares and small figurines give the first indications of an interest in the relationship between life and death. From Tlatilco for example, a rich pre-Classic site in the Valley of Mexico, comes a figurine head showing a face half fleshed and half bare skull.

The Olmec, the first of the major civilisations which arose in the Gulf Coast region (c. 1000–400 BC), set the cultural patterns for all the succession of great cultures that were to follow.



30. Pottery figurine head showing a face half fleshed and half as a skull: the duality of life and death. c. AD 800–1000. Soyaltepec, Oaxaca.


Imagery associated with death does not feature in their sculpture and pottery. But from Izapa, a site in Chiapas which flourished at this same early period (c. 800 BC), comes a fine low relief sculpture of a skeletal figure.

Early in the Classic period (c. AD 200–900), the major site of Teotihuacan, just north of present-day Mexico City, again has few representations of death among its frescoes and sculptures. The notable exception is a circular stone carved on both sides with the representation of a skull with protruding tongue, set at the centre of a fluted disc.


Among the Maya of southern Mexico, Guatemala and adjacent territories, there are many representations of skulls, often forming parts of architectural decoration, or seen as ornaments adorning the elaborate costumes in representations of rulers.

The major Classic period sites of the Gulf Coast, also show skulls and skeletonised figures, good examples being from the reliefs in the Ball Court at Tajín, and from the same site, a fine column with a death god.

Some of these figures are associated with sacrificial scenes, others, like the Late Classic pottery head from Soyaltepec in Oaxaca, which



31. Detail from a stone frieze from a ball-court at El Tajín, Veracruz, showing a death god. The ball-courts of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica are often decorated with images associated with death and sacrifice. Totonac, c. AD 600–1000.



32. Stone carving of a skull. Aztec, c. AD 1300–1521. H 17 cms

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again shows a head half living and half skull, have no such direct association. But where, as for example in the ball-court scenes such as those at Tajín and Chichén Itzá, sacrifice is shown, it is associated with symbols of new life. At Chichén Itzá, from the neck of the sacrificial victim, whose severed head is shown in the hand of his opponent, spring six serpents, and a plant, with flowers and fruit.

It is in the civilisations of the post-Classic period (c. AD 900–1520) that imagery of death proliferates, and examples become too numerous to count.<sup>23</sup> In Central Mexico, the Maya area and on the Gulf Coast, there are everywhere scenes of sacrifice, gods of death, skull-racks (*tzompantli*) for the display of the skulls of sacrificial victims, and innumerable pottery vessels in the form of skulls and skeletons. The equation of death and renewal has taken on a new urgency. Mankind must make recompense to the gods for the sacrifice that brought them into being. The life-force must be offered sacrifice – blood and the human heart are the supreme sacrifice – vitally necessary to keep the sun moving in the heavens.

There is not space here to enlarge upon the subject of death and the dead as represented in pre-Hispanic art.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately, there is an extensive literature on the subject.



33. Stone panel with low-relief carving of a skeletal figure. Benque Viejo, Belize. Maya, c. 600–900(?). H 46 cms



34. Stone low-relief carving of a skull (detail from a larger sculpture). Aztec, c. AD 1300–1521.