



# EL DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

History and Customs





In the 16th century Spaniards brought the Catholic celebration of Día de los Muertos to Latin America where it mixed with indigenous rituals honoring the dead. Today, people across Latin America honor their dead and celebrate the cycle of life in early November under a variety of names: “Día de los Muertos” (Day of the Dead), “Día de los Todos Santos” (All Saints Day), “Día de los Difuntos” (Day of the Deceased), and “Día de los Angelitos” (Day of the Little Angels in honor of children who have died).

In general, families begin the morning of November 1 by constructing altars to honor their deceased loved ones. They place photographs and favorite foods of the dead, candles to light the way, incense, and other gifts on the altars. The celebration then shifts to the cemetery where all gather around the graves of relatives. Families carefully clean and sweep the gravesites, and decorate them with colorful adornments, such as streamers, flowers, crosses, candles, and food—all of which serve as offerings to attract and please ancestors. By early afternoon, the cemetery fills with people joyfully celebrating life and death by playing music, dancing, and feasting alongside the spirits of their ancestors.

# History of Día de los Muertos

**N**ative peoples throughout the Americas had been celebrating their ancestors at specific times of the year for centuries. Rituals honoring the dead focused on a reciprocal exchange in which the living offered food, music, flowers, liquor, and other goods to the dead to please them and ensure their blessings in earthly endeavors, such as a successful harvest or marriage.

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Death was not viewed as an end but rather as a part of the life cycle by these natives of America. The indigenous concepts of life and death meshed neatly with the Día de los Muertos traditions brought by the Spanish.

These celebrations date to the 9th century when Pope Gregory IV set November 1 aside to pray for saints, declaring it as All Saints' Day in the liturgical calendar. Approximately four hundred years later, Abbott Odilo of Cluny designated November 2 as All Souls' Day, a day to pray for departed souls, especially those in purgatory. The religious observation of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day spread quickly throughout Europe and was brought to Latin America in the 16th century by Spanish priests, conquistadors, and settlers. Today these dates are



observed in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal liturgical calendars. In Latin America, they are celebrated as happy days with elaborate and joyous festivals unique to each region.

In central Mexico, the Aztecs honored the dead through celebrations and ritual offerings dedicated to the goddess Mictcacihuatl (Lady of the Dead) during early August. The Spaniards moved these rituals to early November to coincide with the Catholic observation of All Saints' Day.

In ancient Mesoamerica (the region that stretches from Central Mexico to Honduras), Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya peoples saw caves as channels to the underworld, the place where the dead reside. Caves in Mesoamerica



still serve as important sites to communicate with dead ancestors through ritual offerings of food, incense, and turkey blood.

In South America, the Inka and pre-Inka peoples mummified their dead through a drying process and stored them in caves (*machay*) or vaults (*chullpas*). The month of November (*Aya Marca Raymi*) was dedicated to ancestor worship, and at this time mummies were taken from their tombs, dressed in fine clothing, and given offerings of llama meat, coca, *chicha* (maize beer), and candles of llama fat in exchange for

their blessings for marriages, fertility, and successful harvests. The Spanish banned these rituals and burned ancestral mummies, and encouraged masses for the dead instead.

Latin Americans continue to see death as part of the life cycle. The deceased participate in family life, exerting their will through blessings and return visits during the Día de los Muertos celebrations. Although each region of Latin America has unique ways of honoring the dead, they are all directed towards welcoming and pleasing deceased relatives to ensure their blessings.



# LAS BICICLETAS.

Calaveras de ciclistas,  
de sportmen y de aviadores,  
de jóvenes moteristas  
y de viejos conductores.

¡Toman paso, que aquí van  
los ciclistas de la muerte  
y arropellan al que encuentran  
porque así sería su suerte.





# Mexico

The celebration of the dead in Mexico takes an especially humorous twist: people confront death by making jokes and laughing at it, painting skulls in bright joyful colors, and personifying death with skeletal figures called *calacas*. The printmaker José Guadalupe Posada's satirical representations of skulls and skeletons in the late 1800s made skeletal imagery the hallmark of the Mexican celebration that it is today. His prints, as well as Frida Kahlo's artwork, are central to the festivities in Mexico and are often displayed as offerings. November 1 is especially dedicated to the spirits of deceased children, *los angelitos*, whereas deceased adults are honored on November 2.

Locals begin the celebration by building altars to honor their deceased relatives in their homes, at the church, or in the cemetery. Altars are unique to each person they honor; they are laid with offerings including photographs and favorite foods of the deceased, flowers, candles, salt, water, sweet breads, and incense. Paths of bright orange marigolds (*Tagetes lucida*) guide the dead home with their powerful fragrance. Known as *cempachuchil*, or 20-petals, in the Nahuatl language, marigolds were used to honor the dead in Aztec and other pre-Hispanic celebrations of death. The rich smell of *copal* (incense) also attracts the dead, candles light

the way, and salt and water purify the souls of returning spirits.

In smaller towns and large cities, people process to the cemetery for picnics at the gravesites of their beloved, converting the cemetery into a grand fiesta with music and dancing. Families decorate their relatives' graves with brightly colored *papel picado* (tissue paper cut-outs) and other offerings

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such as *atole* (a corn-based beverage with spices), tamales, chocolate, and fruit. The festivities continue into the night, with many keeping candlelight vigil by

the graves until morning. Throughout the day and night, people celebrate with and talk about their deceased loved ones as if they were alive, and thus erase the divide between death and life.

Other important traditions in Mexico include *pan de muerto*, an oval-shaped sweet yeast bread decorated with crossed bones or a skull and dusted with sugar, and *calaveritas* (sugar skulls). Handcrafted *calacas* depict skeletons in a variety of activities of the living, representing the hobbies and work of deceased loved ones.

In Mexico City, a custom of writing and publicly displaying short poems called *calaveras* that mock the police, government, and priests has continued since the 19th century.



# Guatemala

**T**he tradition of flying kites, or *barriletes*, on November 1 is a unique aspect of the Guatemalan celebration. This custom reaches its height in the town of Santiago, Sacatepequez, where residents spend months constructing enormous kites, up to several stories high, to fly from the cemetery hillside. Kites serve as a symbolic connection to the dead and help guide returning spirits to their families. Once the celebrations have ended, the kites are burned so that the dead may return peacefully until the next year.

**Kites serve as a symbolic connection to the dead and help guide returning spirits to their families.**

As in Mexico, Catholics in Guatemala prepare special foods and offerings to honor their loved ones on *El Día de los Todos Santos*, and then proceed to the cemetery to share the day with the deceased. The Maya adorn gravesites with pine needles, yellow marigolds called *flor de muerto* (*Tagetes patula*), candles, liquor, and *copal pom* (incense). By early afternoon, the cemetery overflows with families celebrating their loved ones with marimba music, dancing, food, and drink.

In the town of San Jose Petén in northern Guatemala, an important tradition is the procession of three sacred skulls, *las santas calaveras*. Said to be skulls of Mayan kings or priests, they are sought out by individuals who ask them for health, a blessing in marriage, or productive crops. Anyone who makes a request accepts the responsibility to receive the skulls at his or her house for

the following three years. At nightfall on November 1, one of the skulls is taken from house to house in a candlelight procession. Upon entry to a house it is placed atop an altar laden with offerings of food, most commonly hen, tamalitos, liquor, and *ixpasa* (a drink of maize, cinnamon, anise, and allspice made especially for the spirits of children). The skulls are then displayed in the church for nine days, during which a town elder keeps vigil.

Another special Guatemalan tradition for the Día de los Todos Santos is *fiambre*, a cold dish served only at this time of year. The preparation of this dish in association with the dead dates back to the late 16th century, and the dish itself traces a historical trajectory from the Moorish occupation of Spain (in the 8th to the 15th centuries) to the Spanish settlement of the Americas. The principal ingredients of *fiambre* include vegetables native to the Americas such as *pacaya* (a date palm tree blossom), foods introduced by the Spanish such as smoked sausages, cured meats and fish, cheeses, and delicacies from Arabia including olives, capers, and chickpeas. These ingredients are soaked in vinegar for several hours, arranged on a platter, and then sprinkled with the reserved soaking vinegar, called *caldillo*. There are several variations of *fiambre* but all include pickled vegetables and cured meats, making it an ideal dish to await the dead. Derived from a colloquial Spanish word for cold (*frio*), the name *fiambre* alludes both to the cold meats in the dish as well as to a cadaver.







A. DAVIER



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BOYO



# Bolivia

**T**raditional Andean offerings such as coca leaves, llama meat, and the fermented corn drink called *chicha* are placed on altars honoring the dead in Bolivia. Early November marks the beginning of the rainy season when recently planted seeds are germinating. To attract the rain, farmers play music on flutes called *pinkullus*, filling the cemetery with melancholic music that beckons returning spirits.

**Bolivians place special importance on receiving and pleasing their ancestors during the first three years after death as the spirit of the deceased is still tightly connected to the living.**

As in other areas of Latin America, Bolivians construct household altars to honor their deceased loved ones with photographs and personal belongings of the deceased, as well as candles, flowers, sweets, sugarcane, and meat dishes served with spicy *satja* sauce. More elaborate altars reflect the different planes that are so important in the Andes: llama meat, fish, and baskets of flowers are placed beneath the table to represent *Uma Pacha*, the underworld; the base of the altar is adorned with lowland products such as coca leaves, bananas, and *chicha*; *chuño* (dried potatoes), beer, and ocas from the highlands cover the table; and above this a cross made of sugar cane is hung to represent the heavens. On November 2, the altar is moved to the cemetery where the celebration continues. Bolivians place special

importance on receiving and pleasing their ancestors during the first three years after death as the spirit of the deceased is still tightly connected to the living.

In both Bolivia and Peru, small sweet yeast breads called *t'anta wawas* flavored with cinnamon and sprinkled with sugar are made at this time of year. In the most traditional form they are shaped like babies (*wawas*), and may be decorated with a plastic babydoll mask; newer variations include pets, houses, and flowers. *T'anta wawas* are placed as offerings to the dead on house altars and at the head of the grave of loved ones. In Andean Ecuador, similar

foods are prepared on November 1, including sweet breads shaped like children called *guaguas de pan* and a purple beverage called *colada morada* made of blue corn, blackberries, and other fruits.

A tradition unique to Bolivia is the veneration of human skulls called *ñatitas*, or “little souls.” Owners of *ñatitas* keep them in their homes and communicate with them through dreams, asking the *ñatita* for favors such as prosperity, safety, and health. In early November in the city of La Paz, believers take their *ñatitas* to the cemetery for a celebratory mass in which they are crowned and covered with flower petals, given cigarettes, and splashed with alcohol. Owners and other celebrants eat, chew coca, smoke cigarettes, and drink alcohol alongside the *ñatitas*.

# Altar of the Dead

The altar is the sacred site where the living souls honor the dead. Each of the materials used to build the altar has a special significance. The portrait of the departed shows the spirit where to go, and a small cross of ashes helps spirits in purgatory find their way out. Candles, especially purple ones, represent grief. Four candles formed into a cross represent the four cardinal points, so that the soul may orient itself and find its path. The smoke of copal incense cleanses the space of evil spirits, allowing the soul to enter its home free of danger. The large cross of ashes allows the soul to atone for its unresolved sins once it arrives at the altar. The soul uses the basin, soap, and towel on the altar to wash its hands after the

long journey. Favorite foods are arranged on the altar to entice the soul to visit the living. Liquor, preferably tequila, reminds the soul of the wonderful experiences of life, and a jar of water quenches the spirit's thirst and moistens its lips for the long journey. Skulls made of sugar, placed on top of the altar, serve as an allusion to the constant presence of death. Three smaller skulls at the base of the altar are dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and a larger one is dedicated to the Eternal Father. Lastly, the space is decorated with flowers to make it more beautiful and appealing to the spirit.

*Adapted from: Martin Hernández, Jorge Paul Rodríguez, and Alejandra Canela, <http://historyart17.blogspot.com>*

## Further Reading

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