

Day of the Dead Traditions

IN RURAL MEXICAN VILLAGES

by Ann Murdy , writer and photographer



A woman prays at a traditional Day of the Dead altar created in honor of loved ones who have died.

Day of the Dead, or Día de los Muertos as it is known in México, is a celebration of life. It is a time we honor and celebrate the lives of those who are no longer with us by constructing home altars, or *ofrendas*, in their memory and visiting their graves. An altar brings a loved one back to life, and relatives place on it all the things the person once enjoyed eating or drinking. Additionally, *ofrendas* include mementos, photos of the relative, and a glass of water and bread. The altars are adorned with marigold flowers which represent the fragility of life. A pathway of vibrant marigold petals is sprinkled from the outside of the home to the foot of the altar. This pathway, adorned with lit candles, guides the souls back to the home. Sweet-smelling copal, an incense-like resin, is burned to aid in communication with the spirits.

The Spanish friars brought All Saints' Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2) to México in the sixteenth century. In order to convert the indigenous people to Christianity, the friars allowed the people of México to continue their death rituals in November of each year.

The earliest festival was the Aztec Festival of the Little Dead, which took place in Tlaxochimaco, the ninth month of their calendar, July 24–August 12. This festival honored children who had died. The second festival, the Great Festival of the Dead, took place during Huey Miccailhuitontli, the tenth month, August 13–September 1. At this festival, the lives of deceased adults were honored. During both festivals, offerings of food were placed on the tombs, incense was burned and flower garlands were made.

Day of the Dead became popular in the United

States in 1972 when Self Help Graphics, an art organization in East Los Angeles, and Plaza de la Raza in San Francisco initiated the first Day of the Dead celebrations. Since then, Day of the Dead celebrations have spread across the country and now feature art exhibits, public altars, processions and live entertainment.

In 2017 I decided to create a book featuring my photos of how Day of the Dead is celebrated in rural communities in México. I was concerned that popular culture was becoming more important than authentic culture. Here in the United States, this beautiful tradition seemed to be devolving into a Mexican version of Halloween. Also, the popular animated Disney/Pixar film *Coco*, set in one of the villages I visited, had a huge influence on the celebration in México. Since 1991 I have been documenting how Day of the Dead is celebrated, and it has become increasingly commercialized.

I selected three communities in México to feature in my book: the Nahua community of Huaquechula, Puebla; the Zapotec community of Teotitlán del Valle, Oaxaca; and the Purépecha communities around Lake Pátzcuaro in Michoacán. Each has different rituals to celebrate the lives of their departed loved ones.

Todos Santos (All Saints) is the name of the celebration in Huaquechula. The spirits of those who died a violent death return on October 28. October 31 is the day the spirits of the children up to the age of eighteen return. All other spirits return on November 1. At two o'clock in the afternoon on each of these dates, the church bells ring, announcing the return of the dead.

Huaquechula is known for their monumental altars made from pleated white satin. A person receives one of these altars the first year he or she has passed away. After that, the deceased receives a simple altar known as an altar *viejo* (old altar). Visitors to homes in this village bring a candle to add to the altar, and the families invite callers to enjoy food and beverages. Family members and guests visit the cemeteries on November 2.

In Teotitlán del Valle, the celebration is known as La Festividad de los Muertos (The Festival of the Dead). The festival begins at three o'clock in the afternoon on November 1, when bottle rockets are shot off. For the next twenty-four hours the church bells ring nonstop to welcome back the dead. All of the doors of the homes are then opened. Visitors to homes in this village bring bread and a candle for the altar. The family invites them to sit in front of the altar, where they are served *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) and hot chocolate, mezal or beer. After the church bells have stopped ringing on November 2, families visit the cemetery

where all of the graves are elaborately decorated.

In the communities around Lake Pátzcuaro, the celebration is known as La Noche de Ánimas (The Night of the Souls). On November 1, the families decorate the graves and spend the entire night in the cemeteries. In Santa Fe de Laguna, the inspiration for the village featured in *Coco*, the doors of homes open at 6:00 p.m. on October 31 to celebrate the lives of departed children. On November 1 the same custom occurs to honor departed adults. When visiting the homes here, callers bring fruit and a candle for the altar. The families serve visitors a traditional hot corn-and-masa-based drink called atole and offer them posole to eat.

For me, Day of the Dead is one of the most beautiful experiences I have ever witnessed. Entering the cemeteries at night, which are lit only by candlelight, is a magical experience. I am walking on sacred ground. I am overwhelmed by a sense of community, which is tranquil, soulful and heartfelt. Traveling to



México has changed my perception of death and dying. I have learned that as long as we honor our loved ones in this manner, they will live forever.



At the Night of the Souls celebration, families spend the night at the cemetery, where they have decorated the loved ones' graves. Inset: Children in Huaquechula sit before an expansive white satin altar honoring a loved one the first year after his or her death.