

DIA DE LOS MUERTOS: A User's Guide

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DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Introduction:

Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a day of celebration for the people of Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Central America, and more recently for Mexican Americans. Rather than grieve over the loss of a beloved family or friend, they choose to commemorate the lives of the dearly departed and welcome the return of their spirits. The history of Day of the Dead is embedded with Pre-Hispanic and Spanish customs. These customs shaped the common elements of traditional Mexican Dia de los Muertos. Today, Day of the Dead has been increasingly popular with Latinos in the United States. Though many of the traditional elements have remained how and where Day of the Dead is celebrated has changed.

Ancient Mesoamerican customs and beliefs:

For ancient Mesoamericans, life and death were not two independent states of being. Death did not mean the end of one's life but rather through death, new life was created. According to Gabriela Olmos, Day of the Dead may be associated with cyclical nature of agriculture.¹ Trees, plants, and crops grow from the ground in which the dead were buried.

Honoring the dead is not a new tradition in Mexico and Central America. Thousands of years prior to the Spanish Conquest numerous ethnic groups of the region including Aztecs, Mayans, and Toltecs had specific times that they commemorated the deceased. Special months were dedicated to honor the deceased based on whether it was the death of a child or the death of adult. Other months were specifically associated with

¹ Gabriela Olmos. "On Seeds and Death." in *Day of the Dead: Ritual Serenity*. Artes de Mexico #62, 79.

how the person died like a drowning, in childbirth, or in warfare.² During these months of celebration, the indigenous people believed that the deceased would return and they would need to offer them gifts. According to Carmichael and Sayer, providing flowers, food, incense, dances, and music was a way of gaining the favor of the deceased.³

The Spanish Arrival:

Though the arrival of the Spanish drastically changed the lives of the indigenous people, their beliefs did not simply cease. A process called syncretism (a blending of Spanish and indigenous beliefs and practices) was instituted and seemed to only effect indigenous *beliefs* superficially. The clergymen likened the indigenous gods to the Catholic saints. The rituals of worshipping and venerating the dead were changed to correspond with two Spanish holidays: All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls' Day (November 2). Also, Spanish had practices that were similar to Indian like offerings for the dead. By incorporating the beliefs of the Indians, the Spanish were able to quickly convert the majority of Indians to Catholicism.

Spirit's return:

Weeks before Day of the Dead, families start preparing for the return of their loved ones. Families visit cemeteries to have a picnic and clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones. Graves and cemeteries are adorned with *Cempasuchitl* (a marigold flower native to Mexico), candles, and incense. The petals of the *Cempasuchitl* are used to make a pathway. Their scent and color attract the spirits and lead them from the cemetery back to their home.

The Ofrenda:

² Dominique Dufetel. "Occult Ancestors." in *Day of the Dead: Ritual Serenity*. Artes de Mexico #62, 69.

³ Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992) 31.

The welcoming of the spirits back is seen in the home with the creation of an *ofrenda* (altar or literally an offering). On the *ofrenda*, many significant objects are placed as gifts to the deceased loved ones. Of these many objects, the altar holds four important elements: water, wind, fire, and earth. Water is given to quench the spirit's thirst from their long journey and is usually put in a clay pitcher or a glass. Fire is signified by the candles and wind is signified by *papel picado* ("punched" paper). The earth element is represented by food, usually *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead). Other food and drinks are left on the altar like *mole* (sauce with many spices and herbs), fruit, chocolate, *atole* (corn-based drink), and whatever the deceased person liked. Copal incense is commonly seen on *ofrendas*. Copal was used in many ancient indigenous rituals and used to "transmit praises and prayers."⁴ For deceased children, toys and *calaveritas de azucar* (sugar skulls) are also placed on the altar. In addition, flowers are placed on the altar as well as pictures of the deceased and religious items. These offerings ensure that the dead will have everything they need for their journey back.

Dancing

Since Day of the Dead is a celebration rather than a period of mourning, music and dancing are necessary. The types of dancing performed vary regionally. A popular dance that originated from the state of Michoacan is La Danza de los Viejitos (the dance of the little old men). Young men and sometimes boys dress up as old men. They walk out crouched over and holding their backs and then abruptly jump up and start dancing with great enthusiasm. La Danza de los Tecuanes (the dance of the tigers/jaguars) is colonial dance that illustrates farm workers hunting a jaguar or tiger. Some dancers portray the farm workers while two or three dancers represent the devil and jaguars or tigers.

Day of the Dead in the United States:

⁴ Juanita Garciagodoy. *Digging the Days of the Dead: A Reading of Mexico's Dias De Muertos*. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1998) 9.

With the exceptions of border communities in Texas and Arizona, celebrations of Dia de los Muertos have become fairly recent celebrations. The Chicano movement is credited for the emergence of Day of the Dead in the U.S. The movement gave Latinos pride in their ethnic identity and heritage and enabled them to combat the negative stereotypes. The renewed interest in Day of the Dead enabled Latinos to “remember personal and communal *antepasados* (ancestors) [and] strengthened [their] sense of historic past.”⁵

Many elements symbolic of Day of the Dead in Mexico are incorporated in its celebration in the United States like the use of *calacas* (skulls or skeletons), marigolds, candles, and elaborate ofrendas. However, where ofrendas are placed indicates the difference between U.S. and Mexico’s Day of the Dead. In Mexico, altars are typically found in homes and churches, however, in the United States altars are seen as part of museum exhibits.⁶ It is becoming more common that ofrendas combine traditional objects with more contemporary elements. According to Kay Turner and Pat Jasper, ofrendas in U.S. show a “mix of popular with tradition materials, sacred with secular, and personal with national and political agendas.”⁷ This year, the Mexican Fine Arts Center housed an entire section on political topics. Students of the Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy created an ofrendas dealing with immigration titled “Death of a Dream.” The students included traditional objects like sugar skulls, papel picado, pan de muerto, and marigolds. In addition to these traditional items they had objects that signified the dangerous journey immigrants face. There were water jugs representing warrior masks, papel picado with a border scene and barbed wire fence, and in front of the ofrendas is a chain-link fence. Many of the students knew people who took enormous

⁵ Amalia Mesa-Bains. “A Chicano Ceremony of Remembrance and Reclamation.” in *Annual El Dia de los Muertos Celebration*. (San Francisco: Galeria de la Raza, n.d) 3.

⁶ Kay Turner and Pat Jasper. “Day of the Dead: The Tex-Mex tradition.” in *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee, 1994) 134.

⁷ Turner and Jasper, 134.

risk to find a better life in the U.S.⁸ They are not only making a political statement but honoring those who died trying to cross the border.

Conclusion:

Remembering and celebrating the deceased has been a significant part of life in Mesoamerica for thousands of year. Even with the drastic changes brought on by the Spanish conquest, the indigenous people were able to retain this long held practice and combine it with Spanish aspects to create what is now known as Dia de los Muertos. Similarly, Latinos in the United States have developed a new version of Day of the Dead that has significance for their new lives in the U.S. Though Day of the Dead is continuing to evolve, the underlying sense of commitment in honoring the deceased has remained.

⁸ Oscar Avila. "Day of the Dead Remembers Immigrants" Chicago Tribune. September 21, 2006. Available online: <http://www.topix.net/content/trb/1908549512182496478930210583332720438831>

Glossary:

Antepasados – ancestors; the ones who are given offerings by their families and friends.

Atole - a hot beverage made with ground corn powder or cornstarch

Calacas – skulls and skeletons that are shown in a variety of activities

Calaveritas de azucar – sugar skulls that are elaborately decorated, sugar represents the sweetness of life and skull represents

Cempasuchitl – yellow or orange marigolds that are seen on graves and altars and whose smell and color are believed to attract the spirits and lead them back home

Mole – a chocolate based sauce made with many herbs and spices, usually served on chicken or turkey

Ofrenda – “offering,” another word for altar where food, candles, flowers, pictures and mementos are left for the dead

Pan de muerto – “bread of the dead,” baked into different shapes (human, bones, etc) and usually put on the altar

Papel picado – “punched paper,” paper banners decorated with elaborate designs

Lesson Ideas:

- 1) Have students look at the Smithsonian Community Ofrenda (have pic of ofrenda). Discuss the significant components of the ofrenda. What do they signify? Why are they placed there? What components have not been explained? Have them research these items and answer why they are placed there.

- 2) Have students create an ofrenda about an issue affecting your community. What traditional objects can be placed on it? What are some newer objects that can be placed on it?
- 3) Have the students research the origins of Halloween and the origins of Day of the Dead. What are some important differences and similarities? How has the holiday changed since it began?

Activities:

1) Paper Marigolds

Marigolds (Cempasuchitl) are called the flowers of the dead. It is believed that the fragrant smell and their yellow-orange color attract and lead the deceased on their journey to visit their families and friend.

(Adapted from <http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/crafts/paperflowers.html>)

What you need:

- Yellow and/or Orange Tissue Paper
- Green Pipe Cleaners
- Scissors

1. Layer 5-6 pieces of tissue paper. It is helpful to cut the tissue paper into 6"-7" inch squares.
2. Fold the paper like a fan (each strip about an inch wide).
3. With scissors, round off the two edges.
4. In the middle of the fan cut a v- shape out of half the width of the fan.
Take the pipe cleaner and wrap it around this part. Leave a little pipe cleaner to for a leaf. Spread out the fan.
5. Take the top layer of the fan and pull it up. Repeat with remaining layers.
Fluff out if necessary.

2) Papel Picado

Papel Picado (“Punched Paper”) is traditionally used for many Mexican holidays including Day of the Dead. During Day of the Dead, banners of papel picado decorate ofrendas. The papel picado represents wind, one of the four aspects important to an altar.

(Adapted from <http://www.nps.gov/archive/tuma/PapelPicado.html> and http://www.dltk-kids.com/world/mexico/mpapel_picado.htm)

What you need:

- Assorted tissue paper (about 8” by 11”)
- Scissors (for older students a small hobby knife can be used for more complicated patterns)
- Hole puncher or decorative hole punchers (optional)
- String
- Tape

For simpler design:

1. Fold the tissue paper lengthwise and fold twice widthwise.
2. Start cutting out patterns (squares, triangles, rectangles, curvy lines, etc.) but do not cut the corners of the paper. You can also use the hole puncher to add more designs to the paper.
3. For added flair, unfold it and decorate the bottom edge with zigzags, waves, etc.
4. To make a banner, fold the top edge over a long piece of string and tape it. Add at least four more sheets of papel picado.

For more complex designs:

1. Draw or use a pattern (<http://www.nps.gov/archive/tuma/PapelPicado.html> or <http://72.14.209.104/search?q=cache:FWMQz3-lIEYJ:www.storyboardtoys.com/releases/Papel-Picado-Pattern-Simple.pdf+papel+picado&hl=en&gl=us&ct=clnk&cd=32>). You layer multiple layers of tissue paper.
2. Fold the paper lengthwise and with a pencil lightly sketch the design on the paper. Shade the area that will be cut out. Remember the inner pattern needs to the edges of the paper.
3. With scissors or a hobby knife to cut out shaded area. There needs to be a piece of cardboard or magazine underneath if using a hobby knife because it

will cut past the tissue paper. The bottom edge can also be decorated with zigzags, waves, etc.

Note: It is helpful to pin the layers of tissue paper so they do not move. To prevent the paper from tearing, place tissue paper between two pieces of regular paper.

3) Sugar Skulls

Calaveritas de azucar or sugar skulls are given to children as gifts or placed on the ofrenda as an offering. The skull represents death while the sugar represents the sweetness of life.

(Adapted from <http://www.gourmetsleuth.com/sugarskullsmaking.htm> and <http://www.mexicansugarskull.com/mexicansugarskull/recipe.htm>)

What you need:

- Large mixing bowl
- 2 cups of granulated sugar
- 2 teaspoons of meringue powder
- 2 teaspoons of water
- Plastic skull molds
- A piece of cardboard for each skull

1. Mix the meringue powder and sugar in large bowl.
2. Add water and continue mixing until dough feels like moist sand. It is too dry if sugar is still in your hands.
3. Begin to pack dough into mold firmly. Make sure that the dough is packed completely into the grooves of the mold. Use the cardboard to scrape any excess dough from mold and back into mixing bowl.
4. Take the cardboard over the mold and invert.
5. Remove the mold carefully. If it doesn't lift off easily the mixture is too wet.
6. Let the skull dry overnight or at least 8 hours.
7. Decorate with ready-made icings, sequins, beads, etc.

4) Papier Mache Skulls

Skulls and skeletons (*calacas*) are commonly associated with Day of the Dead. They are elaborately decorated and typically adorn the altar (*ofrenda*).

(Adapted from Kathy Cano-Murillo's La Casa Loca p. 70-71 and <http://www.juniperlearning.com/skull.html>)

What you need:

- Papier mache mix (Wheat Paste or make your own with 2 cups of flour, 2 cups water, and ½ cup of school glue)
 - Newspaper (Cut into small rectangular pieces)
 - Balloons
 - Scissors or an Exacto knife
 - Cardboard (one for each skull)
 - Masking tape
 - Acrylic paint (any color you desire)
 - Paintbrushes
 - Assortment of decorative paints, glitter, sequins, etc.
1. Combine papier mache mix until it is a runny consistency.
 2. Blow up the balloon to desired size. Dip newspaper in mix. Make sure the mix is evenly spread on the newspaper strip where it is damp but not drenched in mix.
 3. Place strips on the balloon and cover the balloon. Make sure that the newspaper lies smoothly on the balloon without bubbles. Let the first layer dry for a while. Then apply 2 more layers.
 4. After the balloon is dry, you can attach a rectangular piece of cardboard (about 4" by 2") under the balloon's knot. This will form the jaw of the skull. Cover this with 2-3 layers of papier mache.
 5. Above the jaw, you can cut out a triangle for the nose and above that two circles for the eyes with an Exacto knife or the scissors' blade. The balloon will pop. Cover the holes with papier mache so they are inverted with 2-3 layers.
 6. Let dry a few hours or overnight. You can apply a basecoat of acrylic paint. Decorate the skull anyway you desire.

Note: The papier mache mixture makes enough for about five - six medium size skulls.

Education Standards for History:

(Adapted from the National Center for History in the Schools at the University of California's National Standards for History. Available online at: <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards/>)

K-4th

- Topic One – Living and Working Together in Families and Communities, Now and Long Ago
 - Standard 1A - The student understands family life now and in the recent past; family life in various places long ago.
 - Compare and contrast family life now with family life in the local community or state long ago by considering such things as roles, jobs, communication, technology, style of homes, transportation, schools, religious observances, and cultural traditions.
 - Standard 1B: The student understands the different ways people of diverse racial, religious, and ethnic groups, and of various national origins have transmitted their beliefs and values
 - Explain the ways that families long ago expressed and transmitted their beliefs and values through oral traditions, literature, songs, art, religion, community celebrations, mementos, food, and language.
- Topic Four – The History of Peoples of Many Cultures Around the World
 - Standard 7A - The student understands the cultures and historical developments of selected societies in such places as Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe.
 - Analyze the dance, music, and arts of various cultures around the world to draw conclusions about the history, daily life, and beliefs of the people in history.

Grades 5-12

- World History Across the Eras
 - Standard 1 – Long-term changes and recurring patterns in world history
 - Student is able to: Trace major patterns of long-distance trade from ancient times to the present and analyze ways in which trade has contributed to economic and cultural change in particular societies or civilizations.

Grades 7-12

- Era 6 - The Emergence of the First Global Age, 1450-1770
 - Standard 1B - The student understands the encounters between Europeans and peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, and the Americas in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

- Explain the founding and organization of Spanish and Portuguese colonial empires in the Americas and Southeast Asia and assess the role of the Catholic Church in colonial administration and policies regarding indigenous populations.
 - Standard 6A - The student understands major global trends from 1450 to 1770.
 - Identify patterns of social and cultural continuity in various societies and analyze ways in which peoples maintained traditions and resisted external challenges in the context of a rapidly changing world.

Grades 9-12

- Era 9 – The 20th Century Since 1945: Promises and Paradoxes
 - Standard 3A - The student understands major global trends since World War II
 - Analyze connections between globalizing trends in economy, technology, and culture in the late 20th century and dynamic assertions of traditional cultural identity and distinctiveness.

Resources:

Books

For Children

Johnston, Tony. The Day of the Dead. Orlando: Harcourt and Brace Company, 1997.
Grade Level: K-3

Joose, Barbara M. Ghost Wings. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001.
Grade Level: K-3

Ancona, George. Pablo Remembers: The Fiesta for Day of the Dead. Harper-Collins Publishers, 1993.
Grade Level: 2-6

Hoyt-Goldsmith Diane. The Day of the Dead: A Mexican-American Celebration New York: Holiday House, 1994.
Grade Level: 4-6

For Adults

Beimler, Rosalind Rosoff. The Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed. San Francisco: Harper-Collins Publishers, 1991.

Carmichael, Elizabeth and Chloe Sayer. The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991.

Garciagodoy, Juanita. Digging the Days of the Dead: A Reading of Mexico's Dias de Muertos. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

Paz, Octavio. "Day of the Dead." in Labyrinth of Solitude. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1985. p.47-64.

Salinas-Norman, Bobbie. Indo-Hispanic Folk Art Traditions V. 2. Oakland, CA: Piñata Publications, 1991.

Turner, Kay and Pat Jasper. "Day of the Dead: The Tex-Mex Tradition." Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life. Ed. Jack Santino. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1994. p.133-151.

Periodicals:

Brandes, Stanley. "The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity." *The Journal of American Folklore*, V. 111, No. 442, 359-380.

Brandes, Stanley. "Sugar, Colonialism, and Death: On the Origins of Mexico's Day of the Dead." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, V. 36, No. 2, 270-299

Congdon, Kristin G., Delgado-Trunk C., & Lopez, M. "Teaching about the "Ofrenda" and Experiences on the Border." *Studies in Art Education*, V. 40, No. 4, 312-329.

Websites:

<http://www.public.iastate.edu/~rjsalvad/scmfaq/muertos.html> (general information)

<http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/> (general information)

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4984706> (Sound bite)

<http://www.elpayaso.com/table.htm> (Great for pictures)

<http://www.topix.net/content/trb/1908549512182496478930210583332720438831> (article)

<http://noticias.aol.com/estadosunidos/galerias/diademuertosenue> (Sound bites in Spanish and photo/video of the 2006 NMAI/NMAH Dia de los Muertos festival)

Images:



Smithsonian Ofrenda dedicated to Celia Cruz

Source: <http://americanhistory.si.edu/events/event.cfm?key=26&eventkey=542>



Los Viejitos

Source: <http://www.folklorico.com/danzas/viejitos/viejitos.jpg>



Mexican Center for Fine Arts Museum's Talcott Ofrenda about Immigration