

The Day of the Dead

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When Two Worlds Meet in Oaxaca

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For Ellie & Monica & Our Families
&
All Our Oaxacan Friends

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Shawn D. Haley

1. The Day of the Dead

The Aztec called the hummingbird the ‘Messenger of the Gods’ because this tiny bird seemed to exist in both the natural and the supernatural world at the same time. Its body was in our world while its wings, beating so fast as to be invisible, were in the other world. For most of the Mesoamerican peoples, including the Zapotec of central Oaxaca, there is a very fine line that separates the world of the living from the supernatural world where the dead live. On *el día de muertos* (the Day of the Dead), that line dissolves and, for a time, there is only one world. At that time, November first and second, the dead return to their former homes on earth for a while to eat, to drink, to sing, to be entertained, and to visit with their loved ones. The dead return home as they have done for millennia and the living throw open their doors to them. The reunion is indeed joyous and is a time that is eagerly anticipated.

It is called the Day of the Dead but it is more like a ‘season’ of the dead. It begins in mid-October with a formal invitation issued by the living and continues until San Andreas Day (November 30) when, it is said, San Andreas closes the gates of Heaven after all of the souls have returned.¹ However,



An elaborate and irreverent Day of the Dead ofrenda built in the home of Juan Manuel, a silversmith in the city of Oaxaca.

1. Lechuga 2002.

most of the activity centers on the first two days of November, the Spanish Catholic All Saints' and All Souls' Days, but there is little of the Spanish influence to be found in the Oaxacan Day of the Dead. The Spanish version, which is bleak and dismal, requires one to go to the cemetery to pray and to mourn once again for lost loved ones. For the Oaxaqueñans, these days are not bleak and dismal, rather they are joyous and exuberant. It is not a mourning of lost loved ones, but a celebration, a reunion with the dead.

For many of the people of southern Mexico, the influence *el día de muertos* has on their daily lives is immeasurable. It affects everything they do. It certainly has an impact on the way they see the world and themselves in it. For example, Soledad claimed that her home was in the tiny village of San Dionicio, despite the fact that she was born in Ocotlán and has never lived anywhere else. To her and to many others, home is not where you were born. It has nothing to do with where you live. It is where your dead are buried. Soledad's grandparents are buried in San Dionicio and so that is 'home' to her. The point is reinforced by the observation that one village – Real de Catorce in the state of San Luis Potosí – literally becomes a village of the dead in early November. The graveyard in that village has not been used in a long time and so few of the living have dead ancestors there. Almost everyone from Real de Catorce travel to their 'homes,' neighboring villages where their dead are buried to celebrate the Day of the Dead. Only the long dead remain behind to protect the village.²

Even those who now live far away return home for the Day of the Dead regardless of the hardship this might generate. On a commercial farm in San Diego County, California, a manager who hires a large number of migrant workers from Oaxaca had to deal with this yearly. "One day I'd have thirty or thirty-five workers in the field; the next day they'd all be gone. I'd want to fire them all but then I'd have to train new guys every year. Finally, I just shut the operation down for two weeks in order to keep my best people." Incidentally, the same manager noted that all of his workers were willing to work straight through the Christmas season and Easter week providing they could get home for the Day of the Dead.

Around the middle of October, families go to the cemeteries to invite their deceased relatives to the celebration. Some prepare formal invitations, but most of the time the announcement is informal, delivered as part of a regular visit to the cemetery. This invitation marks the beginning of the 'season' and preparations start in earnest. To outsiders, it seems like the village people have taken leave of their senses, preparing a party when the invited partygoers are all dead. As we will see later, being dead is no big deal for a Oaxaqueñan. First, let us look at that party we call the Day of the Dead.

Imagine that you are expecting some relatives or friends who live far away and can only visit on rare occasions. They are coming home to visit but circumstances prevent them from staying more than a day or two. You would pull out all the stops.

2. Martínez 1997.



A traditional Day of the Dead ofrenda in the home of Carlos, a baker in the city of Oaxaca.

You would want to make sure that their visit was the best one possible. Nothing can be allowed to interfere with it and you will do everything you can to insure a happy, harmonious reunion. Among the first things you would do is notify all of the local relatives and friends of the impending visit. You will arrange for all the locals to meet at a specific time and place, but of course you will schedule some quality time for the visitors and their closest relatives and friends. You will then plan to open up the gathering to everyone. Perhaps you would even move the gathering to a public place like a hall or hold it outdoors in some communal area such as a park.



Traditional foods such as pan de muertos (bread for the dead), tamales, and hot chocolate were placed side by side with more modern elements such as beer, Pepsi-cola, and cigarettes on this ofrenda in Zaachila.

To make sure the visitors have a good time, you will go to the store and get all of their favorite foods, favorite drinks, favorite treats, and favorite music. You would plan to have whatever meals your family traditionally has when there is a special occasion. You will use your 'good' dishes and possibly go so far as to decorate your house in a festive manner. There is no doubt you will do all you can to signal to your guests that they are special to you. You will politely refuse offers of assistance that the locals offer. You want to do it all yourself but, in the back of your mind, you know that the local folks will show up bringing potluck dishes, drinks, and other special treats or gifts. They too want to show the visitors how much they care.

On the day your guests arrive, all regular activities stop. Normal routines are discarded to be replaced by festivities. The food and the drinks will be put out and replenished constantly. With favorite music as background, the members of the family and



A close up of the ofrenda in the house of Jesus in Teotitlan del Valle. In the center of the picture is a stack of crisp tortillas (called totopos), some salt and some pan de muertos.

close friends gather in your home to visit, to gossip, to enjoy the company of the visitors and of each other. There will be a constant stream of relatives and others coming and going. The chatter is nonstop and will continue throughout the day and into the night as well. You can always catch up on lost sleep once your guests have gone.

The next day, the party might move to a larger venue where everyone, even those who know the visitors only slightly, can visit with your guests. To make this day as special as the one before, you might add some fireworks, perhaps hire a local band in addition to keeping the food and refreshments flowing. Of course, the short visit is over all too soon and your guests depart. You are sad to see them go but you are happy that you had that time with them. You sit back, reflect on the visit, enjoying those parts that went well and planning to improve on those that did not go so well.



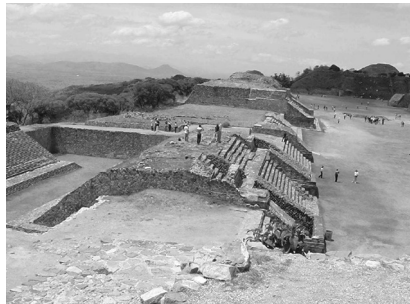
A simple rural ofrenda from the home of Doris in Ejutla de Crespo. All of the materials on this ofrenda were purchased locally.

The people of Oaxaca in southern Mexico do exactly what you would have done in this situation. There are only slight differences between your behavior and that of the Oaxaqueños. The visitors who live far away and come visiting for a short time happen to be dead and all the dead are coming home at once. People have to juggle their time to give their own relatives adequate time, but also to fit in visits with all of the other visitors around the village that you would like to see. This visit and the often frantic activity that comes with it combine to become what is known as *el día de muertos*.

2. Oaxaca and Its People

The state of Oaxaca is both culturally and environmentally diverse with ecozones ranging from swampy lowlands to highland areas deeply incised by canyons and arroyos. There are roughly sixteen indigenous groups scattered across the state, each with its own language and set of customs. However, the central valleys are part of a single ecosystem and are dominated by a single indigenous group, the Zapotec. The name “Zapotec” comes from the *Náhuatl* word *Tzapotecatl* that means “the village of zapote” and refers to the large number of zapote fruit trees growing in the Oaxaca area. The Spanish corrupted the *Náhuatl* word to the present Zapotec. Of course, the locals do not call themselves Zapotec but instead are the *ben 'zaa* (the people of the clouds) or simply *'zaa* (the people).

The central valleys of Oaxaca are bordered on all sides by the Sierra Madre Mountains and share, with some local microvariations, a single ecosystem that ranges in altitude from 1150 to 1850 meters (3773 to 6070 feet) above sea level. The climate ranges from temperate to hot and from dry to humid, with the major climatic factor being rain. Some areas get rain all year while much of the valley system gets rain only during the summer months, with some regions getting very little rain at any time of the year. Generally, the center regions of each valley arm falls into the temperate zone with sufficient seasonal rainfall while the higher edges of the valleys tend to be hotter and drier.³ Vegetation tends to be savanna-like on the valley floors.



The ruins of Monte Alban, an ancient city on top of a hill high above the city of Oaxaca (photo by Ellie Braun-Haley).

There are three valleys in the Central Valley System: (1) an arm running west from the city of Oaxaca (containing the District of Etla); (2) another arm running east from the city (the District of Tlacolula); and (3) the longest valley running south from the city and including the districts of Zimitlán, Ocotlán, Ejutla and Mihuatlán. Since the city of Oaxaca sits where all three valleys converge, it has its own district (Cen-

3. Alvarez 1994: 106-107.

tro) and is considered a fourth part of the Central Valley System. According to the 1990 Census, the Central Valleys contained 797,261 people or 26.4% of the total population of the State of Oaxaca (but in area, the valleys represent only 12.6% of the total area of the state). Because the Central Valley System is geographically separable from the rest of the state, and is home to a single (but not necessarily homogeneous) ethnic/linguistic group—the Zapotec—it is possible to look at that single ethnic group and how its members celebrate the Day of the Dead.

The city of Oaxaca de Juárez has among its population representatives of all of the ethnic groups present in the state. It also has a sizeable population that considers Spanish to be its mother tongue and whose members identify with the city rather than with any ethnic home region. This group and its urban affiliations allowed data to be collected on the effects of urbanization on what is essentially a rural celebration.



A campesino traveling home with his herd to San Lorenzo a few miles west of the city of Oaxaca (photo by Ellie Braun-Haley).

Ethnicity, Variation and Loyalty

Many villagers in Oaxaca assign their loyalties to their villages rather than the poorly perceived nation of Mexico. “The Zapotec peasant has traditionally thought of himself first and foremost as a citizen of his own community. De la Fuente notes that Oaxacan villages have come to resemble small sovereign states”⁴

4. Dennis 1987: 4-5; also see De la Fuente 1965: 31-32; Kearney 1972; Newbold Chiñas 1992.