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Elaborate offerings are made to welcome the dead.

Oaxaca's Traditional Celebrations

Centuries of pre-Hispanic, colonial and post-independence history have left our country with a legacy of traditions and fiestas that are still meaningful, even though the way they are celebrated has changed with time. Oaxaca is no exception: the celebration of traditional rites and fiestas, from the cities to the most isolated towns, is a part of day-to-day life throughout the year.¹

THE CULT OF THE DEAD

In the dual world view of the pre-Hispanic peoples, life and death were inseparable; both ruled the passage of Man on Earth. The cult of the dead was part of Mesoamerican peoples' everyday life. Like most, the Mixtecs, Zapotecs and Mixes believed that the spirits came to visit every year, and they held festivities to celebrate the

visit. When the Spanish conquistadors and religious orders arrived, they tried to transform this custom and adapt it to Christianity. The Catholic Church declared November 2 All Saints Day. Church altars were adorned as for a funeral, all in black, and decorated with an offering. Years later, the tradition of placing these altars in the churches was eliminated and the offerings began to be put up in people's homes.



The tradition of erecting altars is centuries old.

In Oaxaca, on October 31 and November 1 and 2, the graveyards are festooned with flowers and most people prepare elaborate offerings with which to welcome their dead. October 31 is reserved for going to the "Plaza —or Market— of the Dead" to buy everything necessary. Wooden boxes in the shape of coffins are put on a table and covered with white sheets or paper cut-outs, over which arches made of sugar cane or another kind of cane are erected. On this "coffin" they place the offering: *mole* sauce, pumpkin cooked in brown sugar, Day of the Dead sweet buns, local fruit, chocolate, water and mescal, among other things, prepared specially for the spirits of the dead to savour their aromas and quench their thirst after their long pilgrimage from the other life to Earth. But the road the spirits travel must be well lit, so white or yellow candles or an oil lamp are also included. Copal or incense are lit



The Night of the Radishes. Children showing their skills.



La Calenda processions from different churches meet around 11 p.m. in downtown Oaxaca.

to attract them with their aroma, and *campesúchil* flowers cover the rest of the table. Paper and clay figures are also included, arranged in different ways to mock death.

The “little angels,” children who died after being baptized, arrive October 31, around three in the afternoon and begin their return journey at the same time the next day, on November 1, to make way for the adult spirits, who stay at the celebration until the afternoon of November 2, when the living leave their homes to visit the graveyards.

THE NIGHT OF THE RADISHES

The Night of the Radishes is celebrated December 23 in Oaxaca’s Zócalo, or central square. It is a community fiesta in which truck farmers, flower growers and craftsmen—both children and adults— exhibit figures made of radishes, the “immortal flower” (a local flower that is left to dry naturally) and *totomoxtle* (dry corn husks). Entire traditional, historic or biblical scenes are made out of these materials and all compete for prizes in different categories.

This tradition originated at the end of the last century when vegetable farmers



Carving begins three or four days before.

who brought their produce to market began to arrange them artistically to attract buyers, trimming each stand with figures made of radishes, cauliflower leaves and little flowers made from small onions. This custom led to the first contest to elect the market’s best decorated stand on December 23, 1897.

Initially, the competition only included figures made of radishes and the “immortal flower” and *totomoxtle* were added later. Until a few years ago, the radishes used were grown by the truck farmers themselves. Today, they are planted in the *tequio*, or common land, a garden-park on the outskirts of the city, and the organizers distribute them to the contestants. Different sized radishes are used, some up to 50 cm long and 3 kilograms in weight.

The carving begins three or four days before the festivities. Children between the ages of 6 and 12 participate in a special workshop on December 23 and exhibit their work along with the adults. Prizes are given out about 9 p.m. and the fiesta ends with fireworks.

LA CALENDIA

One of the oldest traditions in the city of Oaxaca is *La Calenda*, in which community religious processions leave from different churches in the city and wind through the streets the night of December 24, to meet in downtown Oaxaca and then return to their churches to hear midnight mass.

The origins of *La Calenda* can be traced to the colonial custom that every church or chapel that had its own Christ child would name *padrinos* (community sponsors) for celebrating the Nativity. At least three days before Christmas, these *padrinos* would take the Christ child to their homes and build a nativity scene around it, inviting the neighbors in to pray and celebrate with food and drink. On the 24th, the child would be placed in a basket and serenaded as the spon-



The origins of *La Calenda* can be traced to the colonial period.



La Calenda is one of the oldest traditions in the city of Oaxaca.

sors served *atole*, a hot drink made from corn flour, and tamales to the neighbors who would then accompany him at nightfall on a walk downtown where all the Christs gathered at about 11 p.m. Each procession would then return to its own church to celebrate midnight mass.

Each church organizes the procession, *La Calenda*, that will accompany the child on his walk. They give participants

little colored-lanterns—each church has a different color—, whistles and flares. The cavalcade is headed by a lantern with the name of the church it belongs to, and accompanied by people costumed like biblical figures (Joseph and Mary, the shepherds, the Three Wise Men); the famous giant figures, enormous structures covered in paper or cloth that originally represented the different races that formed

the empire of Jesus; musicians, fireworks makers, and women carrying large baskets of flowers. In recent years, *La Calenda* has included elaborate floats. ■■

Elsie Montiel
Editor

NOTES

¹ Information for this article was provided by the Oaxaca state Ministry of Tourism.

Errata

Our last issue, *Voices of Mexico* 48, contained some errors. The following are the corrections.

Page

37 The illustration appears up side down.

84 The blouse pictured is from Santiago Yaitepec and not Mazatlán, as it says in the caption.

85 The top illustration says “Pinotepa de Don Luis, Mixtec”, and should say “Chinantec” *Huipil*.

We apologize to painter Sergio López Orozco, and author Ruth Lechuga for these errors.

