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# THE DAY OF THE DEAD IN MICHOACAN

Death is a common word in Mexican vocabulary, graphic representations, crafts and traditions. Few peoples have such a cult to death as exists in Mexico, where people joke, play and pursue death as if it were a faithful companion. It is present in many actions in family and social life. Death is a necessity, only that while some flee its presence, others seek it and render tribute. What is the cause of this attitude towards death? In what parts of Mexico exist the strongest traditions of celebrating death? In this article we will only mention some groups which inhabit the state of Michoacán and their ceremonies on the Day of the Dead.

## The Celebration has Pre-Hispanic Origins

Michoacán, a state in the western part of central Mexico, has a special celebration, especially in the areas populated by the Purépecha, Nahuatl and Mazahua indigenous groups. The rites begin on October 31 and continue through November 2, with altars in honor of the dead adorned with flowers, food and drink, and visits to the cemetery.

The Purépecha area is located in the western Sierra Madre, in the neovolcanic zone and around some lakes, such as Pátzcuaro and Zirahuén. The Purépechas are the largest indigenous group in Michoacán.



Children in Mexico City on the night of November 1.  
Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz, Imagenlatina

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In the native cultures, death was conceived as a heaven where all who were born, returned, including the gods. When their gods began to decline, the people thought that chaos was governing the earth. The Resurrection was represented by corn, and the dead were given drinks on the basis of the belief that the dead would be comforted by these as the corn plant is comforted by rain. The indigenous people considered that people died so as to later wake up from a dream and begin a new life as spirits or gods.

There are currently diverse anthropological opinions about the origins of the "festival of death" as it is held today in Michoacán, especially on the island of Janitzio, in the lake of Pátzcuaro. Some historians and anthropologists attribute it to pre-hispanic cultures, while others find the philosophical bases both in indigenous and Spanish colonial customs, and in the fusion that has occurred of these traditions.

### The Fusion of Two Cultures

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico, the Purépechas were the second most important group after the Aztecs, because of their cultural development, their great territorial expansion and their advances in the art of war. In Michoacán, the colonial administration led by Fray Vasco de Quiroga established schools and hospitals for the entire population - the hospitals served both for the sick and as refuges for travellers, and were economically self-sufficient. The state created schools for the teaching of Spanish, of the Gospel and to introduce new craft techniques.

The Spanish idea of death was based on the resurrection of the body, with two distinct destinies after death: heaven or hell. The possibility of going to hell was greatly feared and this generated an aversion to death.



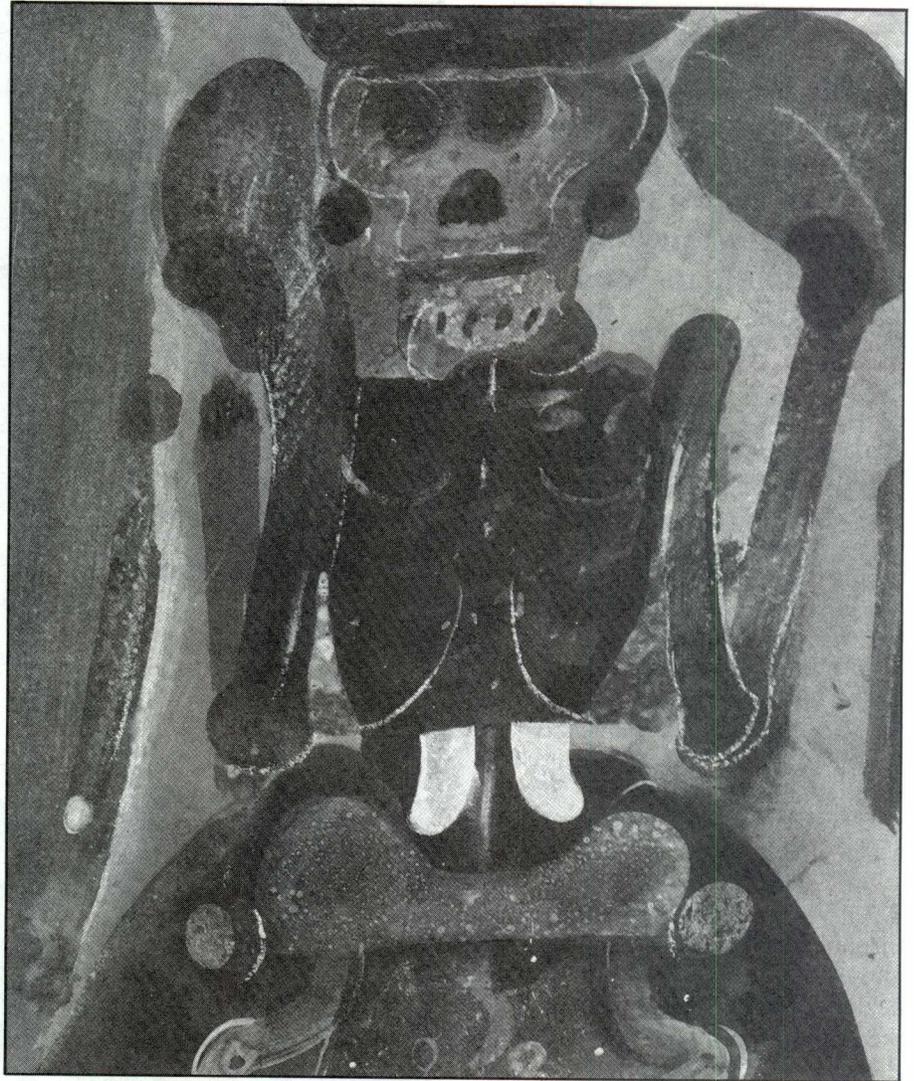
The Day of the Dead in Zacapoaxtla, Puebla. Photo by Marco Antonio Cruz, Imagenlatina.

**The Spanish colony imposed the form and dates of celebration, but indigenous philosophies were not so easily altered**

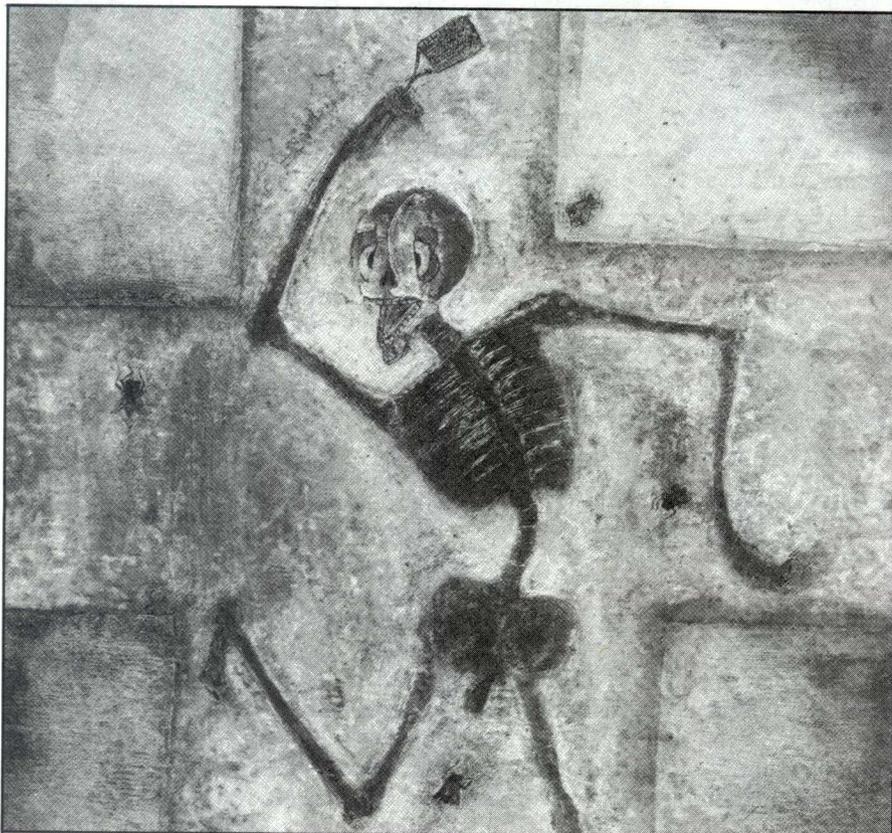
Different government, productive processes, language and religion were imposed by the colony, and the Catholic religion set the dates when a certain saint should be venerated and the manner of doing so. That is, the

Colony imposed the form, but indigenous philosophies were not so easily altered, and the conception of death of both cultures became mixed. The remembrance of the dead was converted into a Catholic celebration, with the observance of rites indicated by the Church and the incorporation of elements from native indigenous beliefs and customs.

On the Day of the Dead, homemade altars are adorned with candles, flowers, food, drink, images of saints and even clothes, all this serving as provisions for the dead in their journey beyond death. The ceremonies of the first two days of November also include visits to the cemetery and dances. The candles represent the light



**Muerte Catrina (1989) by Roger von Gunten.** Photo courtesy of the Juan Martín Gallery, Mexico City.



**Death with a fly swatter (1989) by Francisco Toledo.** Photo courtesy of the Juan Martín Gallery, Mexico City.

which will guide the spirits which return to earth to spend one night with their relatives.

These beliefs and customs are so strongly rooted that in 1943, when the volcano Paricutín erupted, the inhabitants of Parangaricutiro or San Juan de las Colchas, refused to abandon their town, in spite of the burning lava, because their dead relatives "would be left alone with no-one to look after them and receive them" on their annual visit.

The success of the new life of the dead person is considered to depend on the funeral service; if a soul is abandoned at this point it runs the risk of being changed into a "Nahual", a kind of animal spirit which will return to the native town or village and cause harm to its inhabitants.

The indigenous people believe that the dead person must receive offerings of flowers, candles, food and drink during the first three years after death. After this period has ended, the spirit no longer has its own personality, but becomes fused with the completeness of one single Spirit. There is no doubt that this thinking belongs to the pre-hispanic idea that the dead person has to make a long and painful journey to

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the place where he or she will live forever. The presence of the offering will help the dead in this journey to the "beyond". After their death, the dead person becomes a supernatural protector who judges, advises or mediates in the life of their relatives.

**Michoacán Today**

The places most visited by tourists today in Michoacán for their natural beauty and for the high quality production of craft work in copper, wood, wool and clay - are Ihuatzio, Tzintzunzán, Pátzcuaro, Janitzio, Paracho and Huecorio, where various traditional activities are still practised, for example, the ancient ball game is

played in the archeological ruins of the ceremonial center in Ihuatzio.

On the shores of the lake of Pátzcuaro, duck hunting was a traditional activity during centuries, but due to abuses by hunters with powerful firearms, less ducks are arriving from their migratory journey from Canada. The indigenous people used to use a kind of arrow to hunt, and traditionally make a duck soup to place on the altar on the Day of the Dead.

On the night of November 1, the darkness is filled with flickering candle light and the perfume of the orange marigolds. The first day of November is specially dedicated to dead children and to the "little angels" who died before birth, while November 2 is dedicated to the memory of dead adults.

On this day, boats transport hundreds of local people and tourists from Pátzcuaro to the lake's island, Janitzio, where the night long ceremony is held, in spite of the cold and humidity.

Airline companies which service Morelia, capital of Michoacán, located 310 kilometers from Mexico City, are booked out for these dates many months ahead. Hotels in Morelia, Pátzcuaro, Uruapan and other towns are also filled with visitors who arrive from many parts to participate in this colorful ceremony.

There are no social distinctions in this honoring of the dead. All join together, each with his or her own vision, in a festival of peace. □

