



Photos by Dante Barrera

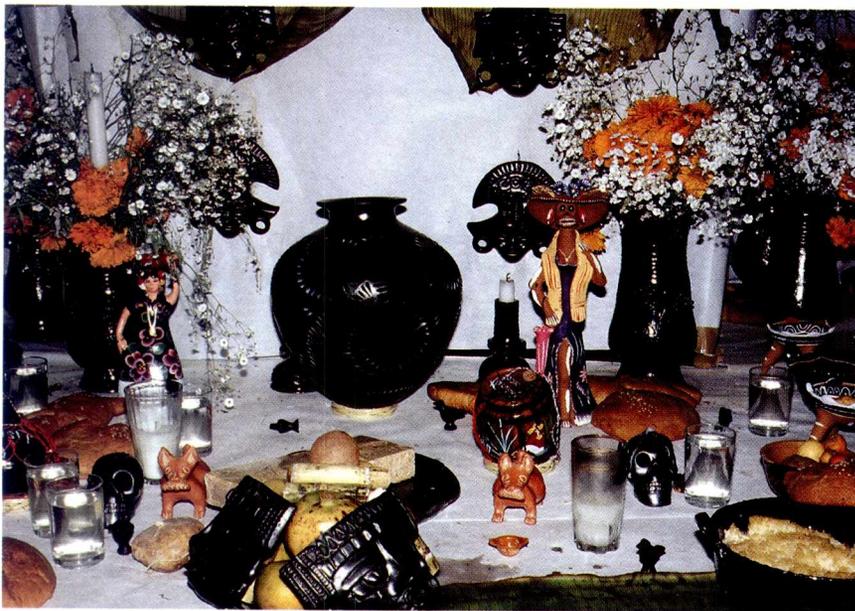
## Offerings On the Day of the Dead

**T**he veneration of the dead is a custom common to the majority of great civilizations and is carried out differently by different cultures and countries. In Mexico, November 1 and 2 (All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day, respectively) are real fiestas dedicated to the dead: they are wor-

shipped, remembered, visited in cemeteries, invoked and presented with offerings.

Offerings the Day of the Dead have become an important popular Mexican custom combining religion, the recovery of traditions, art, ingenuity and even humor. The veneration or worship of

the dead encompasses a characteristic peculiar to the Mexican collective unconscious and its relationship with death: ambivalence vis-à-vis the fear and respect for the beyond on the one hand, and scornful mocking as a defense mechanism against the unknown on the other.



The offering was designed in the style of the southern state of Oaxaca.



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The tradition of putting out offerings on the Day of the Dead has preserved elements from its pre-Hispanic origins. It both incorporates and is enhanced by religious and cultural components from the different forms of sincretism Mexico has seen throughout its history, from the colonial period, through modernity and globalization.

Day of the Dead festivities combine sadness and joy, mix mysticism and reflection, enriched by both the magical and the profane. The offerings and altars set up to honor the dead combine all of this with an artistic creativity and popular ingenuity that pay tribute to the dear departed who, according to pre-Columbian tradition, reside in Mictlán, a Nahuatl word meaning “place of the dead.”

The National Autonomous University of Mexico has concerned itself with preserving this custom and familiarizing the student community with the history of its cultural traditions so it may participate in strengthening our national identity. For the last three years the Youth for Humanities and Sciences Research Program, a part of the UNAM Humanities Coordinating Department, has made its own offering on the Day of the Dead. Every year, the program has picked a different state and presented its particular local tradition among the many nationwide, each of which has its own legends and special rituals.

In 1997 the students from UNAM High School No.1 designed an offering in the style of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, which has strong indigenous roots, even today, as well as the recreation of the tradition of the *Niño*

*Pa* (Child *Pa*), an important part of community lore in the Xochimilco district of Mexico City.

The offering has three basic parts: the portal, the Oaxacan offering and the altar to the *Niño Pa*.

The portal is a monumental facade put up in the vestibule of the Humanities Coordinating Department building, using representations of pre-Hispanic rock carvings which join together aesthetic elements of old Mexico showing the vision of death that existed in the pre-Hispanic world. Made with beans, amaranth, French beans, lentils, millet, rice and corn, the facade's main subject is Mictlantecuhtli, the lord of the dead, in charge of welcoming souls to Mictlán. Blazoned across the portal is the Nahuatl phrase "*Xi mo cal aququi can*," which means "Enter here," a clear invitation to the living to pass into the world of the dead.

The second part of the display is the Oaxacan offering, which reproduces that locality's tradition of erecting funeral monuments to the dead. Like in other parts of the country, one of the main components is flowers, the *cempoaxóchitl* in particular, or "flower of 20 petals" or "golden blossom," arranged in the Oaxacan manner in a chain. The offering preserves the pre-Hispanic/Christian tradition and reflects perfectly both the seriousness and the enthusiasm with which the residents of Oaxaca prepare to receive their dead; its characteristic colors and smells guide the spirits to the place where their relatives await them. The offering is an altar where gifts for the dead are placed: bread, wine, water, salt, thick wax tapers, fruit, sweets and votive candles.



**Above:** Detail from the portal depicting Mictlantecuhtli, the Lord of Death.

**Below:** The portal at the entrance welcomes the living into the world of dead.

Special mention should be made of the food and drink typical of Oaxacan cuisine: grasshoppers, *tlayudas*,<sup>1</sup> *totopos*,<sup>2</sup> *cecina*,<sup>3</sup> *quesillo*,<sup>4</sup> black mole sauce and, of course, the famous mescal. The altar also holds photos or other images of the honored dead and, next to them, *retablos*, or little altars, with images of saints

and virgins who protect the faithful; Our Lady of Soledad, the patron saint of Oaxacans, occupies a special, prominent place in this arrangement. At the foot of the little altar a funeral urn is placed.

Each part of the offering has its own symbolic religious significance. For example, the water symbolizes the principle of life. When a person dies, his or her soul must travel through mountains and deserts before arriving in paradise; to make the trip, the soul needs to quench its thirst. Salt is the symbol of wisdom and also preserves the body from corruption. The wax tapers are used by the souls on their trip to eternity; the copal, food and flowers are all gifts inviting the dead to reunite with their living loved ones on the Day of the Dead.

The third part of the celebratory display, erected in the auditorium of the same building by the students, is the lovely, original altar honoring the *Niño Pa*, "the pilgrim child" of the town of Xochimilco, who, according to popular legend, brings luck and protection to those who give him shelter. "The pilgrim child" has traveled Xochimilco for the last 400 years, a wooden carving of the baby Jesus whose cheeks, it is believed, change color according to his mood, and who at night, unobserved, plays with his toys and eats the sweets offered him. The residents of Xochimilco are enormously devoted to the *Niño Pa*. Every February 2, the day Mexico celebrates the Festival of Candelaria, the figure is handed over to the region's new steward, designated as such because he will be responsible for caring for and giving refuge to the child for the



Scale model of Xochimilco's San Bernardino Cathedral, made of amaranth and other seeds.

entire year. It is such a great honor to be steward of the *Niño Pa* that the post has been reserved in advance until the year 2035. Whomever has been honored with the post must prepare because it requires practically his undivided attention, not to mention enormous expense. When the steward's family is poor, it may have to save for up to 25 years to meet the obligations of hosting and feeding all the visitors to the *Niño Pa* for a year.

The students' altar to the *Niño Pa* included a scale model of Xochimilco's San Bernardino Cathedral made of amaranth and other seeds. The offering table displayed the customary gifts to the child from the people of Xochimilco: bread, wine, water, food, salt, tapers,

copal, votive candles, fruit and plentiful amounts of sweets and toys.

Tradition dictates that any local resident may invite the child to his or her home for a day. The visit begins with a procession to the church, where the child hears mass and is then taken to the home of his host, who must give him back to the steward without fail at 8 o'clock in the evening at the latest. In this case, the host was Dr. Humberto Muñoz, the humanities coordinator, who accompanied the child until 4 p.m. in the Humanities Coordination Department building. The child was also accompanied, naturally, by his nannies and *chinelo* dancers to amuse him.

The UNAM's Day of the Dead celebration respected tradition, and, in addi-

tion to the offerings, was the occasion for dances and prayers in honor of holy Death. The university community contributed in this way to preserving and valuing one of Mexico's most important traditions. ■■■

Diego Bugeda Bernal  
Senior Editor

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>A *tlayuda* is a pizza-sized tortilla typical of the region. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>2</sup>*Totopos* are large, crispy tortillas made from white corn. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>3</sup>*Cecina* is salted, dried meat, usually beef or venison, that is fried for eating. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>4</sup>*Quesillo*, known in the rest of the country as Oaxaca cheese, is a local, mild cheese produced in long strips and then wrapped into a ball. [Translator's Note.]