



Xantolo in the Potosí Huastec Region

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The first cool breezes of autumn bring the Huastecs a flood of memories, some conscious, some buried in their collective unconscious.

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Photos courtesy of Fernando Domínguez.

Something in them makes them pay attention to the cosmic world of their ancestors. The need to pay homage to their dead leads them to prepare a great celebration. Their pre-Hispanic legacy does not provide exact dates, but the Gregorian calendar of the conquest does.

November 1 and 2 are nearing, and with them, the syncretic event that allows them to get close to their ancestors, who since time immemorial have trodden the paths of purification, and the recent departed who have barely begun their process of sanctification.

Huastecs sharpen their senses, savoring once again the sweet flavor of freshly ground chocolate served in past years. They yearningly evoke the spicy smell of tamales and all the regional dishes that descend upon them.

This is the feeling that made them plant corn and marigolds using the ceremony handed down for generations: amid agricultural dances and offerings to Mother Earth; they respectfully ask permission to open her up and drop in a fertile seed, asking that both the corn and the flower soon be reborn to be present at the great upcoming *Xantolo* fiesta.

The word *Xantolo* does not come from Nahuatl, but from Latin: *Santo Sanctorum*, which degenerated onomatopoeically into the indigenous pronunciation *Xantolo*.

Xantolo is the link among all people living in the Huastec regions: Querétaro, Tamaulipas, Hidalgo, Puebla, Veracruz and San Luis Potosí.

The “Day of the Dead” fiesta in the San Luis Potosí Huastec region is a fiesta for life. The lushness of the area makes the ritual especially significant when faced with the approaching winter, which greatly slows agricultural production; the indigenous have to appeal to their customs and tradition for the ceremonies to renew life in nature.

Chickens, pigs and turkeys are fattened, all to be used in tamales; corn, native beans (*sarabanda*) and marigolds are planted. Provisions are stored, among them colored chili peppers, *el chino* chili peppers and sesame seeds. *Chichapales*, or great clay pots, and the enormous *chiquihuites*, baskets made of willow branches, are prepared.

Little napkins with multicolored embroidery are made to cover the offering baskets, and a new embroidered ruffle is prepared as the base for the altar.

The open-air markets in each community, in each municipality, begin to fill up with and sell everything needed for the coming days. Pure wax candles, the ones that do not smoke, the most expensive ones, since the ordinary ones contaminate the air and the souls of the dead get angry. If that happens, they will not come to the banquet.



Fernando Domínguez painted the delights of *Xantolo*, like this traditional offering.



Fireworks and extremely long garlands bedecked with many-hued ornaments, covered with velvety purple *viudita morada* and *mano de león* flowers and palm leaves are all bought. They are sold everywhere. Pork and lard are set aside beforehand; loaf bread, butter cookies and *tapabocas* rolls are all ordered. Cacao is procured for the chocolate, careful that it is the best quality, not old.

Huastecs set up the ceremonial altars to receive their dead. Rounded arches in the San Luis Potosí Huastec region, square and with flower points in the Hidalgo and Veracruz regions.

The same number of candles as you have dead family members, and a candle for the “lone animus,” the one without relatives. The pure wax candles shine brightly, smokeless, and are put out at a specific time of day ritually using two marigolds to smother the flame. They are the lights that guide the souls to the precise place where they should arrive.

The music of the *vimuetes* breaks through the silence of the day, and November 1 is the day the “little angels” or the dead children, are received. All the different Huastec regions receive the souls of the

innocent with special care. The offerings for children are sweet little tamales; sugary, hot pineapple, tamarind and orange *atole*; rice pudding; little cakes; candies. These are all called *chichiliques*, and children dressed as *huehues*, or old men, dance through the streets shouting, “We want *chichiliques*; we want *chichiliques*!” a custom that has fortunately done away with the transculturalized Halloween.

The following night, the adults go to the cemeteries to wait for the adult dead. In some communities, people share the food in the offerings on the tombs, accompanied by music, religious songs, prayers, rosaries, and great wreaths, candles and votive candles.

November 2 is generally uproarious. The dead adults have arrived and the *dances* of *huehues*, costumed characters, give it the joyful, comical touch; members of the community are satirized. Nobody escapes the jokes and laughing. Those who are part of the group of *huehues* are obliged to participate every year for seven years.

The carved wooden masks are blessed by the group captain and ceremoniously put away. Next





year will soon come when “taking them out” will be done with all due ritual.

Gastronomy is king. The offerings are the attraction on every altar. We have to taste everything and nobody can turn down an invitation. The offerings are exchanged mainly among godparents and parents, friends and neighbors. The entire altar shines in all its splendor, and the arrival of relatives is the center of this celebration. It is adorned with plants from every community. Even with the variations, marigolds are a must, with their aroma and color that attract visitors, alive or dead.

The altar has everything for everybody. They have included everything, throwing discretion to the wind, with no regard for the expense. Everyone wants to offer the best for their dead.

Tamales of all colors and flavors. The main tamale, the *zacahuil*, has a place of pride because it is made of corn. The loaf bread and chocolate surround photographs of the dear departed and of protective, favorite Catholic saints. It is the *Santo Sanctorum*. A moment for the living and the dead to be together. A moment when there are no distinctions. It is the fiesta of *Xantolo*, the annual celebration where hospitality reigns and locals and outsiders alike share the sanctity of the offering.

It is the time and place where everyone is a brother, godparent and friend.

Then comes the *ochavario*, the repetition eight days later of the entire November 2 ceremony. The souls begin to say good-bye. Tamales, visits to the cemetery, chanting, prayers. The wilted altars are placed deferentially and respectfully on the roads out of every community. The dead are bid farewell, sadly because they are leaving, joyfully because we had the opportunity to receive and pamper them.

All 20 of the towns in the Potosí Huastec region have the same custom, with slight variations. In all of them expositions of altars are staged in the central plaza. The fiesta ends on the last day of the month, the day of Saint Andrew. And again, the joyful noise, the tamales, the fireworks, the visits to the cemetery. Everything ready to receive the dear departed next year, God willing. **MM**



We are sorry to inform our readers that the author of this article, **Fernando Domínguez García**, died suddenly October 6, shortly before we went to press. As an untiring fighter to preserve Huastec customs and traditions and to defend its environment, as well as the author of many essays and paintings, he will be sorely missed.