

Commemoration of the Day of the Dead

Our intimate and well-known tradition of commemorating the dead is of an imminently religious character, which is not only fundamentally Christian taken from the custom of "honoring the faithful deceased", but also one that conserves many of the characteristics of the funerary ritual practiced by our pre-Hispanic ancestors.

The rituals of the vigil, including the placement of altars and offerings in homes and cemeteries in order to pay homage to the dead, are the result of a complex weaving of various cultural traditions: on one hand, the indigenous of pre-Colombian origin, and on the other hand, that of the Spanish Christians who arrived with the Conquest; and, in addition, the properties of other groups from Africa, Asia, and Europe that migrated to Mexico during the Colonial period or later (19th and 20th centuries).

The commemoration of the Day of the Dead in Michoacán is a solemn tradition that preserves a genuine outpouring of profound respect and veneration for beings who, in a material form, no longer exist and to whom, through the offering, are given tribute.

The ritual of the wake that takes place in many of our indigenous communities in the area around Lake Pátzcuaro is deeply rooted. Today people maintain characteristics and rites very similar to those observed in earlier times, with only minor variants according to their own beliefs and customs.

Where we are Michoacán is located in the western part of the country. It is a state that, as a result of its geography and natural environment, offers a great variety of landscapes and climates. Michoacán is bordered to the east by the states of Mexico and Guerrero, to the north by Querétaro and Guanajuato, to the west by Colima and Jalisco, and to the south by Guerrero and the Pacific Ocean. The state is crossed by the Transversal Volcano Axis and its topography is varied, with beautiful mountain panoramas, green plains, tropical coastal areas, and abundant rivers and lakes. Its history and culture are fused, creating an interesting journey for the traveler.

Prior to the Spanish occupation, the lands of Michoacán, which means "place abundant in fish", were inhabited by an important ethnic and linguistic group, the Tarascans. In the Mexica language the Tasascans were referred to as the "Michoaques". The chroniclers of the early Colonial period referred to the

Michoques as the tarascos, however, the descendents of these people today call themselves the P'urhepecha.

We know little of their origin, just what is described in the Account of Michoacan, in which it is discussed how a group of "Chichimecas" who called themselves Üacusechas", arrived in Michoacán led by the Lord Hireticiteme.

After a long pilgrimage, they first settled in a place near Zacapu, and later, near what is known today as Santa Fe de la Laguna. Tariacuri, one of the first governors, was able to consolidate rule in Tzintzuntzan, the site of one of the most important ceremonial centers of the Tarascans, especially the "Yacatas" which were the temples of our ancestors.

The Tarascan Empire was distinguished as being comprised of a warring people whom the Mexicas could never conquer. A much-celebrated defeat was suffered by the Aztecs (Mexicas) under the command of Axayacatl at the hands of the Tarascans at the frontier of Taximaroa, today known as Ciudad Hidalgo.

Upon the arrival of the Spanish, the Tarascans surrendered peacefully, therefore the conquest of Michoacán was fundamentally spiritual. Nevertheless, with the establishment of the First Court its president Nuño de Guzmán initiated a cruel war against the Tarascans, depopulating the inhabited towns. Pacification was achieved by the Franciscan evangelists and by Vasco de Quiroga, judge of the Second Court. He arrived in the state in 1533 and, later as the first bishop, he initiated the spiritual conquest of the region, while at the same time fighting against the abuses committed by the Spanish landowners.

As a result of this spiritual conquest there came to be a rich blending of religious beliefs, one example of this being the commemoration of the dead, which is celebrated even today in places such as Janitzio, Ihuatzio, Tzurumútaró, Tzintzuntzan, and Jarácuaro, among others.

The pre-hispanic concept of the duality of life and death

Pre-Hispanic people conceived of the universe as a concert of contradictions, a world of dualities necessarily opposite in a game that has as its origin the very existence of human beings. Within this concept, the Life-Death binomial was considered to be two aspects of the same reality, a consequence of the other, part of a same process of creation-destruction that had given birth to the universe, the world, and humanity. The location to which a person went after death was determined not by the way in which one lived, but rather by the manner in which one died.

The Meso-American world was divided into three planes which constituted a whole in which none of the parts could prevail over the others: the highest part, or the sky; the middle plane, or the world of men, and the lowest part, or the underworld, kingdom of darkness and death.

The Tarascans shared this concept. Their universe, also made up of three parts, was designated as: the Auándaro or Heaven, inhabited by celestial gods or creators represented by the sun, moon, stars, small and large eagles, and other birds. Terrestrial gods lived on Echerendo or Earth. These gods had descended to live among men, and it was they who were present in the hearth of the dwelling or in spirit that lived in the animals of the mountains, in the air, in the water of lakes and rivers, and also in large rocks. In Cumiehchúcuaro, or in the greatest depths of the underworld, dwelled the gods who governed the World of Death.

Each of these planes was divided into five areas: the Center, East, North, West, and South to each of which there was a corresponding color. It appears that to the Tarascans these were: blue in the Center, red in the East, yellow in the North, white in the West, and black in the South.

The Underworld, called *infierno* by the Spanish – in Latin *ínferus* – which means the lower region, was the equivalent of Heaven or the Christian sky for the Tarascans. They considered it a place of pleasure, but they also believed that in that place darkness ruled. The name designating that place was Pátzcuaro, which was literally translated as “place of darkness”, in other words, the world of death, because night is the death of the sun which is going to rule in the land of shadows.

Pátzcuaro was also considered to be the “door to the sky”, the place through which the gods ascended and descended, and the seasonal seat of Curicaueri, god of sun and fire, to whom offerings were made in this place.

The gods of death were represented by, among others: Uitzume, the water dog, servant of the god of Paradise; Ucumo, a mole that governed the Cumiechuquaro, which the teacher Corona Nuñez theorized could have been another of the regions of the underworld located in the South; Thiuime or “black squirrel”, god of war; the black warrior – like Tezcātlipoca of the Nahuas – with adornments and white feathers who was located to the West; and the Apatzi, or weasel, which could have been located in Apatzingán, as that name translates as the “place of weasels”.

All the animals that live under the surface of the earth were considered to be representatives of the gods of death for the Tarascans, especially because they ate the roots of plants, as do moles, causing the death of the plant.

We know little of the religion and rituals practiced by the Tarascans, as the Account of Michoacán or the Escorialian Codex, a writing that describes the customs and ethno-history of the Michoacanos, is mutilated. The first part, which probably described the cosmogony and religion has been lost.

Nevertheless, the same Account of Michoacán tells us how the funerary rites occurred based on the death of the Cazonci, their leader. The chiefs of the kingdom adorned the Cazonci with blankets, rich plumage, and jewels.

His body was accompanied by his weapons. In addition, several of his servants were sacrificed. They carried with them the various tools necessary to perform their daily tasks, according to the job with which they served the monarch, in order to continue serving him in the next world. At midnight the procession carrying the

body of the Cazonci departed walking toward the “patio of the large guinea pigs” where his body was to be incinerated.

In the morning his ashes were gathered and put into a blanket upon which they placed a turquoise mask, gold ear plugs and bracelets, turquoise and shell necklaces, rich plumage around the head, silver shields, and a sword.

His bow and arrows were interred at the base of the temple of Curicaueri, in a tomb previously arranged with wine and food, arrows, clay jars, clay pots, etc. The large earthen jar in which they used to deposit the ashes of the Cazonci was placed on a bed of wood that faced to the east. This was followed by five days of mourning.

The funerary rites were also applied to the other members of the community.

These were given offerings, all the objects considered necessary for the journey, those that allowed for continuation of the person’s vocation on earth, as well as those that conserved the deceased’s social position within the group.

The Colonial Period and the New Notion

The Meso-American religious tradition suffered severe cultural transformations as a result of the Conquest and subsequent evangelization. Alfredo López Austin called it the “birthing of indigenous Colonial religions” as the indigenous blended their customs and beliefs with the Christian ones sown in the New World by the conquerors.

The newly arrived Spanish priests, who fundamentally emphasized an evangelical conquest, immediately attempted to destroy all the ancient beliefs and practices which were considered to be based on idolatry. Therefore, the gods of death were destroyed, but not the cult to the dead that joined the concepts and practices that both cultures revered.

Catholic funerary rites and customs, as well as the annual homage paid to the dead, were easily accepted by pre-Colombian people, since, in a sense, these coincided with the ancient customs.

It is believed that the Church established the commemoration to the dead on the 2nd of November because the Benedictine Saint Odilón, Abbey of Cluny, fixed upon that date, based on a vision, in order to dedicate it to the “Souls in Purgatory”. It was later approved and implemented by the Pontiffs.

The Catholic ritual to celebrate the dead has consisted, ever since the times of Saint Odilón, in the celebration of masses, suffrages, prayers of various types, responsories to the dead, alms, and Holy Communion, which combine to be the prayers with which the living can help the dead.

However, the Christian concepts of Heaven and Hell, the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, penetrated the indigenous world more through art than through sermons. Theater, sculpture, paintings, and music were the most effective mediums used by the evangelicals to achieve their mission. Thus, we find iconographic examples that allude to these themes in the decoration of chapels

and churches in indigenous communities. One oft represented concept in the early days of the Colonial period was that of

Hell with its flames embracing and devouring the sinners. The idea was to teach a fear of God and to save the people from committing major sins.

The popular Spanish customs of giving offerings were incorporated into religious beliefs. The Spanish would adorn graves with flowers, and they would leave food offerings including a special bread known as "souls' bread". Tombs were illuminated with oil lamps and they said prayers as part of the religious aspect. Bread, fritters and other foods were prepared and then eaten upon conclusion of the celebration.

Thus, indigenous customs were interwoven with those of the Old World to form the Mexican tradition. Of these rituals, the most wide spread has been and continues to be the visit to the cemetery. Also, altars are put up in homes where people put water, candles, flowers, and food, according to what is produced in the region and also the favorite dishes of the deceased.

The Offerings

Today, the commemoration of the dead conserves its religious and popular significance of paying tribute to those who have passed away in an environment steeped in contradictions, of bereavement and celebration, of sadness and silly gibberish. The beliefs that life continues after death, that the souls of the dead travel and that they communicate with the living, the uncertainty about the destiny of souls provoked by the certainty of final judgement which will send them to Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, or Limbo, continue to be the substance and the reason for the existence of the funerary rituals.

In Michoacán the celebrations begin on the 31st of October with the Hunting of the Duck, an activity on the verge of disappearing due to the scarcity of ducks. This is followed by the placement of the Altar of the Little Angels" on November 1st, and concluding with the homage to deceased adults on the 2nd. These rituals take place mainly in the region around Lake Pátzcuaro and some other P'urhepecha communities.

The Hunting of The Duck (Kuirisi-atakua)

This activity was still practiced by people from many of the towns surrounding Lake Pátzcuaro up until a few decades ago. It was quite a show to see the hunters emerging from the cardinal points in their traditional canoes in search of ducks. The most skilled hunted ducks on wing, others sought them out in their natural hiding places. Today this tradition continues only in a few towns, such as Janitzio.

The hunt begins in the early hours of the 31st. The kill will serve as part of the food offered to the dead in the days to come. A number of hunters practice this tradition

both for ceremony and sport. They utilize harpoons or lances armed with reeds as well as some firearms, and meet by community to determine the hour and the hunting grounds.

Gathering and Offering

(Teruscan y Campaneri)

Included as part of the ceremonies which occur during these few days is the collective gathering and offering organized by the P'urhepecha youth as a type of "looting" which is both accepted and supported by the authorities of the community. This used to be a common tradition around the Lake, but is quickly disappearing.

The game began the night of the 1st of November when the young people of the town, accompanied by their guide, celebrated the teruscan - a type of acceptable theft – stealing ears of corn, chayotes, squash, flowers and other recently-harvested food products from corrals and rooftops. The guide was appointed in each village March 19th and his function was to coordinate the religious and popular festivities. The adults waited for the loot in the atrium of the church or in a community house to cook the food in a community- owned copper kettle. This offering served as an offering to those deceased who no longer had living relatives who remembered them or those who had simply been forgotten, and was distributed among those in attendance at the wake.

The offering of the fruits of the harvest was gathered the morning of the 2nd when the townspeople would go into the streets shouting proclamations to the effect. This was known as the Campaneri, or the donation. The products thus obtained were handed over to the priest of the town, who said responsories for the dead that same afternoon.

Vigil of the Little Angels (Kejtzitakua Zapicheri)

Offerings and altars are placed for dead children on the 1st of November. If it is the first offering, the godfather from the baptism brings an arch, which is arranged with flowers known as cempoalxóchitl or tiringuini- tztiziqui or marigolds and flower of the soul, a type of orchid that blooms this time of year. The arch also has sugar candies in the form of angels or small animals, toys, and even clothing.

The entire family participates in decorating the altar. This is announced with firecrackers during the walk from the godparents' house to that of the deceased godchild. Those in the procession sing and pray. In the home of the deceased child, the altar is hung. The parents have prepared traditional dishes such as pozole (corn and pork stew), tamales (corn meal cakes), atole (a hot, flavored cornstarch beverage), among others and invite those in the procession.

Very early on the morning of the 1st, the parents and godparents of the child take the offering to the cemetery. They remain there from five to nine AM, at which time

they light candles as a remembrance of the light of Christ and they tribute their offering to the child.

The offerings of the “Little Angels” is a tradition that takes place in all the towns around Lake Pátzcuaro albeit with some variations. On the Island of Janitzio, for example, the celebration takes place in the atrium of the church from seven to ten the morning of the 1st and is attended by the mothers and siblings of the deceased children. Beautiful decorations made of flowers adorn the graves, as well as wooden and straw toys. Gifts the children never received while alive adorn their altars during the wake.

In Huecorio the children are remembered in their homes with the placement of altars placed the evening of October 31st. The offerings are lavishly adorned with sweets, bread, wooden toys from Tócuaro, clay toys from Ocumicho, and clothes that the parents have brought from Pátzcuaro.

The Wake for the Dead. In Different Places in the Region of Lake Patzcuaro (Animecha Kejtzitakua)

As previously stated, the offering is dedicated to adults who have passed on November 2nd. The vigil begins the previous evening with the preparation of the offerings that will be placed at the grave or in the altars at home and ends the morning of the 2nd. For those who have died recently, in other words, receiving their first offering, the homage begins with a novenary, which begins nine days before, and ends on the Day of the Dead. Family and friends gather, say the rosary and ask for eternal rest for the soul of the deceased.

Once the activities in the home are concluded, the family take their offering to the cemetery where they will stay until dawn, along with the other townspeople who are also revering their dead. It is customary for the families to exchange portions of their offerings with families sitting nearby during the vigil. In this way they don't take the same offering home in the morning.

Arches made of woven rods and decorated with yellow marigolds known as cempoalxóachitl and hung with fruit such as bananas, oranges, limes, jícamas, as well as bread in the form of animals or rings covered with granules of pink sugar. The tombs are covered with embroidered napkins upon which are placed pots, jugs and baskets of the favorite foods of the departed. Candles guide the path for the death to receive their offering.

The common altar, which is placed in homes, is put together according to the customs of the area, incorporating religious images, photographs of family members that have departed this world, at times clothing or personal or vocational

objects in order to evoke that person's presence. Families light candles around a cross made of marigold petals and these remain lit to light the way for the dead. They also use ceremonial pottery, for example flower vases of black clay, to hold the bouquets of yellow marigolds and flower of souls, as well as small incense burners made of the same material with pungent, smoky copal. The foods are varied: fruits and vegetables, bread, bundles of Indian corn, and sugar candies in a variety of shapes. There are always glasses of water for the souls that arrive thirsty as well as dishes filled with salt, to which many meanings are attributed. For some the salt represents perspiration, while for others it represents an offering to the Earth. Some say that salt is identified with baptism or that perhaps it helps to avoid the corruption of the body. A path of marigold petals placed from the door of the house to the altar guides the dearly departed to the offering.

Tzintzuntzan

This town was the capital of the Tarascan Empire. Later, after the Conquest, it was the first city of Michoacán. The vigil of the dead begins in the first minutes of the 2nd of November in the cemetery where families begin to light tapers and candles on the newly cleaned graves. It is also here that they place their unique offering of flowers and foods accompanied by the best pieces of pottery that are made in the region including black glazed earthenware, white ceramics, as well as straw and carved wood angels.

Janitzio

Preparation for the commemoration of the Animecha kejitakua begins the night of the 1st on this picturesque island in Lake Pátzcuaro. Almost at midnight, just before the end of All Souls Day, women and children go to the cemetery in silence to arrange the offering to their loved ones. These include beautiful yellow flowers and, placed on delicately embroidered tablecloths, are the favorite foods of the deceased. The candles lit in the cemetery illuminate the faces which, on that night, will depart with the dead. A bell hanging in the archway leading into the cemetery tolls all night to evoke the spirits of the departed. The participation in the ritual of the vigil is considered sacred for the inhabitants of Janitzio.

Jaracuaro

This ancient town has conserved its tradition within a more pure atmosphere.

The ceremony begins with the placement of large arches, one for each neighborhood, which are placed in the atrium of the church. These arches are then decorated with flowers, pine needles, and other plants as well as other common

objects. Then groups of dancers perform in the plaza demonstrating their virtuosity as they execute beautiful pieces. Jarácuaro is famous for its musicians and dancers.

Meanwhile at home families prepare the offerings that the women will take to the cemetery at dawn. These offerings are removed when the sun becomes high in the sky and taken to the church where they will chant praises. On the afternoon of the 2nd the offerings are divided among the faithful who set out for the cemetery for the ceremony of the blessing of the dead.

Ihuatzio

Ihuatzio is an ancient Tarascan ceremonial center located on the banks of Lake Pátzcuaro 12 kilometers from the Pátzcuaro-Quiroga highway. The vigil is performed in a very similar manner to that of other nearby towns, but conserves its character of true tradition which modern times have respected.

Tzurumutaro

In this town, located a few kilometers from Pátzcuaro, the celebration to honor the dead is similar to the previously mentioned towns. However the strong agricultural tradition of this area is reflected in the decorations and offerings adorning the graves, such as squash, corn plants, and seasonal wildflowers combined with the candles that illuminate the cemetery.

These are, essentially, the rituals that take place in Michoacán to commemorate the dead as a symbol of devotion and of reaffirmation of our beliefs, as well as remembrance and a sense of presence of those who have gone before us on their journey to death.