

El Día de los Muertos en México

(1) At first glance, the Mexican custom of *El Día de los Muertos* — the Day of the Dead — may sound much like the U.S. custom of Halloween. After all, the celebration traditionally starts at midnight the night of Oct. 31, and the festivities are abundant in images related to death. But the customs have different origins, and their attitudes toward death are different: In the typical Halloween festivities, death is something to be feared. But in *el día de los muertos*, death — or at least the memories of those who have died — is something to be celebrated. Therefore, the Day of the Dead in Mexico is not a mournful commemoration but a happy and colorful celebration where death takes a lively, friendly expression.

(2) *El día de los muertos* has become one of the biggest holidays in Mexico, and celebrations are becoming more common in areas of the United States with a large Hispanic population. Its origins, however, are distinctly Mexican: Before the Spaniards arrived, the indigenous groups celebrated the return of the souls between the months of July and August. Once arrived, the Spaniards changed the festivities to



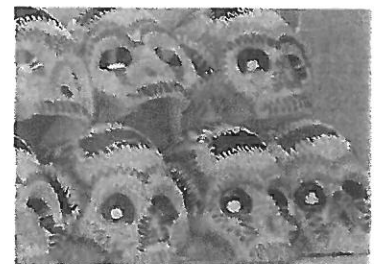
November 2nd to coincide with All Souls' Day of the Catholic Church. Presently, two celebrations honoring the memory of loved ones who have died take place: On November 1st, the souls of the children are honored with special designs in the altars, using the color white on flowers and candles. On November 2nd, the souls of the adults are remembered with a variety of rituals, depending on the region.



(3) The celebrations of Day of the Dead or All Souls' Day are referred to differently in some of the states. For example, in Yucatan it is known as *Hanal Pixan* which means "The path of the soul through the essence of food;" in the highlands of Michoacan it is known as *Jimbanqua* or the party honoring with flowers the people who died that year; in San Luis Potosi, Hidalgo and in the southern part of Oaxaca it is known as *Xantolo*; and *Day of the Dead* in the majority of Mexico. Whatever name

is given, this is an ancestral tradition that blended with Catholicism to create a special time and space to remember and honor the loved ones by offering them an *ofrenda* (altar), the fragrance of the flowers, the light of the candles, the aroma of special foods and the solemnity of prayers.

(4) It is also a time to joke and make fun of death through *calaveras* (skeltons); poetry allusive to a particular person, generally politicians; sugar, chocolate, and amaranth skulls which are given to one another with their friend's name so "they can eat their own death"; and special crafts allusive to different aspects of the

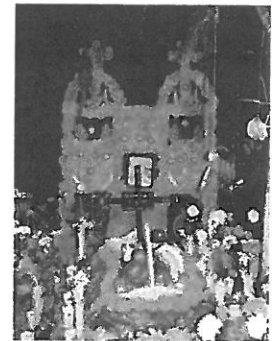


living, with skeletons representing daily activities. A special bread is also often prepared, called *pan de muerto* (dead bread). It is often baked in the shape of a skeleton or will contain a “skeleton” inside.



(5) People start getting ready for the celebration on the third week of October with the harvesting of the *cempasuchitl* flower, also known as the flower of the twenty petals or the flower of the dead which is sold in the market place, or *Tianguis*, where the family goes to buy everything that they will need to put on the altar (*ofrenda*). On the *ofrenda* they will place fruits, vegetables and the special dishes prepared for the soul to enjoy the essence of the aroma of the food. This altar will also have items that once belonged to the deceased.

(6) On November 1st, in many towns the ritual of the *Vigil of the Little Angels* takes place in the cemeteries. On November 2nd, the souls of the adults are honored in their homes with beautifully decorated *ofrendas*. Each state has different styles, but all of them represent a place where the *ofrenda* becomes a spiritual communion between life and death. Again, in each state the making of the altar and the rituals are different.



(7) The celebration concludes in many towns with the vigil in the cemetery. In some places the vigil is done during the whole night of November 1st to November 2nd. In other towns, the vigil is done during the day. Mysticism is the rule in the cemeteries, but in many music is also part of the ritual that combines religious prayers with the sounds of the trumpet playing a tune by a Mariachi band. In others, it is a trio that sings a song by the tomb, or in some cases even a band plays *danzones* at the entrance of the cemetery.

Ritualistic dances are also part of the celebrations in many places honoring the deceased. Families will also clean the gravesite and place candles and flowers to decorate the graves.

(8) Whichever way is celebrated, *el día de los muertos* is a time of reflection about the meaning of life and the mission that one needs to fulfill. Death in many situations imparts a feeling of pain and loss, particularly for those who do not know the purpose of their path on this earthly plane. For others, death is transcendence, transformation, and resurrection. During the celebration of *el día de los muertos*, all those feelings and beliefs come together in a season that brings to life the memory of the loved ones.

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After reading the article, circle the best answer for each question.

- 1.) The Day of the Dead is different from Halloween because ____.
 - A. The Day of the Dead is celebrated at a different time of year
 - B. The Day of the Dead is not celebrated by children
 - C. The Day of the Dead celebrates the lives of loved ones
 - D. Halloween and the Day of the Dead are actually the same holiday

- 2.) The Day of the Dead (*el Día de los Muertos*) is celebrated on:
 - A. October 31st
 - B. November 1st
 - C. November 2nd
 - D. November 1st and 2nd

- 3.) *El día de los muertos* originated in:
 - A. Mexico
 - B. US
 - C. Spain
 - D. Argentina

- 4.) When the Spaniards arrived in Mexico, why did they change the indigenous festivities to coincide with the catholic holiday All Souls' Day?
 - A. Because the catholic holiday All Souls' Day was similar, and they wanted to convert the Mexicans to catholicism.
 - B. Because the Mexicans wanted them to change the holiday.
 - C. Because they were afraid the Mexicans would revolt.
 - D. None of the above.

- 5.) On November 1st, ____ are honored:
 - A. the souls of deceased adults
 - B. the souls of deceased children
 - C. the souls of the catholic saints
 - D. all of the above

- 6.) The Day of the Dead has many different names, depending on where you are in Mexico.
 - A. True
 - B. False

- 7.) An *ofrenda* is described as ____.
 - A. a fragrant flower placed in cemeteries
 - B. a type of food prepared for the souls of the dead
 - C. a colorfully decorated altar in honor of a loved one
 - D. a candy skull with the name of a friend written on the forehead

8.) Humor is a part of the Day of the Dead.

A. True

B. False

Explain below using details from the reading:

9.) Typical items placed on an *ofrenda* are ____.

A. food

B. items that belonged to the deceased loved one

C. *cempasúchil* flowers

D. all of the above

10.) The Day of the Dead celebration concludes in the cemeteries where ____.

A. families gather for a candlelight vigil involving prayer

B. music is played

C. families prepare the grave sites with decorations

D. all of the above

Open Response

As you have learned, *el Día de los Muertos* is a very special celebration that many look forward to and spend a lot of time preparing for. However, many misconceptions exist about the holiday. 1.) Explain what you think some of the misconceptions are, (perhaps some were your own misconceptions). 2.) Go on to describe what the holiday is really about, mentioning details about how it is celebrated. 3.) Also explain why it is so important to the people who celebrate it. **Write neatly or type on a separate sheet of paper.**