
Dia de los Muertos and its Representation of *Calaveras*

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Introduction

The word death is not pronounced in New York, Paris or London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, by contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it... it is one of his most favourite toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away... (Paz, 1967, in Sayer, 2009: 105)

While every country has its own festivals and celebrations, each deeply rooted in the country's culture, none does so more vibrantly than Mexico's festival of *Dia de los Muertos* (*Day of the Dead*), which dates back to the Aztec belief in life as part of the wider cycle of existence (Weiss, 2010). Celebrated on *All Saints'* and *All Souls'* days at the start of November, Mexico's festival is significantly different from other countries' celebrations, such as the perhaps more familiar Westernised, secular celebration of *Halloween*. Although festivities vary from region to region across Mexico, it seems that *remembrance* remains central to the festival, during which the living "honour the souls of the departed with gifts of food and flowers" (Sayer, 2009: 12).

Far from being a sombre affair, *Dia de los Muertos* is a time for celebration mixing Spanish Catholic traditions with ancient Aztec rituals, it is "quite the reverse of morbid; it is a period full of life, colour and festival" (Carmichael and Sayer, 1991: 7). By contrast, Western Catholic countries continue to honour more traditional practice of *All Saints' Day*, a national holiday in many Catholic countries, including Spain, where *Todos los Santos* remains as one of the country's most celebrated religious festivals and *All Souls' Day*, on which ancient customs of decorating graves and praying for the dead are still observed (Catholic Culture, 2015).

Celebrating the dead

Almost every culture has a belief that the dead should be honoured and across the globe different religions and communities have been remembering the deceased for centuries. *Lemuralia*, a ritual to free one's house of spirits, dates back to ancient Rome. In Hindu tradition people remember the deceased through