



# La Tradición Popular

No. 181

**Cultural expressions of All Saints' day  
and All Soul's day in Guatemala**

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Year 2008



**San Carlos de Guatemala University**



# CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS OF ALL SAINTS' DAY AND ALL SOULS' DAY IN GUATEMALA

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## Context

In Guatemala, a country of great cultural richness and variability, the spiritual manifestations of its people take on the characteristics of true popular religiosity. Invariably syncretized, these manifestations are expressed with equal intensity and fervor both in the smallest hamlets in the mountains, and in the big cities. They become traditions, costumes or simply celebrations in which people participate with the innate conviction provided by the cultural heritage, and the joy of feeling part of a social group that shares the same ideals, with linked cosmovisions.

The festivities of *Día de Todos los Santos* or "All Saints' Day" and *Día de los Santos Difuntos* also known as "All Souls' Day" do

not differ at their popularity, they become a single celebration, although each day The festivities of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day do not differ at their popularity level, they become a single celebration, although each day is endowed with its own magical-spiritual traits. They took place on the 1st and 2nd of November: the 1st is All Saints' Day, the 2nd is All Souls' Day. Their establishment by the Church occurred during the tenth century. In 835 Pope Gregory IV instituted the celebration of All Saints' Day, and the order for it to be celebrated worldwide was given in 840; in 998 Saint Odilo established the All Souls' Day to remember with joy the memory of the deceased. The festivity arrived in America with the Spanish colonization.



One of more than a thousand ceremonial centers in the country where a large part of the festivals of Saints and Souls are concentrated. Here, the entrance of the cemetery of Santiago Sacatepéquez, the stage for giant kites and other cultural events.



This is how the festivity reached Guatemala, where its acceptance had few obstacles as the Mesoamerican peoples, in pre-Hispanic times, already worshiped their dead. Because of this, when they merged, they gave rise to a religious syncretism that is enriched to the extent that social facts of the country's multiculturalism are practiced. There it manifests itself in cultural expressions like those that comprise this brief article, such as the giant kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez, the *Procesión de la Santa Calavera* or "Procession of the Holy Skull" of San José Petén, and the *Carrera de las Ánimas* or "Race of the Souls" of Todos Santos Cuchumatán.

### *Giant Kites*

The practice of kite flying is very old in Guatemala. It is unlikely that a specific date can be given for when this custom began to become established in the village. Well rooted in rural communities, it is customary that with the cool fall winds of the north, children begin with a festive gathering of "*varitas de coyote*," (coyote sticks) or "*cola de coyote*," a tall grass whose reed is used for frames.



The final adjustments of a giant kite in Santiago Sacatepéquez. This one in particular is one of those that mark the beginning of the vindicative time (see text).



Sometimes as children's handicrafts, their construction then passes to the hands of young people without excluding the participation of adults. On this behalf, when October is almost over, the multicolored kites are already prepared for the boreal bursts that are present for the celebrations of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. They come in all sizes in the tradition, though the most popular ones are between 50 centimeters to one meter in diameter.

Giant kites are a very particular and localized version of this social phenomenon. Those of several meters in diameter require a very strong frame, so the coyote sticks, too fragile for the task, are replaced with vigorous woody reeds and the lining is also adapted to the intense wind pressure they must withstand. If their construction imposes such radical changes, as a cultural expression they also acquire a different connotation. It is no longer a child's play. It is a cultural expression that has other meanings, and although it is always linked to the cult of the dead, it has been consolidated only in certain communities, such

as Santiago Sacatepéquez and Sumpango, both in the department of Sacatepéquez.

In Santiago, the natural and sacro-profane environments, the history surrounding the event, the cosmovision that surrounds it, and the pride of identity developed in the community give the flight of its giant kites a connotation of its own. The event takes place on All Saints' Day, with the annual regularity of a custom fully established in the collective imagination and has become in a ceremonial expression more artistic than spiritual, although without leaving aside the deep religious syncretism manifested and linked to the festivity.

There are many unknowns surrounding its origin and meaning. In general, it is known that the Asians used the kites since time immemorial, with obvious symbolism regarding the need to connect profane time with sacred time. In Santiago Sacatepéquez the ones before the giants, as in the rest of the country, are not separated from this condition. Although there is no certainty as to their



The abundance of flowers and their tremendous symbolic charge can be seen in any cemetery, as part of the cult of the deceased.



appearance in Guatemala, their Asian origin is something that is not in doubt and, since then, the materials they are made from, and the symbolisms they carry have shrouded them in a true mysticism.

Several hypotheses have been postulated to try to explain their appearance in Guatemala. One of them links the Catholic Church, with the participation of the Franciscan Order. It is considered that through their evangelization work in the Philippines and in several other Asian peoples, by the 16th century, they managed to capture authentic elements of the cultures of that continent. In this way, it manages to incorporate into the Christian world multiple cultural facts from the classical antiquity of evangelized Asia.

Later, with the European invasion of our lands, the kites, as an expression of these events, reached Mesoamerica. Already here, admitted within the sacro-profane practices of the conquerors, they merged with the local beliefs and led to an evident cultural syncretism. They took up elements of ours and, in a certain way re-semanticized, their conception was related to the celebration of All Saints' and All Souls' day.

The people have a deep motive for sociocultural manifestation in the practice of kite flying. But nobody knows for sure why it does it. When inquiring about it and about its origin, within the framework of oral tradition, the people limit themselves to conceiving it as a custom, a faithfully maintained tradition. But nothing can be revealed about their meaning and origin.

Being very cautious in estimating the chronology, one could think of their local origin in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period associated with the arrival of groups of different nationalities, including Asians. This is another of the hypotheses used to unravel their appearance in the country: to

think of an importation through the popular route, not through the religious route as would be the case with the Franciscans. Therefore, it would be the direct importation of a tradition by the holders of this cultural heritage, not a syncretized event in the Church.

One piece of evidence that has made it possible to establish the end of the 1900s as the date when they were already in Guatemala is a painting by Augusto de Succa. You can see some people flying kites in it. From there it can be said that they were already part of the customs of Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción towards the end of the 19th century.

The practice of flying giant kites in Santiago Sacatepéquez, as a phenomenon of the expression of the material folklore involved in popular art, can be defined in two stages: one is ritual, the other is vindication. In the first one, which can be dated between 1900 and 1991, the giant kites are contextualized in a very syncretic religious environment. Spiritually, they revolve around these deeper aspects since their magical relationship is between the living and the dead, and the kite acts as a connecting thread between the profane and sacred world.

The context of vindicative time is established as of 1992. Here the kite takes a new turn and acquires a broader connotation. In addition to commemorating the dead, they were oriented to strengthen the reunion with Mayan ancestral beings and do so through designs and symbols stamped on them. Through these kites, a variety of messages related to the cosmic world, care for the environment, respect for life, peace, the planet, and to awaken a sense of solidarity are transmitted. In this way, the ethnic and social identity of the Mayan people is reinforced. Since then, the symbolic core of the kite, originally dedicated to the dead, has been reinterpreted. They no longer respond only to an evangelizing logic but express more strongly the need for peaceful coexistence and the rejection of violence.



The novel significance sent to the living and the dead with the giant kites fulfills a clear role within the group and strengthens its social-historical existence. It is included in the development of the community and identifies it as such because it is geographically associated with its entire context. It also fulfills a function of social cohesion and is of economic and religious importance, as well as an aesthetic expression, and spiritual satisfaction. It fulfills these tasks by suggesting the participation of the whole community. And, in fact, they are considered a manifestation of the local culture.



The typical giant kite of Santiago Sacatepéquez. Notice the predominance of traditional, multicolored signs, alternating with messages of social vindication.

## Making

Making the giant kites in Santiago Sacatepéquez requires the participation of groups of young people between the ages of 10 and 20, on average. The groups are often made up of about 10 to 15 young people, who begin their work two months before the day the kites are to be flown. Preparation includes meetings to reach consensus on the design, which is proposed in advance by a town committee, which also proposes the themes to be included in the final product. A type of regulation is established that defines parameters such as: the use of tissue paper, giant cane (arundo donax), paste as an adherent, and natural ropes made of agave leaves. Currently, the cost of making a typical kite can amount to about Q2,000.00, a price that varies greatly depending on the size.

There are two categories: those of competition, and those of exhibition. The first ones compete for their design, flight and a few other elements of participation; these kites are between 4 and 6 meters of diameter and, if they win the contest, they get a cash prize. Those of exhibition are larger, generally between 12 and 16 meters in diameter.

Whatever the motivation for making and flying them, by 1900 and 1991 the size did not reach 6 meters in diameter. Geometric designs were predominant and only two colors of paper were preferred. The others, from 1992 onwards, are those that already reach sizes up to 16 meters and their content is more symbolic and expressive, with designs that manifest their identity as belonging to a Mayan group.



Santiago Sacatepéquez, the town referred to for the geographical context of these kites, is in the Mayan-kaqchikel ethnolinguistic area, to the west of Guatemala City and at a distance of about 25 kilometers from it. Another community that has the tradition of giant kites is Sumpango, in the same department, and its inhabitants belong to the same ethnic group; they are probably the most representatives and largest that are made. But the kites, because of the windy fall in the country, adorn its blue sky everywhere.

### *Procession of the Holy Skull*

In San José, municipality of the department of Petén, one of the cultural expressions with which All Saints' Day, November 1st, is celebrated year after year is the tradition called Procession of the Holy Skull. Strongly linked to popular religiosity, it is a sacro-profane manifestation deeply rooted in the community.



The three Holy Skulls resting inside the temple in San José, Petén. One of them will depart in procession at night, in a deeply rooted ritual within the social expressions linked to the Day of the Dead.



It consists of a nocturnal procession that goes from the church to family homes that have requested it in advance. A penitent, with devotion and spiritual dedication, carries a human skull with an expression of solemnity and dignity, while ringing a little bell and is surrounded by other individuals who have special roles in the procession, and an enthusiastic crowd that complete the processional courtship with a mixture of faith, mysticism, and devotion.

Prior to the execution of the procession, a mass was celebrated in the catholic temple at 8:00 p.m. During the religious service, three skulls, property of the tradition, are exhibited. These are kept with fervent respect and are taken out to perform the ritual. According to the oral tradition kept in the community, they belong to a woman, a man, and a girl. This has not been formally investigated, nor whether they are part of a family or not.



The procession of the Holy Skull in the municipality of San José, department of Petén. The bearer of the skull is accompanied by a small bell, while the people surround the procession.



The person who must carry it on the streets is the same person for seven years, unless something unexpected happens that prevents the custom from being maintained. During this period, he retains his responsibility without major obligations, until the time comes when he must fulfill the rite devoutly, as well as attend the tasks that are inherent to it.

At the end of the mass, he is the one who must become the centerpiece of the celebration. Of the three skulls that were exposed for the liturgical office, only one is the one that departs in procession, but it is not the same one. They must be rotated every year, in a cycle that has been maintained since the beginning of this religious festivity.

The destination is homes that have asked to be visited by the processions. It is granted to them as an honor so that they can pay funeral honors to some deceased relative or some dead person of their special consideration. The fact is that it is usually requested by many households, and it is granted to all of them, as an inclusive tradition that allows them to worship their deceased in the framework of a popular festival.

Because of this, the processional courtship generally spends the whole night walking through the streets of the town. It is usual to return to the temple until day 2, All Souls' Day, in the morning hours.

A very significant detail is the role that food plays in this form of worship. Each house that temporarily receives the skull has erected a small altar, also temporary, on which the food that the deceased being honored liked the most during his lifetime is placed. A way of pleasing him with the material things that were of his predilection. And for the mourners and guests, popular traditional food has been prepared, including bread rolls and *ixpasá*, that sour dough atole which is so appreciated in Petén.

### *Race of the Souls*

This is the name given to a ritual deeply incorporated into the traditions and customs of November 1st in the municipality of Todos Santos Cuchumatán, department of Huehuetenango. Geographically very localized, it has been performed from ancient times by the male inhabitants, although the entire town participates in the celebration in a massive display of values, courage, symbolisms, and cultural identity of the community.

It consists of a ritual race of horsemen that, in an exhibition that has something of competition and much of religious expression, constitutes a peculiar form of worship to the sacred time and to the deceased ancestors. The most courageous males ride "bareback," that is, without a saddle; some others do use one. There are no limitations, but it is considered a more satisfactory ritual commitment for the horsemen, for the divinity, and for the souls of the deceased if the first form is used.

### *The symbolism of flowers*

An ancestral custom to worship the dead is the offering of flowers. Through them, the mourner creates a powerful bond of affection with the deceased. In such a circumstance, it has become traditional to decorate the tombs with a multitude of such plant organs, although some have become the icon of the festival par excellence, such is the case of the so-called *Flores de Muerto* (flowers of the dead).

These grow freely in the field in the form of pungent-smelling herbs. They are annual plants, which sprout spontaneously with the first rains of the year and bloom abundantly from mid-October, so they are available for the festivities of November 1st and 2nd. Their variety is astonishingly rich, but the most common and popular are those with small flowers, golden yellow color and pungent aroma.





The decoration of tombs acquires connotations of respectful celebration of the deceased ancestors.

The offering of flowers takes various forms: they can be arranged in wreaths, carried in simple bouquets or reach the apotheosis of the tribute, which is to plant them in front of the tomb. Whatever the case may be, as bearers of a message between the living and the dead, they are present with as much strength as the cultural fact that integrates them.

In Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción, from the first weeks of October onwards, commercial preparations begin to have them within reach of the mourners who will need them in November. Markets specialized in their sales, stalls of occasion and popular markets in general are ready to satisfy the demand. The supply comes from neighboring towns,





The intensified spiritual syncretism can gather a variety of social meanings: the musicians playing for the blessed souls (right end), the giant kites (background, left), the prayers and baskets with "*comida de cabecera*" (food placed at the head of the tombs as an offering), and the expression of rejoicing with mixtures of magical-religious recollection.

particularly San Juan Sacatepéquez, very close to the city.

In the world of symbols, the shapes, colors, and aromas are elements that are manifested as human beings' own feelings to express their beliefs. In this way, there is a clear relationship between religion and the symbolic, through flowers, with scents that represent nuances that speak. In addition, each color symbolizes a compendium of codes that express something. This is an element that reflects an immediate impact on emotions, which has the power to stimulate and cheer as it suggests effects on the mind as a sensory perception, as an act that is not only physical but cultural, supporting that sight and smell, like others, are immersed in

our senses.

As for the smells of that sensory moment, they become part of the religious sensibility. Each smell relates to the moment. The smells emitted give rise to cults that are convincing and accessible to the sensibility of believers. Therefore, they reflect cultural traits and express and communicate as a language that is integrated to the human mind, trying to externalize the objective reality of the religious life that arises from that tradition. For all these reasons it is understandable why the living so affectionately entertains their dead through the flowers offered to them, sometimes with the addition of food.



### All Saints' Day meals

Another cultural expression kept by tradition is the feast of meals. This is the reason for the emergence of that very special category called festive food, which revolves around the search for balance between the sacred and the profane and therefore acquires the characteristics of sacred cuisine.

Undoubtedly one of the most deeply rooted and accepted meal throughout the country is the "*fiambre*." A cold dish based on vegetables with the addition of a multitude and variety of meats. Much has been said about its origin, and oral tradition has taken charge of it, transmitting anecdotes and legends of the most

diverse kind. What is as significant as the orality surrounding its appearance is the cultural fixation it has achieved in Guatemala, and with it the gastronomic identity it imprints the sacred cuisine of the time.

The "*comida de cabecera*" is also worth mentioning. This is the name given to very select foods that have taken root in the custom, such as ayote squash, corn, and squash, which when cooked and shared with the food of the living, are deposited at the head of the tombs so that "the deceased may eat" through his or her soul. It is one of the most sacred foods of deepest meaning, both for the symbolism it carries and for being made from native vegetables.



*Fiambre* is the traditional popular dish par excellence in the celebrations of All Saints' and All Souls' Day.



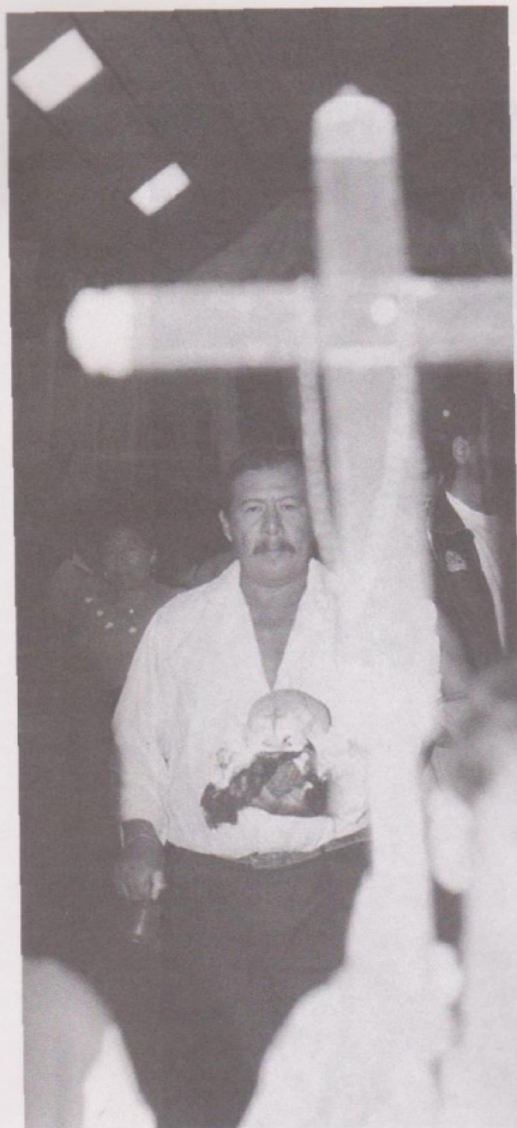


The Holy Skull has reached the altar of a house of mourners. Between the warmth and the light of candles, the food that the person who is commemorated in this way liked in life is laid out.



The cushion for the Holy Skull shows the deep respect they have for it.





The symbolic Christian cross accompanies the processional courtship and is printed on the forehead of the Holy Skull.



The temporary transfer of the Holy Skull is part of the ritual that honors the deceased at this particular ceremony in Petén.





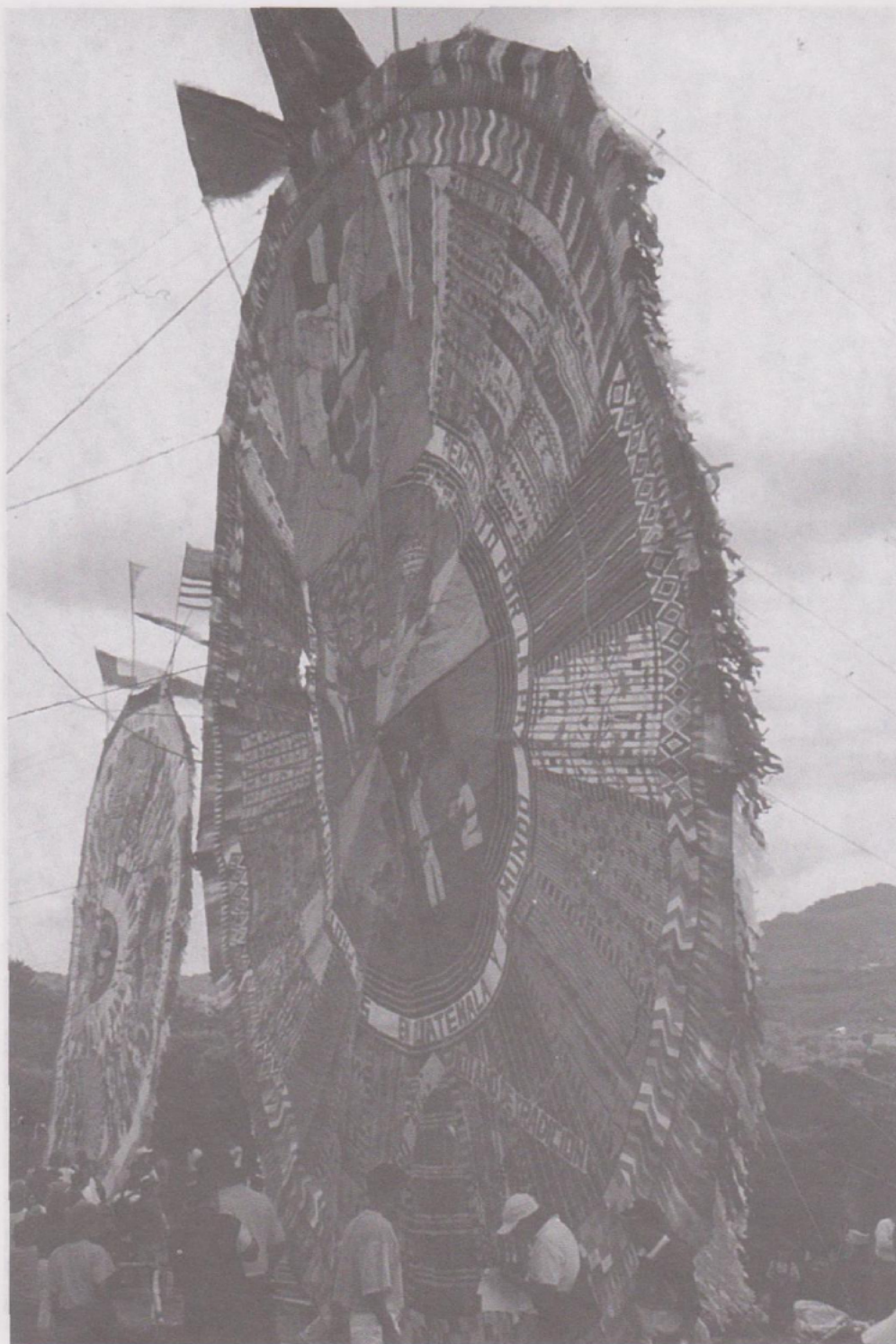
The colors and elements that make up the wreaths, tissue paper tulle and fringe garlands are a regular part of the traditional ceremonies of tomb decorations.





In addition to the celebrations, the sale of jaggery (raw sugar or panela) blocks is available for sale. They will be used for the typical gastronomy of the time: *ayote en dulce* (squash in a sweet syrup of panela), and *jocotes en miel* (hog plums in a sweet syrup) in particular.





It is easy to feel the imposing presence of a giant kite in Santiago Sacatepéquez. It corresponds to the time of vindication, but it primarily elevates the cultural identity of these people to communicate with the overworld, with their deceased ancestors, with the blessed souls.





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