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TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA



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DAY OF THE DEAD IN CHINAUTLA

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INTRODUCTION

With a deep personal interest in thoroughly understanding the tradition of the Day of the Dead in Chinautla, I began by asking various individuals who are well-acquainted with the subject. Thanks to the generous and selfless collaboration of all those I consulted, I am now able to present a summary of what remains, to this day, a very old tradition that, despite the passage of time, has not lost its vitality and continues to be present in the small group of inhabitants of the town, the municipal seat.

To conduct this study, I initially distributed some questionnaires among acquaintances who had, in one way or another, participated in the tradition. However, not entirely satisfied with the results, I personally traveled to Chinautla, where I had the opportunity to distribute more questionnaires and engage in lengthy conversations with individuals who provided me with the most comprehensive and reliable information, though I must note that both the first and second groups were extremely generous in their cooperation.

MUNICIPALITY OF CHINAUTLA

When, in 1526, Don Pedro de Alvarado subdued the fierce town of Mixco by force, the inhabitants of the region located on the other side of the Río Grande, inhabited by people of the Pocomam race, were allied with the Mixco people. These were the people of Chignautla, who eventually surrendered to the conquerors and sent emissaries to Alvarado bearing gifts of blankets, feathers, and gold. Later, the inhabitants were relocated to the site where the present town of Santa Cruz de Chinautla was founded.

In this rugged region, covered with lush pine forests, the population grew, preserving the purity of their race thanks to a decree from the Laws of the Indies that prohibited the intrusion of Spaniards into native settlements.

The lands were divided on several occasions, but the greater portion always remained with the native people.

It is located to the north of the capital city. The Saljá and Las Vacas rivers run through the municipality. Most of its land is barren, extremely uneven, and composed of white, sandy soil. Excessive harvesting and uncontrolled deforestation have further worsened the already poor conditions.

"The inhabitants of Chinautla," says engineer Aparicio, "are all indigenous and maintain the customs and traditions of their race, without being influenced in any way by the proximity and contact with the inhabitants of the Capital."

They all speak their native dialect, though they can make themselves understood in Spanish.

The current town of Chinautla is located in a deep ravine surrounded by high peaks. Its municipality is crossed by the Las Vacas River, which is also known as the Chinautla and Salayá Rivers, and its tributaries, Pencos, Arenal, and Campanero, which come from Mixco.

To reach Chinautla from the capital, the most convenient route is the road near El Martinito, which, passing by the Micho Lime Kilns, leads to the town. Another route begins in Jocotales, a detour that runs along the top of a ridge and descends almost steeply into the town.

The current residents, for the most part, work in the capital. The women are almost the only ones who work within the municipality. Their activity revolves around the well-known pottery craft, many of whose models are made only by special order.

Years ago, when there were no other roads to exit the capital, there was a large influx of visitors to the banks of the rivers in Chinautla to enjoy the pleasant climate and its waters. Today, the town is greatly neglected. The rivers have become drainage channels for the capital, and pottery has lost its relevance due to the rise of plastic products. Nevertheless, the locals remain attached to their homeland and, with admirable effort, continue to fight for their survival.

This grim situation is brightened only once a year, and not precisely by a joyful event. It is on the Day of the Dead that the town and especially the cemetery take on an extraordinary atmosphere. Many residents of Jocotales descend to Chinautla on that particular day to take part in the “*cabeceras*.” Most notably, it is the youth who come.

Finding this tradition very interesting and being unfamiliar with it, I decided to thoroughly investigate how the Day of the Dead is celebrated and, above all, what the “*CABECERAS*” consist of.

I began by inquiring among those who had participated in one way or another on that particular day. Not being fully satisfied, I went directly to the town itself, where I obtained the information that I now present, based on a questionnaire I previously distributed and of which a copy is attached.

I must thank all those people who generously cooperated in answering it, especially those interviewed in the place itself.

THE DECEASED

Since the dawn of humanity, and precisely because of being human, man has kept the memory of those who departed this life before him to enter another. All civilizations have had the distinct trait of honoring their dead, ensuring that what stood out most about them in life endures.

Simple stones, tombs, monuments, and even buildings help keep the memory of loved ones from falling into oblivion.

In Guatemala, devotion to the dead is deeply rooted. There is no family that forgets their deceased on the first of November. Some even travel long distances to “clean” the graves of their loved ones and leave some flowers. It is a tradition that has its own local characteristics. There are many variations, but all are oriented toward the same goal, to remember the dead, especially loved ones.

It is a tradition passed from parents to children in almost every family. Few people learn it from other sources, some from the church.

Among the inhabitants of *Chinautla*, there is the unique tradition of the “*cabeceras*,” which consists of bringing food to the cemetery.

These “*cabeceras*” consist of a wide variety of foods. The main ones include: *tamales* (corn dough stuffed with meat or sauce and steamed in a leaf), corn on the cob, squash, *jocote* (a type of small, sour-sweet tropical fruit also known as hog plum), *chayote* (a green, pear-shaped vegetable), sweet potato, *chuchitos* (smaller Guatemalan-style tamales wrapped in corn husks), *atol* (a traditional hot corn-based beverage), and *horchata* (a sweet rice or seed-based drink with cinnamon). As an essential complement, most also bring liquor.

Most of the family takes part in the activities at the cemetery. By November 1st, nearly everyone is gathered, even those who live far from home.

It should be noted that the Day of the Dead reaches its peak of celebration not necessarily on the 2nd, but rather on All Saints’ Day, November 1st. The reason is very simple, November 1st is a public holiday, which allows those who live far from home or who work in factories or other jobs to attend, while the 2nd, being a workday, makes it more difficult.

Normally, the preparation at home consists of setting up an altar with curtains, decorations, and flowers, along with candles. They do not have the custom of placing photos of the deceased, “because they didn’t leave them for us.”

The altar is something kept inside the home. It remains in place almost all year and is used for family religious gatherings on various religious dates.

Catholics begin All Saints’ Day by attending Holy Mass. They usually do not bring the *cabeceras* to the church, nor do they bring candles or other items meant to be placed on the graves. Some do say an extra prayer in the church atrium, in front of the image of the Lord of Souls. Around the candles, they place flowers.

Houses are not decorated on the outside. Some people hang black paper or cloth streamers on the door, but this is rare.

Once everything is ready, they head to the cemetery, which is located on a steep hill about ten minutes’ walk from the town center. They have previously cleaned the graves of their loved ones and whitewashed the crosses. The graves are dug directly into the ground. There are only three slightly elevated tombs, the rest are underground.

Once at the cemetery, they place the “*cabeceras*” on the grave. Then they light candles and votive lights and say a few prayers, generally the Our Father, Hail Mary, Salve Regina, and Memorare. That is to say, they recite simple prayers.

The prayers at the cemetery are usually led by the family member who knows them best, often the father or the eldest daughter.

There are usually no professional prayer leaders, nor are there mourners who cry aloud.

The prayers are typically said at the beginning of the day. For the rest of the day, no further prayers are made. Everyone remains peacefully “keeping company” with the deceased in a quiet, still manner.

In the past, it was customary to bring marimba music as accompaniment, but nowadays it has diminished "because the priest says it is not appropriate." However, marimba is still brought, although only by the marimbists themselves.

As the day progresses, the time comes to begin tasting the food presented to the deceased "to see if it smells." This is when food exchanges are made between friendly families, neighbors, or relatives. Both parties give each other mutual gifts of food and drink. They then gather in groups to eat, which often lasts until sunset and ends with the consumption of drinks, many times in excess. As a result, many men return home somewhat drunk, appearing "very sad."

A portion of the food received as a gift from friends is taken home, and another portion is left "for the deceased." It is this part that is mainly sought by the young people from the capital, particularly from Jocotales and the surrounding neighborhoods, who come down to the town in large numbers to "take the *cabeceras*."

An essential complement for this significant day are the wreaths and decorations. Nowadays, wreaths are usually bought in the capital, as well as the flowered crosses made of Styrofoam. Those who cannot afford to go to the capital's market make their wreaths from pine, cypress, and other "local" materials. There are both natural and artificial decorations.

The wreaths are not all the same size. Some are small and others large, depending on the age of the deceased to be honored. It is not uncommon for the same family to bring several types of wreaths in different sizes.

The decoration is complemented with pine cords and paper chains on the cross and around the tomb.

Flower bouquets are usually the least common; almost all are wreaths. All the floral decorations are left at the cemetery. Some bring vases or flowerpots so that the flowers last a few more days.

With the arrival of dusk, people return to the town.

Interestingly, the priest does not usually take part in the cemetery activities. Some say it is because the "cabecera" rituals displease him, as they often end in drunkenness, although it could also be because he does not live in the town and only goes there to provide the religious service of the Holy Mass.

There is a Mass on the second, and most people attend it, although many, due to work commitments, have already had to leave for the capital.

CONCLUSION

Thus, with a family-filled ceremony, the deceased are honored in Chinautla. With the "cabeceras" placed on the graves, the communion that must continue to exist between the living and the deceased is symbolized, and how both should partake in the material goods that God has given us. A tradition that, despite its proximity to the capital, has not been erased in Chinautla. On the contrary, with very few modifications, it has been passed down from generation to generation and is revived every November 1st, for the comfort of the living, the relief of the deceased, and as an example to those who attend out of curiosity or for personal gain.

SURVEY RESULTS

By age:

From 10 to 15 years.....	3	From 15 to 20 years.....	5
From 20 to 40 years.....	1	From 30 to 40 years.....	6
From 40 to 60 years.....	4	Over 60 years.....	1
		TOTAL people.....	20

1- End of the Day of the Dead:

a- To remember the memory of the dead:	1
b- To remember deceased loved ones:	6
c- To remember the dead and give them worship:	3
d- To honor the dead:	1
e- To celebrate the dead:	2
f- To go see the dead buried in the cemetery:	1
g- To visit the graves at least once a year:	1
h- To celebrate the dead with joy:	1
i- To offer them prayers:	1
j- To visit the cemetery and bring flowers to the graves:	2
k- To remember the deceased, particularly family members:	1
TOTAL: 20	

2- Where did you receive this tradition from?

a- From our parents:	6
b- From our grandparents:	1
c- From generation to generation:	1
d- From our ancestors:	2
e- From the people of Chinautla:	2
f- From religious figures:	1
g- From the Mayans:	1
h- From parents to children:	2
i- From parents and grandparents:	3
j- From what I have read:	1
TOTAL: 20	

d- Sacred music:	1
e- Funeral marches:	1
f- None:	2
g- Turtles and drums:	1
TOTAL: 20	

12- If there is music, who pays for it?

a- They are paid:	2
b- They do it on their own:	13
c- Volunteers:	1
d- _____:	4
TOTAL: 20	

13- Is there any special act or ritual at home?

a- Yes:	4
b- No:	3
c- Nine-day prayer:	3
d- The Rosary is prayed:	3
e- Prayers are said before the altar:	2
f- The family gathers to toast and eat in their memory:	1
g- Altars are made and candles are lit:	3
h- Farewell with thoughts of the deceased:	1
TOTAL: 20	

14- Who takes part in the home rituals?

a- The family:	15
b- Family and friends:	1
c- Family and neighbors:	1
d- He and his wife:	1
e- Especially elderly people:	1
f- _____:	1
TOTAL: 20	

15- Who says the cemetery prayers on behalf of the family?

a- Elderly people:	1
b- Special prayer leaders:	1
c- The father or eldest daughter:	3

d- Father or mother:	3
e- Parents:	2
f- The mourners:	1
g- The most sensible person:	1
h- The family:	1
i- Those who know how to do it:	2
j- Volunteer prayer leaders:	1
g- _____:	4

TOTAL: 20

16- What kind of wreaths are taken to the graves of the deceased?

a- Round, heart-shaped, flower bouquets:	2
b- Paper or natural roses:	3
c- Paraffin paper flowers:	1
d- Cypress:	9
e- Artificial and natural:	4
f- Pine and eucalyptus:	1

TOTAL: 20

17- Are they all the same size?

a- Yes:	1
b- No:	5
c- Small and large:	5
d- Depending on whether the person was an adult or a child:	5
e- Of different sizes and shapes:	4

TOTAL: 20

18- Are the wreaths made of natural flowers or other materials?

a- More natural than artificial:	5
b- Made of paper:	3
c- Other materials:	1
d- Both kinds:	10
e- Natural:	1

TOTAL: 20

19- Are other decorations taken to the cemetery?

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| a- Pine and cypress garlands: | 2 |
| b- Crepe paper chains: | 6 |

29- Do those who go to the cemetery take part in it?

- | | |
|--|---|
| a- No: | 2 |
| b- Yes: | 8 |
| c- Everyone takes part: | 3 |
| d- Only Catholics: | 5 |
| e- Family members and others who want to go: | 1 |
| f- _____: | 1 |

TOTAL: 20

30- Is anything brought to the cemetery taken to the church beforehand?

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| a- No: | 4 |
| b- Yes: | 5 |
| c- Sometimes: | 3 |
| d- At personal discretion: | 1 |
| e- The "cabeceras": | 1 |
| f- When going to mass: | 1 |
| g- It is taken directly: | 1 |
| h- _____: | 4 |

TOTAL: 20

31- Is there any external decoration on the house that day?

- | | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| a- Yes: | 4 |
| b- No: | 10 |
| c- Crepe paper: | 1 |
| d- Ribbons: | 1 |
| e- Colored papers and flowers: | 1 |
| f- _____: | 3 |

TOTAL: 20

32- Are the houses near the cemetery related to any decoration or not?

- | | |
|-----------|----|
| a- No: | 12 |
| b- Yes: | 4 |
| c- _____: | 4 |

TOTAL: 20

33- Is there anything else you can share that hasn't been asked?

- a- The "fiambre" is a regional dish that brings together all types of food in one.
- b- They believe in superstitions.
- c- That day, people play cards and the flower game.
- d- It is believed that the deceased eat what they liked most when they were alive.
- e- The mourners place flowers and light candles in the cemetery, and in the evening, drinking begins.
- f- Upon returning, there is a great sense of sadness, mostly due to excessive drinking.

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