

# ACTIVITY 1A: THE ORIGINS OF HALLOWEEN

## EL DIA DE LOS MUERTOS — Teacher Information Sheet

### EL DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

November 1st, “All Saints Day,” and November 2nd, “All Souls Day,” are celebrated in Latin America differently than in the United States. This festival is perhaps the most fascinating Latin American holiday. In Mexico, this two-day fiesta is called *El Día de los Muertos*, “The Day of the Dead,” and it had its beginnings in pre-Colombian Mexico. Parts of “The Day of the Dead” traditions date back to the Aztecs who celebrated the harvest while paying homage to their ancestors. With the introduction of Christianity, the Aztec feast days were moved to coincide with the Christian feast days. These two days can be compared to our Halloween in three ways: (1) they both have their roots in ancient cultures, (2) they both celebrate the end of the harvest and (3) they both utilize symbols of death.

In Mexico, *El Día de los Muertos* celebration is one that embodies the primary elements of the Mexican psyche: religion, mores (values and traditions), cultures, customs, and philosophy. To Mexicans, death and the dead were a part of everyday life. Death is not something to be feared; it is not viewed as the end of our existence, but as the beginning of eternal life. This is a time for remembering the dead with church services, prayers, and the lighting of candles forming a crucial part of the celebration. After all, “The Day of the Dead” is a holy day. *El Día de los Muertos* is the time of year when the spirits of deceased loved ones return to their homes. This return is the cause of great merrymaking and jubilation. Parades are staged in which people masquerading as skeletons carry coffins through the streets. Children will often run through the streets with jack-o-lanterns begging for pennies from observers. Trees are decorated with

lanterns in order to guide the dead back to their homes. Popular toys for children include skulls, coffins, and *calacas* (clay figurines of the dead). Food such as *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) and sugar-candy skulls with people’s names on them are also popular. This custom of providing food for the dead is important; food is placed at the gravesite of the deceased, on the family altar at home, and in the churches.



The celebration of “The Day of the Dead” begins with the preparation of an altar. This altar may be at the home or at the gravesite of the dearly departed or both. Most families will visit the cemetery, clean the gravesite of their loved ones, and set up an altar with a cross of *cempazuchitl* (marigold) flowers. All-night prayer vigils are not uncommon. At the home, there would be two altars — one for children and the other for adults. An altar to a child would contain such offerings as hot chocolate and sweet cakes, glasses of water, dishes of salt, white candles and flowers, and toys. For an altar to one or more adults, the candles and

flowers would be yellow. There would also be candy skulls, sticks of sugar cane, and *pan de muerto*. Other items on the altar would be photographs of the deceased, some cherished objects, and dishes of their favorite food and drink. Every altar always has a candle for those who have no one to remember them.

The offering of food, like the offering of flowers, is a symbol of love and respect. However, the dead do not eat the food in the conventional sense. They absorb the foods' essence. Many Latin American cultures believe that the food will be a source of strength for the deceased as it is for the living. After the dead have "eaten" their fill and left the home or gravesite, then the food is taken to a relative's or neighbor's home and shared with everyone. In this way, the living have given to the dead, and the dead have given to the living.

*Source:*

*The Days of the Dead: Mexico's Festival of Communion with the Departed* by Rosalind Rosoff Beimer, San Francisco, CA, 1991.