Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead
By Stanley Brandes

Some illuminating excerpts from this ethnographical study provide great insight into the history, culture and growth of the celebration of the Day of the Dead.

**Food Traditions**

The foods that are used to decorate as an *ofrenda* indicate no belief in the actual consumption of *ofrenda* foods by the dead, rather, it is the ephemeral “essences” of the food set out for them—the flavor and the aroma—that the dead take from their offerings.

Liquor is a common feature of home altars, although generally not graveside *ofrendas*.

Family members take account of the individual tastes of deceased relatives in deciding which foods to include.

From the 1500s, All Souls’ Day celebrations required a catafalque, situated in the main chapel of any given church, surrounded by a variety of candles as well as by “twenty-five rolls of bread.”

On the afternoon of All Saints’ Day and well into the night, the animation along the Ramblas and streets flowing into it was extraordinary. Food stands sold special seasonal sweets called *panellets dels morts*.

What is astounding about this document, aside from references to dead bread, is the use of the term *Dia da dels Morts*, that is, Day of the Dead, to refer to All Souls’ Day, which is the earliest use of the term.

Curet (1958) writes that in 18th-century Barcelona “on the afternoon of All Saints’ Day and well into the night, the animation along the Ramblas and streets flowing into it was extraordinary. Food stands sold special seasonal sweets called *panellets dels morts*.”

A document from the Barcelona silversmith guild dated October 15, 1671, stipulates that on All Souls Day, two *corteres of pa dels morts* (dead bread in Catalan) be offered to the deceased. What is astounding about this document, aside from references to dead bread, is the use of the term *Dia da dels Morts*, that is, Day of the Dead, to refer to All Souls’ Day. This, to my knowledge, is the earliest use of the term.

In a will dated December 13, 1344, Jaime Corbera stated, “I wish and arrange…that my heirs should give each year, on the Day of the Deceased [*Dia de Difuntos*] on my sepulcher, five *sueldos* of bread, candles, and other obligatory objects, in such manner as on this day is custom to do.”

Among foods, bread is the earliest and most widely reported offering.
It would be hard to deny that the Mexican Day of the Dead does have a prominent, though not exclusive, Spanish origin.

A study of pulperías (small grocery stores) in 18th-century Mexico City shows that sugar by that time had become a regular stock item.

Indeed, in Spain's first published cookbook, dated 1778, Francisco listed no fewer than eight recipes for molded marzipan. What Europeans, including Spaniards, fabricated out of marzipan, the Mexicans created with sugar itself.

One of the oldest and most widespread Spanish sayings (Arora 1980), *El muerto al hoyo y el vivo al bolla* ["To the grave with the dead and bread to the living"]

There is every indication, then, that the chemistry of both bread and sugar—the two most distinctive and prevalent Day of the Dead food substances—inspires a negation of death.

For now, evidence indicates that the Mexican Day of the Dead is a colonial invention.

The principal types and uses of food on this holiday definitely derive from Europe. After all, there is no *tortilla de muertos* but rather *pan de muertos*, just one highly significant detail.

All derive from Spain. At the same time, the particular anthropomorphic form that Day of the Dead sweets assume is part of both Spanish and Aztec traditions.

**The Ofrenda or Offering for the Altar**
This combination of Spanish and indigenous culinary habits and tastes no doubt culminated in the *ofrenda* patterns we observe today.

The *ofrenda* itself is probably Spanish, although it has long assumed significance in Mexico that far outstrips that in the mother country.

The *ofrenda* must contain candles and fresh flowers or flower petals. In fact, these are the only items without with an *ofrenda* would be considered incomplete and inadequate.

**The Art, Poetry and Music**
These complex and diversified folkloric traditions—the poetry and songs, the masks and sculpture—invariably suggest the enormous tenacity and wisdom of a people and a culture whose oppressed situation has not been an obstacle for the expression of a unique and creative philosophy of life and death.
Consider first the place of skulls and skeletons in Mexican popular culture. These artistic representations display at least nine intrinsic characteristics:

1. They are ephemeral art.
2. They are seasonal art.
3. They are humorous
4. They are secular. Aside from the cross, it would be difficult to discover religious imagery in the Day of the Dead iconography.
5. This iconography is commercial.
6. Day of the Dead art is designed for living people, not for the deceased.
7. Day of the Dead art is comical.
8. Day of the Dead art is small, light, and transportable.
9. Much of Day of the Dead art is urban and shared among Mexico's cultural elite. Although there is a rural artistic tradition associated with this holiday as well.

Although death themes appear among the polychrome vessels associated with elite burials, most mortuary art reflects various categories of human activities in the context of life, not death. The Aztecs show representations of skulls, but no full-length skeletons. Contextually, the use of skulls among the Aztecs could not be further removed from that among Mexicans in today's Day of the Dead celebration.

The death theme in Spanish and Mexican Arts (1986:113-137) offers a survey of the topic from the 15th century through the 20th century. Nothing from these countries bears the least resemblance to skulls or skeletons.

The Day of the Dead figurines are skeletons—dressed as humans, but entirely fleshless nonetheless.

In the case of Day of the Dead figures, death itself is mocked, not any specific human victims.

Sugar skulls are labeled with the names of living persons, never the names of people who are actually deceased.

Mexicans, like people virtually everywhere, take the death of friends and relatives seriously. Humorous iconography is a product of and appropriate to a single celebratory moment, the Day of the Dead.

By the mid-18th century, the holiday already had acquired its unique Mexican name, the Day of the Dead.

There is no doubt that the most explicit and abundant evidence of humorous popular art during the Day of the Dead comes from the last half of the 19th century: broadsides known as calaveras (“skulls”).

The first illustrated newspaper in Mexico was called El Calavera, January 1847.
José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913)
By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Posada was creating powerful *calavera* images each year on the occasion of the Day of the Dead.

Probably the most famous of Posada’s images is that of the *catrina*, the female dandy, portrayed as a fleshless skull, topped with a fancy, wide-brimmed hat. Posada’s influence on Mexican art and culture is incalculable.

By the 1930s, Posada and his *calaveras* became symbolic of Mexico.

The Day of the Dead, by Posada’s time, was a well-entrenched Mexican tradition.

Posada’s art and its offshoots provided what I have called elsewhere a type of “peaceful protest.”

Day of the Dead has become one of the most famous spectacles of Mexican indigenous life.

**Calaveras**
An equally prominent type of *calavera* is the poetic epitaph.

The literary *calavera* is almost always rhymed and often organized into quatrains. Though *calaveras* nowadays are generally short—four to twelve lines at most—they can vary from simple couplets to minor epics.

Although *calaveras* are sometimes complimentary, they are usually bitingly satirical and mock the victim’s weaknesses through humorous teasing.

The *calavera* author normally dedicates his or her verse by making the victim’s name the title of the epitaph. However aggressive they might seem, short verses of this sort almost always operate to reinforce friendships and other social ties. They are an expression of ongoing joking relationships.

On the whole, however, *calaveras* are designed to ridicule well-known figures from the world of politics, sports, the arts, and other high-profile professions.

Literary *calaveras*, published mainly on broadsides, emerged in the mid-19th century mainly in response to the freedom of the press that came with Mexico’s independence from Spain in 1821.

**The Celebration**
There is evidence, in fact, that the Spaniards tried to eradicate, or at least tone down, together with Carnival, the Day of the Dead presented a threat to civil authorities, and that, at least during the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, both of these ritual occasions were suppressed to varying degrees.
This fiesta, which drew boundaries between the living and the dead and partially inverted their roles, showed up the presence of death in the midst of life in an era in which the elite of New Spain tried to forget its existence (Viqueira 1984:13).

Day of the Dead, with its culinary, iconographic, and other flamboyant symbols of death, became a form of resistance against official ideology and social practices.

MacCannell, whose innovative book, *The Tourist* (1976), which was almost singlehandedly responsible for the promotion of tourist studies, suggests that a major impulse behind tourism is the search for authenticity, and that tourism, far from automatically eliminating local ritual performances, might actually contribute to their perpetuation.

*Skulls to the Living, Bread to the Dead* by Stanley Brandes is a must-have book for any serious aficionado or historian of Day of the Dead and is sold at the Whaley House Museum Shop (HERE).

**Editorial Reviews**

“A cogent, attractively presented case study of a single festival in its diverse forms. It provides a lucid account of cultural change and a careful plotting of causes and influences.” (*Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, March 2009)

“As Brandes explains in this small, well-written, colorfully illustrated volume, the Day of the Dead has strayed far from its origins as a Mexican version of the pan-Roman Catholic All Saints’ and All Souls’ days to become a spectacular international and interethnic happening ... Recommended.” (*CHOICE*)

“Penetrating look at ... how religious ritual can be shaped and transformed by culture ... to serve new purposes in a rapidly changing world.” (*Missiology*)

“Erudite and charming, Brandes’ book provides a welcome antidote to previous studies of Day of the Dead ‘morbidity,’ segueing seamlessly from the Mexican festivities to Mexican-Americans in California. The book is destined to become a classic in Hispanic studies.” *David D. Gilmore, SUNY, Stony Brook*

“This is a marvelous book. Brandes, a perceptive analyst and delightful writer, mines his years of fieldwork to offer both the telling ethnographic episode and the revealing photograph. *Skulls to the Living* not only illuminates the fascinating rituals of the Day of the Dead, but offers rich insight into changing and kaleidoscopic Mexican culture as well.” *David I. Kertzer, Brown University*