

Ancient Middle America Week 9

## *Dia de los Muertos . . .* (for Extra Credit?)



[Wikipedia](#)

. . . begins 31 October and ends 2 November. It is a time celebrated around the world, but especially in Mexico and Brazil. Family and friends gather, often at cemeteries, to pray for deceased family members—and to celebrate with food and drink. The deceased are honored with sugar skulls and other sweet treats, and their favorite foods and beverages.

“The festival of *Dia de los Muertos* on the first of November celebrates deceased infants and children. Roman Catholics on the same day celebrate “All Saints’ Day”, and on November 2<sup>nd</sup> Roman Catholics celebrate All Souls’ Day. The Mexican feast *Dia de los Muertos* begins on November 1<sup>st</sup>, and *similar* to the Catholic “All Saints’ Day” it is a time for family and friends to gather and remember deceased family and friends. The origins of *Dia de los Muertos* itself go back hundreds of years, and before that deceased-tribute customs go back to Aztec festivals dedicated to departed ancestors who were watched over by *Mictecacihuatl*, the Aztec goddess of the underworld charged specifically with guarding the bones of the dead. Scholars suggest that feasts for deceased ancestors in Mexico may go back as far as 2,500–3,000 years.”

“Folks today celebrate with sweet treats. They drink sweet *atole*, a sweet corn-based hot drink tracing its roots to Aztec times, eat sweet candied *calabasa* (pumpkin) treats typical of the candied preserves brought to Mexico with the conquistadors from southern Spain, they share sweet *pan de muerto*, a decorated sweet “bread of the dead” soft roll, and they rally around the famed brightly-colored sugar skulls and sugar skeletons (*calavera*) characteristic of the festival. The skulls motifs, although modern, harken back to and are reminiscent of Aztec times when rulers would put thousands of human skulls on display on their famous skull racks called *tzompontli*. Today the skulls in Mexico are sugar skulls (*calaveras de azúcar*), and as the symbol of the virtual national Mexican *Dia de los Muertos* holiday the sugar skulls not only honor the dead but seek also to convey one’s fondness to one’s object of affection. For the occasion, for example, one can order a sugar skull with their beloved’s name colorfully inscribed with bold-colored frosting.”

“As part of the *Dia de los Muertos* celebration people offer food to their deceased relatives and friends (*ofrendas*), including *many* sweet treats, and then they themselves eat sweet *pan de muertos* and other of the relatives’ favorite foods. The festival becomes a celebration of sweet treats for the living and the dead.”

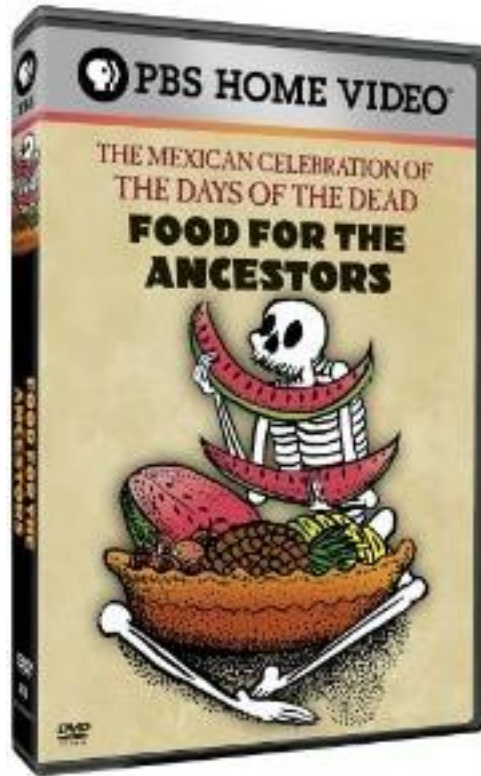
“What foods do they offer and what do they eat?”

“That, like so many things, depends on the region, the local history, family traditions, and the personal likes and dislikes of both the living and the dead. They will, for sure, be eating all of the abovementioned sweet treats . . . and more. And, for example, over in the little twenty-seven-person settlement of La Coyotada, San Juan del Río, Durango, Mexico, where José Doroteo Arango Arámbula was born, some folks may serve him/his spirit ice cream sundaes and chocolate covered ice cream “baseballs”. They were Pancho Villa’s sweet treat favorites. Pancho’s devotees will probably have *vanilla*, the flavor favorite of Mexico.”

–from *Sweet Treats around the World*, Timothy G. Roufs and Kathleen

Smyth Roufs (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2014), pp. 230-231

**If you are looking for a timely Extra Credit Film Review Project, have a look at *Food for the Ancestors*, available at the UMD Library (60 min., 2006, UMDMD GT4995.A4 F66 2006 DVD).**



*Food for the Ancestors* presents Mexican customs relating to the care and remembrance of the dead as celebrated in the culturally rich state of Puebla. Focuses on folk arts related to the celebration, such as weaving, pottery, dance, and preparation of special foods."

(Mexico)

Details for the Extra Credit Film Review are at <<http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/troufs/anth3618/maextrac.html#EC-lecture>>. Turn in your Extra Credit papers in the Week 14 "Activities" section of your **Moodle** Folder.

**The question to ask in your Extra Credit review is, "How might modern-day celebrations and ceremonies, such as *El Dia de los Muertos*, be interpreted as a cultural "survival" from Ancient times?"**

Enjoy your All Hallows' Eve (Halloween), All Saints' Day (Hallowmas), All Souls' Day food and treat celebrations.

Tim Roufs