THE SKELETON AT THE FEAST

THE DAY OF THE DEAD IN MEXICO

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This book is dedicated
with affection and grateful thanks
to all our Totonac friends
and colleagues in the town of Papantla
and surrounding communities.
Introduction

The ten interviews which follow were all recorded in Spanish in 1988 and 1989. Although they have been translated and edited, an attempt has been made to retain the spirit and the phrasing of the spoken text. These first person accounts describe the beliefs, rituals, religious commitment and artistic endeavour embodied today in the ancient festival of the Days of the Dead, or Todos Santos.

Celebrations are evoked within the cultural context of each community. Some of the people interviewed live in cities and towns—namely Mexico City, Puebla City and Toluca; others live in rural settings in the States of Puebla and Veracruz. Two interviews offer an insight into Totonac traditions near the archaeological site of El Tajín: while Fredy Méndez offers a factual account of festivities in the region, Juan Simbrón links Todos Santos with early Totonac history and mythology. Although the other speakers are Mestizo, traits from Nahuatl culture are clearly discernible in San Salvador Huixcolotla and Huaquechula. The age of informants also varies: Fredy Méndez is in his twenties, while Consuelo García Urrutia was seventy-eight at the time of her interview. All stress the serious nature of this festival, yet agree that the arrival of their dead brings great pleasure and tranquility.
Fredy Méndez

(La Congregación del Tajín, State of Veracruz)

Before the Conquest the lands of the Totonac were known as Totonacapan; today their descendants live in south-eastern Veracruz and northern Puebla. According to the National Census of 1980, the Totonac language is spoken by more than 185,836 people. Differences between highland and lowland culture are marked. The archaeological site of El Tajín is located in northern Veracruz; built in the mouth of a thickly vegetated valley, it lies 50 km from the Gulf of Mexico and 15 km west of Papantla. This area currently supports a large Totonac population, yet the formal establishment of the present community is relatively recent. In the late nineteenth century the Mexican government opened up a great stretch of the Papantla area to settlement; many of those who purchased plots of land were Totonac.

Fredy Méndez lives with his family beside the road which passes El Tajín. They own a strip of land, and make a living selling beer and soft drinks to motorists and tourists. Fredy, now in his twenties, is respected in the region for his embroidery skills. There is, as he explains, a shortage of jobs. In Papantla or Poza Rica there is little work to be had. Many people here embroider — men, women and children. I started when I was ten or twelve. No one taught me; I learned by myself. I embroider skirts, blouses, servilletas [cloths] and tablecloths. During Todos Santos Fredy regularly receives awards and compliments for the splendour of his ofrendas. Judges from the town of Papantla visit ofrendas in local homes; they also assess exhibition ofrendas mounted in the town centre.

In nearly every Totonac house, the religious shrine or altar is a focus for artistic expression. Catholic saints and holy images are venerated, and frequently displayed in wooden, glass-fronted nichos. During the festival of Niníin (the Totonac term for the Days of the Dead) returning souls are received with lavish and costly offerings. These may be arranged with those of the saints; alternatively they may occupy a second, temporary altar. The visual appearance of these ofrendas can vary widely from house to house. Balloons and colourful cut-outs of tissue-paper are a recent innovation; suspended palm-leaf suns and stars, flowers, foliage
77. Household saints' altar in the Totonac village of El Cedro, Veracruz. A temporary altar for returning souls is set up beside it during Todos Santos. Saints and souls both receive offerings of incense, candles, food and drink. The carved wooden saints wear miniature garments; behind them are a number of Holy pictures.

and clusters of fruit have a much longer history. Fredy gave the cost of his materials as 300,000 pesos, which works out at about £75.00 (US$125.00). No sum was suggested for the food. Because people buy things slowly over several weeks, they rarely calculate the total outlay.

Although the State of Veracruz is rich in pottery, its produce is rarely seen beyond the locality where it is made. Before Todos Santos cooking utensils and incense burners, some shaped like birds, are made for family use in many houses by women who rely on nearby clay deposits. Sometimes objects are fired indoors in the embers of the cooking stove; sometimes they are fired outside without a kiln. A rapidly diminishing supply of firewood – the result of widespread deforestation – now threatens this ancient tradition.

The spiritual conquest of Totonacapan dates from the very arrival of the Spaniards. Today traits of the old religion are fewer in the lowlands than in the highlands. Catholicism is a powerful unifying force, and evangelical sects have made little headway. Prayers and rituals are often led by rezanderos (prayer-makers). According to Fredy, 'Such a man would take an interest in this subject from an early age. He learns the prayers from an older man – perhaps his father; when the older man dies, or when he's too old to carry on, the younger man inherits his hand-written books. Rezanderos in El Tajín are farmers; they sing alabanzas (Catholic hymns of praise) when the dead return.' In the Handbook of Middle American Indians, H. R. Harvey and Isabel Kelly (1969) write: 'The most common ritual numbers are four and seven, but eight and twelve also occur. Reference to twenty- and eighty-day periods strengthens the assumption that the Totonac shared the Mesoamerican calendar.' Some of these numbers occur in the following pages.

Fredy Méndez was interviewed in 1988 in the company of his father and his mother. Both contributed information, and confirmed his statements. Although Fredy was not taught Totonac as a child, he has since learned to speak it fluently. He takes great pride in his cultural heritage, and hopes Totonac customs can survive.
We have lived in this region for a long, long time. My great-grandparents moved from a place nearby, and settled in El Tajín. They knew many stories about the pyramids, but these have mostly been forgotten. Who the builders were, no one is sure. I don’t think they were our ancestors. If the original inhabitants had survived, their ruins would not have been forgotten and buried underground. Perhaps the Spaniards killed them all. Some people say there are spirits in the ruins of El Tajín, but they lived long ago and they do us no harm.

We are Totonac, and we are Catholics. We go to mass, as we have always done, and observe the ceremonies of the Catholic Church. The Protestants want us to abandon our beliefs. They say we waste our money on foolishness. People whose faith is weak are easily persuaded. In these parts, however, there are few converts. When Protestants talk, we listen politely and buy their books, but we don’t read them. We are faithful to our festivals and saints.

Each year during Todos Santos the dead return. This is the most important festival of the year. It is not a time for making merry. It is a sad and solemn time, as when someone close to us dies, yet it gives us pleasure to receive our dead. We do the things our ancestors did: my father follows his parents’ teachings, and I will continue to do the same. The dead come to eat: they come to consume our offerings of food and drink. These must be set out with pleasure and affection. If I decide to make you a present, I do it whole-heartedly, because I want to. It must be like this during Todos Santos. The souls do not force us to give them anything. If we give, it must be because we truly want to.

As the festival approaches, we accumulate the things we need. When we want something costly, like new clothing, we put money aside over many weeks. So it is with Todos Santos. Last year we spent 300,000 pesos on materials alone, without including the cost of food. During October, and maybe September, our purchases include plates, paper, candles and other goods; we buy chili peppers, sugar, salt, cacao, coffee, cinnamon, and twelve kilos of wheat flour. In this way we make our preparations.

Not everyone takes the same amount of trouble. Not everyone has the same amount of skill. To do something good takes time, enthusiasm and a love of tradition. I like things to be ornate, not simple and uncomplicated. From the ceiling we hang tissue-paper cut-outs in many colours. These are laborious to make: if the blade slips even slightly, the sheet is wasted. Some people barely pattern their paper, but I create birds, animals, flowers and people; I even show the main pyramid of El Tajín. This technique was uncommon in my father’s youth. Instead, he uses tissue paper to cover rope or strips of wood: by tying the paper at intervals with string, he shapes the paper into bubbles.

On 29 October my mother grinds cacao on her metate (grinding stone). She adds sugar, cinnamon, hard-boiled egg yolks, and powdered cloves. She prefers not to add biscuit crumbs, as some people do. This mixture is kneaded and rolled flat, like a tortilla. Then she fashions it by hand into different shapes. Some are inspired by nature, while others refer to things that no longer exist. Not everyone does this: some women make unadorned circles,
ours in a private place; we shield them from visitors, who might swear or become drunk. When Todos Santos comes, these other families mount a second altar beside or opposite the first, according to the space available. This is what my grandparents did. If we, in our house, had lots of images and lots of saints, then we might follow their example and have two altars. As it is, we have just one.

We love our surroundings, and the fruits of nature; we hang clusters of bananas, jicamas, limes, oranges and mandarinas. We put out flowers — yellow flowers, and others if we want. We deck the altar with green tapejilote leaves, and we fashion suns, stars and pine-apples from the palma de coyol. We cut the fronds ourselves nearby. These are the adornments that we make. At the centre goes an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe or the Sacred Heart. In front we lay a petate on the ground.

If we have photographs of the deceased we put them out, but many families have none. There should be a chair, so that the dead can sit and eat. There should be towels and a dish of water, so that the dead can wash their hands. We need ribbons, incense burners, shoulder-bags, embroidered servilletas, and cloths. The dead use these cloths to carry away their food. Of course this is a belief — they can’t physically take it away. Sometimes we put out clothing. The dead go to the grave in the clothes they have used. When they return each year, we give them what we can afford: a newly embroidered kerchief, a blouse, or a skirt. If you like, you can put out other things as well — a machete or a comb.

Candles for the dead are supported by split logs and split sticks. There are yellow candles and white candles. Once we preferred the yellow ones of beeswax, but now they are poorly made and oily; as soon as they get hot, they start to bend. Today we find the white ones better; they are made from paraffin wax, and they are harder. We also offer candles in glasses.

There are many classes of copal (incense). High-quality copal costs 24,000 pesos a kilo, but some varieties are more expensive. Cheaper ones are bad value: they won’t burn and the smell is poor. Good copal is white in tone; bad copal is usually dark. The kind we buy is from the State of Puebla. During Todos Santos wealthy families use half a kilo over three days; we make do with less. The cost is high, so we use a quarter of a kilo, and chiefly burn it when food is placed on the altar. Incense drives evil spirits away. They are attracted by the
80. Suspended household altar in the home of Fredy Méndez (see also plate 20b: fig. 14). Adornments include papercuts and hanging figures made from the coyol palm. Candles are set into a section cut from the stem of a banana plant. Laid out on low chairs are newly made women’s garments, handtowels and a man’s hat; these are for the use of the returning souls. Although the central cloth is from Tenango de Doria, Hidalgo, all other embroidery is the work of Fredy Méndez.
The day of La Vigilia, from the hour of noon, is for the souls of dead children. November is for adult souls, who also arrive at noon. Although the dead can find their way home from the cemetery, we lay a path of flowers near the door to lead them inside. When they leave us on the 2nd, they need no path.

Between 31 October and 2 November, past generations were careful always to leave the front door open, so that the souls of the deceased could enter. My grandmother was constantly worried, and was forever checking that the door had not been accidentally shut. Younger people are less concerned, but there is one rule which we must obey: while the festival lasts, we treat all living beings with kindness. This includes dogs, cats, even flies or mosquitoes. If you should see a fly on the rim of a cup, don’t frighten it away—it is a dead relative who has returned. If a moth sits on a servilleta, leave it be; welcome every living creature.

The dead come to eat tamales and to drink hot chocolate. What they take is vapour, or steam, from the food. They don’t digest it physically; they extract the goodness from what we provide. This is an ancient belief; it comes to us from our grandparents, or maybe it’s older still. Each year we receive our relatives with joy. We sit near the altar to keep them company, just as we would if they were alive. We are not able to talk with the dead, though there are those who can. Some people possess this knowledge. Because they study books on Satan, they know how to converse with the dead. Individuals can visit these people, if they want to contact their dead. A murder victim could say who had killed him, and why. Several women near Papantla have these powers. We, during Todos Santos, do not; we merely sense the presence of those we love.

We burn incense, and we feel glad. We offer food, and we say: ‘Eat’. Always, we do this with good grace. If people are irritable and resentful, the dead know it. They become ill, and they vomit. Our duty is to make them happy. The poor must do the best they can. Hard-up families offer bread and water, if that is all they can afford: what matters is the feeling in their hearts. Some people, however, make no ofrenda. They have lost faith in the return of all souls. ‘Why should I spend my savings on the dead?’ they ask. ‘I can use my money in better ways.’ These people, after Todos Santos, frequently fall ill. The dead say: ‘In this house, nothing has been done for us’ and misfortune may follow. People who neglect their dead have been known to fall, to sicken with fever, maybe even to die. I myself have seen such cases. When such a person starts to vomit, he or she must see a doctor, take medicine, garlic and other remedies, pray and say the rosary. We, in this house, have never been ill, because we respect and welcome our dead.

We feed dead children with comida blanca (‘white’ food); this means that it contains no chili. Red meat is never given. Instead we provide broth, and tamales with egg and sesame seeds, chicken, fish, and squash with shrimps. For these tamales we use maize dough and salt. We put out refrescos (soft fizzy drinks) and hot chocolate prepared at home. We cook sweet dishes from pumpkin, banana, boiled camarote (sweet potato) and yucca. We serve toasted sesame seeds, and toasted pumpkin seeds with panela (brown cane sugar). We make totopos, which look like square tortillas. For these we use maize dough, eggs, lard, aniseed and panela. Fried until they are crispy, they last about two weeks. To decorate the altar, we hang up bollitos de amí: wrapped in maize husks and steamed, they contain maize dough, panela, carbonate, lard and aniseed.

Dead adults eat many of the things I’ve listed; they too like totopos and bollitos de amí, sweets dishes, fruit, chocolate, refrescos, and home-baked bread in a batea (wooden dish). In addition they like meat and chili, so we make them tamales with pork, and serve them hot mole sauce with turkey and tortillas. We offer them
coffee, cigarettes, beer, and sometimes refino (aguardiente, or cane alcohol). Some things, like mole, are best served in earthenware dishes, but for other foods we prefer fine china. A single plate, which might have cost 200 pesos a few years back, is now priced at 20,000 pesos or more. The best make is called Ñora. It costs a lot, but it's still the one we like the most. Those who can afford it buy new dishes for Todos Santos; those who can’t offer the best of what they have. Many families also need new cooking pots for this time of the year. These are made or bought with care. A good earthenware pot, if you treat it well, can last ten or fifteen years.

In other places, so I’ve been told, people wear masks, dance and play music when the dead return. This is not the custom here. Instead, we have alaranzas. These are sung by four men, who go in groups from house to house. On 1 November they sing in the evening and late into the night; then, on 2 November, they sing again. They sing Los ángeles en el cielo (The Angels in Heaven), El Señor de Tampico (Our Lord of Tampico) and other songs besides. Householders give them food to eat and alcohol to drink. There is little music other than this. In our region we have brass bands: if a dead man had been a musician, his family might pay a group of musicians to play for him; or his fellow musicians might come and play for free. But this is rare.

I have a holy picture which shows two roads: the road of virtue and the road of evil. When someone dies, the soul rises up and the body goes below. The good ascend to Heaven, but those who have robbed or killed must go to Hell. Our altars, our offerings and our alaranzas are for los fieles difuntos (the faithful departed); we are welcoming pure souls from Heaven. We cannot be sure that the wicked return from Hell, but, in case they do, we offer them their own ofrenda. Outside the house, on a narrow shelf or table, we put bread, chocolate and flowers. Those who have sinned may neither enter the house, nor approach the blessed altar; they must remain outside. This altar is for errant souls, for souls in torment, and for orphans.

At midday on 2 November the dead depart. Those who have been well received go laden with bananas, tamales, mole and good things. Those who have been poorly received return empty-handed and grieving to the grave. Some people here have even seen them, and heard their lamentations. When the visiting spirits have withdrawn, we visit each other in our homes, and exchange gifts of food. On this day, we welcome relatives and friends; as the hours pass, they come and go, talking and eating. We like to offer hospitality. There is mole with turkey or chicken, rice, and tamales; there is hot chocolate and bread.

On the 2nd or 3rd we go to the cemetery: this is our duty. We sprinkle tere over the grave, as if clothing the dead person in white, and we offer bread, chocolate, tamales, bolillos de amí, totoxos, fruit, candles and flowers from the altar at home. We lay a leaf on the grave, then we spread out the food; we perfume the air with incense, and we light our candles. When we go home, we leave the food behind.

This is not the end of our celebrations. On the eighth day of November we set a small quantity of food upon the altar.16 Then, at the end of November, comes the day of San Andrés. We offer him tamales, chocolate, bread and many things, just as we did the other saints on All Saints’ Day. Dead adults and dead children both return: together, on this day, they make their last farewell. Todos Santos, you see, lasts all month long.

Even though we know the dead will visit us on earth, we feel grief and sorrow if our loved ones die. When this sad moment comes at last, a crucifix is placed on the dead person’s breast, to offer protection against the devil. Then the body is washed, and dressed in its finest clothes. A man who is de calzón is arrayed in the newest calzón he owns.17 People may go to the grave with all their clothing, although some families like to keep a few garments in memory. Forty years and more ago, when a woman died, she was buried like a bride in her white skirt, her blouse and her quequé (quechquemitl, or shoulder cape). She wore her gold earrings, her gold necklace and her gold rings. Now these things go to her daughter, or her daughter-in-law.

When a man dies, his wife prepares him for burial; when a woman dies, her husband prepares her for burial. This task may also be done by the compadre or comadre. In adult life, at the time of our marriage, we form a life-long bond with a man and woman: they become our compadre and our comadre, just as we become theirs.18 When death occurs, they must immediately be told. We also run to tell the chief rezandero who arrives asfast as he can, bringing with him one, or three companions. He asks for a petate and a blanket, so that they can kneel and pray during the night-long vigil.
The coffin is placed on a table; beneath it we put the dead person’s belongings – his machete, his coa (digging stick), his shoes and his blankets. Forty years ago, the rezanderos would ask for all these things, and take them away for their own use. Now we are becoming modern: today these things go to the next of kin, and not to the rezanderos.

When someone dies, we cut a short length of carrizo (stiff and hollow reed). Into this little cup we pour water and two or three fresh-water acamaytas (small crustaceans).19 This goes in the coffin, so that the spirit will have something to eat and drink. Some people also put in miniature gorditas (puffed maize cakes), and throw pieces of tortilla on top of the coffin. The dead person is thus assured of water and maize on his journey.

On the day following death, the body is borne away for burial.20 The chief rezandero will say three prayers; often, he chants in Latin. In the cemetery, he blesses the grave, which has been dug for a fee by the community’s own policemen. Then, when the coffin is in the ground, each relative drops a handful of earth on it, making the form of the cross. After the coffin has been properly interred, we offer flowers, and light twelve candles – six along one side, and six along the other. These don’t need to be tall; if necessary, we cut big candles into smaller pieces. Then we erect a provisional cross.

When a death has occurred, someone goes asking for donations. He or she goes from house to house, asking for eggs and nixtamal (maize boiled in water with slaked lime). Four days after death, this is used to make egg tamales. For these four days, the dead person’s house has remained unswept, inside and outside. Then, on the fourth day, the chief rezandero sweeps: he asks for a bucket of holy water and aguacatillo leaves. With these, he drives away the evil spirits. He sprinkles water, and he sweeps. This is his task, and he must do it alone. He gathers the refuse in a bag, a sack or a blanket. He takes it away, prays, and burns it; to do this, he needs aguardiente. Then he returns to the house, asks again for the petate and the blanket, and says three prayers. On the ninth day after death, he comes again to the house, and again says three prayers.

Eighty days after death, we erect a permanent cross. Next week my father will be el padrino de la cruz (godfather of the cross) for a woman who died aged ninety.21 In the house where she lived there will be an altar for la difunta (dead woman). This altar will be decorated as if for Todos Santos; so too will the permanent altar of the saints. There will be flowers, food, incense and candles. New clothes will be set out for the dead woman; later, these will be worn by the living. The rezanderos will kneel on a petate. They will pray for the soul of the dead woman; they will bless the cross, and the ofrenda. There will be food in abundance for relatives and friends. Afterwards the flowers and the cross will be taken to the cemetery.

All regions and all peoples have their own traditions. I take our traditions seriously and am forever asking questions. I want to know how things were done and why. It saddened me that some young people now reject our culture, and take no interest in our past. Many customs are already lost. As the years pass, and as old people die, memories are blurred. We live next to the pyramids, yet we know next to nothing of their creators. They too had their traditions and beliefs. One day our descendants will also forget how we dressed, how we behaved, and what we believed.
Children in the Nahua village of Atla, Puebla, making a path of *cempasúchil* petals to lead the souls back to the cemetery after the Day of the Dead.
III. Tissue paper banners for *Todos Santos* by different artists.
San Salvador Huixcolotla, Puebla. Maximum w 70 cms
a. Offering in a public building, Mexico City. Included are skulls and skeletons of papier mâché and pottery. Also, reproductions of *La Catrina* by José Guadalupe Posada. The floor is decorated with metallic paper cuts, *copal*s and dried chili peppers. Made by Maurilio Rojas of San Salvador Huixcolotla, Puebla.
b & c. Lifesize sugar skulls representing a bride and groom. Made by Wenceslao Rivas Contreras. Toluca, State of Mexico. h (approx.) 34 cms

Mestizo family *ofrenda* (offering) in the town of Chicontepec, Veracruz. The arch framing the offering is decorated with yellow *copal*s flowers and the magenta and (less common) greenish *mano de león* (cockscomb) flowers. The wall behind the photographs, candles, crucifixes and other ornaments is decorated with red metallic paper overlaid with a white hand-made cloth.