

# DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

## A CATHOLIC AND AZTEC TRADITION

**D**ía de los Muertos is a holiday celebrated in Mexico and throughout much of Latin America. It is closely linked to Hallowe'en but with a much different history and traditions. The holiday is actually a combination of two much older traditions. The first was a month long feast and ceremony the Aztec people performed for their dead. It was a celebration of the dead, remembering them, and remembering that all life ends. For the Aztecs it was a religious holiday as it is now.

The Aztec religion was polytheistic, meaning they worshiped many gods, and no one god in particular was supremely powerful. Many holidays were dedicated to individual gods, and celebrated what the gods stood for. Different gods would often symbolize fertility, death and rebirth, the harvest, the sun – they represented the connections between people and the world that sustained them.

The Aztec celebrations were dedicated to the goddess Mictecacihuatl, the Queen of the Underworld. In Aztec art and mythology she was often depicted as a skeleton. In the Aztec tradition, and as it is now, the holiday is celebrated as joyous, honoring the cycle of life and celebrating the ones who have passed.

In 1519, the Spanish conquistador Cortez landed in modern day Mexico and met the Aztecs. Within a few years the Spanish, having more advanced weapons, had conquered the Aztecs, and Spain began colonizing the region. One of the earliest people sent from Spain to the Aztec land were missionaries who wanted to convert the natives to Catholicism. Over time many natives married Spanish people who had moved there, and were converted. The traditions of the Aztecs, however, didn't just go away. They were remembered then just as they are now by many people in Mexico. Since the Spanish demanded that Catholicism was the only accepted religion, the Aztec people were forced to give up their old practices, but they were able to find new ways of keeping them alive.

The Catholic holiday All Souls Day was similar to the Aztec holiday, it was a day of remembering the dead. To remain true to Catholicism, and their old Aztec traditions, the native people of Mexico put the spirit of many of their old traditions into the new Catholic holidays. The influence of native culture can still be seen in Día de los Muertos and many other parts of modern Mexican and Latin American life.

### ❧ QUESTIONS

*In your opinion, how is Día de los Muertos similar to Halloween?*

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*How was the goddess Mictecacihuatl depicted in Aztec art?*

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*Which Catholic holiday is the most like Día de los Muertos?*

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