

## 5D Day of the Dead

Álvaro Amat

Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

I am a Mexican immigrant and practicing orthodox Catholic. I celebrate many things at the same time on the Day of the Dead (Sayer 1994). But my mom, who was raised in Spain with Cuban ancestry, had her own personal reasons to dislike the Day of the Dead. For her, the Day of the Dead was a dark and disturbing tradition. Therefore, we did not follow any of the practices as a family. In a way, I grew up as an external observer who longed to join those traditions in any meaningful way, happy when any of my friends allowed me to be part of their family celebrations. I remember vividly the sugar skulls, or *calaveras* (Mack and Williams 2015), with my friends' names on them and I remember the hope that one day I would have my own sugar *calavera* with my name on it.

When I was very young, the images of *calaveras* and *calacas* (skeletons) scared me, and during the holidays of Día de Muertos in Mexico, *calaveras* are everywhere. Images in printed and TV advertising appropriating or imitating the art of José Guadalupe Posada, creator of famous images like *La Catrina*, would flood streets and homes. Decorated *calaveras* would emerge, populating the shelves and tables of markets and stores of traditional folk art. I was particularly disturbed by the figures of skeletons or *calacas* performing everyday activities (Figures 5.8–5.12). To cope with my fear, I used to run around the house with my fingers pulling my mouth horizontally to show my teeth like a *calavera*. This scared my younger siblings, and we would all end up running around the house, laughing and scaring each other, playing *calaveras*. In a way, we were doing what Day of the Dead accomplishes: sharing the fear and mocking death to make it part of life. I eventually got used to the *calavera* as ubiquitous in the Mexican cultural and artistic landscape. As a young aspiring artist, I greatly enjoyed visiting archaeological sites and the Museo Nacional de Antropología to appreciate the mastery of the great Mesoamerican artists and their geometrically stylized representations of skeletons, *calacas* and *calaveras*. From my art professors in high school and college, I learned to appreciate the art of José Guadalupe Posada and became an admirer of Mexican and popular graphic arts, appreciating the creative representation of human skeletons and skulls for social critique and dark humor.

Many of my friends had *ofrendas* at home and visited their relatives' graves to clean them, bringing flowers and making *ofrendas*. In school, each year we created big collective *ofrendas* dedicated to some famous person, usually someone who had a big impact in our culture who had died recently. Most of the time this would be a Mexican celebrity or artist, but sometimes the passing of an international figure would take over, for example in the year John Lennon was killed we created Beatles-inspired *ofrenda*. But at home we didn't have *ofrendas*, or at least that's what my mom thought. When my dad passed away, and not knowing that my mom did not follow any of Day of

the Dead traditions, some of my dad's friends used to bring home some of his favorite cigarettes, food, and beverages to the house, hoping that we could place them in their name on an *ofrenda* dedicated to him. My siblings and I, in collusion with the maid, secretly placed these items with some of his things (his pen, his watch, his lighter) hidden near his photo on the entrance table, with some flowers placed nearby elegantly, so my mom would not identify this arrangement as an "ofrenda."

For me it is hard to distinguish where the Catholic feast begins and where the pre-Columbian tradition ends. The three-day celebration/veneration of the dead includes prayer, two masses, a visit to the cemetery, *ofrendas*, *calaveritas*, *Pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), *cempasuchil* flowers (Mexican Marigolds), costumes, and *fiestas*. These three days are all enveloped in the unique beauty of the Day of the Dead and the solemnity of the Catholic religion. However, secularized celebrations like Halloween have also jumped into the mix with the intensely spiritual practices of our pre-Columbian and Catholic legacy. For me, it all comes together in a seamless celebration. I saw Halloween invade Mexico as it penetrated our culture. I used to visit rural Estado de México, bordering Morelia, during Halloween and the Day of the Dead holidays, which had become a strange week-long celebration. People would go "trick-or-treating" for three or more consecutive nights, singing "Queremos jalagüi" (We want Halloween) as well as "Me da para mi calaverita?" (Do you give me [something] for my little [sugar] skull?). It was a continuous procession of kids wearing homemade costumes of Superman and Spiderman with rubber masks of the current president on top, escorted by adults wearing traditional Mazahua attire, and carrying large plastic *calaveras* as baskets for candy, money, or used as lanterns.

Now that I live in the USA, Halloween has become more important because of my Americanized children, but also because I am fascinated by cultural cross-pollination. Halloween invaded Mexico, but the Day of the Dead invaded Halloween in return; for example, the way in which *Catrin*as have been integrated into the repertoire of American Halloween costumes, or like that James Bond movie that portrayed a fictional Day the Dead parade with giant *calaveras*. Those parades didn't exist when I was growing up in Mexico, but now they have emerged as part of Day of the Dead celebrations all over Mexico. The invasion goes both ways, back and forth.

As an immigrant and as a father, Day of the Dead has gained significance and meaning. I still celebrate both the religious feasts and the cultural traditions together. I don't see any conflict or separation between them. On All Souls Day (*Día de los fieles difuntos*) on November 2 we commemorate the souls of the departed that are in purgatory for their purification. That night I

feel particularly connected to my own departed family members and friends. For me, this is when prayer and celebration is most intertwined with the Mexican traditions, and it is more intimate and personal. Since I cannot visit any of my ancestors' graves because they are all buried far away, I make *ofrendas* to remember them here at home. I started placing a small *ofrenda* on the mantel in my house in Illinois, with photos of my wife's and my own family's *muertitos* (beloved dead ones), some of their possessions, favorite foods, yellow flowers, and candles, all under an image of the Virgin Mary and a crucifix. I taught my children to cherish and celebrate these feasts, trying to keep this tradition alive. As I have become more "at home" with having my own traditions and accepting my own heritage, I have made these *ofrendas* larger and more complex, with levels representing Heaven, Purgatory, and Earth. This year I started incorporating a small skull image, a symbol of *memento mori* and at the same time as a *calavera*. I plan on adding more *calaveras* into my artwork and being more intentional in creating these

*ofrendas* through the years, hoping to bring my children and their families into these meaningful and beautiful traditions.

For me, these are days of prayer and remembrance. Many of my Mexican friends believe that their loved ones in some way come to visit and join them to celebrate with their favorite food and drink. I don't personally believe that the souls of the dead physically visit us. During those Days of the Dead, I pray to God that He lets my beloved ones be more present in my heart. The practice of the Day of the Dead and its traditions help me feel closer in spirit with my beloved departed, but also serve as preparation for my own death. I hope this helps those around me to be more prepared as well.

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Figure 5.10. Skeleton figure of ceramic from Oaxaca, Mexico (FM 343441).









Figure 5.12. Ceramic skeleton figure from Central Mexico (FM 341964).

Scriptural texts represent “heaven” in various ways, ranging from something like the Garden of Eden, a Heavenly Court surrounding the divine, or a New City and New Earth (Rev. 21:1). In sum, “heaven” is that condition in which God’s will is done, and human fulfilment found. It is for this reason that Christians pray to God in the “Lord’s Prayer” that “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” While physical images may be used to imagine heaven, it is a spiritual reality that exceeds the physical reality that is marked by joy, love, and creativity, but also suffering, sin, and death. Like many contemporary Christians, modern Jewish thinkers often shy away from hard-and-fast conceptions of Heaven, Hell, and judgment and prefer to speak of sin as separation from God and the community. More importantly, Christians and Jews insist on the mercy and love of God such that all human beings have inviolable dignity and may share in the blessing of this life and even the life to come. Given the priority of life found in these religious traditions, it is not surprising that the deepest dread is not physical death, but, rather, to be separated from the divine source of life and goodness that can and does happen to the living and perhaps the dead as well. This is also why, as noted above, these religions face the challenges of living a mortal life by stressing messianic

hope, the importance of the moral life (*Mitzvot* or the life of love), and membership in a community, the Church, or the Jewish people.

## References

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# Social Endurance beyond Human Death

Gary M. Feinman and Patrick Ryan Williams

*Field Museum*

**Abstract:** This thematic essay considers how the death of an individual reverberates through human social networks and groups. The authors explore how societies endure in the face of individual mortality and how those challenges vary depending on who specifically died and how the social group is organized. The essay transitions from a consideration of death in mobile, small-scale populations to larger human aggregations that were organized in different ways. For example, the death of a leader has been characterized by markedly different cultural patterns and practices depending on the nature of leadership, legitimation, and succession. The case studies explore examples, from the origins of social memories to the roles of different monuments to the dead that reflected the links between leaders, their forebearers, and their followers.

**Resumen:** Este artículo explora cómo la muerte de un individuo repercute en las redes sociales y los grupos humanos en que este se insertó. Los autores exploran cómo las sociedades resisten y hacen frente a la mortalidad individual, y cómo los desafíos varían dependiendo de quién específicamente murió y cómo está organizado ese grupo social en particular. Este artículo revisa desde una consideración de la muerte en poblaciones móviles y de pequeña escala hasta las grandes comunidades humanas que se organizaron de maneras diferentes. Por ejemplo, la muerte de un líder se ha caracterizado por ciertos patrones y prácticas culturales marcadamente diferentes según la naturaleza del liderazgo, su legitimación, y su sucesión. Los artículos aquí contenidos exploran múltiples ejemplos, desde los orígenes de las memorias sociales hasta los roles de los diferentes monumentos erigidos en honor a los muertos que reflejaron los vínculos entre estos líderes, sus antepasados, y sus seguidores.

During 2022, the US death toll from COVID-19 passed one million. Of course, global totals and the many additional “excess deaths” tabulated by nations around the world portend a human impact even much more severe (Adam 2022; Schreiber 2022; Yong 2022b). Virtually every death leaves a personal void for some or many survivors, depending on the social networks that the deceased belonged to and the extent of their contacts. The ramifying effects—grief, mourning, ritual enactments—from the death of a military and political leader like General Colin Powell extend much more broadly than for most other citizens. Nevertheless, almost every death ignites a social response among those left behind, although the scale and specifics vary widely. Here, we briefly explore why death for our species has always been such a trigger for social response, albeit taking various forms. We ask why these repetitive practices become so encoded, enduring in human traditions and even materialized monumentally on landscapes? We also focus on underlying factors that underpin how and why these reactions vary depending on particular social contexts and the specific roles of the deceased.

Among the living, funerary rituals and interaction between the dead and their earthly descendants are ubiquitous; some researchers even argue that communication with deceased antecedents is a human universal and a key to understanding the underpinnings of religion more generally (Steadman,

Palmer, and Tilley 1996, 63). “Of all sources of religion, the supreme and final crisis of life—death—is of the greatest importance” (Malinowski 1954, 47). Ritualized mortuary activities take a wealth of different forms, and not every death receives an equivalent or as ritually full response. Yet it is worth pondering why funerary rituals and correspondence with the dead are such a fundamental aspect of humanity’s cultural practice in the past and present (Jong 2016; Steadman, Palmer, and Tilley 1996)? In the archaeological record, funerary behaviors provide some of the earliest material evidence for human ritual behaviors (Pettitt 2011), as with the tomb of King Tutankhamen, among the most stirring and memorable windows into our species’ past (Nilsson Stutz and Tarlow 2013).

Although humans generally have a sizeable capacity for selfishness, they also are exceptionally good cooperators. No other animal cooperates with non-kin at the scales that humans do, and in various global regions people established large-scale cooperative arrangements and dense social networks that extend back more than ten millennia. Death, especially sequential or mass death, leaves holes in human social networks and can undermine interpersonal institutions, creating grief and malaise (Yong 2022a). “For those grieving, even more normal times don’t feel like old times” (Lee 2022). In other words, at death, gaps in social networks are opened, and people respond in different ways. Steps may be taken by those who do