

Purépechas: The Guardians of Angels

Every year on November 1st, Mexican cemeteries enliven with color, feasting and lamentation. In the light of candles and shadows of graves, families gather for a unique meal with their dead relatives. This macabre and poetic pre-Colombian ritual is recognized by UNESCO as part of the World's Intangible Cultural Heritage, illuminating the soul of onlookers and bereaved alike.

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In the Early morning in the village of Tzurumutaro, Marisol hears her husband Martin, who passed away two and half years ago, enter her home. Not wanting her husband to get lost, Marisol, with the help of her family, has done everything she could to help guide her husband on his daunting journey: she has cut and arranged aromatic bouquets of flowers to guide his soul, the front door is left open so that the floral scent could drift freely throughout the home, she has deposited copal in the censers, lit candles so that Martin could recognize the familiar faces of friends and family, and a gigantic arc has been assembled to facilitate his passage into the world of the living. For two days Marisol has cooked Martin's favorite meals to nourish him and has left him water to quench his thirst following the difficult journey back. In plain sight, a colorful altar honors Martin, where the food and water awaits him.

Every year throughout Mexico, the souls of the dead return to visit their living relatives. Though celebrated nationwide, this incredible pre-colombian belief and ritual is rooted in Purépechas Indian culture, whose territory resides in the middle of the State of Michoacán, located just 400 km West of Mexico City. "Dia de Los Muertos", also known as the "Day of the dead", is a two day celebration commencing on November 1st. The first day is known as "Fiesta de los Angelitos" and is dedicated to children and November 2nd commemorates the passing of adults and the elderly. As the festivities begin the social atmosphere fuses with fantasy. In the towns of Morelia and Pátzcuaro, people dress up in funeral attire. Offerings of morbid poems and sweet skeleton candy are given amidst exploding fireworks. In the glowing streets, story tellers frighten people passing by with twisted tales of traditional myths and urban legends. The parks and plazas are decorated with flowered tombs and among giant sculptures and "Catrinas", The female incarnation of Death in Mexico, droves of crowds begin their funeral march.

As dusk fades to night, the cemeteries illuminate with thousands of candles. Purépechas, wearing blankets on their shoulders, to keep warm solemnly deposit offerings on the tombs of the deceased. By the hundreds, people gather to celebrate and lament. Hushed whispers and sad songs mix in an infinite poetry to dance among the head stones and entangle with the contradictions of laughter and somber faces. The Dead idly stand by as their loved ones cry, pray, feast, and tell stories about their lives. As the night carries on, friends of the family and deceased come by to offer

candles and fruits to the dead. In exchange for their support, the family offers freshly baked “bread of dead” and other traditional foods accompanied by tequila and mezcal.

In the twilight hour, when it is time to say goodbye, the sleepy eyed families collect the relics of the evening, pack up the remaining food, adorn the tombs, and with a last prayer, depart from the dead. The next year, they will be reunited. And all will start again.