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Día de los Muertos in Leeds

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Date

Saturday 28 October 2017



A guest blog from Laura Loyola-Hernández

In the last two decades, Halloween marketing around the globe has appropriated *Día de los muertos* (Day of the Dead). Nowadays, it is very common to find in stores across the UK some type of imagery or costume associated with *Día de los muertos*. While I welcome people outside of Mexico embracing new customs and traditions, for Mexicans as myself this is something more than a fad. It is part of our culture, a way to see life and a form to remember our ancestors. I always appreciated *Día de los muertos*. Yet, it wasn't until I had

children of my own and moved to the UK that I made a conscious effort to practice this tradition. I want to pass on to my children this celebration of life and death.



In Mexico we celebrate *Día de los muertos* from 31 October to 2 November. We do not see death as the end. Instead, we believe it is part of the circle of life. We embrace it and celebrate it in multiple ways. During these three days, we make fun of death through the writing of *Calaveras* (skulls), a playful short poem describing someone's encounter with death (the people in the poems range from loved ones to public figures). Here is a *calavera* written by my husband in honour of *Día de los muertos*:

When death encountered Theresa May
Death asked her 'Will Brexit be delayed?'
The Prime Minister struggled and couldn't say
Whether Britain in Europe should Remain
Frustrated and tired of this child play
Death told May that on Earth she will not stay.



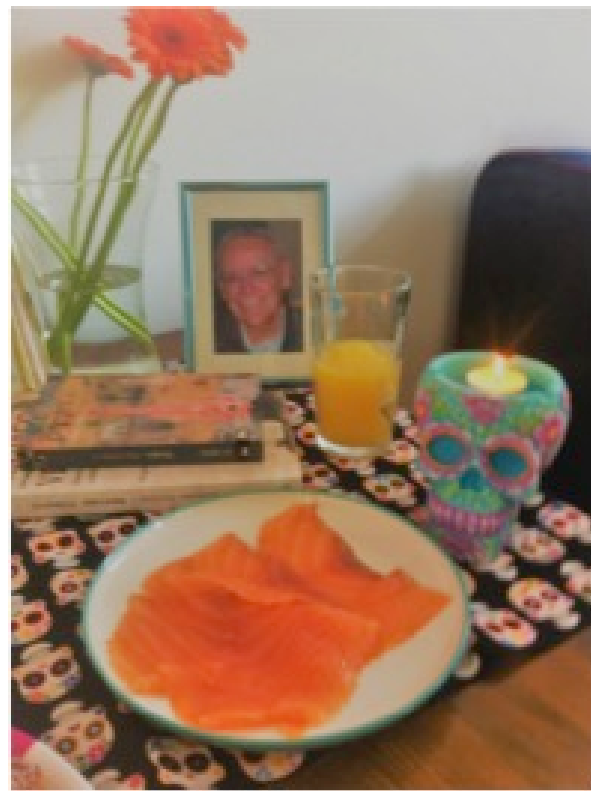
Día de los muertos varies from region to region and even from home to home. In my home state of Yucatán we celebrate *Xanal Pixán* (in Maya it means 'food for the souls' and is pronounced Hanal Pishan). An *ofrenda* (offering) is a private memorial consisting of the deceased's favourite meals, drinks and activities as well as a photograph of the dead and flowers (*Cempasúchil*). On 31 October an *ofrenda* is done for children who have passed away. On 1 November we celebrate the adults that have deceased. Finally, on 2 November we remember the day of all saints. Special food like *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) is prepared only for *Día de los muertos*. This food is intended for the dead and is not to be consumed until after 2 November. A glass of water and simple bread is left in a different table for those souls who have no one to be remembered by.

Over the years, I have brought back from Mexico traditional crafts like sugar skulls; and *papel picado* (Mexican folk art cut into coloured tissue paper often depicting traditional *Día de los muertos* imagery) which I include in the *ofrenda*. Since I cannot buy traditional *Día de los muertos* food in Leeds I have learned to prepare it myself. I bake *pan de muerto*, sweetened soft bread topped with sugar that is meant to appear to be bones. I try my best! Since I cannot buy *Cempasúchil* (Náhuatl for 'twenty flowers' also called Flower of the Dead) in Leeds I substituted it with orange and yellow flowers (the colour of this Mexican traditional flower).

For me it is important to show my children how we remember our ancestors as not something sad but as a happy event. While doing the *ofrenda* I can share with my children why we put orange juice and smoked salmon in the altar; their grandfather Artemio use to drink orange juice every morning and loved smoked salmon! Or why we include lots of books in the altar as Grandpa Artemio and Great grandmother Soledad always had a book in hand. There is also good Tequila, as this was Sol's favourite drink. We also include doughnuts and coffee to honour my Uncle Fito, who first taught me as a little girl to love coffee and sweet bread in the morning. Some barbeque tongs are also in the *ofrenda*, as Fito loved his barbeque no matter the weather! *Alatares* are not restricted to family members; therefore, this year we will also designate a special place in the *altar* for all the people who died in the 7 September and 19 September deadly earthquakes in Mexico. When I was a child my great grandmother Soledad taught me about *Día de los muertos* and my deceased family members while preparing for this celebration. This *Día de los muertos* will be the first one I dedicate an *ofrenda* for my beloved Soledad, who recently passed away. I hope I do her proud.



We will be holding a stall to mark the Day of the Dead in



the Tiled Hall Cafe (part of Leeds Central Library and Art Gallery) on Thursday 2 November from 10am to 4pm, with Leeds Bereavement Forum and Leeds Museums and Libraries. Come along to find out more about our project.

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