

THE NIGHT OF THE DEAD

—Lives On in Patzcuaro, Mexico

By Carol L. Bowman



The pristine sky glistened with starry constellations and the waters of Lake Patzcuaro reflected the half moon glow that showed the way. Mist rose as the coldness of midnight's breeze whipped around our necks. Captain Fidel moored his launch, the *Carmela*, through the darkness from Patzcuaro pier toward our anticipated destination. We passed by Janitzio Island where boat after boat deposited hundreds of visitors coming to see the Night of the Dead celebration on Lake Patzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico. The noisy crowds and hawking vendors on shore resembled a spectator sporting event rather than a solemn, moving experience. We sighed with relief as Fidel veered our boat away from the confusion.

Rosie Elia, our expert guide from Ajijic, assured us that the secret of Patzcuaro's November 2nd *Noche de Muertos* (Night of the Dead) tradition lay on an untouched P'urhepecha island village, ahead. Our eyes searched across the

black water and saw only darkness, but Rosie promised special things. Ahead, a lone, empty dock jutting from the lake's edge awaited our arrival. This island will remain nameless, the secret kept intact. One Janitzio is enough.

We lumbered up the steep stone steps and upon reaching the plateau, the clangy sound of church bells calling the souls to return shattered the silence. Village children, given the task of ringing the bells, performed their duty well. Elderly P'urhepecha women, wrapped in traditional black and neon blue *rebozos*, pushed wheelbarrows piled high with grave offerings over the rutty, cobblestone path. We followed in silence. A dim light illuminated the cemetery entrance, as smoke from candles drifted through the crisp night air.

We entered a world unknown to us, fearful of being considered intruders, but eager to be accepted participants. We came to witness the most solemn commemoration and respect for the deceased through the vigil rituals of the Night of the Dead.

The funerary wakes practiced by the P'urhepechas, (known as Tarascans in pre-Hispanic times) interwoven with the Catholic rituals honoring the dead through All Saints Day on November 1st and All Souls Day on November 2nd resulted in a blended religious period for the indigenous communities in western Mexico. In Michoacán, celebrations begin October 31st

when families gather flowers, candles, food and other offerings to prepare home and gravesite altars; November 1st

represents the day of the "Little Angels" vigil for deceased children and single persons, followed by a midnight, November 2nd

to dawn gravesite wake for departed adults. The celebration of mass and feast of offerings at the cathedral on the Day of the Dead, November 2nd

concludes the commemoration.

Upon entering the sanctity of the cemetery on the Night of the Dead, the aura of solemn homage and tribute, urging departed souls to travel back to their loved ones, mesmerized me. The color of the sun, represented by bright orange marigolds, or *cempoalxoachitl* flooded my senses. Handmade three meter candles, which lined gravesites covered with marigold petals, provided a lighted path for the soul's journey, while simple altars constructed of wood and wrapped tight with flowers acted as headstones.

Favorite foods, fruits, breads, candies, sugared skulls and even articles of clothing worn by the deceased person decorated the altars. Glasses of water or bottles of Tequila on several graves stood ready for the souls, thirsty from their long journey. With candlelight glow brightening the 2AM night and the smoky smell of copal wood burning, families huddled on the frosty ground, faces showing grief, pride, even joy. The sensual and emotional bombardments proved staggering.

To reduce the feeling of invasion, we brought gift offerings. Rather than being gawkers with cameras, we presented our offerings to family members to modify our role to "participant." I searched the faces of mourners and gravesites for a prospective recipient of the candle I brought. Economic means showed. Families with sufficient funds create elaborate altar offerings, with numerous candles, embroidered tablecloths and flowers galore, while others manage only a few flickers of light, no altar and a sparse bunch of posies. The number of offerings in no way reflects the level of a family's grief.

I spotted an elderly man, staring at the three candles adorning the grave. His wife, murmuring out loud, in P'urhepecha language, was possibly trying to communicate with the spirit of the deceased. The gravesite next to them had at least twenty candles. I approached the old man, holding out the long, waxed stick and said to him in Spanish, "*Quisiera dar su familia un regalo de una vela.*" He smiled with a gentle understanding, dug the candle in the soft earth and motioned for me to sit for awhile with the family. His wife, in halting Spanish, mentioned that they were visiting the grave of her husband's father.

The tribute these people pay to departed family members made me feel reverence for them and shame for myself. I wondered how many people from my culture would sit by a grave from midnight to dawn on the cold ground on a frigid night at 6000 feet above sea level to welcome back the souls of departed family members. I knew the answer-none.

We walked among the dead, but I experienced a cemetery full of life. The positive energy expended to keep contact with deceased loved ones reveals the extraordinary nature of the Mexican people. I shall not forget the images of that night; that tender smile, the acceptance of a *gringa's* intrusion, the frosty boat ride across Lake Patzcuaro.

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These rituals have gone on for centuries with little modification. Despite the Spaniard's attempt to destroy the religious beliefs of native people in favor of Catholicism, through a blending, the indigenous customs regarding life and death remain alive and well. To experience The Night of the Dead ceremonies is to understand Mexico.