

## GLOSSARY

A note on the succeeding terms: The words in this glossary are all associated with Día de los Muertos albeit in different capacities and settings. They come from English, Spanish, and Nahuatl. The authors of this guide assume the reader is proficient in English and Spanish, but recognizes that Nahuatl, the language spoken both among the Aztecs as well as by many contemporary indigenous groups, may be less familiar. For reference, know that in Nahuatl, vowels are pronounced as they are in Spanish and consonants are pronounced as they are in English except for the following examples (Moreno, 2007):

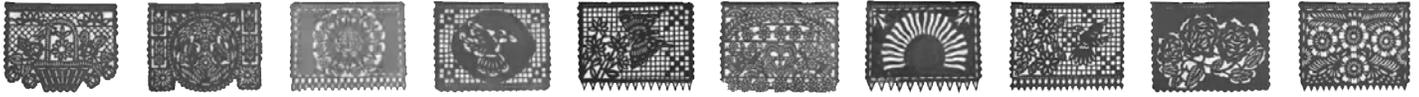
x	as “sh” in shell	Mexica, Xochimilco
z	as “s” in suit	Aztec, Azcapotzalco
hu	as “w” in waste, weed	Huchuetl
ll	as in <i>fully</i>	Ollin, Calli
que, qui	as “kay” or “kee”	Quetzalcoatl
cu	as “kw” in quasar, query	Coatlicue, Cuicatl
tl	as in Tlingit	Tlatoani, Tecpatl
tz	as in pretzel	Tzompantli, Tzitzimime

**ALFENIQUE** - Sugar figures, typically skulls, created and decorated for Día de los Muertos.

**ALL SAINTS’ DAY** – A Roman Catholic holiday traditionally held the first Sunday after Pentecost, All Saints’ Day celebrates the pantheon of Catholic Saints and generally takes place on October 31st and November 1st. In Spanish, it is known as “El Día de Todos los Santos.”

**ALL SOULS’ DAY** – A Roman Catholic holiday traditionally held on the day after All Saints’ Day. It is a time when the living pray for the souls of the departed to pass from Purgatory to Heaven; celebrations are similar to All Saints’ Day and Samhain. In Spanish, it is known as “El Día de Todos los Difuntos.”

**ANCIENT MAYA** – Refers to the ancient civilization in Central and Southern Mexico and Central America which had a Pre-classical period from 2000 B.C.E. to AD 250 and a Classic periods from AD 250-900. They had a written language and were masters of architecture, art, farming, mathematics and astronomy. Note that care should be exercised when using the term simply “Maya” rather than “Ancient Maya” to refer to this cultural epoch and people, as many Mayan peoples are still alive today and practicing their own vibrant, cultural traditions.



**ANGELITOS** - Small children's souls, literally "little angels."

**ÁNIMAS** - Souls, often depicted as figures which in turn represent the souls of the dead.

**AZTEC** – Refers to a group of Nahuatl-speaking indigenous peoples who, through warfare, trade and cultural assimilation, took over neighboring indigenous peoples and created a vast empire. The core of the empire was located in Tenochtitlan—modern day Mexico City. The Aztec reigned from the late 1200s until they were conquered by the Spanish (led by Hernán Cortéz) in the middle to late 1500s. Also known as Mexica.

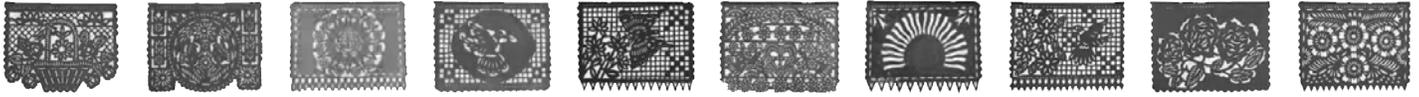
**CALACAS** – A slang term for skull or death, usually shown as skeletal figure carved from wood, stone or candy. Many times, skeletons depict the joyous and irreverent attitude of Day of the Dead. They are generally extravagantly dressed and shown dancing, laughing, playing music, etc.

**CALAVERAS** – Skulls, generally, but also used to refer to satiric poetry and mock obituaries. This term is commonly used to refer to José Posada's prints of skeleton figures.

**CALAVERA CATRINA** - The name associated with José Guadalupe Posada's most iconic skeletal figure. Also referred to simply as "Catrina."

**CEMPASÚCHITL**—Marigold flowers, also known as "flor de muerto." Marigolds are a commonplace feature among Día de los Muertos ceremonies as their strong scent is believed to help guide the deceased back to the land of the living. Marigolds are often placed in the shape of a cross, displayed across an ofrenda, or used as a path of petals to help the deceased find the home in which they once lived. Also spelled zempasuchitl, cempoaxochitl, and sempasuchitl. The word is derived from the Nahuatl language and means "twenty-flour," which refers to the thick and numerous petals of the flower. Nahuatl is the language spoken by the Aztecs and other ancient Mesoamerican cultures.

**CHICHIHUACUAUHCO** – Also known as TONACACUAUHUITLAN, this is a Nahuatl term whose closest translation is "in the wet-nurse tree." It is used to refer to a paradise orchard in Aztec mythology. It was believed that infants who had died went to this afterlife reserved specifically for them. It was believed that any infant which died while still nursing was innocent, having not yet had the opportunity to eat directly from the earth and thus had no debt to pay to the gods. Because of their innocence, the gods



protected these children and ensured that they would be well sustained by trees whose branches produced breasts that dripped milk to the infants.

**CODEX** - Plural, codices. An English term for the painted hieroglyphic books that were the written documents of Mesoamerican cultures, particularly the Aztec and Maya.

**CONQUISTADOR** – Spanish term for conqueror. In modern context, it is used to describe the Spanish who colonized the Americas starting in the mid-1500s. It should be noted that in some academic circles, this term is considered politically incorrect as it assumes the complete decimation and assimilation of a people whose culture, language and heritage still remain strong to this day.

**COPAL** – Incense made from hardened tree resin. Copal is commonly used in ceremonies of all kinds by indigenous peoples in Mexico and northern Central America. It is used during Día de los Muertos ceremonies because it is believed that the strong smell of copal will help guide the deceased back to the land of the living.

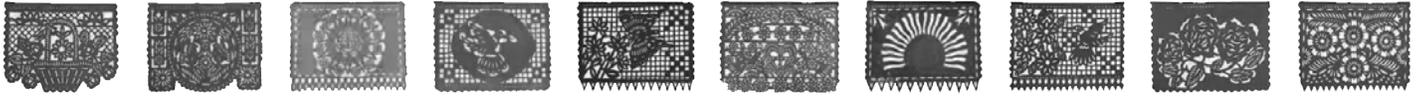
**DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS** - The Latin American term for the combined celebrations on Nov. 1 and Nov. 2. Literally, “Day of the Dead.”

**ESQUELETOS** - Spanish term for “Skeleton,” the definition for which provides more information.

**HUESO** – The Spanish term for “bone.” Huesos appear in Día de los Muertos celebrations in many formats, from the skeletal prints to the bones on the traditional pan de muerto breads.

**JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA**—a major figure (1852-1913) in Mexican media, popular around the turn on the 20th century. Posada is known for his calavera prints that satirized the political, economic and cultural times of the Mexican Revolution. His Calavera Catrina has become perhaps the most popular symbol of Day of the Dead.

**MESOAMERICA** – Mesoamerica, an area that is generally acknowledged to include Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, though several scholars also cite Nicaragua and Costa Rica as part of its boundaries. “Mesoamerica” is an historical term; there is no such region in existence today. Instead, when scholars refer to Mesoamerica, they refer to a historical commonality of culture and language shared by the peoples of the region.



**MICCAILHUITONTLI** - Male Aztec deity presiding over the dead.

**MICTECACIHUATL** - Female Aztec deity presiding over the dead.

**MICTLÁN** – A Nahuatl-term which translates to “the place of the dead,” or what is often understood as the “underworld.” Mictlán was one of four destinations in Aztec culture to which the deceased could go. It was a place described as the belly of the earth. This was not an ethereal or figurative description, but rather a way of describing a very real physical place. Mictlán was the eventual destination for all people who had died of natural causes, diseases, or accidents. Individuals destined for Mictlán had to complete an arduous journey consisting of natural obstacles which had to be overcome through nine separate phases. This travel was thought to take up to four years to complete. In Aztec culture, it was believed that once an individual’s soul had reached Mictlán, then that person’s “essence” would no longer exist in the consciousness of those still living. This was cause for many philosophers and artists to contemplate death and its meaning.

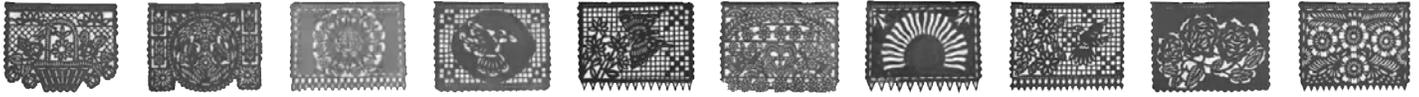
**OFRENDAS** – Spanish word literally meaning “offerings” but more often translated as “altars.” Created during the Day of the Dead, ofrendas are decorated table-top arrangements that offer favorite foods and snacks to the deceased; often elaborately decorated with marigolds, bright paper, lights, candles, cloth and retratos of the departed.

**PAN DE MUERTOS** – Bread of the Dead. Traditionally sweet bread decorated for Day of the Dead celebrations and offerings on the ofrenda.

**PAPEL PICADO** - A Spanish term literally meaning “cut paper.” Papel picado is an art form associated with Día de los Muertos. Traditionally, colorful sheets of thin tissue paper are cut into intricate designs and left to flutter in the wind. Their ephemeral nature (tissue paper dissolves easily in the natural elements) and their vulnerability to breezes ensure that they symbolize not only the natural element of wind, but also humans’ fleeting existence.

**RETATRO** - Spanish term for portrait or likeness. Retratos of the deceased are a common part of Día de los Muertos ofrendas.

**SAMHAIN** – a Celtic festival marking the end of the harvest season traditionally held on October 31st



through November 1st. It was believed that the world opened up enough for the spirits of the dead to come from the underworld and visit the world of the living. Samhain was celebrated with feasts, music and dancing.

**TENOCHTITLAN** - The main city of the Aztec empire and what is now known as Mexico City.

**TLALOCAN** - The realm of the afterlife ruled over by Tlaloc, the Aztec deity of rain, and his consort Chalchiuhtlicue.

**TONACACUAUHTITLAN** - See entry for **CHICHIHUACUAUHCO**.

**TONATIUH** – the Aztec name for the Sun God. Warriors were especially revered in Aztec culture and are believed to walk the eternal life with the Sun God, unlike those who are destined to perish in Mictlán.

**VEINTENA** – Monthly celebrations and rituals held by the Aztecs to honor different elements of their religion and agricultural practices.

**XOCHITL** - A Nahuatl word generally meaning “flower.”