Sugar, Colonialism, and Death: On the Origins of Mexico's Day of the Dead

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THE DAY OF THE DEAD

Mexico's most famous holiday is, without doubt, the Day of the Dead. At the end of October, large numbers of foreign visitors descend upon Mexico to witness colorful—some would say carnivalesque—ritual performances and artistic displays. Decorated breads, paper cutouts, and plastic toys, most of them humorously playing on the theme of death, are evident everywhere. Sculpted sugar candies in the form of skulls, skeletons, and caskets suggest an almost irreverent, macabre confrontation with mortality. During November 1 and November 2, Mexicans clean, decorate, and maintain vigil over the graves of relatives. Tombstones and burial sites are adorned with flowers, candles, and food, all aesthetically arranged in honor of the deceased. Some Mexicans claim that the souls of the departed watch over their living relatives during these few days. Negligent family members await punishment, whether on earth or in the afterlife. This belief is invoked throughout Mexico to explain the substantial time, money, and energy invested in the two-day ceremony.

At the outset, it should be made clear that the Day of the Dead is, at least in the contemporary era, an essentially Mexican term referring to the Mexican version of a pan-Roman Catholic holiday. Strictly speaking, the Day of the

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Dead—in Spanish, *el Día de Animas* [Souls' Day] or *el Día de los Fieles Difuntos* [the Day of the Faithful Deceased]—refers to All Souls' Day, which usually falls on November 2. (When November 2 is a Sunday, the celebration is postponed until November 3.) However, it usually also refers to activities that occur the day before, that is, on November 1, All Saints' Day—*el Día de Todos Santos.* In fact, in colloquial speech the Day of the Dead most often means the entire period encompassing the evening of October 31 through the morning of November 2, the days when the greatest range of ritual involvement, artistic exuberance, and commercial activity are in evidence. In terms of time, money, and energy expended, it is no exaggeration to say that the Day of the Dead rivals other great annual ceremonial occasions in Mexico, particularly Holy Week and the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe on December 12. Further, even though All Saints' and Souls' Days are pan-Roman Catholic holidays, nowhere in the Catholic world have they reached such lavish proportions as in Mexico.

To the Vatican, however, only one thing counts in the observance of these holidays: the celebration of special Masses on November 1 in honor of all the saints and on November 2 in honor of the souls in Purgatory. Moreover, special Masses have their origins as far back as medieval times (Smith 1967:318). There is evidence that, from the fifth through the seventh centuries A.D., there existed in various parts of Christendom and at sporadic intervals a feast dated May 13 to celebrate the holy martyrs. During the first third of the eighth century, Pope Gregory III (731–741 A.D.) set aside November 1 as a sacred occasion for the Christian faithful to commemorate all the saints. The connection between the May 13 and November 1 celebrations, if any, remains unclear. However, it is known that Pope Gregory VII (1073–85 A.D.) was responsible for definitively eliminating the feast of May 13 and supporting that of November 1 (1967:318–9).

As for All Souls' Day, November 2, this is the more critical liturgical day of the two. On this date, the Office for the Dead and Requiem Masses are celebrated in sympathy with the deceased in order to help them attain final purification. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church had encouraged prayers for the deceased, although these occurred on different dates from one locale to another. The choice of November 2 is generally attributed to St. Odilo (d. 1048 A.D.), the fifth abbot of Cluny, who decreed that all Cluniac monasteries should "follow the example of Cluny in offering special prayers and singing the Office for the Dead on the day following the feast of All Saints" (Cornides 1967:319). The example of Cluny, a highly influential monastic order of the day, encouraged the Latin Church as a whole finally to declare this custom universal. By the fourteenth century, these holidays had assumed a permanently important place in the liturgical calendar; throughout western Europe, they assumed a significance nearly equivalent to Christmas and Holy Week (Gaillard 1950:927–32).

Nowadays, the Church requires that parish priests recite one special Mass on November 1 and another on November 2, although three Masses on November 2 are more common: one in honor of departed souls; a second, for a cause designated by the Pope; and the third, for a cause designated by the parish priest himself. Church historian A. Cornides (1967:319) states that "the custom of having each priest celebrate three Masses seems to have originated among Spanish Dominicans during the 15th century. After this privilege was approved by Benedict XIV in 1748, it was rapidly adopted throughout Spain, Portugal, and Latin America." According to Cornides (1967:319), the high number of war casualties during he mid-eighteenth century led Pope Benedict XV to grant parish priests the privilege of reciting three Masses on November 2 in order to serve the rapidly burgeoning departed souls on their way to heaven. We may presume, however, that the unprecedented population decline in Spanish America that occurred for two centuries prior to this date may have had something to do with the decision as well. This population decline is a point to which we return later.

What needs to be made clear is that even though the Day of the Dead embraces two official Roman Catholic feast days, only the special Masses constitute the official parts of the celebration. Ironically, most observers would agree that Masses are the least salient part of the celebration. Most of the activities and artistic displays connected with this holiday—including the special food offerings that form the focus of this article—are a folk elaboration, a deviation from present-day orthodoxy. Halloween is, of course, the United States' version of this popular celebration, a version so secularized that only the centrality of sweets, the incorporation of ritualized begging, and the prevalence of skeleton costumes and skull-like jack-o-lanterns connect it to the contemporary Mexican event.

From an historical and symbolic standpoint, the Day of the Dead presents a number of perplexing paradoxes: Consider, in modern times, the increasing elaborateness and geographic distribution of the holiday in the face of a precipitous decline in national death rates; the ubiquitous incorporation of humor into what amounts to a vast mortuary ritual; or, finally, the mystifying but unmistakable connection between sweets and death. Then, too, there is the ideological component of the event. Mexican and foreign scholars alike repeatedly cite it as something peculiar to Mexico, remnant of ancient Aztec funerary rites and an expression of a uniquely Mexican relationship to death. The Day of the Dead supposedly demonstrates the Mexican's "contempt for death" (Paz 1961:57), "obsession with death" (Lope Blanch 1963:8), "indifference toward" death (Brodman 1976:39), "slight regard for human life" (Covarrubias 1947:390), and "fondness for dying" (Hewes 1953–54:219). These words and many like them pervade the past and present literature concerned with this holiday.

THE MEXICAN VIEW OF DEATH

Because it is a flamboyant, colorful holiday of considerable renown, the Day of the Dead is often cited as a manifestation of a uniquely Mexican view of death. The prototypical example of this attitude comes from the lengthy chapter entitled, "The Day of the Dead," in Octavio Paz's influential *Labyrinth of Solitude* (1961:57–58):

> The Mexican . . . is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away: he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain, or irony. . . . The Mexican's indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life. He views not only death but also life as nontranscendent. . . . It is natural, even desirable, to die, and the sooner the better. We kill because life—our own or another's—is of no value. Life and death are inseparable, and when the former lacks meaning, the latter becomes equally meaningless. Mexican death is a mirror of Mexican life. And the Mexican shuts himself away and ignores both of them. Our contempt for death is not at odds with the cult we have made of it.

In other words, contemporary Mexicans, according to Paz, not only fail to distinguish life from death but also embrace death, as if it were some sort of welcome friend.

Given the enormous popularity of *Labyrinth of Solitude,* Paz's views on death have been disseminated, reproduced with minor transformations, and accepted to the point where they constitute a kind of intellectual orthodoxy. This orthodoxy has a foothold in both Mexico and the United States. Consider psychologist Rogelio Díaz Guerrero's statement that a man's virility can be proven "when he convincingly affirms or demonstrates that he is unafraid in the face of death" (1961:15). Juan Lope Blanch (1963:8) posits the same, arguing that "there is in Mexico a true obsession with death" and that "man, the true 'macho,' should fear nothing, not even death. Or at least overcome his natural fear, giving evidence of his boldness" (1961:15). A prime interpreter of Mexican views on death, Lope Blanch also sees the ancient Aztecs as a people for whom "Death and life were not so separate, so clearly differentiated—counterpoised—as for western man" (1961:15). More recently, we read in a museum catalog published by the National Autonomous University of Mexico that death is "triumphant or scorned, venerated or feared, but always and at every moment, walking inevitably alongside us" (1974–75:1). Patricia Fernández-Kelly, too, sees in the Mexican view of death a "bitter gaity that philosophically recognizes the fact that the definitive character of death can only be successfully confronted with gestures of indifference and scorn" (1974:533).

Endless quotations could be provided from Mexican and foreign scholars to substantiate the view that Mexicans hold a special relationship to death and, moreover, that this relationship has become a mark of national identity. Con-

sider one last example, issued in 1984 by Miguel Limón Rojas, who at that time was the director of the National Indigenous Institute (Instituto Nacional Indignista). In "The Concept of Death in Mexico," a speech delivered on November 2 of that year, Limón Rojas proclaimed that "the Mexican does not invite death, does not want to die, but perhaps because of our indigenous origin we accept it as an unavoidable phenomenon, which is an implicit consequence of life; and for that reason, the Mexican tries to ingratiate himself with death, be death's friend and accept death with the naturalness that this phenomenon bears." All these attitudes are supposedly reflected in Mexico's celebration of the Day of the Dead.

In fact, the Day of the Dead, more than any other ceremony, provides a concrete indication of whatever Mexican posture toward death might exist. The celebration can thus be invoked as a test of ideas that Paz and others have advanced on this topic. The Day of the Dead, perhaps more than any other single Mexican ritual, is also believed to be either a basically pre-Conquest Indian survival with a European Catholic veneer or a near-seamless fusion of pre-Conquest and Roman Catholic ceremonial practices. Consider the statement of Haberstein and Lamers (1963:592) that "in Mexico everywhere the Day of the Dead celebrations combine a curious admixture of ancient Indian and Catholic beliefs and practices." The same goes for Childs and Altman (1982:6), who claim that "the beliefs and practices associated with contemporary observances of Día de los Muertos, although not a direct and simple survival of pre-Hispanic ritual, have their roots in the ancient religions of Mesoamerica." They continue (1982:6–7), "However successful the Spanish church may have been in the destruction of state cults, it is apparent on close scrutiny that much 'Catholicism' of contemporary Indian communities is pre-Hispanic in origin, especially the beliefs and customs related to death and the dead." As yet another expression of the same point of view, Sandstrom and Sandstrom (1986:254) state that, at least for three indigenous linguistic groups in the central Mexican highlands (the Nahua, Otomí, and Pepehua), "Even observances that clearly have a pre-Hispanic base, such as All Souls and Carnival, are syncretized with the Christian celebration of similar character."

The assumption that All Souls "clearly" has a pre-Hispanic base is common in the Mesoamerican literature. The prevailing paradigm posits a more or less pure Mesoamerican death cult, which includes a pre-Columbian version of the Day of the Dead, followed by the imposition of elements from Spanish Catholicism and the subsequent degeneration and decline of the original ceremony due to contact with contemporary Western and urban mores. One of the most thorough scholarly treatises on the Day of the Dead, Hugo Nutini's *Todo Santos in Rural Tlaxcala* (1988), is predicated mainly on this proposition. In a review of this volume, P.E.B. Coy (1988) states that "Dr. Nutini aims to rescue information about the cult of the dead before it finally falls to the forces of modernization and orthodox Roman Catholicism." Nutini shares with most

observers the idea that the Day of the Dead is progressively losing its authentic and autocthonous character. It is at risk.

No one can deny that in ceremonial life, as everything else, Mexico is an amalgam. It is a truism almost to the point of being a cliché to state that a fusion has occurred in Mexico between pre-Conquest and European civilizations and that the roots of contemporary Mexico should be sought in pre-Hispanic times. However, when dealing with a number of aspects of Mexican society and culture—and perhaps most often with those concerning ritual and religion—the assumption that they are of indigenous origin is either insufficiently examined or not examined at all. The study of the Day of the Dead, with few exceptions, has fallen victim to this intellectual negligence.

To counteract possible stereotypes, it is advisable to carve out a given domain for close historical and ethnological examination. The remainder of this article focuses on food—particularly sweet food—as it is and has been used during the Day of the Dead. Scrutiny of this one domain can, in fact, reveal a lot both about the origins of this festival as a whole and about what this holiday expresses about any particular Mexican relationship to death.

THE OFRENDA

Sweets and other foods are essential to the celebration of All Saints' and Souls' Days in Mexico. One of the most distinctive features of the Day of the Dead, the so-called *ofrenda,* or offering, consists of breads, candies, and other foods which are placed on the graves of deceased relatives and used to adorn home altars prepared specially for the occasion. These comestibles, in fact, have become world famous, a symbol of Mexico itself, as one *New York Times* report (November 4, 1993) demonstrates: "From bike repair shops in rural villages to fashionable burger joints in Mexico City, the dead's annual homecoming brings forth the designer in everybody. Across the country, bakers fashion *pan de muerto* [known colloquially in the United States as 'dead bread'], the special bread that looks like twisted bones glistening with white icing. The markets are filled with rows of sugar skull candies with tin-foil eyes and gold grins, sugar coffins in which serape-clad corpses holding liquor bottles are tipsy with Bacardi." Ordinary foods, too, are part of the ofrenda, particularly oranges, bananas, squash, and other fresh produce of the season, as well as cooked items like tamales and chicken or turkey mole. Almost everywhere the holiday is celebrated, family members take account of the individual tastes of deceased relatives in deciding which foods to include. A potter from Tzintzuntzan, a town of some 3,000 inhabitants on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro, explained to me: "The customer here is to take to the dead whatever they enjoyed a lot in life . . . fruit and such things . . . *corundas* [the local version of tamales], *tortillas,* beans, pork, a duck, if the deceased liked fish, whatever, whatever the deceased liked the most."

The town of Mizquic, near Mexico City, is famous throughout Mexico for

particularly elaborate Day of the Dead celebrations. According to Jesús Angel Ochoa Zazueta (1976:96), who has carried out a detailed study of death in Mizquic, food offerings include "tamales, oranges, sugarcane, bananas, different types of *pan de muerto,* salt, water, candy, corn on the cob, lard, *atole,* squash, *tejocotes* [a small, yellow, plum-like fruit], lemons, sugar, chocolate, *mole,* cinnamon, corn kernels, tangerines, tall candles [*cirios*], votive candles and flowers. In the case of ofrendas for adults, they also offer *margallate,* rum, pulque, bunches of herbs, and clay objects principally with zoomorphic representations." John Ingham (1986:137) reports that offerings in the town of Tlayacapan in the state of Morelos include "sweets, chocolate, chayotes, *jícamas,* special breads, oranges, peanuts, green mole with fish, flowers, tamales, and figurines." It is safe to say that everywhere, seasonal availability has some influence over the composition of offerings, especially in the case of fruit and flowers.

It is important to know why people set food on the altar in honor of the deceased. In the first place, it is clear that the symbolic significance of the food is transformed once situated on a gravesite or home altar. An orange resting on the kitchen table is there for the taking. Put the same orange on an altar, and it obtains an aura of sacredness. I recall an incident in Tzintzuntzan which illustrates this principle. I was chatting in the outdoor kitchen of a married couple, when the wife offered me some fruit which was sitting on a simple sideboard. At that moment, I was standing next to the altar the family had erected for the Day of the Dead. When I raised my arm absentmindedly, the wife instantaneously extended her hand to prevent me from taking a banana from the altar. "Not from there," she said, laughing nervously. "That one is for the deceased." Then, pointing to the sideboard, she continued, "Take a banana from over there."

During the Day of the Dead, food is clearly set out for the deceased. But Mexicans decidedly do not believe that the returning souls actually eat the food. The situation that Ochoa Zazueta (1974:97) describes for Mizquic is typical of Mexico generally: "It is believed that the departed relative visits the home and takes pleasure in the foods that in real life pleased him or her. The visitor, since he or she is a spirit, can only aspire to enjoy the aroma of the ofrenda, with which they remain satisfied." The aroma is all they can hope for since, as the people of Mizquic say, "the souls are [made] of wind and cloud, without either teeth or palate, without eyes and without hair." In the village of San Juan Totolac, located in the state of Tlaxcala, "They try to put out as ofrenda recently prepared mole, tamales, and sweets, as well as the freshest flowers and fruits, since it is believed that the souls carry off only the essence [that is, aroma] of these items so situated" (Scheffler 1976:97). Cándido Reyes Castillo, from Huaquechula in the state of Puebla, states that "of course, there are those who say the dead do not return, but I know that they do. I feel sure of this, because when we offer food to the deceased it loses its

aroma and taste" (quoted in Carmichael and Sayer 1991:99). Among the Mixe, when a relative dies during All Saints' Day itself, this departed soul cannot partake of the food set out that very year. Rather, it is said to wait around either in the house itself or in the resting-place of the dead until the following year, when it returns for its share of the ofrenda (Lipp 1991:139).

All this evidence indicates that, insofar as food for the dead is concerned, we are clearly confronted with a widespread, probably ubiquitous, phenomenon: the spiritual presence of the recently deceased, the phenomenon recognized and brilliantly analyzed nearly a century ago by Robert Hertz (1907). In fact, Day of the Dead altars and tombstones nowadays bear photos of relatives who died in the relatively recent past, say, four or five years before. This may indicate that, once this amount of time has elapsed, the liminal grieving period is over.

ORIGINS OF THE OFRENDA

The origins of the ofrenda are important, for it is largely on the basis of the history of these ritual food offerings that scholars claim ancient Aztec ancestry for the Day of the Dead. The great sixteenth-century chronicler, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who has been called a "pioneer ethnographer" (Klor de Alva, Nicholson, and Quiñones Keber 1988), is a necessary point of departure. There are some culinary aspects of Aztec mortuary ritual which, in his accounts, seem strikingly similar to the contemporary Day of the Dead.

According to Sahagún (1978), the Aztecs made images out of wood, which they covered with *tzoalli,* or amaranth seed [*Amaranthus hypocondriacus*], dough shaped in human form. Consider, for example, the Aztec account of what they did with a tzoalli image of the great god Uitzilopochtli during Panquetzalitzli, the fifteenth month (Book 3:5–6):

> And when he died, thereupon they broke up his body, the amaranth seed dough. His heart was Moctezuma's portion. And the rest of his members, which were made like his bones, were disseminated among the people. . . . And when they divided among themselves his body of amaranth seed dough, it was only in very small [pieces]. . . . The youths ate them. And of this which they ate it was said, "The god is eaten." And of those who ate it, it was said, "They keep the god."

On Atemoztli, the sixteenth month, tzoalli mountain images were made during the feast of the rain god, Tlaloc. The mountain images were apparently anthropomorphic, for Sahagún's account (Book 2:29) said that "they made eyes and teeth on them and worshipped them with music. . . . They opened their breasts with a tzotzopaztli [a weaving sword] . . . and they took out their hearts and struck off their heads. And later they divided up all the body among themselves and ate it." The goddess Tzapotlan tenan, who was the turpentine deity, also had her image fashioned of amaranth dough (Sahagún, Book 1:17), as did the god Omacatl (Book 1:33), of whom it was said: "He who ate the god first made a sacred cylinder [of dough]: this was the bone of the god. Only a

priest . . . [made it]. Then the sacred roll was shared, broken in pieces, divided among them."

But it was during the thirteenth month of Tepeilhuitl (Book 2:131–133), that amaranth dough images took on a specific mortuary cast, according to Sahagún's account:

> All the [wooden] serpent [representations] which were kept in people's houses and the small wind [figures] they covered with a dough of [ground] amaranth seeds. And their bones were likewise fashioned of amaranth seed dough. . . . Either fish amaranth or ash amaranth [was used]. And [for] whoever had died who had not been buried, they also at this time made representations of mountains. They made them all of amaranth seed dough. Thereupon they dismembered the amaranth seed dough [figures] . . . little by little they went taking some of it when they ate it.

As indicated in this passage, these dough images commemorated only specific classes of deceased, namely, those who had drowned or who had died in such a way that they had to be buried rather than cremated. Food offerings were set out in honor of the images. Sahagún continued:

> They . . . placed these images of the dead on . . . wreaths of grass, and then at dawn placed these images in their oratories, on beds of grass, rush, or reed; having placed them there they offered them food, tamales and *mazamorra* [a dessert made of maize gruel and fruit], or stew made of fowl or dog meat, and later burned incense to them in a pottery incense burner like a big cup filled with coals. . . . And the rich sang and drank pulque in the honour of these gods and their dead: the poor can only offer them food.

It is of course tempting to interpret the dough figures as precursors of the special breads and sugar candies manufactured nowadays in the form of skulls and cadavers. The Aztec food offerings, too, seem like erstwhile gravesite ofrendas.

Especially noteworthy in Sahagún's accounts, of course, is how the Aztecs incorporated anthropomorphically shaped food into their rituals, including some kinds of mortuary ritual. However, before attributing the origin of contemporary Mexican sugar skulls, cadavers, and the like to the Aztecs, a note of caution is in order. For one thing, Mexicans today make sculpted breads and candies specifically to be presented as gifts and offerings. During the Day of the Dead, candy images are named after particular living people, to whom they are given as a kind of humorous token of affection. All these sweets are eventually consumed. Sahagún's Aztecs, by contrast, made food offerings to the amaranth figurines, which were themselves treated as holy objects (although they were apparently eaten after ritual purposes had been served). Moreover, sculpted food images today do not differentiate among people according to how they died or the manner in which their body was disposed, as was the case in pre-Columbian times. If any distinction is made at all—and certainly there is no salient one—it is one based on age: Candy skulls presented to young children are sometimes called *muertitos* (little dead people) in

specific reference to the youth of the recipients, whereas those destined for adults are simply *muertos* [dead people].

But the problem of indigenous origins goes deeper than just the presence or absence of analogues. It extends to the nature of the source material itself. Sahagún and other Spanish chroniclers had as their main goal the conversion of indigenous peoples, not the preservation of accurate information about pre-Conquest culture. As Louise Burkhart (1989:5) has stated, the contemporary historical reconstruction of the pre-Conquest period often boils down to "a quest for the authentic Indian." She continues (1989:5), "The use of colonial sources to reconstruct pre-Conquest culture is symptomatic of a general tendency within anthropology to place other cultures into an 'ethnographic present' in which they are described as static, self-perpetuating systems." Sahagún like other sixteenth-century chroniclers, must be read for what he reveals of the contact situation during the period in which he lived and wrote. Burkhart wisely points out (1989:6–7):

> The Nahuas [i.e., Aztecs] reinterpreted their own culture and their own past in the light of new experiences and pressures; their own image of the 'ancient Aztec' was in part a colonial artifact.
>
> In discussing their culture, the colonial Nahuas did not speak freely, for Europeans created the context within which the information was set down. They sought answers to particular questions, determining not only what matters would be recorded but the form the records would take. Investigators, especially those who were priests, tended to respond to what they learned about indigenous religion with shock or zeal, depending on their own values. Even if the Indians were encouraged to be honest, they soon understood what their interlocutors thought about some of their most cherished traditions.

Burkhart's cautionary casts some doubt on the degree to which Aztec ceremonial practices are lineal ancestors of Day of the Dead customs today.

It is critical, when assessing any early colonial sources, to bear in mind that what we know of the ancient Aztecs is the product of information extracted from indigenous peoples under tumultuous circumstances and that, moreover, these circumstances were fraught with clear-cut power relations. The chroniclers were representatives of Church and Crown, hence at the top of the new colonial hierarchy. "Their ultimate goal," states Burkhart (1989:9), "was to silence indigenous voices, to resolve dialogue into monologue, to replace cultural diversity with conformity." With particular respect to Sahagún, it has been said (Klor de Alva, Nicholson, and Quiñones 1988:5) that "his primary mission was to replace the 'mission of the devil' with Christianity." Even Klor de Alva (1988:46), who manifests utmost respect for Sahagún's ethnographic accomplishments, recognizes that "the more details he gave, the more the text could be useful for eradicating idolotrous beliefs and practices." Given the number of instances of amaranth figurines reported in Sahagún, as well as the detail of the reports, it would be difficult to deny their importance in Aztec

religious ritual. It is entirely possible that the missionaries were anxious to eradicate the practice of making consumable amaranth idols. If so, however, the missionaries were largely unsuccessful, judging by the enormous popularity of eatable figures in Mexico today. There can be no doubt that anthropomorphic foods were a significant part of pre-Columbian sacred tradition in the Valley of Mexico.

Further, it would appear from the literature of the Conquest that foods in general were an integral part of Aztec mortuary ritual. Perhaps the most complete account comes from the Dominican friar, Diego Durán (1964:171–2), who arrived in New Spain from Seville as a five-year-old child in 1542. In the year 1581, he described the ritual honoring military captains who died in war:

> Four days after the ceremony had taken place, images of the dead were made from slivers of firewood, each one with feet, arms and head. Faces were placed upon them—eyes and mouth—and paper loincloths and mantles also. On their shoulders were put wings of hawk feathers, as it was believed that in this way they would fly before the Sun every day. The heads of these bundles were feathered and pendants for the ears, nose and lips were placed upon them. These statues were taken to a room called *tlacochcalco.* The widows then entered, and each one placed in front of her statue a dish of a stew called *tlacatlacualli,* which means "food of human flesh," together with some maize cakes called *papalotlaxcalli,* which means "butterfly bread," and a little flour made of toasted maize dissolved in water as a drink. After this food had been offered, the drum began to sound again, and the singers began their hymns which told of mourning and tears. The chanters came dressed in filthy stained cloaks and with dirty leather bands tied to their heads. They called this chant *tzocuicatl,* "song of dirt." Each carried a gourd vessel of the white native wine and placed it in front of each statue. These vessels were *teotecomatl,* "the divine gourds." In front of the statues were also placed flowers and tobacco and thick straws for drinking. This type of straw is called "sun drinker." The chanters of the dead then took the gourds of wine in their hands and raised them twice, thrice, in front of the statues. After this they poured the wine in the four directions around the statue.

It is important to recognize the integral role of food and drink in the mortuary ritual of the Aztecs, although it is impossible to evaluate the extent to which these comestibles are precursors of the Day of the Dead ofrenda. There is probably no funerary rite anywhere in which food does not play some role. The offerings that Durán describes for the Aztecs are certainly no closer in substance or function to that which occurs during the Day of the Dead than are food offerings in other times and places.

If we consider early reports of All Saints' and Souls' Days themselves, there exists scattered evidence on food. Fray Toribio de Benavente [Motolonía] (1951:144–5) reported of sixteenth-century Tlaxcala that "on the feast of All Souls in nearly all the Indian towns, many offerings are made for the dead. Some offer corn, others blankets, others food, bread, chickens; and in place of wine they offer chocolate." About a century later, Francisco de Burgoa (1675:2) described daily life in and around Oaxaca, writing unappreciatively of "these Indian nations, in which drunkenness is so powerful, as

are their gentile rites; in the funerals of their kin, friends, and family they make superstitious banquets . . . and drinks . . . for guests and singers, and this superstitious custom is so strong that the best Christians adapt to its use." Apparently, by the end of the seventeenth century, when Burgoa published his account, at least some Spaniards and Indians shared funerary customs in the Oaxaca Valley.

The first really detailed report of sculpted images in Mexico dates from the mid-eighteenth century, by which time the Day of the Dead in the Valley of Mexico clearly had acquired its present-day flavor. The relevant testimony belongs to Francisco de Ajofrín (1958:87), a Capuchin friar:

> Before the Day of the Dead they sell a thousand figures of little sheep, lambs, etc. of sugar paste [*alfeñique*], which they call ofrenda, and it is a gift which must be given obligatorily to boys and girls of the houses where one has acquaintance. They also sell coffins, tombs and a thousand figures of the dead, clerics, monks, nuns and all denominations, bishops, horsemen, for which there is a great market and a colorful fair in the portals of the merchants, where it is incredible [to see] the crowd of men and women from Mexico City on the evening before and on the day of All Saints.

Worthy of note in this account is the use of the words Day of the Dead in a Mexican context, as well as the implication that the figurines were used as toys, hence, that they probably were humorous or at least whimsically conceived objects, not unlike those in Mexico today. Ajofrín (1958:87) goes on to explain that sugar figurines and other "cute little things" (*monerías*) are made in rapid succession by "clever" artisans who sell them cheaply. However, he warns the innocent consumer against advance payment, which would result, he says, in the receipt of second-rate goods delivered late.

The references to corn, chickens, banquets, and the like that we encounter in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature also suggest possible continuity with Aztec customs. However, Ajofrín's eighteenth-century description resonates in every respect with contemporary Day of the Dead patterns. It is important to note that early colonial observers themselves made no claim for indigenous origins of the Day of the Dead. To them, All Saints' and Souls' Days seemed to be of little note at all. It is, rather, later writers, mainly contemporary scholars and literati, who used scattered Conquest sources to assert pre-Columbian origins. It is also essential to note that of all colonial writers, only Burgoa and Azofrín actually mentioned All Saints' and Souls' Days. The remainder of the accounts described either Aztec rituals that were very remote in virtually every respect from Roman Catholic ceremonies or post-Conquest funerals, which were different from a collective, annual commemorative event such as the Day of the Dead.

FOOD OFFERINGS IN EUROPE AND THE AMERICAS

An examination of the colonial period in Spain and, indeed, throughout Europe reveals countless analogues to the food offerings in Mexico. Consider the Old Castilian province of Zamora. From the 1500s on, All Souls' Day celebra-

tions required a catafalque, situated in the main chapel of any given church, surrounded by a variety of candles as well as by "twenty-five rolls of bread" (Lorenzo Pinar 1991:95). Historian Lorenzo Pinar (1991:165) states that in Zamora, "ofrendas and banquets formed an habitual part of funerals. The ofrenda constituted—according to those who treated of it—one more of the multiple efforts made on behalf of the souls in purgatory, and the church insisted that [ofrendas] be installed on the days of Easter, during principal annual festivals, and during All Souls' Day." In the town of Madridanos in the province of Zamora, it was stipulated that women "give offerings [*ofrenden*] in church for their parents, ancestors, and elders . . . that God orders especially the days of Easter and principal fiestas, and in particular the Day of the Commemoration of the Souls" (quoted in 1991:165) An important document from eighteenth-century Guipúzcoa in the Basque country (Aguirre Sorondo 1989:350) describes how funerals were conducted: "They carry out funeral services . . . with obligations of bread and wax, apart from . . . veal and lamb, and the customary ofrenda of all the women of the land." The document concludes with a moral commandment from San Tobias: "*Pon sobre la tumba del justo pan y vino*" [Put on the tomb of just one bread and wine]. We can assume that, at least at the level of Catholic religious orthodoxy, the bread and wine mentioned here represent the body and blood of Christ. The association between bread and death rituals persists in the Basque country to the present day. As recently as 1987, a Basque priest (quoted in 1989:355–6) reported that for a full year after a death in the family, the relatives put on the tomb "candelabras with candles tied about with black ribbon, on top a black cloth and resting on the cloth a basket filled with bread." "Formerly on All Saints' Day," continues the priest, "the aggrieved family brought a [loaf of] bread to church, which was divided among the priest, sacristan, and altar boys."

Regarding Catalonia in the northeastern corner of the Iberian Peninsula, Curet (1953:288) write that, in eighteenth-century Barcelona, "on the afternoon of All Saints' Day and well into the night, the animation along the Ramblas and streets flowing into it was extraordinary." Food stands sold special seasonal sweets called *panellets dels morts* [little bread-like dead], and the people at large held chestnut roasts, a custom that I observed during All Saints' and Souls' Days in the province of Avila in 1969. A document from the Barcelona silversmiths' guild dated October 15, 1671, stipulates that on All Souls' Day two *corteras* of *pa dels morts* [Catalan for dead bread] be offered to the deceased. What is astounding about this document, aside from references to dead bread, is the use of the term *Diada dels Morts,* that is, Day of the Dead, to refer to All Souls' Day. This is the earliest such reference of which I am aware. Equally relevant is Joan Amades's observation (1956:611) that in eighteenth-century Barcelona, during All Saints' Day, panellets and chestnuts "were combined and distributed in such a manner that they formed whimsical designs and figures." Panellets are still the All Saints' Day sweet

par excellence in Catalonia. For generations they were made of marzipan (sweetened almond or walnut paste) and covered outside with pine nuts. Nowadays, in the 1990s, these ingredients have been substituted for with natural fruits (lemon, strawberry, pineapple, and the like), which, according to one baker in Barcelona with whom I spoke, are more in keeping with contemporary preferences for "light cuisine" than were the rich nuts of the past.

There are several revealing testaments from late medieval Mallorca which conclusively document the custom of situating bread on tombs during All Souls' Day. In his will dated December 13, 1344, Jaime Corbera stated, "I wish and arrange . . . that my heirs should give each year, on the Day of the Deceased [*Día de Difuntos*], on my sepulcher, five *sueldos* of bread, candles, and other obligatory objects, in such manner as on this day is custom to do" (quoted in Gabriel Llompart 1965:96–97). A century later, this Mallorcan practice was still flourishing, as witnessed in another will, stating that "my . . . brother Pedro Juan be obliged for life on the Day of the Deceased [*día de difuntos*] each year to carry to the sepulcher of the Betnassers . . . a *cuévano* of bread worth 10 sueldos, as well as a tall candle [cirio] to burn while the holy office is celebrated, as is customary" (1965:96).

Throughout the late middle ages and early modern period, bread was not only situated on tombs during All Souls' Day but was also distributed to the poor and crippled. In present-day Mallorca, confectioners sell small circular cookies on All Saints' and Souls' Days which, in Mallorquí, are called *panetets de mort* (little dead breads). Gabriel Llabrés Quintana (1925) believes that panetets, which used to be strung up like rosary beads as a seasonal gift to children, were originally the large round breads annually given to the poor on this date. As recently as the 1920s, such candy rosaries were still being made, although the beads were by that time fabricated out of candied egg yolk or marzipan similar to the Catalan *panellets*, rather than pastry dough.

There is, thus, an abundance of evidence from the Middle Ages to the presence of offerings of breads and sweets on All Saints' and Souls' Days. The evidence, moreover, derives from all over the Iberian Peninsula: Galicia, Castile, the Basque Country, Catalonia, and Mallorca. Food and, of course, candles and flowers seem long to have been essential ingredients in funerary ritual and All Saints' and Souls' Days celebrations. Among foods, bread is the earliest and most widely reported offering. However, even in the case of sweets not based on wheat dough, the vernacular name of the sweet derives from the word for bread: *pa* (in Catalan and Mallorqui) and *pan* (in Castillian). Hence, panellet and panetet both mean approximately "little bread-like substance." The earliest references, scant but highly significant, indicate the custom of carrying bread to the very tombs. From the early modern period on, bread offerings occur in many forms and on many occasions throughout the year but principally as a means of assistance to clergy and the poor.

In addition to panellets and panetets, there are nowadays plenty of Eu-

ropean analogues to the Mexican sweets offered during the Day of the Dead. Clearest of all are the so-called *huesos de santo* (saints' bones), the single most characteristic Spanish sweet sold during the All Saints' and Souls' Days seasons. The Old Castilian provinces of Burgos and Avila are particularly well known for huesos de santo, although they are found all over. At Foix de Sarriá, probably the most elegant and traditional pastry shop in Barcelona, *ossos de sant,* the Catalan version of huesos de santo, are still sold during the end of October and beginning of November. Huesos de santo are little cylinders of marzipan, several inches long. They are filled inside with *marrón glasé,* or crushed chestnuts and sugar, and are glazed outside with a sugar coating. Panets de mort are produced in Mallorca at the end of October and beginning of November. Enrique Cases Gaspar (1947:362), one of Spain's most encyclopedic folklorists of the post-War period, claims that the panets de mort displayed on All Souls' Day in Palma de Mallorca "symbolize the embalmed cadaver." However, these candies, rather than being iconographic, bear only an abstract resemblance to dead bodies.

Sweets of an unambiguously anthropomorphic nature, such as those produced in Mexico during the Day of the Dead season, are uncharacteristic of Spain during All Saints' and Souls' Days. However, this is not to say that they have not been produced at all. Violant y Simorra (1956) presents evidence that little loaves of breads in human and animal form were made especially for children throughout Catalonia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Every week or two, when mothers prepared dough for the family's bread, they molded small images of nuns or Gypsy women to amuse their children. In Galicia, located in northwestern Spain (Epton 1968:186), "the crude figures of a man, a woman and a serpent are sold among other universal symbols." Anthropomorphic designs in food preparation, though not necessarily specific to All Saints' and Souls' Days exist throughout the Iberian Peninsula. This situation is apparently not universal. I have been told that, in France, it is unthinkable to eat an identifiable human form; to some peoples, eating anthropomorphic dough figures seems sadistic, even cannibalistic. And yet, even in France, non-anthropomorphic sweets during All Saints' and Souls' Days are common. The great folklorist Arnold Van Gennep (1953:2808–18) reports, for example, that in the Haute-Saône, young girls and boys jointly bake cakes out of nuts and apples on this holiday. There are at least half a dozen Portuguese pastries and candies designed for All Saints' and Souls Days, including the Azorean specialty, *maminhas do preto* (little dark breasts) (Adelina Azevedo Axelrod: personal communication). Italy produces a variety of regional specialties. Consider Sardinia, where "they make *papassinos,* which are compounded of bruised almonds, nuts, and walnuts, mixed with sugar and grape-juice into a kind of stiff paste or pudding." On the island of Sardinia, on the night between All Saints' and Souls' Days, church sacristans, "having armed themselves with bells and baskets, go from door to door in their

respective parishes, begging for '*su mortu, su mortu,*' and dried fruit, almonds, papassinos, and bread, are put in their baskets" (Vansittart 1990:327). Think of the way that children in the United States go begging on All Hallows Eve, or even more significantly, of the way Mexicans today commonly solicit candies and breads from one another by asking in a jocular tone for "*mi muerto, mi muertito.*"

The presence of European analogues casts doubt on pre-Columbian roots to the Day of the Dead in Mexico. So, too, does the presence of Mexican-like celebrations in other parts of Latin America, most notably the Andean region, which was of course conquered only shortly after Mexico. There are several published sources which indicate how All Saints' and Souls' Days are celebrated by the Bolivian Aymara. Hans Buechler's (1980:80–81) description is detailed and apt:

> First they shape an arch out of two sugar canes . . . over a table . . . and place two candles on either side; then they heap the table with bananas, oranges, bread, agricultural produce, and quinoa of *k'espiña* dough figures and sometimes milk, alcohol, and coca. The bread and k'espiña are prepared specially for the occasion. A few families in the community own ovens used on All Saints. Each family forms some dough into wreaths (to represent flower wreaths), ladders (for souls to climb out of purgatory), and men and babies (symbolizing respectfully the world of old persons and of infants) and animals (standing for the deceased's herd). The bread figures are then baked in the available ovens. Some families also bake bread for sale on this occasion. Returned migrants . . . prepare k'espiña figures. First they grind the roasted quinoa and mix it with lime, water, and a little lard to make a dough. Then they shape the dough into the form of llamas to carry the food offerings to the land of the dead . . . dogs to herd the llamas; eagles; etc. Finally they steam the figures and place them on the "altar."

Joseph Bastien's (1978:171–87) description of what his respondents call "The Feast with the Dead," the Aymara All Souls' Days, is a variation of Buechler's account. Bastien's respondents set up home altars, which, in the course of the holiday, are moved from home to the grave sites of deceased relatives. The altars are decorated with *chicha* (maize beer), flowers, fruit, coca, potatoes, candy, oranges, and an item called "bread babies."

Bread babies are, to judge from Bastien's photograph, beautifully sculpted figurines made of wheat dough (Bastien 1978:183–7). Each is about a foot and a half long and portrays a hooded infant wrapped snuggly in a blanket. The bread babies undergo a mock baptism, after which they are set on the altar, and subsequently broken into pieces by an officiating officer who says, "This is the death of these babies, eat their bodies!" Each "baby's" parents, godparents, and other members of the community then consume pieces of the dough body. Clearly, from both Bastien and Buechler's accounts, anthropomorphic food offerings are an essential part of All Souls' Day ritual for the Aymara. So are other foods similar to the ones employed in Mexico, like oranges, bananas, beer, and comestible animal figures.

If we turn north of Mesoamerica, to the pueblos of New Mexico, there

exists convincing evidence of parallels with Mexico and Bolivia. From an account written early in this century, Elsie Clews Parsons (1917:495–6) reports that on All Souls' Day groups of young Zuñi boys go from house to house crying out, "*Tsale'mo, tsale'mo.*" At the threshold they made the sign of the cross and received presents of food—usually bread or meat—from the residents. According to Parsons, too, at Acoma, a more overtly Roman Catholic pueblo than Zuñi, food was taken to the cemetery and placed around the foot of the cross marking each grave. In the pueblo of Laguna, November 2 was called *shuma sashti* (skeleton day). Laguna offerings included "the fattest sheep and the best pumpkins and melons" (1917:496). "On shuma sashti, candles are set out on the graves. A little ball made up of a bit of everything served to eat is also put on the fire." The boys who go about getting food call out, "*Sare'mo, sare'mo!*" (Parsons 1917:496). Parsons reports that the Pueblo Indians themselves could not explain the meaning of the terms employed by young boys on their village rounds. Superficially, the terms seem like nonsense versions of the Anglo-American "Trick or treat." And yet, folklorist Aurelio Espinosa (1918:550–2) provides convincing evidence that "Tsale'mo" and "Sare'mo" are both derived from the Spanish *Oremos* (Let us pray).

The custom of young boys going from house to house and begging for food on All Saints' and Souls' Days is also widespread throughout Spain, as is bell ringing and other noisemaking. I observed all these practices in 1969 in the Old Castilian village of Becedas (Brandes 1975:88–109). It certainly exists and has existed throughout Mexico as well. In Tzintzuntzan, young boys still make the rounds of village homes to collect food and drink, which they then take to the churchyard and prepare for consumption around an open fire on All Souls' Eve (Brandes 1988:88–109). As for Bolivia, Bastien reports that on All Souls' morning, in the Aymara community he studied, "About forty . . . ritualists were making the rounds, praying for the dead. They carried large sacks filled with bread and fruit. Those who prayed were given beautiful bread figurines, oranges, and bananas." This custom is nearly identical to what occurs nowadays in Tzintzuntzan, when on All Souls' Eve a brotherhood of villagers goes round the churchyard, praying over the tombs and asking for donations of food in return (Brandes 1988:88–109). It is also a reminder of our sources from early modern Europe in which distribution of food to the needy was an integral part of All Saints' and Souls' Days ritual.

What seems clear is that, throughout southern Europe and Latin America—particularly the parts of Latin America, like Mexico, the Andes, and the American Southwest, which were all settled at the time of the Conquest—special food displays are an important part of All Saints' and Souls' Days proceedings, as is the ritualized distribution of food, whether by begging or other means. The particular foods that are placed on altars or distributed

throughout the populace depend largely on local conditions; hence, chicha is the preferred beverage in Bolivia, while it is pulque in Mexico. With such widespread distribution of ceremonial practices all being carried out on a single Roman Catholic holiday and with all of them analogous to what we know of Europe before and during the Conquest, it would be hard to deny that the Mexican Day of the Dead does have a prevalent, though not exclusive, Spanish origin.

SUGAR FIGURINES, COLONIALISM, AND THE DAY OF THE DEAD

Is there anything unique, then, about the food offerings in Mexico? Based on comparative and historical evidence, it appears that in Mexico, and perhaps only in Mexico, does there exist an elaborate, widespread, and world-famous array of molded sugar and sweet breads on the Day of the Dead. As far as I can tell, Mexico is also the only country in which sugar is the principal substance, rather than one of several other ingredients like nuts or flour, out of which Day of the Dead figurines are sculpted. In its proliferation and ever-increasing variety of sugar skulls, animals, cadavers, caskets, and the like, Mexico stands alone. At least one key source—Ajofrín—indicates that this tradition existed in the mid-eighteenth century. We do not know how widespread its distribution was at that time. Nowadays, of course, the tradition has diffused throughout the Mexican Republic and even to the United States, where it has become a marker of Chicano identity and an expression of Anglo sophistication, artiness, or kitsch.

The existence of sugar cane figurines in the colonial era brings up the undeniable connection between sugar and colonialism. Sidney Mintz's path-breaking research on this topic conclusively demonstrates that, from the sixteenth century onwards, the taste for sugar cane-based sucrose increased rapidly. Food preferences were changing simultaneously with the rise of European military might and economic power. "What the metropolises produced, the colonies consumed," says Mintz (1985:xxv). In fact, although it did not become part of the European workers' diets until the nineteenth century, sugar was already widely consumed by Indians throughout the sixteenth century. A study of pulperías (small retail grocery stores) in eighteenth-century Mexico City shows that sugar by that time had become a regular stock item (Kinsbruner 1987:2–3). "The desire for sweet substances spread and increased steadily" throughout the colonial era, continues Mintz; "many different products were employed to satisfy it" (1985:25). Included among these products, we may surmise, were sugar figurines produced for ritual occasions. Mintz points to marzipan as one of the earliest and most visible products of the revolution in culinary taste that took place during the colonial era, claiming that "it was possible to sculpture an object out of this sweet preservable 'clay' on nearly any scale and in nearly any form" (1985:88). Indeed, in

Spain's first published cookbook, dated 1778, Francisco Martínez Montiño listed no fewer than eight recipes for molded marzipan. What Europeans, including Spaniards, did with marzipan, the Mexicans did with sugar itself.

If the connection between sugar and colonialism is indisputable, the relation between colonialism and death is even more so. In the first century after European contact, numerous major and minor epidemics afflicted the indigenous peoples of the Valley of Mexico and their neighbors. The first major epidemic, a virulent attack of smallpox, came to Mexico from the island of Hispaniola and decimated the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán. It is generally agreed that this was a decisive event favoring the Spanish conquest (McNeill 1976:183–4). Subsequent severe and widespread disease occurred in the years 1545–48, 1576–81, and 1736–39, although, as Charles Gibson (1964:136–7) points out, many lesser epidemics caused traumatic destruction in limited areas. Throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, large-scale depopulation occurred both during and between epidemics. Although it is uncertain which pathogens were responsible for the three major epidemics, the most likely candidates are smallpox, measles, typhus, and typhoid (1964:136–7). Spanish methods of treatment, based largely on bloodletting, only served to exascerbate the effects of disease. In the plague of 1576, for example, the viceroy distributed medical instructions to all affected towns; the principal method was prompt bleeding. The same remedy applied during an epidemic that occurred in 1959 (Gibson 1964:499).

Although estimates of the population decline are by no means definitive, Sherbourne Cook and Woodrow Borah's are among the most widely accepted and cited. Based on their exhaustive research into the source of royal revenues, they calculate that from 1519 to 1532, the population of central Mexico shrank from 25.2 million to 16.8 million (Cook and Borah 1979:1). In 1548, the population stood at about 6.3 million and in 1605 at 1.075 million. By the 1620s, only about 730,000 Indians were left (1979:100). John Super (1988:52) refers to this loss as "a demographic catastrophe perhaps unequalled in the history of the world." Spanish observers of the era were understandably concerned about the population loss. A summary of the literature (Gibson 1964:136) indicates that "excessive labor requirements, excessive tributes, mistreatment, drunkenness, the Indians' '*flaca complexión*' [weak constitution], starvation, flood, drought, disease, and divine providence were all mentioned . . . as causes."

From the vantage point of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century observer, however, the full extent and impact of this massive loss of life could not have been recognized. The one early chronicler who faced up to the severe demographic catastrophe was Fray Bartolomé de las Casas. In *The Devastation of the Indies,* first published in Seville in 1552, Casas (1992:58) wrote:

> Thus, from the beginning of their discovery of New Spain, that is to say, from the eighteenth of April in the year one thousand five hundred and eighteen until the year

thirty, a period of twelve whole years, there were continual massacres and outrages committed by the bloody hands and swords of Spaniards against the Indians living on the four hundred and fifty leagues of land surrounding the city of Mexico, which comprised four or five great kingdoms as large as and more felicitous than Spain. Those lands were all more densely populated than Toledo or Seville and Valladolid and Zaragoza all combined, along with Barcelona. Never has there been such a population as in these cities which God saw fit to place in that vast expanse of land having a circumference of more than a thousand leagues. The Spaniards have killed more Indians here in twelve years by the sword, by fire, and enslavement than anywhere else in the Indies. They have killed young and old, men, women, and children, some four million souls during what they call the Conquests. . . . And this does not take into account those Indians who have died from ill treatment, or were killed under tyrannical servitude.

Whether through warfare, debilitation, or disease, the enormous destruction of life suffered by the Indians of sixteenth-century Mexico is incomprehensible to the human mind or, if comprehended, immediately repressed as a defense against deep, paralyzing agony and sorrow.

Under the circumstances, it seems realistic to posit that the Day of the Dead became ritualistically elaborate in Mexico as a by-product of the enormous loss of life during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Not only did people die in staggering numbers in this period, but they were also uprooted and forcibly resettled in unfamiliar territory. For purposes of taxation and civil obedience, people were herded into hundreds of new grid-plan towns (Foster 1960:34–49). The anguish that these changes must have wrought is incalculable.

Sugar, death, and the irreversible destruction of a civilization—no, of many distinct civilizations—were among the clear consequences of the Spanish colonial regime. As for the connection between sugar and death, a connection flamboyantly established in Mexico's Day of the Dead, causation is less easily established. Perhaps some insight may be gained by a preliminary glance at sugar, colonialism, and death elsewhere in the Americas during the colonial era. The sugar cane-rich islands of the West Indies are one obvious point of comparison. Certainly, Hispañola, Cuba, and even the English-speaking islands were like Mexico in that they suffered serious population decline. But, in their case the decline was so serious that it meant virtual obliteration of the indigenous population. As in the case of Mexico, population figures are inexact and under continual revision. European diseases bore most of the responsibility for the demographic catastrophe in the Caribbean region. However, "massacres and other brutalities on the part of the conquistadores . . . food shortages, overwork, worry, grief, suicide, infanticide, and flight" (Fagg 1965:2) were also important contributing factors. Cook and Borah (1971,I:376–410) estimate the aboriginal population of Hispañola to have declined from nearly 4 million in 1496 to some 125 souls in 1570. Taking Cuba and Hispañola together, John Fagg (1965:3) states that "within two

generations after Columbus' first voyage to the islands, scarcely any Indians were left."

For several centuries after that, according to Fagg (1965:3) "Both islands languished." The Spaniards introduced sugarcane production to the islands in the sixteenth century and imported African slave labor to work the fields (Mintz 1985:32–33). But, for the most part, these islands were long ignored by the Crown, "underpopulated and poorly developed (Fagg 1965:3), mainly used as stepping-stones for the colonization and development of richer population centers on the American mainland. To be sure, by the end of the eighteenth century the West Indian islands were, together with cane-producing Northeast Brazil, among the richest agricultural lands in the Americas. But the slave population that drove the economy, in the Portuguese (Scheper-Hughes 1992:31–64) and Spanish Caribbean alike (Florescano 1975), was overworked, underfed, and downtrodden. In the words of Richard Dunn (1972:224), "Slavery in one form or another is the essence of West Indian history." The care that Church and Crown took to nurture the Indian population of Mesoamerica in a European style of life and religion was far from replicated in the Indies. Sugar, colonialism, and death were all present in the Caribbean. But, during the colonial period at least, an essential ingredient present in Mesoamerica—concern for the salvation of souls and the militant propagation of Roman Catholicism—was missing in this region. The West Indies existed for the single purpose of economic exploitation. Like Northeast Brazil (Scheper-Hughes 1992:31–64), the West Indies conformed to Wolf and Mintz's model (1977:39) of plantation economies in which "the plantation produces for a mass market. It subordinates all other considerations to the desire to meet the demands of this market." With virtually no disposable income among the slave population and with single-minded exploitation of slave labor, sweet bread and sugar candy would hardly have gained a culinary foothold in such societies.

Although sugar, colonialism, and death were also present in colonial Peru, we find nothing there like the elaboration of sweets related to the Day of the Dead in Mexico. In Peru, to be sure, there existed the kind of energetic imposition of Catholicism that characterized New Spain as well as a severe (if not quite as severe) population reduction. Burga (1976:56–58) estimates that between 1525 and 1571 the population of Peru was reduced by some 75 percent. Despite striking parallels with Mesoamerica, we may hypothesize, however, that in Peru it was the character and distribution of sugar plantations that made sugar and sweets less prominent than in the viceroyalty to the north. In the conquest period and for some time thereafter, the Peruvian population was concentrated high in the Andes. The Spaniards established haciendas in the area around Cuzco, for example (Mörner 1975:360–5), but these estates specialized in the production of cattle, sheep, coca, and European cereals and fruits rather than sugar, for which the high altitude was clearly

unsuited. Initially, sugar production became economically important on the north coast (Gonzales 1985) as well as in the area around Lima (Mancera 1974:xiii). However, these regions were, as Mancera puts it, marginalized (*arrinconada*) during the colonial era (Mancera 1974:xi–xii): "The development of these plantations was, even by the end of the eighteenth century, very much less that that of other American countries. By that time its sugar production . . . was very much less than . . . Brazil had attained two centuries before and five times less than that of Cuba" (1974:xi–xii). The marginal role of sugar in colonial Peru was exacerbated by two disastrous floods on the north coast in 1720 and in 1728. The floods proved to be calamaties "from which growers never completely recovered" (Gonzales 1985:18). In examining the relatively minor role that sugar played in colonial Peru, we must also consider the fact that sugar was a plantation, rather than hacienda-type, crop, to use Wolf and Mintz's terms (1977). Sugarcane estates were worked almost exclusively by imported black slave labor. "Since the stated purpose of the conquest had been to convert the natives to Christianity, not to exterminate them," African slaves were generally exploited in their place. This was one of the few areas where Indians were actually spared" (Gonzales 1985:14). The plantations, unsuccessful as they were, oriented themselves insofar as possible toward the external economy. Overall, the marginal role of sugarcane in colonial Peru was not conducive to giving sugar the prominence that it attained in Mexico.

In Mexico, to be sure, black slaves were an important, often prevalent, presence on sugarcane haciendas (Martin 1985:199); but free labor did exist in Mexico, unlike the exclusive use of slaves in Brazil—a most significant point of contrast that Barrett and Schwartz (1975:571) discerned in assessing the differences between the sugarcane economies of Morelos, Mexico and Bahia, Brazil. These authors (1975:558) claimed that they had "at least one case in Morelos of a small sugar plantation (*ingenio*) [that of Santa Rosa Cocoyotla] which functioned during the eighteenth century with few or no slaves; in Bahia not a single such case is known."

Further, sugarcane production in Mexico, unlike Peru, was concentrated in areas of relatively dense colonial population such as Morelos (Martin 1985), Oaxaca (Taylor 1976), and Michoacán (Huerta 1993). In Oaxaca, sugarcane was planted in virtually every part of the Valley (Taylor 1976:78). Ward Barrett's work (1976, 1977) in Morelos, demonstrates that sugar cane remained a prominent crop in that area throughout the colonial period, and moreover, that sugarcane haciendas "developed within a setting of previously established indigenous towns with their own claims to land and necessary water, a very different case from the Greater Antilles, where the aboriginal population had not survived and the land was more or less empty" (1976:171). The Morelos sugar estates were populated by "groups of people organized in urban ways" (Barrett 1976:171). Moreover, the sugar produced in Morelos,

situated close as it was to the capital, furnished Tenochtitlán-Mexico City, the heart of Mexican colonial society and economy.

Cheryl Martin (1985:7) emphasizes the economic link between Mexico City and sugarcane growers and merchants in Morelos. Equally significant is her observation that "for most of the colonial period Mexican production was oriented toward domestic consumption, with sugar-producing enclaves, each tied to a specific city or mining region, scattered throughout New Spain and New Galicia" (1985:7). Despite the fact that sugarcane production never attained the importance in Mexico on the world market that it did in Brazil (see, for example, Furtado 1977) or the Caribbean—in the Valley of Oaxaca, for example, it attained only "modest results" (Taylor 1976) due to the temperate climate—it was prominent locally in areas of dense population and political and economic centralization. This combination of factors probably accorded sugar a culinary role in Mexico that it lacked elsewhere.

And, unlike the Caribbean, sugar achieved prominence here in an area of intense religious concentration and activity, where ritual and belief were critical instruments of social and economic control. In fact, Martin (1985:38) underscores the financial involvement of convents and monasteries in the sugar industry. The greater part of loans to the expanding sugarcane haciendas in Morelos came from religious institutions such as these; eventually, because of default on loans, "leading ecclesiastical institutions of Mexico City acquired sizable perpetual liens on most of the region's haciendas" (1985). In such a religious and economic climate, together with the spatial and demographic characteristics that prevailed in central Mexico, it is reasonable to conclude that sugar should play a large role in popular Catholic ritual and ceremony. As a footnote, we do know that convents have always been and continue to be producers of valued sweets in Mexico. Whether the convents that loaned hacendados money to expand their sugarcane estates were the same institutions that actually produced these sweets I have not yet been able to determine. If such proves to be the case, however, the connection between sugar, colonialism, and the Day of the Dead in Mexico would be further strengthened.

If we accept these working hypotheses to explain why sugar should be more prominent in Mexico's Day of the Dead than elsewhere, the connection between sugar and death still requires further exploration. Though speculative, psychoanalytic insights should be included in the analysis. Imagine a visit to a Mexican marketplace around the end of October. We encounter a multitude of wooden tables upon which rest hundreds of colorfully decorated sugar caskets, no two exactly alike; in each casket lies a little sugar cadaver, which can be resuscitated and made to sit up at the pull of a string. Later, the casket and cadaver are eaten, the sugar and colored icing—along with the death they represent—melting in the consumer's mouth. Can there be a clearer image of the denial of death, or, to put it another way, the assertion of life? Is there a

more concrete way of acting out a fantasy that the processes of death could be reversed or made to disappear altogether?

Of course, the consumption of dead bread, or any bread for that matter, is itself an act that is certain to stave off death, not only symbolically but biologically. One of the oldest and most widespread Spanish sayings (Arora 1980), *El muerto al hoyo y el vivo al bollo* [To the grave with the dead and to the bread with the living], assumes particular relevance in this context. Or consider the very chemistry of food offerings. Bread dough rises, an inherent assertion of vitality. Sugar provides a quick rush of energy and is, in essence, "energy in concentrated form" (Poleszynski 1982:8). In fact, sucrose is as rich in energy as protein, a more-or-less pure source of energy in that it causes no associated body "pollution" because, as Beidler points out, "Sucrose is broken down into carbon dioxide and water, both easily eliminated (Beidler 1975:14). Moreover, there is some indication that sugar, when combined with fat (in sweet breads, for example), is a source of oral pleasure. Cantor and Cantor (1977:441–42) speculate that combining fats and sugar results in "numerous pleasant associations that relate to early life experiences as well as to continuing experiences that may reinforce the pleasures. The proper combination of fat and sugar which produces the taste of richness is not only enhanced by associated richnesses sensed differently but revives infantile pleasure of suckling. Textural enjoyment must also have important sexual associations." There is every indication, then, that the chemistry of both bread and sugar—the two most distinctive and prevalent special Day of the Dead food substances—provides a negation of death.

To the question of European versus indigenous origins, I still have no definite answer. In the absence of more extensive colonial sources, speculation is the only possibility. The evidence indicates that the Mexican Day of the Dead is neither Spanish nor Indian but, rather, a colonial invention, a unique product of colonial demographic and economic processes. The principal types and uses of food on this holiday definitely derive from Europe. I refer here to special breads and sugar-based sweets, to the custom of placing these food substances and others on gravesites and altars, and to the begging and other distributive mechanisms. However, it is clear that the particular anthropomorphic form that Day of the Dead sweets assume is part both of Spanish and ancient Aztec traditions. This conjunction of Spanish and indigenous culinary habits and tastes no doubt culminated in the ofrenda patterns we observe today.

The custom of the ofrenda itself probably derives from Spain, although it has long assumed a significance in Mexico that far outstrips that in the mother country. One measure of the relative unimportance of All Saints' and Souls' Days in Spain, even as long ago as the eighteenth century, comes from news bulletins relaying information from Spain to Mexico about the catastrophic earthquake of 1755. This earthquake flattened Lisbon; it cost many lives and

wreaked terrible damage there and in other cities throughout the southern Iberian Peninsula. The earthquake occurred on November 1, All Saints' Day; yet, reports coming from the Andalusian cities of Granada, Córdoba, Sevilla, Ayamonte, and Huelva (Anonymous 1756) completely ignore any mention of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. Only the report from Jaén even mentions All Saints' Day by name, and this simply as a calendrical marker ("*El día de todos los Santos, experimentamos aquí, a las 10 menos quarto de la mañana, un formidable Terremoto*") [On All Saints' Day, we experienced here, at a quarter to ten in the morning, a formidable earthquake.] (Anonymous 1756). The bulletins did, in fact, attribute some religious significance to the tragedy. Miraculous occurrences were reported in Jaén, and the earthquake was interpreted in Seville as a divine punishment for profligate living. In no case, however, were All Saints' and Souls' Days linked causally or metaphorically to the earthquake.

There is evidence, in fact, that the Spaniards tried to eradicate, or at least tone down, the popular celebration of this holiday during the colonial era. Historian Juan Pedro Viqueira (1984) believes that, together with Carnival, the Day of the Dead created a threat to the civil authorities and that, at least during the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, both of these ritual occasions were suppressed to one degree or another:

> The nocturnal visit which village men, women, and children made to the cemeteries, the festivities and drunkenness that took place there, could only scandalize and above all horrify the illustrious elites, who looked to expel death from social life. This fiesta, which drew boundaries between the living and the dead and partially inverted their roles, showed up the presence of death in the midst of life in an era in which the elite of New Spain . . . tried to forget its existence (Viqueira 1984:13).

It is not surprising, says Viqueira, that in October 1766 the Royal Criminal Chamber (Real Sala del Crimen) prohibited attendance at cemeteries and also imposed a prohibition on the sale of alcoholic beverages after nine in the evening (1984). It is clear that, to the mind of the Spanish colonialist, death and the celebration thereof were dangerous signs of civil disorder. There is, therefore, evidence that popular observance of the Day of the Dead, with its culinary, iconographic, and other flamboyant symbols of death, became a form of resistance against official ideology and social practices.

At the same time, it is also clear that the festival of All Saints' and Souls' Days in Mexico more than survived throughout the colonial era and that during that time it acquired at least part of the distinctive cultural cast that the celebration of this holiday displays today. Is it any wonder that this fundamentally Spanish Catholic ritual, which is really a vast collective mortuary rite, should have developed a unique flavor during the colonial period? The devastating impact of death and suffering during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was enough to assure this outcome. The acute suffering, too, can explain why the Day of the Dead is basically European, rather than indigenous, in origin. Just listen to the words of Motolonía, one of the original

twelve Franciscans—the so-called apostles—sent by Spain to carry on missionary work in Mexico in the 1540s (Benavente 1951): "All the feasts with the ceremonies and solemnities which the Indians observed . . . ceased to be held when the Spaniards began waging war. The reason is that the Indians were so absorbed by their afflictions that they forgot their gods and even themselves. They had such hardships to bear."

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