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Two Previously Unpublished Papers on the Day of the Dead in Mexico by Helga Larsen (1891–1938)

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Today, the traditional Mexican celebration of Día de los Muertos or Day of the Dead has evolved into a global phenomenon, now partly merged with Halloween. Inscribed on UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2008, the Day of the Dead has also grown into a major attraction for both national and international tourists in Mexico. In the twenty-first century, the Day of the Dead thus constitutes a significant economic force in several towns and cities across most of the country (see Day of the Dead 2024; Mexico Leads Global Revival 2025). In media and popular representations Precolumbian indigenous, primarily Aztec elements of the religious fiesta are typically (over-)emphasized, seeking direct visual links between ancient deities associated with death and comparing the skulls and skeletons present in Mesoamerican iconography with those now seen in markets in the shape of sugar skulls, papier-mâché skeletons, *papel picado*, etc. There is an equally growing academic literature on the origins and different cultural components of the Day of the Dead—Indigenous as well as Euro-Christian—and how they have entangled, continuously changing and absorbing new cultural elements and expressions, as well as its larger role in shaping Mexican culture and identity (e.g., Carmichael and Sayer 1991; Garciagodoy 1998; Johansson 2004; Lomnitz 2005). Yet these are very recent developments—and a century ago, the Day of the Dead had not yet taken on its enormous nationwide importance in Mexico outside of indigenous communities. While also celebrated then in larger cities, including Mexico City, where *pan de muerto* and sugar skulls could be purchased in bakeries and on the markets alongside "…amusing toys for children—little coffins from which a skeleton jumps when a string is pulled; funeral processions with priests carrying a coffin, their bodies and hats made of shiny black and colored paper, and heads made of chick-peas…" (Toor 1947:237) (Figures 1 and 2), it was not the massively commercialized event it is today. Consulting some of the seminal ethnographical studies of indigenous cultures in the central Mexican highlands of the twentieth century, we find that the Day of the Dead rarely received special attention, and is commonly summarized rather briefly along with other yearly celebrations (e.g., Madsen 1960:218-219; Montoya Briones 1964:151-152; Nutini and Isaac 1964; Redfield 1930:124-125). This furthers the importance of the two papers presented here almost 90 years after they were written. As the author Helga Larsen stated herself: "The Day of the Dead has in Mexico City become a hilarious holiday for the living. In the Sierra and deep forest it is different. Here the festival has survived as a true rite and has retained all the beauty and wistful sadness which make Indian ceremonies so sincere."

During my ongoing research for a biography of the two Danish autodidact Mesoamericanists Helga Larsen and her sister Bodil Christensen, I discovered in 2024 in a private family archive belonging to Anne-Marie Smith, one of the sisters' two surviving grandnieces, a series of unpublished manuscripts by Helga. Two

Figure 1. Bakery in Mexico City selling *pan de muerto* (1930–1935). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-1177 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

Figure 2. Sugar skulls offered for sale in Mexico City (1930–1935). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-4223 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

of these provide observations on the Day of the Dead (or *Fiesta de Todos Santos y de Fieles Difuntos* or *Mihkailhuitl*) in the mid-1930s, while a third (to be published in *The PARI Journal* in the near future), named "The Sierra," also includes details on the celebrations for the dead. The manuscripts, named "Celebrating the Day of the Dead in Mexico" and "Following the Trail of the Dead: Ceremonies of the Day of the Dead in Various Parts of Mexico" describe the Day of the Dead in Mexico, but their most detailed and important descriptions derive from small Nahua and Otomí-speaking villages in the Sierra of northern Puebla, and it is from here that we find the most valuable ethnographic data.

Helga Larsen (1891–1938): A Biographical Sketch

Helga Ludovica Wiggers Christensen was born on May 10, 1891 in Holbæk, Denmark, some 50 km west of Copenhagen. Helga, her elder sister Julie Henrikke Wiggers Christensen (1886–1957), and younger sister Bodil Othilde Wiggers Christensen (1896–1985), were born into a family in the upper middle class. Their father, Harald Leopold Christensen (1848–1911), a former first lieutenant in the Danish army, was a dentist with his own practice in Holbæk. The mother, Marie, born Wiggers (1860–1907) was a housewife and followed the traditional gender and family patterns of the time. When Helga was 16 and Bodil only 11, their mother died from tuberculosis, a feared disease that caused death to thousands of Danes between 1890 and 1920. Just four years later, in 1911, their father passed away, leaving the three sisters as orphans at the ages of 25, 20, and 15. Perhaps influenced by the illness and death she had experienced, Helga became a nurse and came to work under Professor Thorkild Rovsing (1862–1927). Rovsing was not only a famous doctor and surgeon, he also briefly served as a minister in the Danish government (1920), and also as Rector of the University of Copenhagen (1919–1920). However, Helga's own health was not good, and she probably suffered from tuberculosis, just like her mother. Rovsing recommended that she travel to a drier and healthier environment—and the destination for Helga became California. This was not a random choice, because in Los Angeles lived their uncle, the marvelously named Didrik Laurentius Fog Wiggers (1863–1934), merchant, entrepreneur, and owner of his own goldmine.

On May 2, 1912, Helga sailed from Copenhagen onboard S/S The United States (first class), and reached Ellis Island, New York, on May 15. She traveled on to Los Angeles to stay with uncle Didrik—and his Danish wife, Dagmar Danebo Knudsen, journalist and editor of a news magazine for Danish emigrants on the West Coast. In Los Angeles she met and subsequently married (1914) compatriot Hans Christian Larsen (1879–1932), who was then in the banking business in Los Angeles. In 1919, Helga returned briefly to Denmark because her marriage with Hans Christian was in crisis. Bodil, now a young, determined woman, decided to join Helga on her return to the States. At some point between 1919 and 1921 Hans Christian moved to Cartagena in Columbia (it does not seem that Helga went along), and later he got a job in an American bank in Culiacan in Sonora, Mexico. Again, Helga does not seem to have moved with him, although photos show that she occasionally visited. The marriage was clearly unstable, and in 1922 the divorce was a reality. After the divorce Hans Christian continued to support Helga financially and continued hoping that she would come back to him. He later moved on to Mexico City where he entered the business world, representing different companies. In 1932, he died from a stroke while in León in Guanajuato.

After Helga's divorce, the two sisters made a radical change in their life, as they decided to move to the small town of High Rolls in New Mexico (100 km from the border with Mexico and Ciudad Juárez). High Rolls, a settler town from the 1880s was known for its tuberculosis treatment—and this was probably the reason to move there, since Helga still suffered, and in photos from the time she is looking terribly thin. They lived on their own in a rustic hut for a time. Here they learned to live under primitive condition and survive on their own during winter—perhaps they also had their first experience riding horses. High Rolls is very close to the Mescalero Apache reservation, and it is likely that Helga and Bodil had their first real encounters with indigenous culture here. In 1923, they move once again, and this time to Mexico—possibly inspired by Helga's visits to Sonora. They first spend time in Cuautla in the state of Morelos. Their motivation to choose exactly this spot—in the revolutionary heart of Mexico—is uncertain, and currently the following years of the sisters' whereabouts and activities are not very clear. We do know that they eventually settled in the capital where there were good job possibilities. Eventually they moved to an apartment in the heart of the historical center of Mexico City. It was just a stone's throw from the *zócalo*—on Avenida 5 de Mayo nr. 46, apartment 4 on the second floor, and with access to the rooftop terrace. This was to be their joint home for the rest of Helga's life. In the busy city, Helga made a living working as a translator, translating Spanish to English, and she also established a language school.

In Mexico City the two outgoing and extroverted young women became part of a social network of other Scandinavians, as well as international "colonies," while at the same time they built up a local Mexican network of friends, including intellectuals and academics. Among the Scandinavians was Norwegian engineer Ola Apenes (1898–1943) who had arrived to Mexico in 1929, and soon became an enthusiastic amateur researcher—particularly interested in chronology, Lake Texcoco,

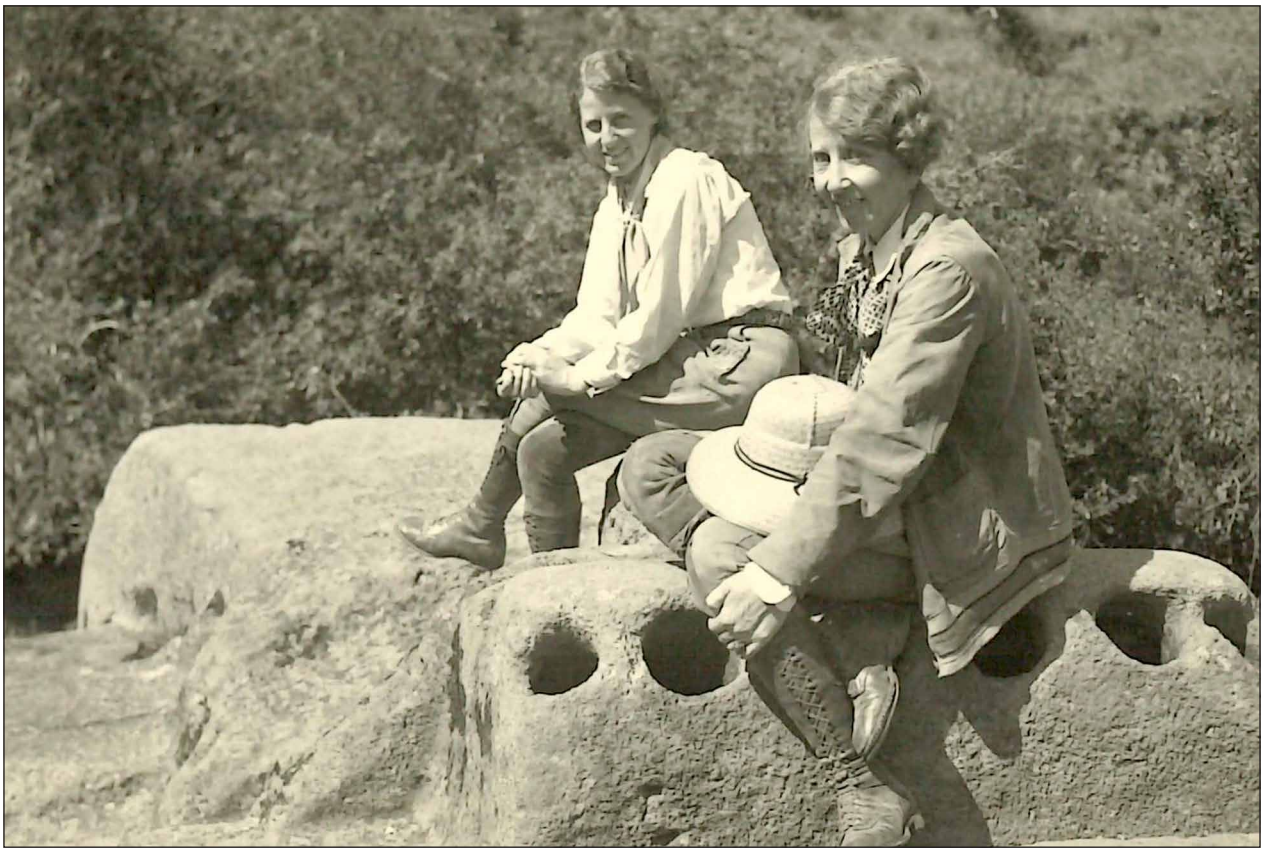

Figure 3. Helga (right) and Bodil seated on top of the monolith at Coatlinchan (1936) (unknown photographer). Private collection © Anne-Marie Smith.

and early maps of central Mexico (see Carrillo Ibáñez 2024; Linné 1944). Since his arrival, Apenes had worked for Ericsson, the Swedish telephone company (later Teléfonos de México), and perhaps through Ola, Bodil got a job there—and with time became a department manager. It was a position she kept until her retirement, three decades later, and it secured her an income that allowed her to spend weekends, holidays, and periods off with Helga, exploring and photographing the landscape, ancient ruins, and the living indigenous peoples in central Mexico and the Sierra of Puebla (Figure 3). Often their apartment was the scene of parties, music being played and masquerades organized. In a letter Apenes wrote:

> There are plenty of festivities here. The main event was the party at the "Danish ladies." These are Mrs. Larsen, divorced from Larsen, who is in the business of clay in Chihuahua, and her sister Miss Christensen. These ladies are self-acquiring, Miss Christensen is employed at Ericsson, and Mrs. Larsen has a language school etc. They are both immensely entertaining and funny, they know everyone, and know all about Mexico. They are incredibly imaginative and get a whole lot out of anything […] They organized a splendid party in Mexican style. They had got hold of a bunch of zarapes—blankets—and decorated [the apartment]. We received telegraphic invitation with encouragement to show up in Mexican costumes. Quite a few, especially the ladies, did so. Apart from us in the colony, there were several Mexican ladies and gentlemen. They had also hired some excellent musicians, who play in the finest "orchestra tipica" and who play in the park of the president on Sundays […] The sisters had even gone to the countryside and brought some big cactus and worked really hard. But the result was a great success. (Apenes 1929)

It was probably also through the Scandinavian colony and Ericsson that Helga and Bodil got into contact with Swedish archaeologist Sigvald Linné (1899–1986), which would prove to be a defining meeting. Already in 1932, the Ethnographical Museum of Sweden had sent an expedition to Mexico, partly funded by Ericsson and headed by Linné, and had made significant finds at their excavations at Teotihuacan. Now, a second expedition—archaeological and ethnographical—was organized by Linné and fellow-Swede, ethnographer Gösta Montell (1899–1975). Montell explained the ethnographic fieldwork and its importance in this way: "More and more it was impressed upon us how necessary it is to acquire knowledge of modern Indian culture if one wishes to gain an understanding of antiquity" (Montell 1936:60). And Helga and Bodil clearly played a significant role in this; their previous travels through the regions around the Valley of Mexico made their knowl-

edge and contacts invaluable. Linné stated: "It was only their intimate knowledge of the country and the natives that enabled us to acquire extensive and scientifically important material as well as archaeological collections" (Linné 1942:14). In terms of archaeological discoveries, the most spectacular find was made at Calpulalpan in Tlaxcala—a bowl with images and glyphs that have since been extremely important in attempts to understand religious beliefs and social organization at Teotihuacan (Linné 1942:82-88; Taube 2000). Considerable archaeological and ethnographic collections were later sent to the museum in Stockholm (Linné 1936, 1937, 1942; see also Scott 2001). To Helga and Bodil, however, it was the ethnographic dimension of field work that attracted them the most. They were interested in living people and culture more than anything else. Helga and Bodil would subsequently publish some of the results of their expedition work in *Ethnos*, a Swedish journal. They would also write up their observations from other research trips, for example to Malinalco and Xicotepec (e.g., Christensen 1939; Larsen 1938). They see something interesting in every village, every city they come to; and yet, an interest in certain themes and practices begin to stand out more and more clearly: dances, textile production, and religious rituals—such as those involving paper "dolls" or figures and the *voladores* (ritual "flyers" who rotate around a tall pole while descending on ropes). They also continue to expand their network among Mexican scholars.

In 1935–1937 they travelled as often as they could—mostly just the two of them and their trusted guide and muleteer Antonio Martínez—documenting rituals in caves up on the slopes of Iztaccihuatl, paper-production and *voladores*—the daily life and death of indigenous communities. Considering their full-time workload outside academia, and their lack of formal university education, they each produced significant articles. Remarkably, considering that they spent so much time together and shared interests—they never wrote anything together. Through Linné and Alfonso Caso, Helga got in contact with famous Maya archaeologist, Sylvanus Morley (1883–1948). Morley was head of a multi-year exploration program in the Maya region, funded by the Carnegie Institution in Washington, and was in charge of excavations at Chichen Itza in northern Yucatan in the 1920s–1930s. Helga became Morley's personal secretary for one year (October 1935 to September 1936), while he and his team was excavating at Chichen Itza. One of her tasks was to copy edit his magnum opus *The Inscriptions of Peten* (published in 1938). Going through Helga's letters to Bodil, it is clear that she found Morley easily distracted and unfocused, and a bit frustrating to work for (Larsen n.d.c). Over the years in Chichen, Morley had been visited by delegations of rebel Maya leaders from the Zona Maya (now Quintana Roo), the so-called Cruzo'ob Maya. During and after the Caste War, warfare had ravaged the eastern and central parts of northern Yucatan, and the signs were everywhere. In the 1930s the fighting had ceased, but the Cruzo'ob still longed for autonomy and needed weapons in a future confrontation with the Mexican army and negotiated for rifles and ammunition from British Honduras. They were also interested in support from the US, and Morley was the representative in the region they turned to. Morley, although incapable of such deliveries, agreed in continued meetings, and on February 26, 1936, Morley, along with his wife Frances, Helga, a translator, and two mule drivers took off to the ritual center and village of Xcacal Guardia, where the rebel leader, Captain Cituk, had his headquarters. They rode through a desolate landscape and saw many buildings destroyed during the war. In Tihosuco Helga wrote: "how much worse is the destruction of the hand of man than the slow erosion of time and how much more sad is a ruin from our own time than the ancient ruins of vanished races" (Larsen 1964:13). At Xcacal Guardia, they were welcomed by Captain Cituk and his lieutenant Zuluub'. They were allowed to enter the church, and over the next days they witnessed rituals and celebrations, later described and published posthumously in 1964 by Helga (Larsen 1964; see also Sullivan 1989). When Helga returned to Chichen, she immediately wrote to her sister. She noted that she had missed her, and imagined how many excellent photos she could have taken with her Leica camera—which Helga had borrowed—and continued: "I am grateful to Morley and to the fate that I got to see this little piece of Mexico that nobody knows exists and got to see a little fiesta, which, although it is certainly Catholic, was so Indian in nature, and so untouched by the world outside of this small group of about 400 Maya, that have never surrendered to any government, or allowed any strangers into their pueblo. They said we were the first whites to enter" (Larsen n.d.c).

In the years 1935 to 1937, Helga and Bodil concentrated much of their travels and fieldwork in their favorite region in Mexico, the Sierra in northern Puebla and Veracruz. Helga stated, "Of all Mexico the Sierra of Puebla and Veracruz hold a greater fascination for us than any other place and we have crossed those towering ranges from north to south and from east to west" (Larsen n.d.b). They loved the landscape, the isolated villages, and found their own research niches in the *voladores* and in the production of paper for religious ceremonies. They visited countless villages, two of which became particularly central throughout the years: Pahuatlan and San Pablito, with only some 11 km and a two-hour ride in between them.

Although she had no academic education, Helga was active writing, and she wrote well. However, she appears to have doubted her own capabilities and what she could contribute; in a letter to her friend Elsie McDougall (a wealthy widow from the US, who became

Figure 4. Helga in the apartment on Avenida 5 de Mayo, No. 46 (1937). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-1934 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

a specialist in and collector of indigenous textiles in Mexico and Guatemala, see Cole 2025), she wrote as late as July 1934: "You told me once that I should write. Write what? I would like to in a way—I would like anything that would take me away from this office and out in the country, but what can one write about?" (Larsen n.d.a). Few of her manuscripts got published, but in the Swedish journal *Ethnos,* edited by close friends and colleagues, appeared her investigations of the 260-day calendar (Larsen 1936), the Aztec temples at Malinalco (Larsen 1938), and the *volador* ritual (Larsen 1937a). It must have felt like a new milestone when, in 1937, Helga's article "The Mexican Indian Flying Pole Dance" appeared in the pages of *National Geographic* (presumably she was the first Dane to publish in the famous magazine) and thus made the *volador* known to a wider audience (Larsen 1937b). After her death, an obituary lamented the unpublished writings: "It is regrettable that Helga Larsen had published only a very small part of the rich material she had collected […] It is our hope that we may have an opportunity of publishing also some of her literary remains" (Lindblom and Linné 1938:141) (Figure 4).

Since the trip to Yucatan with Morley, Helga had been concerned about pains coming from what she first took to be an infected mosquito bite on her neck. It was far more serious, and turned out to be cancer that had developed in a birthmark. It had gone untreated for too long and in late 1937, things slowly got worse and worse; she was too tired to do much, and a tumor the size of a child's fist grew on her neck. In the early spring of 1938, Helga was in constant pain, she gets morphine and Bodil was forced to hire a private nurse, allowing Helga to stay home in their beloved apartment while Bodil went off to work at Ericsson. Friends also stay with her on shift, trying to comfort her. On her birthday, May 10, Helga was almost unconscious. The next day, Bodil wrote in her diary: "Helga died at 2:30 pm. I was holding her hand" (Christensen n.d.b.).

Linné and another Swedish colleague, Gerhard Lindblom, wrote a moving obituary that was published in *Ethnos*, concluding that, "She showed a preference for the people living in the Indian villages and her friends there assisted her in penetrating more than is given most people into their ancient customs still surviving under the modern surface. Her death is a great loss to science too, for there are but few that have the qualifications she possessed. The Indians of Mexico have lost a whole-hearted advocate" (Lindblom and Linné 1938:141). When Helga and Bodil's father died he was, unconventionally for the time, cremated, and it was also Helga's wish not to be buried but cremated. However, it was not until 1963 that Catholic Church would allow for cremations. In other words, cremation was not exactly standard procedure in Mexico in 1938, but yet somehow Bodil succeeded in having it arranged, and later the

Figure 5. Day of the Dead Altar, Mexico City (1935–1940). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-8322 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

same year, she brought Helga's ashes with her to the Sierra and spread them in the mountains that her sister had held so dear. We do not know the exact location, but most likely it was in the vicinity of Pahuatlan and San Pablito. Bodil was devasted by the loss. The two of them had been living and working closely together for many years, experiencing hardship, success and the joy of finding a common fascination with another country and its cultures.

Bodil continued her career, became a Mexican citizen in 1940, and did exceptional work in San Pablito (see Christensen 1942, 1962; Christensen and Marti 1971) and later also in Oaxaca, researching and collecting textiles (e.g., Christensen 1947). Bodil later bought a house in San Felipe de Agua just outside Oaxaca City, but also kept the old apartment in the capital. On March 27, 1985, Bodil passed away from a heart attack. Like her sister, she wished to be cremated, and in her will specifically directed to have her ashes spread on the mountain slopes near San Felipe. On April 3 her ashes are spread by her close friends on a "high mountain" north of San Felipe del Agua. And so, Bodil and Helga were joined again—as part of the Mexican landscape and the big cycle of nature.

The Two Manuscripts on the Day of the Dead

Neither of the two typewritten manuscripts are dated, but in "Following the Trail…" there are references to the years 1935 and 1936, and by consulting the brief entries in Bodil Christensen's five-year diary (1933–1937) (Christensen n.d.a.), it can be confirmed that most if not all of her descriptions from Cuetzalan, Pahuatlan, and San Pablito are from their visits in 1935 and 1936 (although they also visited Cuetzalan for Día de los Muertos in 1934). Thus, at home in their apartment on Avenida 5 de Mayo, Bodil noted on Thursday, October 29, 1936: "Preparing for the trip to the Sierra. I have two days off [for the] Día de los Muertos." Here we get a little glimpse of the conditions they worked under, contrasting with those of their colleagues that had university or museum employment: Fieldwork had to be carried out on weekends, extended weekends, and holidays. The following day, the diary reads: "Left 7.55 AM. It rained in Honey and the road was awful, but halfway down to Pahuatlan the clouds lifted and it was as if the curtains on a stage opened up to a fairyland." On the 31st they reach San Pablito, where they spent most of their time in the company of the "witch," the "brujo mayor" (*bädi* in Otomí) Santos García (see also Vargas Serna n.d.). They had first

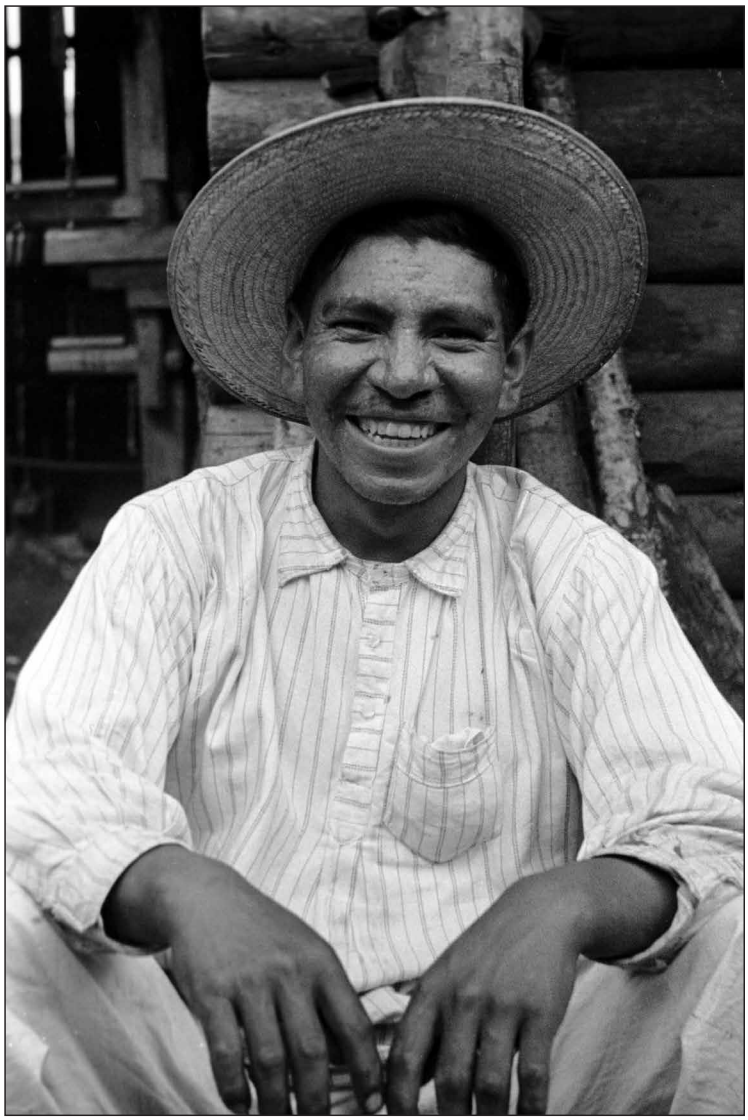

Figure 6. Antonio Martínez, the *mozo* or muleteer and trusted guide (1936). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-1255 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

visited San Pablito in 1934, and Helga described the arrival then to her friend Elsie McDougall: "Nobody speaks Spanish and the people are shy and run away to their huts and shut the door when they see a stranger […] they were not so friendly and eager to see us. However, we sat down on the tiny plaza and smoked a cigarette and paid no attention to them and little by little they came back. Luckily we found a Mexican woman who was married to an Otomi and had lived in the village for many years." Later, in the same letter, she wrote, "I would have liked to spend about a month in Pahuatlán and gone to San Pablito every day—I suppose they would not like strangers to live in San Pablito—and I am sure I could have got lots of information, especially after making friends with them all" (Larsen n.d.a).

As already mentioned, the manuscripts provide some general observations on the Day of the Dead in Mexico and the capital (Figure 5), but have a distinct focus on Cuetzalan and San Pablito in the Sierra Norte of Puebla. The two manuscripts are related, in the sense that parts of the seven-page-long "Celebrating the Day of the Dead in Mexico" is integrated into the longer, 23-page text of "Following the Trail of the Dead." In turn, parts of this was embedded in "The Sierra" (30 pages) (Larsen n.d.b). In both cases, separate sheets list the illustrations Helga had in mind for publication, all of them photos by Bodil. Helga did not include notes or a bibliography, and her style of writing and the vivid impressions of the scenery and people she includes suggests that she probably aimed to have them published not in an academic journal, but rather in a magazine or more popular venue, quite possibly *National Geographic* once again.

Apart from the descriptions of the yearly celebration of the return of the souls of the departed, the articles give us unique insight into their life on the trail, or "fiesta-hunting" as Helga calls it. We learn that they are accompanied by their trusted guide and friend, Antonio, who is taking care of the horses, mules, provisions, etc. In his book *Mexican Mosaic* from 1939, and dedicated to the memory of Helga, British diplomat Rodney Gallop who spent three years in Mexico and travelled on several trips with the Danish sisters, provides a description of Antonio: "As usual we were accompanied by Antonio, our muleteer, with Capulina, his flea-bitten grey, and Chucha, the surest-footed mule I have ever ridden in the *sierras*. Antonio is a great character. Some white blood flows in his veins, but not much. His round, smiling face reflects his natural good humour. Any little joke will keep him chuckling for the rest of the day. He neither smokes nor drinks, an admirable quality for a muleteer" (Gallop 1939:258) (Figure 6). At other times, however, Helga and Bodil travelled alone. Helga summarized their weekend-fieldwork: "For years we have travelled together through Mexico whenever we have been able to snatch enough days from our regular work, and carefully planning each trip, we have been able to cram a whole Indian world into our life in this marvelous country. We always travel alone. It is difficult to find congenial companions who are willing to put up with the absolute lack of all the comforts they are used to, who can eat the food the Indians eat and live like they do (which is so very essential if any information is to be obtained), who will not mind riding for hours in pouring rain and creep into wet clothes day after day. And therefore, we are happiest when we

are alone on the trail and laugh at all the discouraging pictures—ranging from bandits to snakebites—that our well-meaning friends conjure up for us" (Larsen n.d.b).

What is worth noticing is the attention given to descriptions of the food, the flowers, and the preparations and arrangement of the altar and ofrendas, the dances and the songs involved in the celebrations. Also, Helga is careful to include the women's participation, noting details of their dresses and their hair. Whether these points of attention are linked with Helga being a women herself, and—as we know from her correspondence with Bodil and other female friends—a deep fascination with clothing, textiles, and food is impossible to say, but it differs significantly from the dominant gaze and interests of the male ethnographers and anthropologists at the time

Reading Helga's manuscripts and letters, leaves little doubt that she had a profound respect for the Indigenous cultures of Mexico and the people she met and interacted with in the Sierra and elsewhere. Yet, we also cannot help but note the language and descriptive framework that Helga employs. That is, specific terms and generalizations on what "Indians" do and think, are typical of their time, also among those anthropologists and other researchers who involved themselves in describing and communicate to a broader world the distinct lifeways and beliefs of non-Western societies. Embedded as she was in her own time and its standard repertoire of expressions and cultural categorizations, Helga Larsen's descriptions still remain attentive, careful, and empathic representations of the Day of the Dead in Indigenous Mexico.

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Celebrating the Day of the Dead in Mexico

Helga Larsen

On every day of the year there is a fiesta somewhere in Mexico, and as the villages usually honor the name day of their patron saint with the most important celebration of the year, one has only to compare the saint's name of the calendar with those of the villages to find out where to go, if one is fiesta-minded. Of course it goes without saying that unforeseen events sometimes interfere with these yearly festivals and a village, for reasons of its own, may postpone or even altogether suspend its fiesta, but all this only tends to make fiesta-hunting still more exciting.

There is, however, one fiesta in Mexico which is never postponed or suspended and in which every city, town or village joins. It falls on the days of All Saints and All Souls, November 1st and 2nd, and is the Mexican *Día de Muertos* or the Day of the Dead.

In sophisticated Mexico City, which in four hundred years has changed from Tenochtitlán, the lake-bound capital of Moctezuma's far-flung empire, to one of the most delightful, modern cities of the New World, the Day of the Dead has lost much of its original meaning. Only November 2nd is celebrated and though the cemeteries are crowded and graves decorated with flowers and candles, to most people this day of official mourning is just an ordinary holiday, even if one is constantly reminded of the Old Man with the Scythe by children chewing away cheerfully on ghastly white candy skulls and bakeries flaunting signs with skulls and cross-bones advertising the most savory *pan de muertos* or bread of the dead.

On the 1st and 2nd of November it is safe to say that ninety percent of the theaters throughout the Republic stage the famous drama of Don Juan Tenorio. In Mexico City's marble Palace of Fine Arts the foremost artists compete in producing the most striking effects for the many acts of the macabre play, while in burlesque tent shows at the outskirts of the city the world's great and unfortunate lover is being haunted by fantastic ghosts, illuminated tombs and rattling skeletons.

Special newspaper edition adorned with black mourning bands, more skulls and cross-bones, are published in which politicians with a macabre sense of humor write witty and sarcastic obituaries about their opponents—not even sparing the President of the Republic.

Along certain streets Indians suddenly appear from distant villages, build their booths and commence to unpack large wicker crates of fragile pottery, baskets and blankets, which are stacked high on the counters among a ghoulish display of toy funerals, skulls, coffins with dead men that raises their heads when a string is pulled and skeleton jumping jacks that so delight Mexican children.

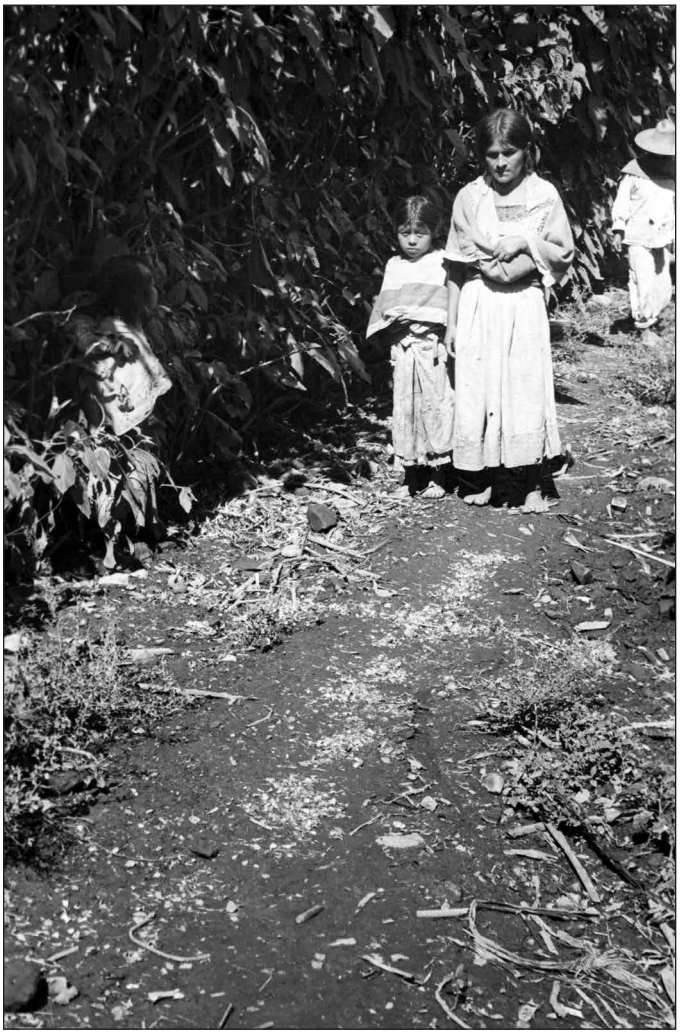

Figure 1. Spirit path of *cempoalxochitl* flower petals in San Pablito (1935). The woman is in all likelihood Hermelinda Aparicio. Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-319 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

In smaller towns and larger villages the cemetery is the center of activity on the 2nd of November, while children's souls are being honored with altars in the home on the first.

Long before daybreak people hurry to the cemeteries with floral offerings. Cornhusks flare in the darkness as they move along in silent groups under their fragrant burden.

Graves carefully cleared of weeds are decorated

Figure 2. Day of the Dead altar with candles and ofrendas. To the left Camila García and to the right her father Santos García and his wife. San Pablito (1936). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-1218 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

with scattered petals and garlands of the deep orange *cempoalxochitl*, the Aztec name for the African marigold, which is the sacred flower of Indian Mexico. Large wreaths of purple and white everlasting flowers are propped against the tombstones or cover the graves like a bright magic carpet. Everywhere candles waver and glow. Silent figures sit beside the tombs of their dear departed ones, but there is no actual sadness, no sign of grief. On the contrary friends visit each other, admire the decorations, exchange news and gossip or picnic together on the tombstones. Late at night Indian dancers with bells on wrists and ankles sometimes entertain the dead and weave their intricate steps among the graves to the deep notes of drums and the accompaniment of reed flutes.

In the Sierra and deep forest, however, it is very different. Here the festival of the dead has survived as a true rite and has retained all the beauty and wistful sadness which make Indian ceremonies so sincere.

It was Pedro who invited us to spend the Day of the Dead in his village [San Pablito] perched on a mountain that falls away sharply to the river. A confusion of towering ranges and deep ravines separates his village from the outside world and makes communication, even on horseback, a difficult problem.

A profusion of coffee trees, banana plants and sub-tropical flowering shrubs conceals the huts which are scattered irregularly over the slopes wherever the ground has afforded sufficient foothold to prevent them from sliding into the river below.

I would not care to be the postman of Pedro's village, for there are no streets or house numbers, only narrow lanes shaded by trees that wind up and down the mountainside from one hut to the other and unite the village into one community. But there is no reason to pity the postman, for he does not exist and I dare say that no letter has ever found its way into Pedro's village for the very good reason that not one of its inhabitants knows how to read and write. Pedro and the other Indians speak very little Spanish or none at all. They cultivate their fields of peanuts, sugar cane and corn much in the same way as did their ancestors and their women weave beautiful cloth on primitive looms and wear the traditional dress of the tribe.

When dusk was creeping up from the ravine a bell solemnly tolled, calling the spirits from the graves. November 1st is also here dedicated to the souls of the children and the 2nd to those of the adults. At the hour of midnight the spirits are supposed to leave the cemeteries and return to their earthly home for twelve hours.

The ceremony is therefore held in the hut, the *campo santo* was left dark and deserted as we passed it on our way to the village.

Narrow paths of yellow petals, beginning with a cross also of petals, led to huts hidden behind the screening fence of trees. "Paths of the Spirits" they are called and are supposed to guide the souls to their former homes (Figure 1). The village had been swept and cleaned of rubbish and stones, lest the souls should stumble and hurt themselves in their nocturnal wanderings.

The Indians were gathering in the huts when we arrived, and were busy preparing the festal dishes for the ceremony and raising altars for the *ofrenda* or offering. The ceremony has a strong Prehispanic flavor, for, as the early historians inform us, the Aztecs were wont to celebrate a festival once a year when offerings of food and drink were made to the spirits.

Everything pertaining to the *ofrenda* must be made at night and everything must be new as old pots and used cloths would be an insult to the souls.

Shortly before midnight Pedro and his family had finished their work. The altar, arched over by sugar cane stalks and covered with bright green banana leaves, was aglow with candles stuck into a banana trunk carefully peeled and shining like old ivory. There were large fat candles weighing more than a pound each for the souls of the older members of the family, thinner ones for those who had died very young and two small candles for the babies who had "flown to heaven" only last year. Apart from the others was one solitary candle for the lonely spirit who might be wandering through the night without a home and an altar to honor him.

The altar fairly groaned under its weight of food. From large brown *ollas* protruded turkey wings and drum sticks glistening with spicy *mole* sauce made of red peppers. Heaps of *tortillas*, and gourds of chocolate were adorned with garlands of marigold, which were also draped over the sugar cane stalks and looped against the banana leaves intermingled with deep purple orchids. *Pan de muertos*, shaped like animals, birds and even Indian girls, were suspended by strings from the arch.

A clay incense burner with copal gum sent fragrant clouds of smoke toward the thatch.

Presently friends dropped in and to the music of violin and guitar, Pedro with two of his compadres, commenced to dance in front of the altar holding yellow arnica flowers in their uplifted hands, while they chanted a song in their own language.

The uncertain light from flickering candles threw long wavering shadows on the walls and cast a mysterious glow on the serious brown faces. The rhythm of the syncopated tune and the shuffling steps blended into one and pulsated through the night, exaggerating the strange words of the falsetto voices of the dancers (Figure 2) .

Figure 3. *Pan de muerto* from San Pablito – in unusual shape of local woman (1935/36). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-1355 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

Then with a shrill discord the musicians suddenly dropped their instruments and a hush fell on all present. Black eyes, apprehensive at the nearness of death, were turned toward the open door in expectancy. It was the hour of midnight and time for the souls to arrive.

In the deep and silent night the scene was weird and eerie. Coils of smoke from the incense burned took on fantastic forms, a breath of wind stirred the flowers on the altar and made the bread birds fly back and forth, as if some phantom hand had touched them and it was the firm belief of everyone that the spirits had come and were savoring the *ofrenda* by smelling to food and touching the flowers.

Then the musicians again took up their instruments and as the hours of the night wore on, song and dance helped to entertain the visiting ghosts. Candles burned down and were replaced by fresh ones. Copal was sprinkled on the glowing embers of the incense burner.

Pedro's little girl, whose eyes had been as bright as the candles on the altar, finally surrendered to sleep and curled up next to the dog by the fire.

When the first pale rays of dawn seeped through the withes, gourds of hot chocolate were passed around and gratefully accepted.

Toward noon, when the souls were believed to have returned to their graves, the living made merry and the *ofrendas* were distributed among friends. It would have been considered very bad form for a family to eat its own offerings. Strangers passing a hut were called in to partake of some food from the altar. Young boys with honey-colored nets slung over their shoulders, roamed through the village led by a tall lad carrying a paper skeleton with a light inside. With much hilarity they skipped from one hut to the other while they shouted: "We are the blessed spirits—we are the blessed souls, give us food" and whether they wished to or not, the women had to fill their nets with fruit, *tamales* and bread (Figure 3).

Not until the flowers on the altars have wilted and the last bit of the *ofrendas* has been eaten do the Indians settle down to daily life again, confident that no harm will befall them during the coming year, for the ofrenda, like most Indian ceremonies, works both ways. Besides being in honor of the dead, it also protects the living from any evil a slighted and disappointed spirit might wish to inflict upon his former family, if he were to return to his grave dissatisfied.

When we returned to Mexico City a few days later, no trace of the Día de Muertos fiesta was left. Don Juan Tenorio had vanished for the last time into his tomb where he will remain till next November. The cross-bone signs of the bakeries were no more, the Indians with their crates of macabre toys had disappeared as mysteriously as they had come—and the last candy skull had been eaten.

[The author added one page with a list of illustrations, nine photographs by Bodil Christensen.]

Following the Trail of the Dead: Ceremonies of the Day of the Dead in Various Parts of Mexico

Helga Larsen

Mexico is a country of violent contrasts, or it might be more correct to say that Mexico is not one but a number of countries that differ widely in language, customs and mode of living. From up-to-date modern Mexico City magnificent highways climb over the mountains and drop into a much less fashionable though no less charming Mexico of small towns and villages. Here the paved magnificence changes to deep-rutted dirt roads, over which only outdated Fords manage to navigate. These roads, in their turn, soon dwindle down to narrow trails that lead beyond the blue mountains into the great peace of Mexico's Indian country, as little visited and practically as unknown to the outside world as it was hundreds of years ago.

Ancient traditions and curious rites have been allowed to survive in these remote parts of the country and although four hundred years have elapsed since the Spanish conquerors with sword and flame planted Christianity on the soil of America, the Indian with tenacious conservatism clings to many of his ancient beliefs. Ceremonies and dances, which spring from a remote past, can still be witnessed by those who care to brave the deep ravines and rushing rivers and although time and man have wrought havoc with religious symbolism and associated ceremonies, some of the ancient mysticism and deep ritual significance have managed to percolate through the centuries to us.

The conquerors were quick to observe that Indian ceremonies were often accompanied by ritualistic dancing and in order to make conversion an easy task, the friars cunningly set about to adapt many ancient ceremonies to the Catholic religion. The Indians were allowed and even encouraged to transplant their dances to Catholic saints' days with the result that now, four centuries later, the two religions in the Indian's conception have practically merged into one. Catholic saints and Indian gods are sometimes so confused that it is difficult to tell them apart, though occasionally a pure Indian rite has miraculously managed to survive.

In a small prayer hut in the bush of Yucatan I saw an image of San Isidro with all the attributes of *Chac*, the Maya rain god. In another Maya village, when the cornfields were drying from lack of rain and the Maya had prayed and said ever so many masses for San Diego, the patron saint of the village, they finally sent for the *h'men* or sorcerer priest, who performed the ancient rain ceremony *Cha-Chaac*. By that time clouds had already commenced to pile up along the horizon and shortly after the ceremony had ended the rain poured down. When I asked the Maya Indians why San Diego had failed to bring rain, they answered, as if explanation were quite unnecessary: "San Diego, *pobrecito*, what does he know about rain? When the crops are threatened by drought, we must go to Chac of course."

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Figure 1. The road from Honey towards Pahuatlan (1935). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-328 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

On the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's Indian patroness, the biggest religious festival used to take place in the village of that name about ten kilometers from Mexico City, where the Virgin is said to have appeared on the hill of Tepeyac on December 12, 1531. Every year hundreds of Indians with plumed headdresses like Aztec warriors of long ago would gather in front of the church, chant their songs to the accompaniment of guitars fashioned from armadillo shells and perform their rhythmic ritual in fulfilment of a vow to the dark Madonna. Lately the Government has prohibited this festival and changed the name of the village to Villa Gustavo A. Madero and it is now necessary to go farther afield in order to find such dances.

Except in the larger cities of Mexico one seldom sees a pure Catholic service. In far-off villages there is always a glimmer of an older religion shining through the Christian rites—an echo of the ancient faith that struck its root deep in the Indian heart.

It was the last day of October, 1935. The villages of Mexico as usual were getting ready for the festival of the dead and we were deep in the mountains riding towards Cuetzalan in the southeastern part of the Sierra Madre Oriental.

In huts along the trail Indians were busy raising altars with *ofrendas* or offerings for the dead, which is the custom throughout Mexico on this day. November 1st is dedicated to the souls of children and the 2nd to those of adults.

The altars were bowers of purple and white everlasting flowers and the deep orange *cempoalxochitl*, the Aztec name for a flower which resembles the African marigold. The *cempoalxochitl* is the flower of the dead and is used only for decorating graves and altars during the ceremony in November. It is never given as a gift to living people.

Tamales, bread, vegetables, sweets, different fruits and other delicacies loved by the departed souls were heaped high on the altars with the Indian's unerring sense of color.

The ceremony has a strong pre-hispanic flavor, for, as the early historians inform us, the Aztecs were wont to celebrate a festival for their dead once a year, when offerings of food and drink were made to the spirits.

Father Diego Durán, who wrote his History of New Spain (Mexico) shortly after the conquest, already then laments the fact that the Indians were still adhering to their old customs, and regarding the ancient ceremony

of the dead he says: "…the natives celebrated a festival which they called *Miccaihuitontli*…meaning the feast of the *muertitos* (dead children)…to whom offerings were made and … which preceded another where offerings were made to *los grandes* (grown-ups)… On All Saints Day they (the Indians) now make an *ofrenda*, and on the Day of All Souls another, and when I asked them why they made such offerings they answered that the *ofrendas* on All Saints Day were for the spirits of children and that it was an ancient tradition… I then asked them if they were going to make offerings on All Souls Day and they said that on that day they would make offerings for the grown-ups and so they did and it made me very sad, because it was obvious that they were really celebrating the ancient ceremony of the dead… They offered cocoa-beans, candles, fowls, fruits, seeds and all kinds of food…and although their ancient ceremony used to fall in our month of August, I believe they have just transferred it to All Saints and All Souls Day and so conceal whatever evil it may contain…"

In Mexico City, which in four hundred years has changed from Tenochtitlán, the lake-bound Aztec capital of Moctezuma's far-flung empire, to one of the most delightful and modern cities of the New World, the ceremony of the Day of the Dead has sadly degenerated. The ancient distinction between the souls of children and grown-ups has been forgotten and only November 2nd is the day of mourning. The intimate festival with altars and *ofrendas* in the home has disappeared and only a grotesque reminder of the Old Man with the Scythe is left.

During the first week of November theaters throughout the Republic usually stage the famous drama of Don Juan Tenorio. In Mexico City's marble Palace of Fine Arts the foremost artists compete in producing the most artistic settings for the many acts of the macabre play, while in burlesque tent shows at the outskirts of the city the world's great and unfortunate lover is being haunted by fantastic ghosts, illuminated tombs and rattling skeletons.

Bakeries flaunt signs advertising the most savory *pan de muertos* or bread of the dead and along certain streets of the city Indians suddenly appear from distant villages, build their booths or *puestos*, as they are called here, and commence to unpack large wicker crates full of delicate fragile pottery, baskets, blankets and tiny miniature clay vessels, which are stacked high on the counters among a ghoulish display of white candy skulls with red or green eye sockets, toy funerals, coffins with dead men that raise when a string is pulled and skeleton jumping jacks that so delight Mexican children. The Indians with their families and sometimes even chickens, cats and dogs, settle down behind their canvas *puestos* to take up again their unhurried village life and, undisturbed by inquisitive eyes, spend the day selling and cooking, or dressing and nursing their babies. When night comes and the booths are dark and silent, the Indians retire to sleep under the counters among crates, boxes and sweet-smelling hay. After a few days, when the candy skulls have been eaten, the toys and pottery sold, the Indians silently slip back to their villages, only to return a few weeks before Christmas to set up their *puestos* again.

Special newspaper editions adorned with black mourning bands, skulls and cross-bones are published in which politicians with macabre sense of humor write witty and sarcastic obituaries about their opponents—not even sparing the President of the Republic.

From early morning on November 2nd the cemeteries are crowded with people—rich and poor. Graves are decorated with flowers and candles; black-robed mourners kneel in prayer while others picnic on tombstones. Outside the massive gates, however, the scene changes completely. A motley crowd fills the sunbaked plaza giving the impression of a village fair rather than a day set aside for mourning. A pungent acrid smell dominates everything. Women sitting in front of primitive charcoal braziers slap small balls of *masa* or maize dough into round *tortillas* and bake them on clay griddles. Spicy mixtures sizzle in hot grease and the sun gleams on fantastically colored drinks. Hawking venders, games of chance and grinding music of merry-go-rounds soon help the mourners to forget the graves beyond the gate.

The Day of the Dead has in Mexico City become a hilarious holiday for the living.

In the Sierra and deep forest it is different. Here the festival has survived as a true rite and has retained all the beauty and wistful sadness which make Indian ceremonies so sincere.

We spent the night of October 31 on a mountaintop in a hospitable hut where sweet tamales for little innocent souls were steaming in large clay pots and the crisp brown *pan de muertos* was taken from beehive ovens.

While we were eating our sketchy supper on a bench outside the hut that overlooked the deep ravines through which we had just ridden, the light waned quickly. A sudden coolness rose from the valley and as the sun swooped down behind the forest, all the villages of the mountains had opened their doors to receive their dead.

A shaft of light fell from the door of the hut beckoning the wandering souls of small children to enter. The *señora* and her two grown daughters were sitting on the floor making *tamales* for the souls of grown-ups. They wrapped the snow-white maize dough around a piece of chicken meat and dabbed a spoonful of red pepper sauce on it, for while the *tamales* for children must be sweet the ones for grown-ups are spicy and hot with chili and herbs. Finally the tamales were folded into dry corn husks and placed in a pot to steam.

These people were not Indians but Mexican farmers

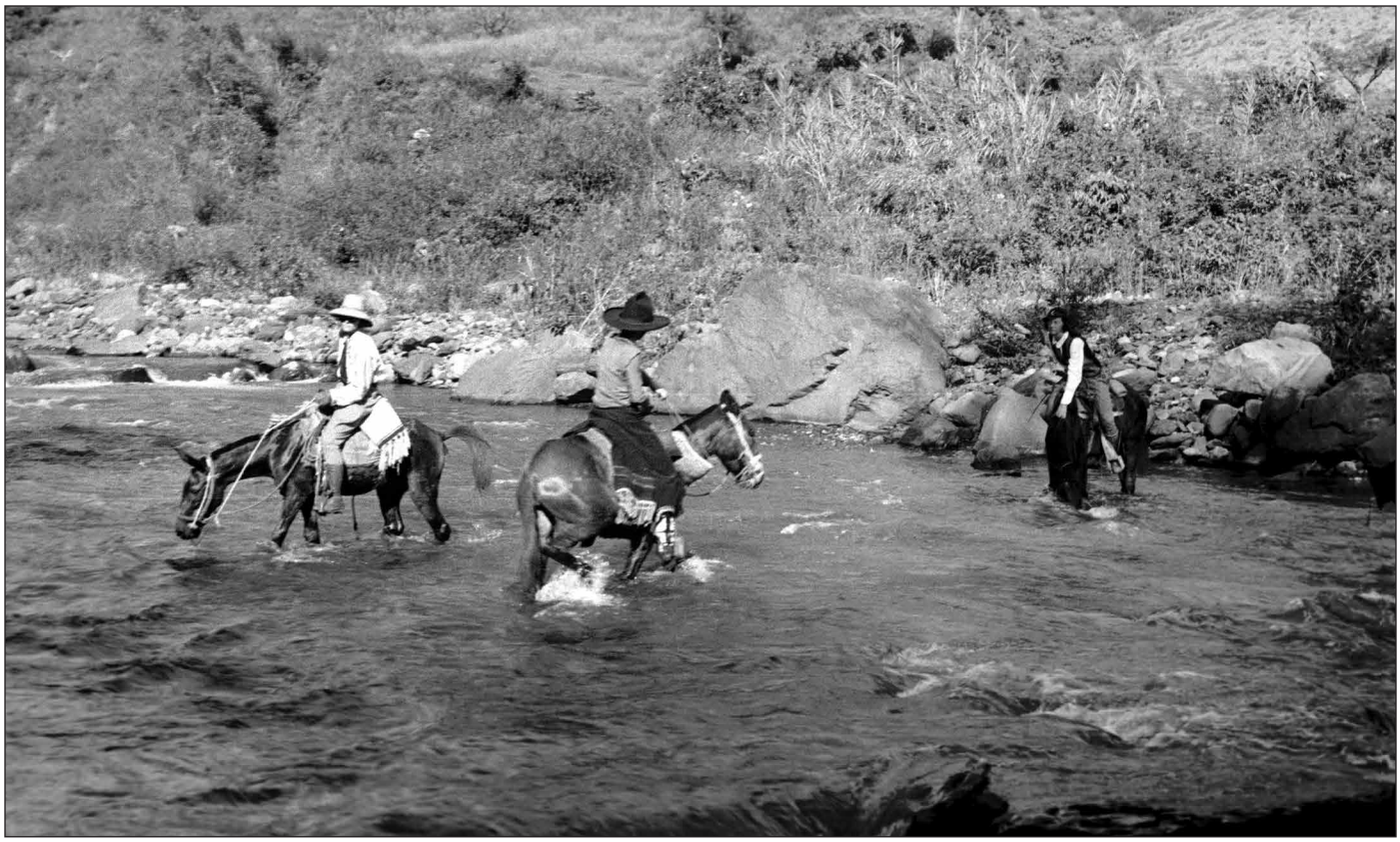

Figure 2. Crossing the river towards San Pablito from Pahuatlan (1935/36). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-339 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

and the vigil was not accompanied by any special ceremony. All through the night they worked and great quantities of bread and other food were heaped on the table to be used for the second night's watch.

As we had a long day ahead of us, we presently rolled up in our blankets and with our saddles for pillows slept until daybreak. Then we bid good-bye to our hosts and set out for Cuetzalan in the penetrating chill of early dawn.

Along the road we noticed narrow paths of yellow petals, beginning with a cross also of petals, which led to huts hidden behind the screening fence of cornfields. "Paths of the spirits" they are called and are supposed to guide the souls to their former home. The road itself had been swept and stones carefully removed, lest the spirits should stumble and hurt themselves in their nocturnal wanderings. Altars, placed at intervals on the road, where weary travellers are supposed to rest for a moment protected by the guiding spirit, were heaped with yellow flowers and burning candles.

Soon the freshness of the morning disappeared as the sun won a final victory over the mist that clung to the treetops and the path led us down through many curves toward the steep roofs of Cuetzalan shimmering in the light far off.

Cuetzalan is built on a sloping mountain so that the narrow cobbled streets are like the stairs of an ancient pyramid. It is extremely picturesque with one-story, old-world houses. A striking feature is the steep unbleached roofs that project far out over the streets and give the town a weird irregular look, but which offer an absolute shelter during the heavy rains that fall in the Sierra. An altitude of about two thousand feet above sea level makes the climate quite tropical. The inhabitants are mostly *mestizos*, but the surrounding villages are Aztec and most of the people of Cuetzalan speak *nahuatl*, the language of the Aztecs, quite fluently, because the Indians know very little or no Spanish.

As soon as we had disposed of our guide and horses we hurried up to the cemetery. A colorful life ebbed and flowed through the gate. The church, which stands at the far end of the graveyard, is a miniature of the famous shrine at Lourdes in France. Its graceful spire is studded with rows of brown clay *ollas* that shine in the sun like burnished copper. Inside it was aglow with candles that drew a shining web of gold around the kneeling figures. In the cemetery graves were a riot of color. Indian girls were busy watering flowers and lighting candles. They were dressed in white and dark blue hand-loomed skirts held in place by a bright girdle.

A white *quechquemitl* or shoulder cape, also hand-woven and fine as cobweb, fell over the shoulders and covered a gaily embroidered blouse. The hair was piled high on the head and interwoven with black or bright-colored wool in such quantities that it stood out in front of their foreheads in thick heavy coils, which made them look like Japanese geishas. They entered the church with uncovered heads or with a *quechquemitl* folded cornerwise and placed on top of the elaborate coiffure. The dress is absolutely pre-hispanic with straight lines, such as was the custom before the art of cutting material was brought over from Europe.

During the afternoon hours the cemetery grew brighter with colors and looked a page torn from a picture book. Many of the Indians had brought their dinner and camped comfortably on large tombstones, or spread their food on the brilliant carpet of flowers. As dusk took possession of the land the candles flamed with increased intensity and crosses, that had gleamed so white during the day, now loomed dark and sinister against a crimson sunset.

Late at night Indian dancers with tinkling bells on wrists and ankles paid tribute to the dead and wove their intricate steps among the graves to the deep notes of a drum and the thrill wail of reed flutes. We watched them in the first pale hours of dawn and their fantastic costumes, red masks, brilliant green plumes and blazing shields made them indeed look like spirits from another world. The dance itself was a dramatic performance in which Santiago (St. James) was being attacked by half of the dancers while the other half tried to protect him. Inside his hobbyhorse with the upper part of his body protruding, as if riding the animal, his head covered by a straw hat trimmed with mirrors, beads and ribbons, his sword lifted in defense, Santiago galloped over the graves or danced with his allied in a long row facing their opponents, while an endless dialogue was delivered in *nahuatl*.

As the sun slanted its first golden rays over the tombs, the dancers filed into the church to hear mass—again this startling mixture of pagan and Christian rites.

After mass had been said the cemetery once more glowed with the colorful throng of Indians homeward bound. The road from Cuetzalan to the mountains was dotted with moving figures returning to their villages to take up again the chores and duties of everyday life.

The festival of the dead was ended.

As the coolness of the morning gave way to the stifling heat of a tropical day, the small cemetery lay deserted under the scorching rays of the sun, its silent inhabitants sweltering in death as they had done in life—but the flowers on the graves, now drooping and wilted—marked the places of those whose memory was still cherished in the hearts of friends.

The last day of October, 1936, found us among the Otomi Indians in the northern part of the state of Puebla, where we saw another celebration of the Day of the Dead.

Deep ravines and a confusion of mountains separate the village of San Pablito from the rest of the world and make communication, even on horseback, a difficult problem (Figures 1 and 2). The San Pablito Indians cultivate their fields of peanuts, sugar cane, beans and corn much the same way as did their ancestors. The women weave beautiful cloth on primitive looms and wear the traditional dress of their race.

The village clings to a mountain that falls away sharply to the river. A profusion of coffee trees, banana plants and flowering shrubs conceals the huts, which are scattered irregularly over the slopes wherever the ground has afforded sufficient foothold to prevent them from sliding into the river below.

I would not care to be the postman in San Pablito, because there are no streets and no house numbers. Narrow lanes shaded by trees wind up and down through this green labyrinth from one hut to another and unite the village into one community. But there is no reason to pity the San Pablito postman, for he does not exist and I dare to say that no letter has ever found its way into this unknown hamlet, for the very good reason that none of the Indians know how to read and write.

Antonio, our faithful companion, servant and friend, who has followed us on most of our journeys into these little known parts of Mexico, returned to a larger village beyond the river, where it would be easier to obtain enough corn for the animals and my sister and I were left alone among our Indian friends.

The Otomi Indians are considered one of the oldest tribes in Mexico. But in spite of this fact they have never reached a high civilization and never played any important role in the history of Mexico. The Aztecs, who looked down upon them and called uncivilized barbarians, used the word *otomi* as an abusive term or insult synonymous with stupid, dumb and uncouth. The reason for this evil reputation acquired even in remote times, is probably that the Otomies have always kept stubbornly to themselves and been slow to accept what is generally termed as modern civilization. They still live in their inhospitable mountain villages, rarely mix with either Mexicans or other Indian tribes and cling to their ancient traditions, dress and language. They are very superstitious and believe in good and evil days. They also practice magic. We had, therefore, hoped to find an interesting ceremony of the dead in San Pablito, which would differ from anything we had hitherto been privileged to see—and we were not disappointed.

When dusk was creeping through the valley and a bell was solemnly tolling to call the spirits from their graves, the Indians of San Pablito were gathering in their huts to prepare the festal dishes for the ceremony. Everything pertaining to the *ofrenda* must be made at night. This in itself is an ancient tradition, as the historians inform us

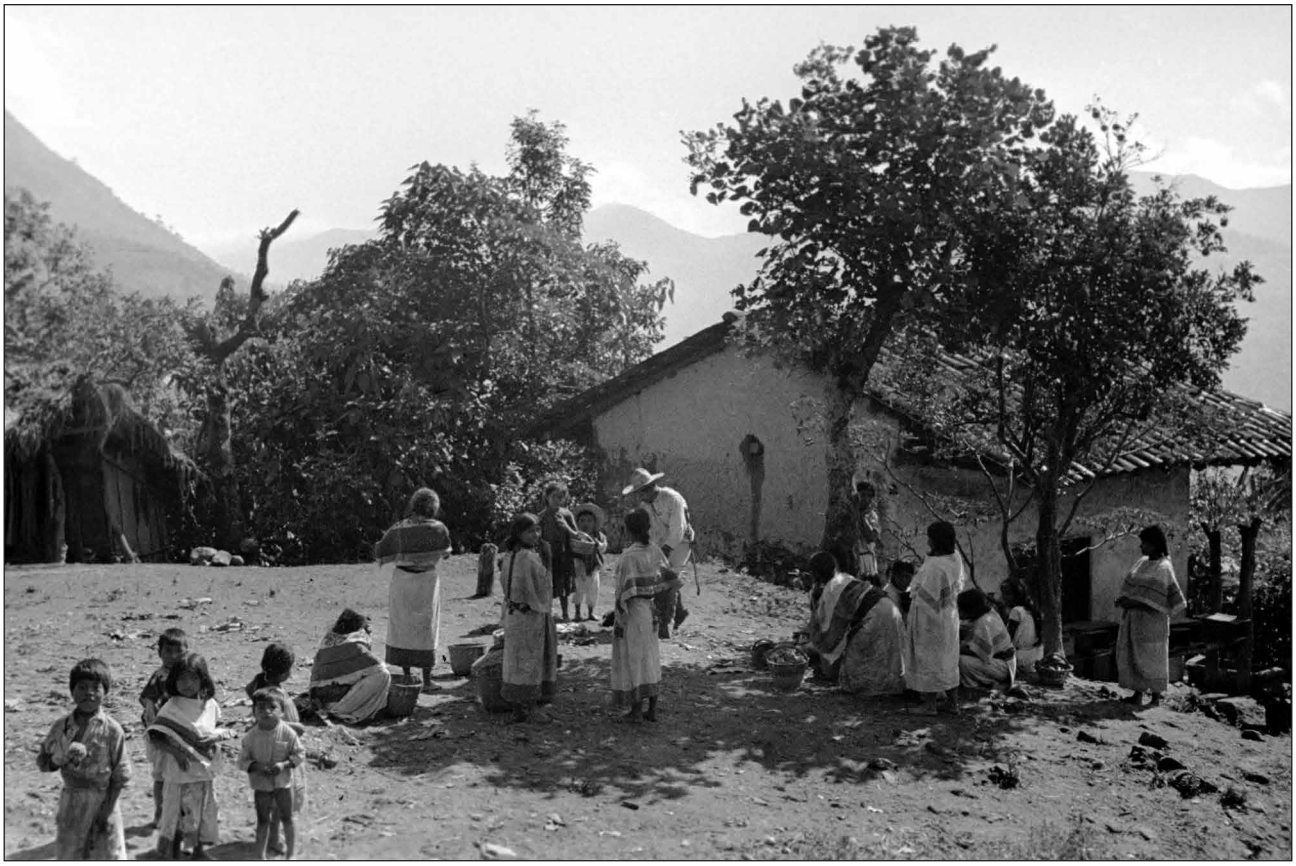

Figure 3. The tiny plaza of San Pablito (1935). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-1202 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

that for certain death rites in honour of Mictlantecuhtli, the Aztec ruler of the underworld and the god of death, all offerings, even human sacrifices, took place in the depth of night.

Women were moving about the village scattering yellow petals on the ground and placing bunches of *cempoalxochitl* flowers at the entrance to the huts.

Late at night, after having strolled around the village (Figure 3), we settled down in the corner of a hut belonging to a family consisting of only the husband, wife and a small eleven-year old daughter—the only survivor of a family of eight children.

Though the climate of San Pablito is subtropical the night was bitter cold and we were glad of our heavy sheepskin coats, as the chill wind blowing freely through the wattle walls cut to the marrow. We withdrew to the darkest corner of the hut so as not to interfere in the least with the progress of the ceremony.

The lady of the household sat in front of her three-rock fireplace. She was dressed in the gay hand-woven *quechquemitl* worn by all the women in San Pablito and its deep red horizontal band threw into relief an intricate pattern of cross-stitched embroidery in black, orange and yellow. A red girdle held the white skirt snugly to the waist and her long single braid was threaded through with a cord of red wool adorned with tassels of bright beads.

After a while her mother joined her and together they ground corn for *tortillas* on a *metate* (grinding stone), roasted cocoa-beans on a clay griddle and watched the turkey which was boiling in a large pot. In low whispers they would discuss the important issue of how much sugar to add to the *champurrado*, a gruel made of corn and chocolate, or whether a pinch of salt would improve the savory *mole*, a red pepper sauce for the turkey, which is the national dish of the Sierra.

Like all good housewives the world over they urged each other to taste the various dishes to make sure that everything was as it ought to be.

Only the husband spoke a few words of Spanish, so conversation did not flow any too freely. But fortunately after the first constraint caused by the intruding strangers, they forgot us entirely and went about their various duties without paying attention to us.

The little girl, a miniature of her mother in face and dress, sat on the dirt floor threading yellow arnica flowers on strings she deftly spun from agave fibre. Her large black eyes occasionally strayed to the beautiful

altar her father was making of branches against the opposite wall of the hut. Her tense baby face seemed suppressed with excitement and apprehension, as the hour of midnight drew near, because from then on she could expect the arrival of the spirits of her brothers and sisters for whom all these wonderful preparations were made. She also knew that she was not allowed to touch any of the things her father was placing on the altar, because what had been consecrated to the dead should not be touched by the living, lest some evil might fall on the house. And she did not question the reason why she was then allowed to eat as much as she liked of the offerings after the second night's vigil, when the dead had returned to their respective graves.

Indians on the whole do not raise as many questions as we do. They take things as they are without asking "why" and even the great mystery of death to them has not final quality as it has to us. They consider it rather as a part of life and accept it philosophically. Therefore, if the dead have to be feasted with food and drink there is no reason in the Indian's mind why he should not eat it all himself after the dead have taken their part, because the dead and the living do things in different ways; and, as everyone knows very well, the dead partake of the *ofrenda* only by smelling the food placed on the altar. Indian logic differs from ours, but I think that sometimes he things perhaps more clearly than we do.

The family worked in silent harmony. Now and then they forgot the sad occasion for the *fiesta* and laughed merrily at some joke we did not understand. Then suddenly remembering the tiny spirits making their way from the dark cemetery, tears rolled down the grandmother's wrinkled face.

A few neighbors dropped in to see how things were going or to borrow a needle for stringing flowers—needles seemed to be the most precious possession and were in constant demand. Friends and relatives came with gourds of *champurrado*, *tamales* or fruits, which were placed on the altar and an equal amount of food from the altar given in exchange.

Shortly before midnight everything was ready. The altar, arched over by sugarcane stalks and covered with bright green banana leaves, was aglow with candles stuck into a banana trunk carefully peeled and shining like old ivory, which had been placed lengthwise on the altar toward the front. Sections of other banana trunks holding long tapers were placed on the floor like enormous candlesticks.

From large new *ollas* protruded turkey wings or drum sticks. Everything used for the *ofrenda* must be new, as old pots or used cloths would be an insult to the souls. Heaps of *tortillas*, *tamales* and gourds of *champurrado* were adorned with garlands of marigolds, which were also looped over the sugarcane stalks and draped against the green background of banana leaves, intermingled with deep purple orchids. During the autumn the mountains around San Pablito are literally covered with orchids, the most common variety being the long-stemmed purple *Laelia anceps*, called the flower of death by the Indians, who use it in profusion on their altars. *Pan de muertos*, shaped like animals, birds and even little Indian girls, were hiding among the flowers or suspended by strings from the arch.

A clay incense burner with copal gum sent fragrant clouds of smoke toward the thatch.

Presently friends came crowding in and by squeezing together we were more than twenty people squatting on the floor. Two of the visitors were musicians and after having carefully tuned their violin and guitar, the ceremony commenced.

The husband and two of his most intimate friends with yellow arnica flowers in uplifted hands stood facing the altar. When the musicians struck up a very Indian air they began to dance. The dance like the music was simple and monotonous—and a few steps to the right then to left, much stamping of feet and an occasional full turn, while they were chanting:

"I am dancing.
I am dancing
The dance of the blessed child
The food is now waiting on the altar.
Blessed child we are waiting with flowers.
All through the year we have been waiting
For you, blessed child.
The candle is now waiting.
The copal is waiting
And so is the turkey."

These lines were repeated again and again while someone kindly translated for us. The uncertain light from flickering candles threw long wavering shadows on the walls and cast a mysterious glow on the serious dark faces. The rhythm of the syncopated tune and the shuffling steps blended into one and pulsated through the night, exaggerating the strange Otomi words of the falsetto voices of the dancers.

Then with a shrill dischord the musicians suddenly dropped their instruments and a hush fell on all present, while black eyes apprehensive at the nearness of death were turned toward the open door in expectancy. It was time for the ghosts to arrive and take possession of the *ofrenda*, someone whispered to us.

In the deep and silent night the scene was weird. Not a sound but an occasional sigh from the bereaved mother, who had never left her place by the fire and who was following what all believed to be the spirits of her children making their way through the crowded hut to the glittering altar.

Coils of smoke from the incense burner took on fantastic forms; a breath of wind stirred the flowers on the altar making the birds fly back and forth, as if some phantom hand had touched them.

Then the musicians again took up their instruments

and while the dancers continued their simple rhythms, they sang:

"*Adios*, *adios*.
Now that you have partaken in the *ofrenda*
It is time for you to depart.
When will you return?
Good-bye and take my love with you.
Take all my love with you
Blessed child, *adios*."

And so the hours of the night passed with song and dance to entertain the ghosts. Candles burned down and new ones replaced them. Copal was sprinkled on the glowing embers of the incense burner. The little girl, whose eyes had been as bright as the candles on the altar, finally surrendered to sleep and curled up next to the dog by the fire.

But not until the first pale rays of dawn seeped into the hut were we allowed to break our fast. *Champurrado* was then dished out in gourds and passed around, a couple of drops having been sprinkled on the ground in front of the altar. We gratefully accepted the stimulating drink and pleasant sensation of heat shot through our numbed limbs.

Soon the sun rose beyond the rim of the mountains and the effect of its golden rays streaming through the emerald green banana leaves of the altar was unbelievably beautiful. Little by little the party dispersed to rest until it would be time to renew the decorations and food on the altars, and we hung our hammocks under a tree and were also soon asleep.

The second night's watch is exactly like the first, but everything on the altar must be changed. No Indian would take a chance on offering adult souls what had already been on the altar for the children. This fiesta, like most Indian ceremonies, works both ways. Beside being in honour of the dead, the *ofrenda* also serves to protect the living from any evil a slighted and disappointed spirit might want to inflict upon his former family, if he were sent back to the grave dissatisfied. By placating the spirits and offering them everything they were fond of in this life, the Indian hopes and believes that they will remain underground and not disturb the living, until they are called back to earth on this special day of combined fiesta and mourning.

After the second vigil the altars are destroyed and the food eaten—but not until the last bit of the *ofrendas* has disappeared do the Indians settle down to daily life again confident that no harm will befall them during the year.

Late in the afternoon Antonio's merry voice came floating up from the ravine and we hastened to get ready to leave. As we passed through the village Indian girls came running out of the huts with hands full of gifts from their *ofrendas*, and loaded down with more food than we could ever eat, even considering Antonio's capital appetite, we finally made our way down the steep trail to the river. And high above us in San Pablito the Indians were again gathering in the huts for the second and last vigil.

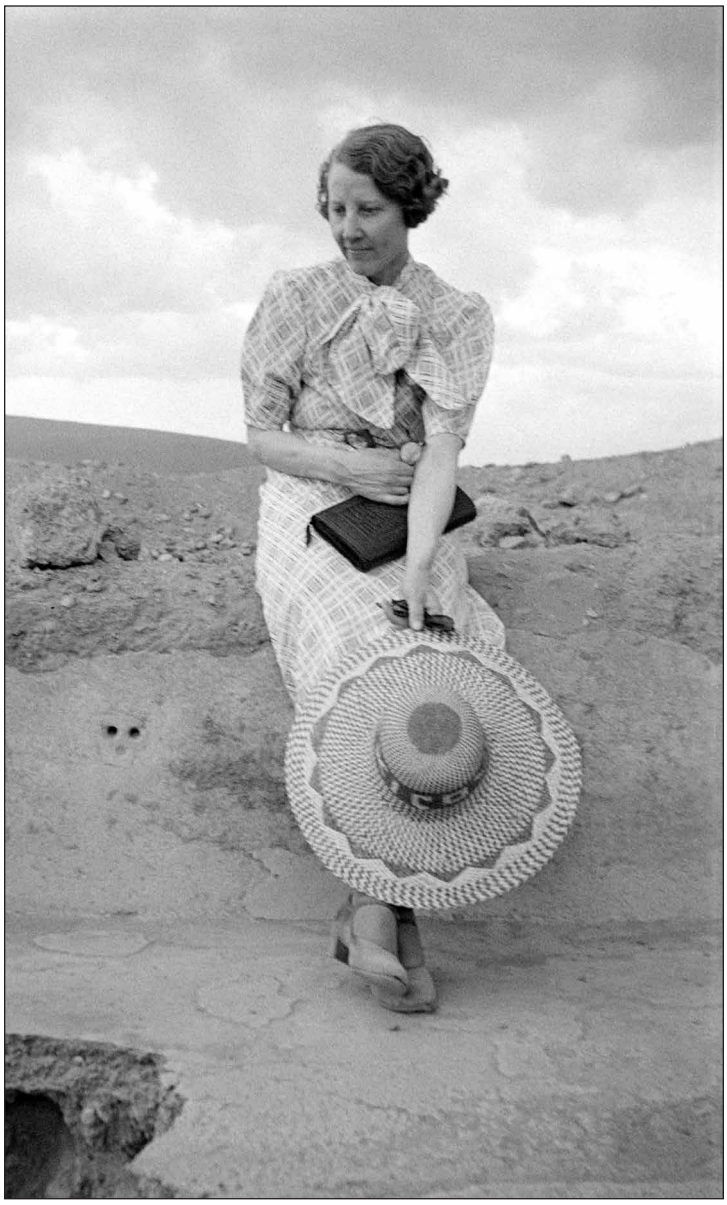

Figure 4. Helga in Teotihuacan (1937). Photo by Bodil Christensen. Collection Wereldmuseum Coll. nr. RV-A173-9539 © The family of Bodil Christensen.

Father Durán and his worries of long ago came into my mind and those distant days seemed suddenly very near, when I thought of our Indian friends and their faithful devotion to an age-old tradition that somehow kept its flame burning steadily through the unhurried centuries (Figure 4).

[The author added a list of 17 photos, all by Bodil, to illustrate the manuscript. They are from Mexico City, Cuetzalan, and San Pablito.]

Southwest Panel Ball, Great Ballcourt, Chichen Itza. Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.

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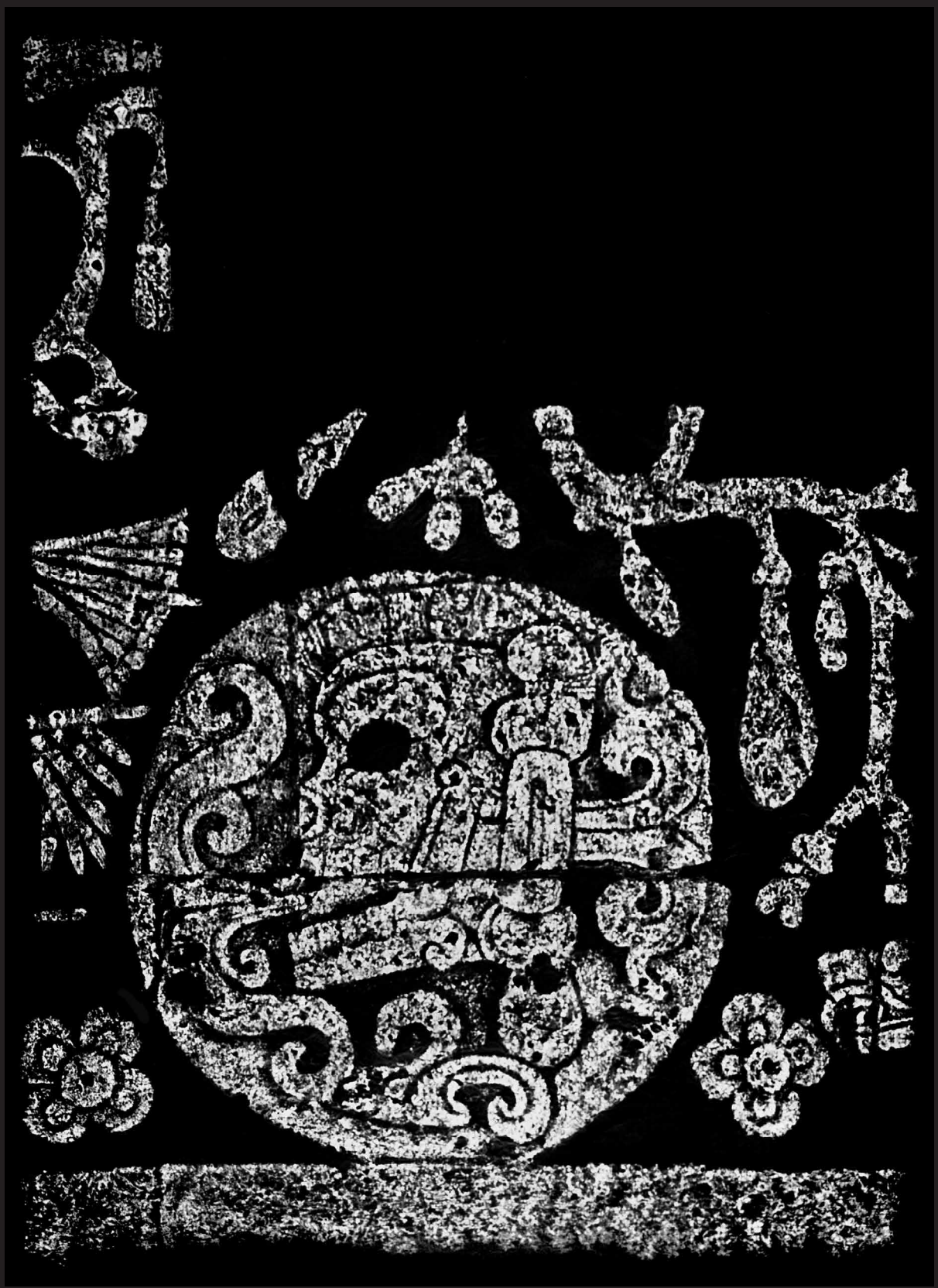

Southeast Panel Ball, Great Ballcourt, Chichen Itza. Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.

Northeast Panel Ball, Great Ballcourt, Chichen Itza. Rubbing by Merle Greene Robertson.