

Día de los Muertos Vocabulary

Ancestor: A person (usually more distant than a grandparent) from whom one is descended. *Día de los muertos* is observed in honor of deceased **ancestors**. It is a time to remember them.

Calavera/Calaca: A skeleton or skull. *Calaveras* are important **symbols** to Day of the Dead. They are usually **depicted** in humorous ways, engaging in everyday actions like eating, drinking and dancing, or playing music.

Cempazuchitl (sem-pa-soo-cheel): The *Nahuatl* word meaning “flower of twenty petals” for the marigold flower, a type of chrysanthemum. It is also known as the “flower of the dead” in Mexico, due to its use in death ceremonies from the time of the *Mexika*.

Depiction: The way a **subject** or idea is shown or represented.

Día de los muertos: Day of the Dead is a traditional Latin American holiday with especially strong ties to indigenous Mexican culture. Originally observed as death ceremonies during the autumn harvest festival of the *Mexika*, the holiday was moved to November 1st and 2nd after the Spanish invasion. Using **religious syncretism**, it is the result of blending indigenous rituals with the Catholic holidays of All Saints Day and All Souls Day. It is a time to honor and remember deceased **ancestors** and loved ones through food, music, religious and spiritual rituals.

Mexika (meh-shee-kuh): More commonly known as “Aztecs”, the name given to them by Europeans, the *Mexika* were a native civilization of the Americas which dominated the Valley of Mexico prior to the Spanish invasion. Many **rituals** and **symbols** used for *Día de los muertos* come from ancient *Mexika* beliefs and customs.

Ofrenda: “Offering.” An *ofrenda* is the offering built for *Día de los muertos*. It is also the word for the structure the offering sits on. *Ofrendas* include a number of elements, including the **ancestor’s** favorite things.

Nahuatl (na-wat): The language spoken by the *Mexika* and still used by indigenous groups in Central Mexico.

Pan de muertos: “Bread of the Dead,” a sweet roll prepared especially for *Día de los muertos*, decorated with symbols in the shapes of bones across the top.

Papel picado: “Cut paper,” decorations made by cutting designs into tissue paper for use as banners during celebrations. *Papel picado* is often used on *ofrendas*.

Religious Syncretism: The process of combining religious beliefs and practices from more than one religion or culture. *Día de los muertos* is the result of combining indigenous and Catholic traditions.

Ritual: A pattern or system of actions performed by individuals or a group of people, usually connected to religious or cultural beliefs.

Subject: A topic, something that is being discussed or examined. The focus of an activity.

Symbol: Something, usually an image, that stands in for something else. A sign with a specific meaning.

Tzompantli (som-pant-lee): *Nahuatl* for “skull rack,” a device used to display the skulls of sacrificed captives and warriors captured by the *Mexika*.