

The Similarities between the Beautiful Feast of the Valley and the Mexican Day of the Dead

Dr. Dalia M. Soliman

Higher Institute of Tourism and Hotels – King Marriott

Abstract

Honoring the dead in a great celebration is not a new tradition in Mexico. Thousands of years before the existence of the Mexican day of the dead, ancient Egyptians had dedicated a yearly festival to commemorate their dead in what is known as the beautiful feast of the valley. This study aims to show the similar beliefs of both ancient Egyptians and ancient Mexicans about death and their commemoration of their dead. This article explores the origins of the modern day of the dead festival which is held every year in Mexico and how it has survived and preserved a part of the cultural heritage of ancient Mexico. It explains similarities between the rituals and traditions of the beautiful feast of the valley and the Mexican day of the dead. This work highlights the purpose of each festival and its social importance as both celebrations are intended to enhance the national identity.

Keywords

Beautiful feast of the valley, Mexican day of the dead, festival, banquet, honoring the dead, offerings, celebration

Introduction

Death for ancient Egyptians and ancient Mexicans occupied a very special place in their life and culture. They believed that death does not end the person's life, but is the access to another world. (Sayer, 2009: 105). The ancient Egyptian beautiful feast of the valley and Día de los Muertos are annual national celebrations to honor the dead. Both festivals lasted for two days. The valley festival was celebrated in Thebes during the Middle Kingdom, while according to the ancient evidences the day of the dead in Mexico is a mixture of pre-Columbian rites (three thousand years ago) and Catholic traditions (Gillam, 2006: 78), (Sayer, 2009: 10).

During the occasion of the two festivals, the living and the dead celebrate with each other at a great nightly banquet. Near to the dead relatives' tombs, their family members present offerings of food, flowers, drinks, and clothes. Light lanterns

(Egyptians) (El Sabban, 2000: 67), candles (Mexicans), and burn incense (Brandes, 1997: 275). They spend the night praying, singing, and listening to music to entertain both the living and the dead. The characteristics of smell, sound, and aroma are capable of exceeding the barrier between life and death worlds. These senses were further stimulated by a large amount of wine, which creates an overwhelming happiness feeling and bring the living closer to the dead (Jauhiainen, 2009: 149). It appears that a sort of physical and intellectual reunion between the living and the dead would take place (Teeter, 2011: 71).

Such festivals related to the dead are not considered sorrowful occasions, but joyful ceremonies that lasted spiritually for a long time. The purpose of both festivals is to remember the virtues and good deeds of the dead. Both festivals consolidate hope for offering presenters who trust that their relatives will take care of them in a similar way after their death. In this manner, the deceased will live eternally in the hereafter. Both festivals play a major role in the reproduction of national identity (Brandes, 2006: 8).

The Beautiful Feast of the Valley

The beautiful feast of the valley was intended for the immortal existence of the dead, it gives the public population the opportunity of closer contact with their gods, dead relatives, and friends. This festival aimed to remember and honor the deceased (Annbyl, 2012: 253:254).

The ancient Egyptians have celebrated this festival for the first time during the Middle Kingdom in Thebes and continued to be organized till the Greco-Roman Period (Gillam, 2006: 78). The first recorded celebration of this festival was in the valley temple of the king Mentouhotep II (2061- 2010 B.C.) (El Shazly, 2008: 411). The beautiful feast of the valley celebration commenced with the new moon in second month of the (*šmw*) summer season (the tenth month of the ancient Egyptian year) during the harvest season (Verner, 2013: 263). The festival lasted for two days "according to Medinet Habu festival calendar" (Nelson, Holscher, Schott, 1934: 74).

The festival

The festival began at the temple of Amun at Karnak on the eastern bank of the Nile, where a great procession headed by the statue of the god Amun-Re carried on a ceremonial boat accompanied with his wife Mut and his son Khonsou (سليمان ، ٢٠٠٤ ،) (١٢٠). They headed down to visit the city of the dead on the western bank of the Nile.

During this journey the god visited the funerary temples of the ancestor rulers on the way to its final destination, where the god spent the night inside the mortuary temple of king Montuhotep II (رواش، ٢٠١١: ١٩٧).

During the reign of Hatshepsut, the barque of the god was placed in the sanctuary of Amun in her mortuary temple to resume the festival in the next day. During the reign of Thutmose III, the barque of the god Amun was spent the night in the mortuary temple of Thutmose III between those of Hatshepsut and Montuhotep II. In short, the site of Deir el-Bahri where king Montuhotep II was built his mortuary temple became a very important center in the veneration of the royal ancestors for a long time (El Shazly, 2008: 412).

Along the way, the procession visited the funerary temples of the ancestor rulers, where the priests' presented offerings to the gods, and then it crossed the necropolis. After spending the night in the company of the goddess Hathor in the temple of Deir el-Bahari, the god Amun returned to Karnak, after having been regenerated (رواش، ٢٠١١: ١٩٧).

During his journey, God Amun had allowed all the inhabitants of the necropolis and their families to participate in this great religious festival. Theoretically, during the passage of the festival procession, the dead of the necropolis had to come out from their tombs to display offerings to the god and his triad. Indeed, this is an opportunity to clear the borders between life and death, between human beings and the gods.

The family members near their dead relative's tombs presented offerings of small meat pieces (Verner, 2013: 265). Different kinds of food offerings, perfumes, drinks, animal sacrifices were important elements (Spencer, 2003: 111-121). Ancient Egyptians believed that lotus (Manniche, 1991: 71) contained the essence of the gods themselves (Fletcher, 1999: 55). They placed floral bouquets on the tombs of their relatives and in front of the statue of Amun-Ra to receive his regenerative power (Annbyl, 2012: 253). Drinks were also represented, lanterns were lit, incense was burnet, and myrrh was poured over the offerings (El Sabban, 2000: 67).

From the 18th Dynasty onwards, the relatives of the deceased could be held banquets near the tomb and involved drinking wine and eating food that would facilitate communication between the living and the dead (Emery, 1962: 87).

The banquet usually began in the middle of the day. The guests were represented wearing expensive clothing, stylish hair styles, and accessories. The banquets were limited to the relatives and friends of the host, and were intended to make the host capable of meeting the deceased relative in the hereafter (Khalifa, 2014: 475).

According to the funerary beliefs, music is a great intermediary; it helps peaceful communication among the living and the dead around the tomb. Musical instruments such as: the lyre, harp, lute, double oboe and round tambourine held an important and integral part of the entertainment during the festival. A choir, men clapping their hands, and women singing while shaking sistra and rattles (Verner, 2013: 265) were gathered on the western bank of the Nile to welcome the sacred bark of god Amun (Mcdermott, 2008 136). Dance troops were available for hire to perform during the festival (Manniche, 2003: 44).

The dead had enjoyed the amusement of their relatives. The connection between the living and the dead regrouped in the tombs, with food, music and dance. These ceremonies were perhaps held in the courtyard of the tomb, with a pause for presenting offerings to the dead (Carroll, Rempel, 2011: 170).

Ancient Egyptians selected their tombs to be located near the road of the valley festival procession to make sure that their relatives can visit them annually during their participation in this festival. In later periods, they preferred to reuse the same tombs; this indicates the importance of the valley feast that played an important role in Theban religion.

According to Dogaer, the beautiful festival of the valley may be come to an end when Ptolemy Soter II devastated Thebes in 88 BC or probably during the attack of the prefect Cornelius Gallus in 29 BC. The social position of the Theban priests had already declined in the first century BC because of the attacks of Ptolemy IX on Thebes to eliminate the rebellions of the city (Dogaer, 2020: 214).

Purpose of the Festival

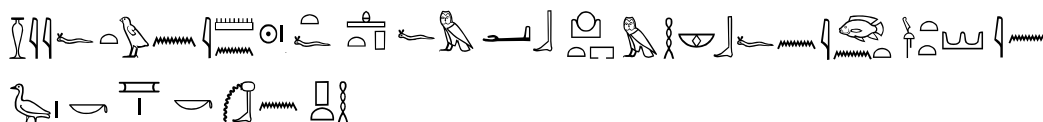
The festival allows the public population to interact and communicate with each other, thus enhancing the unity of a community (Smith, 1975: 9). It was also a joyful time and a chance for the lower community of Thebes to see the statues of their deities and receive oracles (Annbyl, 2012: 253). They also believed that the dead had participated in this festival and a reunion between the living and the dead relatives would happen during this occasion (Martin, 2008: 7).

Selected Scenes of the Beautiful Feast of the Valley from Private Tombs

The scene of the tomb of Userhat

This scene is a part of a banquet takes place during the beautiful feast of the valley. Usherat with his wife are seated on chairs. In front of the seated couple are their two daughters and a son paying homage to their father and presenting offerings including a floral bouquet which was one of the most important offerings during this festival. The life and blessings present in the bouquet would be transferred to the image of the deceased in the afterlife (Harrington, 2013: 117).

The text above the son reads as follows:



ḥsy.f tw n imn r^c tf ḥtp.f m ^cb zḥt m ḥb.f n int imntt in s3.k mr.k w^cb n pth

"(Because) you are praised by Amon-Ra who resides in peace in Ab-Akhet (at the time of) his festival of the valley of the west, by your son, whom you love, the wab-priest of Ptah" Ab-Akhet designates the temple of millions of years (improperly named the mortuary) of Amenhotep II (Hodel-Hoenes, 2000: 78).

Behind the son of the deceased are three rows of the deceased relatives and friends. The upper row shows female guests seated on chairs with a monkey under the chair similar to the one depicted under the chair of the deceased's wife. On the second row there are female seated guests, in addition to the blind harpist and three female musicians, the first plays a double oboe and the two following her clap their hands. On the third row are three female guests receiving offerings and treatment.

The second register shows a group of women to the right side seated on mats and served by maidservants. Servants are either presenting dish or anointing the female guests with fragrant oils. In front of them is a row of walking male servants holding different kinds of offerings.

The last register represents a couple seated on chairs to the right side in front of an offering table. There are three unknown individuals in front of the seated couple presenting some offerings, in addition to the other three individuals behind the

couple. To the left side there is an unknown seated man holding a staff; he may be Userhat or one of his relatives. In the middle of the register there is a line of offering presenters (Beinlich-Seeber, Abdel Ghaffar, 1987: 21: 22). (Fig.1)

The scene of the tomb of Nakht

This scene depicts the deceased and his wife in a banquet during the beautiful feast of the valley. On the right side, the deceased and his wife are sitting before an offering table full of offerings including: bread, fruits, and vegetables. The deceased and his wife are holding a lotus flower as lotus related to resurrection. Two little daughters are shown beside their parents in a smaller scale. Another daughter is presenting a cup of wine in front of her parents. The opposite left side is divided into two rows showing musicians and clappers celebrating the festival. The upper row shows a blind harpist kneeling on a high mat and followed by a standing male lutenist, a female harpist and clapper. The lower row is occupied with standing female harpist, lutenist, flutist and clappers (Manniche, 1986: 56).

The accompanying text above the couple reads as follows:



k3ry n imn ḥtp-nṯr nḥt m3ꜥ-hrw ḥmt.f mrt.f nbt-pr t{3}- ḥmt

"The gardener of the divine offering{s} of Amun, Nakht, justified, his wife, his beloved, the lady of the house, T{a}hemet" (Manniche, 1986: 61).

The inscription above the daughter reads as follows:



*n k3.f iri hrw nfr p3 ḥsy n imn di.f n.k iit r ḥwt-nṯr.f m33 nfrw n ḥr.f šsp snw n didi
k3.f m ḥb nb n pt n t3 in s3{t}.f mrt.f iḥ-ms*

"To your ka! Spend a happy day, you praised by Amun. May he cause you to come and go to his temple to behold the beauty of his face, and to receive cakes from what his ka gives on the occasion of every feast in heaven {and} on earth, {said} by his daughter, his beloved, Ahmose" (Manniche, 1986: 61). (Fig.2)

The Mexican Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos)

It is an annual celebration for commemorating the dead; it is one of the most ancient national festivals in Mexico. The day of the dead had pre-Colombian origins, which combined with some cultural Catholic traditions (Garcia Godoy, 1998: 67).

Mexico is one of the most diverse countries in the world. This diversity made Mexico a place of various cultures and civilizations. Many of the inherited cultural traditions can still be found in the Mexicans ways of living, mingled with the Catholic religion (Arredondo, Casillas, 2019: 226).

Mexico was a part of the Mesoamerican area. The term Mesoamerica was first introduced by Paul Kirchhoff in 1943. The Mesoamerican means several cultures that developed in Mexico and Central America. Among the famous civilizations of Mesoamerica are the people of Maya, Zapotecs, Nahuatl, Tarascans, Otomi, Totonacs and Huastecs.

Because of the various civilizations and cultures that passed by Mesoamerica, historians found that it is difficult to confirm the first celebration of the day of the dead. The day of the dead celebration is a mixture of some Mesoamerican cultures (Broda, 2000: 225).

The Zapotecs are the first people in Mesoamerica to introduce a calendar system during the Middle or Late Formative period (Pre-classic) about 900 to 400 B.C. The Zapotecs and Mayans have introduced the hieroglyphic writing system in Mesoamerica in about 600 B.C. (Marcus, 1976: 36)

Because Mexico was a part of the Mayan civilization who preserved the connection between the worlds of the living and the dead by the day of the dead celebrations, this festival has been the most cultural and historical festival for paying homage to the dead in Mexico (Brandes, 2003: 140).

Brandes attributes the origin of the day of the dead to the Aztecs who formed their empire in 1427 A.D. But the celebrations of the day of the dead were almost occurred many centuries earlier (Brandes, 1998 B: 185). The Aztecs believed that life exists in various times-spaces: the present, the time of religious celebrations, and the time of the dead. Death does not mean the end of life, but is the gate to another time-space

(Sayer, 2009: 10). The Aztec held the day of the dead festival each year in the ninth month of the Aztec solar calendar (Butterwick, 1998: 192).

From the time of the Spanish conquest in 1521, Mexicans observed the catholic celebrations of All Saints' and All Souls' Days (liturgical celebrations of the Church commemorating the dead saints and the other members of the Church). During the All Saints', Souls' Days celebrations, people used to visit their dead relatives and present offerings for their souls (Brandes, 1998 A: 362). The day of the dead was moved by Spanish priests after the conquest era, so that it coincided with the All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day; a great effort has been done to transform this ceremony from a "profane" to a Christian celebration (Badger, 2004: 15). This indicates that several beliefs and rituals of old and new religions were already blended together (Tullius, 1994: 11: 12).

The day of the dead festival is held on November one and two. On this occasion, the living commemorated the souls of their dead with offerings of food and flowers (Fig.3). The dead return to visit their loved ones in the world of the living and look forward to the next generation (Carmichael, Sayer, 1992: 31). The day of the dead shows respect for the dead, and denotes that this event is a principal part of the Mexican national heritage (Gutiérrez, Rosengren, Miller, 2015: 230).

The festival

According to the ancient Mexican beliefs, the dead power affects the lives of the living, so the living must visit the cemeteries of their dead relatives, present offerings to the dead, recite hymns and prayers to motivate the souls of the dead to come and listen to prayers (Haley, Fukuda, 2004: 23).

Preparations for the day of the dead festival included few weeks before the event. All family members take part in the preparations (Carmichael, Sayer, 1992: 31). During the last weeks of October families begin to bring offerings they need to form an altar (offranda) on a table for their dead. Each offranda typically consists of basic elements including: a tablecloth, pictures of the deceased, candles, water, salt, incense, flowers, food, and toys for the dead children (Brandes, 1997: 275).

Each family member has an essential role which leads to the success of the entire celebration. Sometimes specific tasks are divided by age and gender, with men

purchasing goods, women cooking, and children placing flowers and decorating the graves (Gutierrez, and others, 2020: 494:495).

The celebrations start in the afternoon of November 1st, when bells toll at churches announcing the beginning of the festival (Garcia Godoy, 1998: 10). All family members set the altar, (Mullen, 2004: 43) children pull the petals from the flowers to create a floral path to guide the dead relatives to find the altar. It is believed that the dead relative visit the home to consume the offerings that in real life pleased him/ her (Gutierrez, and others, 2020: 494:495). The first day of November is intended for the souls of the dead children. Around midnight on November 1st, the living begin to light candles, and spend the night dancing, praying, and singing for their departed souls (Arredondo, Casillas, 2019: 228).

The Second day of November is intended for the souls of the departed Adults. In the morning of November 2nd, families and visitors gather to prepare the altar of the dead adults which include bread (pans de muertos or bread of the dead) flowers, sugar cane, incense, chocolate, beverages, and candles (Pettit, Pettit, 1978: 129). As during a specific hour of this afternoon the souls arrive (Morisson, 1992: 239).

Later the family members are dressed up and accompany the dead to the cemetery (Haley, Fukuda, 2004: 5). An informal procession takes place led by dancers. The people light candles, bring flowers and food for their ancestors while they talk, pray and sing all day and night. Some common offerings can be obtained from local markets or street vendors (Fig.4). When reaching to the graves complete families eat a meal, listen to or create music to entertain both the living and the dead (Arredondo, Casillas, 2019: 228: 229). (Fig.5)

By midnight, cemeteries are filled with lit candles. (Fig.6) Words of farewell may be spoken by the family relatives (Garcia Godoy, 1998: 13). The tombs become busy during this whole celebration with families pray and talk with each other. Children are active participants during this occasion; they help their families in all the episodes of the festival and play until they become exhausted and fall asleep at the end of the day. (Fig. 7) The souls of the dead return to their world at the end of the festival (Gutiérrez, Rosengren, Miller, 2015: 230).

Purpose of the Festival

This inherited celebration is a symbol of their national identity. The main aspect of the family visits to the tombs is to say the name of the deceased on earth and his good deeds. This occurs through talks among family participants. This public remembrance is the goal of this festival, as children know more about the values, and traditions of their parents with the hope that they will carry them on to the next generations.

The day of the dead is an event through which participants consume pleasure, celebrate their reunion, and strength social bonds (Garciagodoy, 1998: 35: 38). During this festival the one could honor or mourn the dead. Thus the dead depend on the living to provide them with offerings and prayers, which are related to their journey to the afterlife (Garciagodoy, 1998: 38: 40). The day of the dead secures immortality of the dead by receiving offerings and celebrating this festival annually with the living (Brandes, 2006: 8).

The Ancient Egyptian Feast of the Valley and the Mexican Day of the Dead Commonalities

Like ancient Egyptians, Mexicans are familiar with death and celebrate it. According to popular beliefs of both cultures, the souls of the dead have divine permission to return each year to earth to celebrate with the living.

Both ancient Egyptians and ancient people of Mexico were celebrated this festival in the harvest season (Sayer, 2009: 10). Death for them does not mean the end of life, but an episode in a constant cycle. This cycle is equivalent to the seasons of the year; when vegetation died after the dry period, the rains brought the new growth.

Ancient Egyptians and Aztecs were acquainted with the same concept about life and death, they have believed that life was connected with strength, light, and day; death was linked with weakness, darkness, and night (Assmann, 2001: 10).

As early as the pre-dynastic period (4000- 3000 B.C.) (Kitchen, 1991: 206), ancient Egyptians had believed in life after death. The deceased body was wrapped in mats and was placed in a shallow pit in fetal position with some funerary goods for the afterlife such as vessels, pots, statuettes, mirrors, and jewelry. With time Ancient Egyptians were doubled the amount of the offerings inside the tombs of their dead. They believed that the deceased demanded a lot of offerings and needed to be close to the living, that's why they were keen on visiting their dead relatives' tombs, and

present some offerings and celebrate with them each year during the beautiful feast of the valley (Evans, 1986: 18: 19).

For commemorating the dead during the early pre-classic period, roughly between 1500 and 150 B.C., ancient people of Mexico were wrapped the bodies of their dead in a petate "which is a bedroll used in Central America and Mexico". It is woven from the fibers of the Palm of petate. They were buried in primitive graves in fetal position with offerings and tools used in the afterlife such as: clay figurines, vessels, jewelry, and mirrors. Ancient people of Mexico believed that the dead had to overcome some obstacles and difficulties during their journey to Mictlan "the place of the dead", which was ruled by the deity of the water Mictlantecuhtli. The deceased would need various kinds of offerings on a four-year journey to Mictlan. On the anniversary of death for the next four years, offerings required to be represented to help the deceased's soul to reach Mictlan (Garciagodoy, 1998: 110:111). Old Mexicans believed that after the four years, the rebirth of the dead will happen (Daquedano, 2011: 207). To guide the dead to their home during the day of the dead festival, relatives used to place pictures of the dead above the altar to help their relatives' souls to find their homes (Garciagodoy, 1998: 8). Ancient Egyptians had a quite similar concept, they used to mummify the bodies of their dead relatives and cover their faces with masks with the same facial features of the deceased to enable the soul to recognize the face of its owner and return to its mummified body after death (Erman, 1907: 128).

The similar concept of the Mexican offrande was found in ancient Egypt. Offering tables from the New Kingdom were discovered in some ancient Egyptian houses. It may have had dual functions as part of cults for both gods and dead. Several tables inscribed for ancestors and dedicated for their KA were found at Deir el-Medina. Ancient Egyptians placed different kinds of offerings on those tables as provisions for the KA of their dead relatives. An example is the limestone offering table found in the second room of Sennedjem's house at Deir el-Medina (Harrington, 2013: 79:80).

The beautiful feast of the valley took place in Thebes (southern Egypt) because it was the capital of Egypt, where the Egyptian king lived and was keen on celebrating this festival each year (Henry, 2002: 278). Although the Mexican day of the dead takes place all over Mexico, it is more noticeable in the southern states, where natives are more concentrated.

Both of ancient Egyptians and Mexicans used to present offerings for the same purpose, each type of offering had the same symbolism in the two cultures as follows:

- Water: Represent purity and the source of life.
- Incense: It is an offering to gods, transmits prayers, and for purity (Garciagodoy, 1998: 9).
- Toys: Ancient Egyptians and Mexicans used to place a toy with the dead child as a funerary object inside the grave. They used to present a toy as an offering for the dead children during both festivals (Scott, 1999: 85), as toys are the most preferred gift for any child.
- Bread: It is the provision of travelers (Garciagodoy, 1998: 9) and provides the human body with energy (Omran, Hewedi, 2012: 44).
- Flowers: Symbol of love and resurrection (Hepper, 2009: 8), and intended to attract the souls to the offerings (Morisson, 1992: 226).

Conclusions

From this study, we can conclude the following similarities between the beautiful feast of the valley and the Mexican day of the dead:

- Death occupied a very special place in all aspects of ancient Egyptian and Mexican life and culture.
- Both festivals have the same purpose which is honoring the dead and the reunion between the living and dead.
- Both festivals are enhancing the national identity.
- The rituals of both festivals are performed in the same form and have the same meaning such as: presenting offerings and flowers, burning incense, wearing new clothes during the festival, eating around the tombs of the dead relatives in a banquet, listening to music, singing, and praying.
- Both festivals included a procession; the procession of the beautiful feast of the valley was an organized and formal one, while the day of the dead procession is an informal one.

- Through both festivals ancient Egyptians and Mexicans celebrate with their families. They would spend time before the festival preparing the offerings. During the festival they used to have a meal in the company of their dead family members near to their tombs. This indicates that death does not end the family structure, but strengthens the family ties.
- Offerings for both ancient Egyptians and Mexicans have the same purpose. Actually, food supports the relationship between living and dead. They do not believe that their dead relatives consume food, but they believe that the souls of their dead are exist and realize that their living relatives are still remembering them.
- The overall mood at the cemetery in the course of both festivals seemed very festive, full of emotions, colors and smells. The dead can enjoy the aroma of food, incense, and flowers, which are later used by the living.
- The most important notice of the researcher is that:
As before the first millennium B.C. there was no writing system or a calendar in the Mesoamerican civilization, in addition to no written festival calendar or any recorded evidence for the day of the dead celebration was found. The Zapotecs has introduced the first calendar system in Mesoamerica between 900 to 400 B.C. Both Zapotecs and Mayans hav introduced the hieroglyphic writing system in Mesoamerica in about 600 B.C. This indicates that the beautiful feast of the valley which was celebrated for the first time during the reign of the king Mentouhotep II (2061- 2010 B.C.) in the Middle Kingdom was older than the Mexican day of the dead.

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Figures



Figure 1 A banquet scene from Userhat tomb (TT 56), Sheikh Abd El- Qurna, Eighteenth Dynasty; Location of the scene: The southern wall of the vestibule hall. (Harrington, 2013: Fig. 45).



Figure 2 A banquet scene from Nakht tomb (TT 161), Draa Abu el-Naga, Eighteenth Dynasty; Location of the scene: west wall of the transversal hall. (Manniche, 1986: Fig. 10)



Figure 3 Some offerings of fruits and flowers for the dead (Williams, Mack, 2011: 28)



Figure 4 Villagers buy flowers from a yearly market for the day of the dead in Huaquechula, Puebla state, 1989. (Sayer, 2009: 109)



Figure 5 Musicians are playing music during the day of the dead festival (Brandes, 2006: Pl.1.2)



Figure 6 Candles and flowers on the cemetery (Brandes, 2006: Pl. 6.3)