

Let's hear it for a good Mexican burial!

The traditional Western Christian burial is usually a sad affair with the mourners dressed in black, a muted funeral service, hushed voices around the grave and finally the funeral tea where people say nice things about the dear departed.

The Mexicans have a far more cheerful approach to death, burials and the whole darn thing. Here, the burial takes place after the departed has received the Last Rites as expected by the Roman Catholic religion. Before the body is interred, a wake is held, usually at the family home, with the body which is surrounded with flowers as the focal point. Then a funeral mass is held at the church and the body is buried in a gaily painted coffin with scenes of Our Lady of Guadalupe (the Mexican version of the Virgin Mary) or The Last Supper to brighten it up. A period of mourning lasting seven days is then observed.

In our rather boring Western tradition, this would be the end of it. Maybe the following year an "in Memoriam" notice in the local paper, or a few tearful phone calls between family members.

! Madre de Dios! This is not the Mexican way.

Annually, on November 2, death is celebrated with a public holiday called The Day of the Dead (*Dia de Muertos.*) Death was an important ritual in the ancient Mayan and Aztec civilisations and although many old customs are dying out, The Day of the Dead is still the most important holiday in Mexico.

Irrespective of the actual anniversary of the death, family members set up a three-tier shrine in the home, decorated with photographs of the departed, plates of rice and beans, candied pumpkin and bottles of tequila. There'll be cigarettes for the

smokers or sweets if the departed was a child. Next to the shrine will be a basin of water and a hand-towel, for the spirit of the dead is expected to come home on this day and needs to wash after the long journey.

Meanwhile the grave itself is gaily decorated with coronas of fresh marigolds or scarlet cockscombs, paper streamers and balloons, and the entire graveyard looks like a Mardi Gras carnival.

In the run-up to this holiday the markets are full of *Dia de Muertos* specials, the merchants all doing a brisk trade in paper cut-outs of skeletons and skulls, intricate wreaths and exotic candles in the shape of angels, or dolls in the form of skeletons. Different foods sold during the festival week include crunchy coffins and brightly coloured sugar skulls flavoured with amaranth seeds. Sweet breads called *Pan de Muerto* (Bread of Death) are baked in the shape of bones, skulls and sometimes human figures. These are all put on the shrine at home as well as on the grave for the enjoyment of the dead.

On the afternoon of November 1, family members gather at the grave to mourn the loved ones, laden with food to entice the spirits. Roast suckling pigs, chickens, sugary cakes, *pan de muerto* and bottles of tequila are offered ceremoniously to the spirit and then consumed by the family.

A party atmosphere soon develops and as it grows dark, thousands of candles turn the graveyard into a spectacular *son et lumière* (sound and light show). But this is the twenty first century, and the cash-strapped Mexican government is not unaware of the appeal of this unique ceremony. It has encouraged the citizens of Janitzio, a small farming island just off the coast of Mexico, to bump up the festivities to another level, with the streets lined with stalls offering tasteful things like tee shirts adorned with skeletons and baseball caps printed with grinning skulls. A million candles glow

throughout the vigil in the immaculate graveyard and the tourists, mostly from across the border in the USA, are thrilled by the spectacle. They go home clutching their sugar skulls and souvenir bone bread, satisfied that they have witnessed another quaint ole custom in line with bashing the piñata at Mexican children's birthday parties.

Good for trade maybe, but this festival has been celebrated for thousands of years and will carry on regardless of tourist interest or not. And if I have to go, which all of us do, eventually, I know I'd rather be remembered with a roast sucking pig and a bottle of tequila than a little two-liner in the memoriam column of the Cape Times.