Food for the Soul: Eternal Co-existence in the Mayan – Catholic Traditions of Pomuch, Mexico.

Eva Leticia Brito Benítez
Heajoo Chung



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Eva Leticia Brito Benítez
Researcher, National Institute of Anthropology and History of Mexico

Heajoo Chung
Researcher, 359 Institute of Korea

ABSTRACT

The Mayan village of Pomuch is well known for the particular burial customs of its inhabitants. As a result of a process of religious syncretism that began with the arrival of the Spaniards in the early sixteenth century, the Pomuch people fused elements of ancient Mayan beliefs and Christian doctrine. The aim of this paper is to observe the rituals about death and describe the cultural meaning of the stages in the process. The Pomuch people begin the ritual with the treatment of the body just after death, and the process continues until the skeletal remains are exhibited at the cemetery. *Janal Pixan* is the Mayan name of a ritual that consists of preparing food in an oven dug in the ground and making offerings to the soul of the dead, since Pomuch people believe that the dead visit them annually on specific days at the end of October and the beginning of November. These days coincide with the Pomuch agricultural calendar and correspond to the birthdays of honoured Catholic saints. The burial customs of Pomuch are a valuable cultural heritage of the pre-Hispanic traditions of Mexico, and also show a syncretism with Christian beliefs, offering us an understanding of indigenous ways of thinking and their feelings towards death.

Keywords

Mayan, Pomuch, Campeche, burial customs, Day of the Dead, All Saints' Day, All Souls' Day, *Janal Pixan, pibipollo,* syncretism, pre-Hispanic rituals, Mexico

1. Introduction

Mexico is a country that celebrates the 'Day of the Dead' of infants on the 1st of November and commemorates the death of adults on the 2nd of November. This distinction is very important since it demonstrates that Mexico's pre-Hispanic peoples adopted the Catholic liturgical calendar in which the celebration originates from two feasts: 'All Saints Day' (*Todos Santos*) and 'All Souls Day' (*Fieles Difuntos*).

During the reign of Pope Gregory IV, the Virgin and 'All Saints' Days which commemorated those who had died defending their beliefs, was first celebrated on the 13th of May. This was before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Since the year 835 it was changed to the first day of November as a celebration of 'All Saints'.

The feast of 'All Souls' originated in monasteries and celebrated the commemoration of the 'Souls in Purgatory' that was held on the 2nd of November. The celebration of the 'Souls' was officially accepted as a part of the liturgical calendar during the XIII century. Such celebrations were well received by Catholics who believed that the souls of the dead returned to bless the houses of their relatives during the evening of the first day of November, and were to be welcomed with food in return for their visit.

In contrast, according to ancient indigenous traditions of pre-Hispanic groups, the dead are honoured by a great feast, where food and drink are brought to the graves of the dead to maintain closer contact with them. This occurs for several years after death, since they believe that the dead have to undertake a great journey to reach the place where the dead reside. This place was different for everyone depending not on the way that they had lived, but how they had perished. For example, there was a specific place for those who had drowned and for women who had died during labour, one for warriors killed in battle, and a different one for those who had committed suicide, or had died from disease.

According to the Mayan cosmic-vision, people thought the structure of the Universe had three overlapping levels: the celestial dome on top, the earthly space in which man lived located in the middle and the underworld or *Xibalba* at the bottom. However, it was not the same as the Christian concept that believed Heaven in the sky was a prize for human behaviour on Earth, and the underworld or Hell, was a place of punishment. *The Popol Vuh Mythology of Quiché Maya*, written in the mid-sixteenth century is, despite showing Christian influence in some parts, the most important source for determining the origin of the ancient Mayan cosmic-vision, especially the expressed vision of the underworld. The *Xibalba*, the bottom level in the Mayan Cosmos, represents a place where the dead went to receive a test to overcome darkness, in order to return to the earthly world with new life. This means *Xibalba* is a place of ritual to enable resurrection, rather than a place for eternal punishment after death.

When the first Spanish friars arrived with an evangelical mission, they realised that Christian doctrine made no sense to the natives, meaning that they needed to seek similarities between the iconography of traditional belief and the newly-enforced religion. After the first years of colonisation, the partially Christianised natives gave up their endeavour to retain their indigenous view of the world and adapted their own cosmo-vision of the imposed Catholic religion. Meanwhile, Hispanic religious missionaries tried to establish a linkage between European and American history.

As a result it was very important to establish that celebrations for the death of children were on the 1st day of November, and for adults on the 2nd day, since this shows an example of how indigenous cosmo-vision tradition combined with Catholic form. In current times, even though this concept is transmuted and newly interpreted, it is a religious belief that has been kept alive and has converted key elements of indigenous identity. The dynamic connection between the pagan and the Christian is evident in the celebration of the Day of the Dead, which continues to be celebrated to this day.

In regions of Mexico where the population is composed mostly of indigenous people, this celebration takes place during the last days of October and the first two days of November. This means that all the rituals were closely linked to agriculture, since these dates coincide with key times in the agricultural cycle. The farmers believe that the souls of their ancestors help to generate a good harvest and therefore perform several rituals and give offerings in order to show their gratitude.



Figure 1
The village of Pomuch, Campeche state, Mexico. Image: Weather Forecast.com: http://es.weather-forecast.com/locations/Pomuch, public domain).

This linkage between the cult of souls and the end of the agricultural cycle shows that pre-Hispanic religion had its roots in the processes of survival. Although aspects of the celebrations have regional variations, the celebrations all include household altars installed for dead relatives in their own homes or their graves in the cemetery. The Day of the Dead has become a celebration that brings individuals, families, and even neighbourhoods and communities together for a single purpose: the cult of the dead.

The farming village of Pomuch will be discussed as a community committed to conserving Mayan traditions intertwined with Christian beliefs exemplifying religious syncretism about the memory of their dead and rituals in their honour.

2. The village of Pomuch

Pomuch is located in the state of Campeche, Yucatán Peninsula, in the South-east of Mexico. [Figure 1] It lies nine metres above sea level; the prevailing climate is warm and humid and has tropical levels of rainfall with rains occurring during summer and autumn.

The overland roads are generally bumpy and the ground has mild undulations and plains with a shallow relief that does not exceed 100 metres. There are no surface streams because the soil is permeable and ground water, composed of infiltrating rainfall and waste water, is the main source of fluid. The inhabitants obtain water from artificial wells, known as *chultunes* in Mayan that have been built since pre-Hispanic times.

The regional flora is composed of medium and low forest. In the former, tree species such as *Manikara zapota (sapodilla), Brosimum alicastrum (ramón), Haematoxylum campechianum (campeche), Lonchocarpus castilloi Standl (machiche), Bucida buceras (úcar or pucte), Swietenia mahogani (caoba, mahogany), Cedrus (cedro), Lysiloma latisiliquum (tzalam), Guaiacum (guayacán)* and *Cordia dodecandra (siricote or ciricote)* grow; and in the latter a herbaceous layer of grasses, shrubs, and the *Erythrina crista-galli tree (ceibo)* predominate. The fauna is characterised by the coexistence of species such as turtles, iguanas, snakes, armadillos, partridges, pheasants, parrots, wild turkeys, doves, hawks, quails, owls, mockingbirds, cardinals, opossums, rabbits, squirrels, agoutis, badgers and raccoons.

Pomuch was founded by the Mayan in the XV century and was a part of the manor of *Ah Canul*. *Tixpokmuch*, the original name of Pomuch, is composed of three Mayan words: *tix* is an onomatopœic word that refers to dripping or running water; *pok* recreates the sound made by the fall of the toad and *much* means frog or toad(s), so the name can be translated as 'where the toads swim or splash'. For the Mayan, frogs and toads are linked directly with *Chac*, the God of Rain, to whom offerings were made to ensure the fertility of the land

and generate good crops, especially corn which is a sacred food and their staple diet.

An archaeological relic that can be linked to the worship of water and fertility is located in the central square of Pomuch. It is a stone sculpture that people call '*God Picha*' and represents a human phallus. This monolith measures approximately 1.5 metres in height and is located next to the mouth of a well that leads to a ground water source. It is believed that the monolith was brought from the archaeological site known as Kanalku or Kanaku, located 5 kilometres south-east of Pomuch, where the remains of walls and altars corresponding to the Classic Maya period (300-600 AD) can still be found.

In the early XVI century the Spanish conquerors arrived on the Yucatán Peninsula; in 1540 Captain Francisco de Montejo, the 'Mozo'[1] founded the town of San Francisco de Campeche. This was then followed by the distribution of parcels of land among the Spaniards, who organised the natives' main towns into centres that administered the smaller villages.[2] With the new political and administrative order, Pomuch was placed under the jurisdiction of the ancient village of San Francisco de Campeche, which currently corresponds to the city of Campeche, capital of the state of Campeche.

After the Independence of Mexico, the small town remained as a part of the territory of Campeche, and in 1916 it became part of the newly-founded town of Hecelchakán. On 25 December 2001 it received the title of 'Village', which is still used today.

Pomuch currently has a total of 8,694 inhabitants, of whom 4,356 are women (50.1%), 4,338 are men (49.9%) and 5,729 people are over 18 years of age (65.9%), i.e. are adults. A total of 2,831 people (older than 3 years of age) speak an indigenous language, in this case Maya. Economically active villages are mostly concerned with agricultural activities like irrigation, and grow their crops for sale as well as for their own consumption. The main crops are *Zea mays* (corn or maize), *Phaseolus vulgaris* (beans), *Oryza sativa* (rice), *Saccharum officinarum* (sugar cane), *Agave sisalana* (sisal), *Solanum lycopersicum* (tomato), different types of *Capsicum* (chili), and fruits such as *Cucumis melo* (cantaloupe), *Citrullus lanatus* (watermelon), *Citrus sinensis* (oranges) and *Citrus limon* (lemons).

The village also has an outstanding baking industry, which according to Mr. Rafael Pérez Novelo, owner of the bakery, *El Pan de Pomuch* ('Pomuch's Bread'), was started in the late XVIII century by families of Spanish origin [Plate 1]. Honey and wax are also produced thanks



Plate 1
Mr Rafael Pérez Novelo in his bakery 'Pomuch's Bread'.
Photo: Eva L. Brito, August 2012.



Plate 2
Mrs Rosa Yam showing a *hipil.*
Photo: by permission of Eva Chaire, October 2013.



Plate 3
Parish Church of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.
Photo: Eva L. Brito, August 2012.



Plate 4
Image of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary.
Photo: Eva L. Brito, August 2012.

to the *dzidzilchén* flower that grows there, a flower from which the bees obtain the nectar they need to make honey.

Most Mayan women still wear a traditional long tunic blouse, called a *huipil* or *hipil*, which was originally made of cotton or *henequen* (agave). However, after the Spanish conquest the materials for hipil were silk, wool, or later, synthetic fabrics. Nowadays the quality of *hipil* fabric depends on what the wearer can afford. The handmade hipil is embroidered with different coloured flowers on a white background. Some women sell the *hipiles* they have made in order to provide for their families [Plate 2].

Regarding religious beliefs, 4,752 people in Pomuch are Catholic, 54.7% of its inhabitants. Pomuch's parish church in the village square is dedicated to the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, and was founded by Franciscan friars who arrived in the mid-sixteenth century with the purpose of converting the natives [Plate 3]. Every year three major events are held in honour of the patron saint. The first is held in April immediately after the conclusion of Holy Week, on the eve of the rainy season, and religious activities such as masses, rosaries and processions, and pagan celebrations like bullfights, dances and fairs take place. The second religious event celebrates the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and is held on August 15th, the date on which this invocation is honoured by Catholics. There are prayers, services and a procession in which the image is carried on the backs of the participants. The third event takes place on December 8th, the date in the liturgical calendar which marks the day of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, when her venerated image is serenaded. Worship, processions, dances and feasts also take place [Plate 4].

In addition to the festivities of the Immaculate Conception, one of the most deep rooted traditions of the Mayan inhabitants of Pomuch is the commemoration of the dead in late October and early November.

3. The ritual for the dead

3-1. *Mortuary treatment of the deceased*

After a person has died, his or her family place the body in a coffin and move it to the village cemetery located about 1 km from the main plaza and the Catholic church. Then it is placed in a niche sealed with cement[3], which may be at ground level or on a tier above several others. The body remains there for two to three years according to what the relatives decide. After that time has passed the coffin is taken out of its niche, the corpse

is removed from the cemetery and the residual soft tissue (such as skin and muscle) is removed from the body. The skeletal remains are ventilated for a few hours in order to eradicate the smell and then the bones are separated, cleaned and sprinkled with holy water while a rosary prayer is said.

Finally, the 'holy remains', as Pomuch people call them, are placed in ossuaries - wooden boxes approximately 230 cms long by 150 cms wide and 100 cms deep, specially made for this purpose. The ossuaries were originally made of stone, and it is possible to see ossuaries like these lying forgotten in cemeteries which are no longer used for the deposition of bones.

The interior of the ossuaries are lined with embroidered blankets, adorned with floral motifs in bright colours and in many cases with the name of the deceased, making it possible to read names of Mayan origin such as *Chi*, *Yam*, *Haas*, *Chan*, *Kuk*, *Ucan*, *Puc*, *Cahuich*, *Yeh*, *Dzib* and *Cocom* [Plate 5]. The bones are placed inside the ossuary in no specific order, however the skull is always on top in such way that it seems to be



Plate 5
Mayan names.
Photo: by permission of Eva Chaire, October 2013.



Plate 6
Wooden cross on top of bones.
Photo: by permission of Eva Chaire, October 2013.



Plate 7
Bones exposed at the cemetery in a family ossuary.
Photo: by permission of Eva Chaire, October 2013.



Plate 8
Cleaning and dressing the bones.
Photo: by permission of Hugo Borges, October 2014.

peering outwards. In some cases the deceased's hair, or objects such as wooden crosses are placed on top of the bones. [Plate 6]

Subsequently, the ossuaries are placed in open niches that can be individual or shared with family members, of varying architectural forms according to the taste of each family, often imitating simple chapels or miniature houses, topped by angelic figures; some of them also have a safety grid. Surrounding the ossuaries are artificial flowers, candles, or pictures of some saint or some object that was appreciated by the deceased in their lifetime. Thus the skeletal remains are displayed to both their family and all those who visit the cemetery. [Plate 7]

Every year in the last week of October, Pomuch people go to the cemetery for the ceremony of 'cleaning of the bones and changing the clothes'. The purpose of this practice is to clean (and when considered necessary, to wash) the skeletal remains and the ossuaries, changing blankets and sometimes painting the niche. During these days it is common to see the villagers gathered in the cemetery carefully attending to the remains of their dead relatives. [Plate 8]

While similar burial customs were commonly practised in other Mayan towns in the northern states of Campeche and Yucatán, in Pomuch the true essence of the celebration has remained because of the efforts made to safeguard and protect these traditions as part of their cultural heritage.

3-2. *Janal Pixan: food for the soul*

Janal Pixan are words of Mayan origin. *Janal* means 'food/stew/to eat' and *Pixan* can be translated as 'soul or spirit that gives life to a man's body', and it is the practice to offer food to the deceased at household altars. On October 31st the souls of children who visit their relatives are fed, on November 1st the adults arrive, and November 2nd is dedicated to 'All the Saints'. These days, simple household altars are installed using a table on which an embroidered blanket, candles, flowers and sometimes photos of the deceased are laid. Usually on the last day of October the prepared food will be offered first to the visiting souls. This is a practice that takes place amongst the Mayan populations throughout the Yucatán Peninsula, the states of Campeche, Quintana Roo and Yucatán.

Mrs. Leonilda Dzul and her son, Fernando Pool, citizens of Pomuch, allowed us to witness the preparation of the meal on October 31st 2012, and during the process she explained to us every step of the ritual. The main food is a great tamal called *mucpollo* (*muc* in

Mayan means 'buried'), also known as *pibipollo* (*pi* means 'oven'). *Pibipollo* is circular and measures approximately 50 cms in diameter and is 25 cms thick.

To prepare it, three principal ingredients are required. The first is freshly harvested yellow corn, also known in Mayan as *xpataan*. From the corn a *masa* (dough) is made to which salt and lard are added. The second ingredient is the lard. The third ingredient is beans, which can be of three different types: green beans, a tiny bean called *xpelon* or a large one called *tzama*. Currently, *pibipollo* is prepared with chicken, pork or other products, depending on the taste of the cooks. In order to cook the meat used in *pibipollo*, domestic turkey or chicken is prepared, but at all costs the meat of cockerels must be avoided because it 'scares the souls away'. A broth is then made using tomato, onion, garlic, sweet peppers, *habanero* peppers and spices like cumin, cloves and oregano, and anything that complements *achiote*[4].

The *masa* is molded by hand in a dish, beans or meat are added and covered with more of the same dough. Finally the *pibipollo* is wrapped in banana leaves which have been roasted beforehand to prevent them from breaking, and tied with yarn from hemp leaves that have also been roasted. This is a reminder of the ancient Mayan treatment of wrapping the dead using manufactured sisal textiles. [Plate 9]

The prepared *pibipollos* are then put into containers or pots and deposited in a hole 127 to 190 cms deep dug in the soil, into which hot stones are placed to form a hot oven. At the bottom, two parallel and perpendicular wooden planks form a grid on which several rocks are placed; afterwards a fire is lit to burn the planks completely, leaving the containers with the *pibipollos* sitting on the hot stones.

After following these steps, Mr. Pool then proceeded to draw a cross with salt and placed nine *bacales* or cobs around the containers. The cross is a Christian symbol and the nine cobs represent the nine layers of the Mayan underworld, the two traditions are blended together in one ritual and are a clear example of the religious syncretism present in Pomuch.

The containers are then completely covered with foil and earth creating a hermetic seal which will allow the *pibipollos* to cook nicely. [Plate 10] This procedure resembles the burials of the ancestors when the bodies were deposited directly into holes made in the gardens of their houses. It should also be mentioned that in Pomuch the belief is that *pibipollo* must not be cooked for someone who has been dead for less than a year on November 1st since there would be a risk of 'cooking the soul'. Finally, the *pibipollos* are unearthed from the oven and placed on the altar in preparation for the arrival of the souls of the dead.

Afterwards the 'pray-ers' arrive, women who go from house to house to pray, a service for which they are paid. Their prayers invite the deceased to enjoy the delicacies which have been lovingly prepared by their relatives as



Plate 9
The dough is wrapped in banana leaves.
Photo: Eva L. Brito, October 2012.



Plate 10
Covering the earth oven to cook the *pibipollos*.
Photo: Eva L. Brito, October 2012.

an offering to them. After the prayers are over, the members of the family proceed to eat the *pibipollos*, explaining that it is their duty to provide a portion of the succulent dish to any visitor who arrives at their home during the Day of the Dead. The meal is accompanied by a beverage made from cocoa diluted in water, another custom inherited from ancient times. The family event usually lasts all day, the celebration of the dead comes to an end and the countdown for next year's ceremony begins.

In conclusion, all the steps of the *Janal Pixan* ritual commemorate the mortuary treatment given to the dead in pre-Hispanic times. Similar to *pibipollo* which is covered with banana leaves and placed in the furnace of earth, the body of the dead was commonly wrapped with vegetable textile and then buried. The place of the dead to the ancient Maya was a dark and humid place, like the underground layer where the food has cooked.

This cultural tradition thus becomes an annual ritual of remembrance and recreates the fate of all human beings. However, for the people of Pomuch, the tie with their relatives is not a temporary event but a way to maintain eternal coexistence.

4. Conclusion

In Mexico the Day of the Dead is celebrated throughout the country, but mostly in the regions where indigenous people live and where the essence and symbolism of the rituals survive. There are regional variations in the burial customs as a result of the social and cultural context of each region. Pomuch is a village of Mayan origin located in the state of Campeche, South-east Mexico, where the inhabitants are farmers and practising Catholics. Among its most deep-rooted traditions two major cultural manifestations stand out: the celebrations for the holy patron of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary and the cult of the dead through rituals in honour of the loved ones they have lost.

The celebration of the dead takes place in late October and early November, dates whose origin in Catholic ritual comes from the year 835 when 'All Saints' were celebrated on the first day of November, while the feast of 'All Souls' on November 2nd originated in monasteries during the XIII century as the commemoration of the 'Souls in Purgatory'. These Christian elements are fused with ancient traditions of pre-Hispanic origin, such as the ritual of *Janal Pixan* and its meaning related to the ancient mortuary treatment of the dead that results in a religious syncretism with particular traits that are clearly evident in Pomuch's burial practices. When the Mayan people of the village wish to visit the one that they have lost, they simply go to the cemetery to establish direct contact with them through their skeletal remains. Through this action they can maintain an eternal coexistence with their beloved ones.

Of greatest importance is how the inhabitants have preserved their customs until today, while other surrounding towns have been losing similar burial practices over time. The preservation of this tradition can be explained as a form of cultural resistance, because it is their way of differentiating themselves from other communities, following traditions that have been transmitted from generation to generation for over four centuries.

This kind of cultural phenomenon is interpreted by the specialist Guillermo Bonfil (1987) in his work *El México profundo: una civilización negada* (Deep Mexico: a civilization denied), in which he writes that the villages and small towns of Mexico continually create and recreate their culture, following a cycle of collective traditions that represent a way of expressing and renewing their identity.

In the specific case of the village of Pomuch, Mayan descendants maintain direct contact with their loved ones by displaying their bones to all, and each year caring for, cleaning and clothing their remains, a tradition which becomes a form of eternal coexistence between the living and the dead. These traditions constitute intangible cultural heritage of great value, of both a local and regional nature, which is worthy of diffusion throughout the world.

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ENDNOTES

1. He was called 'El Mozo' because he was the son of Francisco de Montejo, who, in 1527, was authorised by King Carlos V to conquer the Yucatán, and was given the titles of 'Advanced', 'Governor' and 'General Captain'. These titles were inherited by his son in 1535.
2. The origin of the parcels of land in the peninsula of Yucatán can be found in the celebrated *Capitulations* of December 8th 1526 between the Spanish monarch, Carlos V, and Francisco de Montejo, in Granada.
3. The niches in which the coffins are placed are made of cement and are usually at ground level because in the Yucatán peninsula the bedrock is close to the surface making the excavation of graves difficult.
4. *Achiote* is a spice of yellowish-red colour obtained from the seed of the achiote bush. Its botanical name is *Bixa Orellana.*

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