

Corn and Maya Time

The Sun Above, the Sun Below

Narrator: In our Maya communities, many festivities are celebrated throughout the year. Day of the Holy Cross and Day of the Dead are linked to astronomy and to our legacy as expert watchers of the sky.

Our ancestors observed and recorded two important astronomical events, the zenith and nadir passages of the Sun. Day of the Holy Cross is connected with the zenith, and Day of the Dead is connected with the nadir.

Alonso Méndez: So they divided the calendar year in two halves, one half dedicated to life and growth and the other half dedicated to death and the Underworld. The first cycle dedicated to Sun and the zenith and the second cycle we now know is associated to the Sun and the Underworld which is the center of the Underworld. This is the polar opposite of the zenith passage.

Narrator: During the zenith passage, when the Sun can be observed directly overhead at mid-day; the shadows of vertical objects disappear. In the ancient Maya city of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatán, the zenith passage can be observed by watching the shadows disappear under hundreds of columns.

During the nadir passage, the Sun is directly underfoot at midnight, and thus cannot be directly observed. The ancient Maya however, were able to track the nadir passage indirectly by constructing buildings and temples that align with the Sun at sunrise and sunset on that day.

Maya communities celebrate Day of the Holy Cross on May third. On this day, crosses are decorated and then hung outside our homes and throughout the town. This is also the day when the Sun passes through its zenith at the latitude of the oldest Maya cities.

Alonso Méndez: Today, still there are groups that practice and observe the dates of the zenith passage in the ceremonies of the Day of the Cross which take place on the third of May every year.

Narrator: November brings the arrival of the nadir passage of the Sun and Day of the Dead. We build altars using the portraits of our beloved departed, water, candles, and traditional foods for the spirits of our ancestors.

The town of Santiago Sacatepéquez in Guatemala holds a unique Day of the Dead festival featuring a competition of giant kites at the cemetery.

Salomón Itzol: The kite festival has a long history that goes back hundreds of years and comes from our grandparents. From when I was a young child, the kites have been flying, and I was taught how to make the kites. According to the history told by our elders, the kites enable the communication between the living and the dead, primarily on this date.

Narrator: Families clean and decorate the tombs with flowers and pine wreaths.

Leonza Chikops: The day before we purchase the flowers and we make the wreaths, then the next day we come and place the flowers on the dearly departed. Yes, this is our tradition.

Narrator: Throughout the day a crowd of excited spectators comes to the cemetery to watch the kite competition. The giant kites, built by local youth, are propped up on the cemetery grounds and measure up to 65 feet, or 20 meters, in diameter.

People also fly kites of all sizes and colors, and they write messages to their departed family members on the tails of these kites.

The Day of the Holy Cross and the Day of the Dead, are among the traditions that continue to affirm the teachings of our grandparents, connecting us with our ancestors, and honoring our relationship with the land and the sky.