

# In Janitzio Death is not Scary

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In Mexico, in a lake called Patzcuaro, there is a little island called Janitzio. 2350 meters above sea level a stunning landscape opens up before visitors: tranquil waters, mountains, torturous slopes, a sky so close you can almost touch it with a finger. Descendants of a proud race, the Tarascan Indians did battle against the Spanish conquistadors. They were beaten, and they adopted the Christian religion of the invader: but the saints whom they revere have kept the character of ancient divinities: the Sun, the Water, the Fire and the Moon. The Tarascanos are skilled in leatherworking and woodcarving, silversmithing and weaving wool. They are just as good fishermen. When they haul in their nets (strange things that look like huge butterflies) they are always swarming with fish. And although they are hard workers nowadays, the Tarascans remain very primitive. Indeed they consider life a transitional state, a brief moment that we must pass through to reach the blessing of death. Death no longer means an inevitable doom but on the contrary is considered a good, the only good thing whose value cannot be calculated. This is why the Day of the Dead is not a day of sorrow for the inhabitants of Janitzio. The party kicks off early in the morning. The houses are decorated for the festival and all the images of the saints are decorated with lace and paper flowers. The portraits of the dead are displayed and lit up with dozens of candles. The women cook the favorite meals of their dead relatives so they will be satisfied when they come back to see the living.

In the cemetery behind the church the graves are also decorated, which, very often, are without names. There are no funeral inscriptions in Janitzio! But the dead are not forgotten. The road from the cemetery to the village is completely covered with flower petals so that the dead can easily find their way home.

The women of Janitzio are beautiful on the Day of the Dead. They comb out their long dark braids and put on silver jewelry. The costume consists of a long red skirt, with wide pleats, fringed in black. The embroidered blouse disappears under the rebozo, which covers the head and shoulders, and out of which often pokes the little head of their newest born child. At midnight the women all go together to the cemetery and kneel to pray for their dead loved ones. They light up the candles, the biggest in honor of the adults and the smallest for those who left this "vale of tears" too early. Then they give themselves up to meditation, which little by little translates into speech. Thus begins the litany which is not one of sorrow, but which expresses the communion between the living and the dead.

Meanwhile the men left in the village gather to drink near the church where a black catafalque has been built, dedicated to the dead who no longer have anyone to pray for them. They go back home at dawn, while their wives

who have kept vigil all night long at the cemetery go to Mass half-hidden in their rebozos. This is how the Day of the Dead goes down in Janitzio. On the face of the villagers one reads no sadness but only the joyous expectation of someone awaiting a visit from their nearest and dearest.

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We have taken this article from an Italian children's comic just as it is and under its own title. It is one of countless rehashes of U.S. "cultural" production which pass from tabloid to tabloid and from review to review without the hacks in service noticing anything other than the degree of effect of each piece that circulates. This umpteenth copycat has not even dreamt of the deeper meaning that its diffusion hides, albeit in a conventionally conformist guise.

The noble Mexican population, having become Catholic under the merciless terror of the Spanish invaders, would show that they have remained "primitive" by not being terrified and horrified of death.

These peoples are, however, the heirs of a civilization misunderstood by Christians then and now and transmitted from ancient communism. Insuper modern individualism can only be flabbergasted by it, especially in this dull text where we read that graves are unmarked and that dishes are prepared even for those dead who no one remembers. True "unknown dead," not because a sluggish, demagogic rhetoric says so but through the powerful simplicity of a life which is of the species and for the species, eternal like nature and not like a stupid swarm of souls wandering in the "beyond" for whose development the experiences of the dead, the living, and the as yet unborn are valid, in an historical sequence whose unfolding is not mourning but joy in all the moments of the material cycle.

Even in what they symbolize, these customs are nobler than ours. For example, these women who make themselves beautiful for the dead and not for the richest of the living, as in our mercantile society, this sewer in which we are immersed.

If under the guise of the squalid Catholic saints the most ancient form of a not-inhuman divinity, like the Sun, continues to live, this brings to mind what knowledge we have — all too often a travesty! — of the Incan civilization that Marx admired. It is not that they were primitive and ferocious enough to sacrifice the most beautiful specimens of their young to the Sun who cried out for human blood, but that such a community, magnificent and powerfully intuitive, recognised the flow of life in that same energy which the Sun radiates on the planet and which flows through the arteries of a living man, and which becomes unity and love in the whole species, which, until it falls into the superstition of an individual soul with its sanctimonious balance sheet of give and take, the superstructure of monetary venality, does not fear death and knows personal

death as nothing other than a hymn of joy and a fecund contribution to the life of humanity.

In natural and primitive communism, even though humanity is conceived within the limits of the horde, the individual does not aim to subtract wealth from his brother but rather is willing to be sacrificed without the slightest fear for the survival of the great *phratry*.<sup>1</sup> Idiotic conventional wisdom sees this as the terror of a God who must be placated with blood.

In the form of exchange, of money, and of class, the species' sense of permanence [*perennità*] disappears, and what is ignoble in the continued existence [*perennità*] of private property increases. This is translated into the immortality of the soul which contracts for happiness outside of nature with the usurer-god who runs this vile bank. In these societies which pretend to be raised from barbarism to civilization we live in dread of personal death and lie prostrate before mummies, like the mausoleum in Moscow, with its infamous history.

In communism, which has not yet happened but which remains a scientific certainty, the identity of the individual and his fate with their species is re-won, after destroying within it all the limits of family, race, and nation. This victory puts an end to all fear of personal death and with it every cult of the living and the dead, society being organized for the first time around well-being and joy and the reduction of sorrow, suffering, and sacrifice to a rational minimum, removing every mysterious and sinister character from the harmonious course of the succession of generations, a natural condition of the prosperity of the species.

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<sup>1</sup> In ancient Greece, a *phratry* was a social division within the Greek system of tribes.