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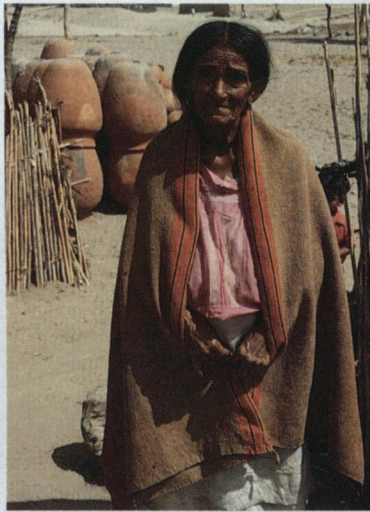


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# DAY OF THE DEAD

by James M. Vreeland, Jr



*A woman from Mórrope stands in the village cemetery where she will prepare a feast for the soul of her deceased husband following ancient Moche customs.*

Scholars have learned much about Moche tomb architecture, burial paraphernalia, and mortuary practices from the spectacular unlooted tombs recently discovered in northern Peru. From both the rich assortment of tomb offerings and elaborate representations of burial scenes on pottery, it is clear that the Moche believed in an afterlife in which many worldly possessions had a distinct place and function. In fact, so many kinds of objects were buried with the dead that many items had to be crafted in miniature simply because there was not enough room for them within the adobe tombs.

Among the most common objects found in Moche burials are votive vessels crafted out of clay, wood, and precious metals. Many of these are in the shape of fruits, vegetables, and domesticated animals. Other grave goods include amulets in the form of animals and insects and sheets of metal hammered into shapes of parts of the human body. The vessels may have contained food, drink, and other perishable offerings for consumption by the deceased in the afterlife. They were probably placed around and inside the burial chamber by family members and social peers during a mortuary ceremony or during annual celebrations commemorating the individual's death. Because practices such as these cannot be reconstructed from the material evidence alone, archaeologists often look for similar practices in traditional societies.

Since 1982 I have lived and worked among peasant

communities of the northern coast, where I have participated in dozens of fiestas that clearly share cultural affiliations with the ancient Moche. The central and almost mystical importance of ancient burial practices are most evident in the traditional Indian village of Mórrope, lying on the desert coast about 500 miles north of Lima.

It is the Day of the Dead when Mórrope comes most alive. Sons, daughters, friends, and relatives return for nearly a week of feasting, drinking, storytelling, and networking while congregating to pay respects to the souls of the dead. An otherwise sparsely populated town of a few dozen families swells to accommodate more than 15,000 visitors, virtually all of whom trace their descent from one or another of those buried in the town's overcrowded and very old *panteon*, or cemetery. Small chapels inside the cemetery often contain human long bones and skulls representing the physical presence of the deceased. Indians light candles inside and at the foot of the graves of their ancestors while they share news of the family and important local events with their ancestors or dead family members.

Liturgical services are held in Mórrope's *ramada*, a chapel built in the 1560s by Indian craftsmen at the request of a Spanish friar. The thick, low-walled adobe architecture, lack of internal lighting, massive carob-log roof construction, and seven-stepped, pyramid-like altar resemble in design and function the Prehispanic temples built atop massive platform mounds like those at San José de Moro and Sipán.

The mile-long road between the ramada and the panteon is lined with hundreds of vendors in makeshift stalls dispensing food, drink, and *ofrendas*, small votive offerings in the shape of household objects, fruit, domesticated animals, and parts of the body, that the living will take to the dead. Many of the stalls are constructed with traditional blankets woven out of native cotton in natural shades of brown and mauve.

At the tombs, the eldest woman of the household directs the installation of a *posada*, or tent, under which family members and friends will congregate during the night-long vigil with the *animas*, the souls of the deceased. Passers-by who are found to resemble the deceased are bid to stop for a moment at the posada to share the repast, which, through the look-alike, is thought to go straight to the stomach of the deceased. Even a pale-face, like myself, wandering about trying to take notes and not be noticed, was invited to enjoy a plate of sweet potatoes and a gourd bowl of corn beer. It wasn't long before I, too, began to feel that I had roots among the contemporary Moche. ■