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The *Table of the Dead* at the celebration of the deceased in the Ecuadorian Coastal Lowlands region

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Abstract

Ecuador is considered a multi-ethnic and multicultural country. It has several celebrations that are part of its traditions. One of these celebrations is the feast of All Souls Day, commemorated in a different way in the four regions of the country. In the coastal lowlands region, especially in the province of Santa Elena, the Tugaduja community performs a ritual called the *Table of the Dead*, which consists of displaying various foods that the deceased relatives loved. The objective of this article is to describe the elaboration of this ritual from the ethnographic point of view, for which in-depth interviews and observation cards were used. The *Table of the Dead* is held 2 days a year, on one occasion for dead children and on the other for dead adults. The festive meals that can never be absent from the table are roasted sweet potato, dead man's bread, corn custard, and goat stew. This social, ritual and festive use contributes to the dialog and respect between the different cultures and communities of Ecuador.

Keywords: All Souls Day, Celebration, Culture, Table of the Dead, Food, Heritage

Introduction

Death is undoubtedly a painful circumstance for the human species, especially for close relatives. Unfortunately, death is indissoluble to existence. Thus, social structures are important to commemorate this event through funeral rites that encompass ceremonial customs that have been transmitted by their ancestors. In general, food and drink, as well as the deceased's belongings are key elements that are usually present in these celebrations.

In this sense, every year is celebrated the arrival of the souls of the deceased, of these loved ones who have departed from this life, and although they are not living in this earthly sphere, they are present in another [1]. All this in the cultural context—traditional, festive, massive, and family nature, and that is holder of the immense

ritual wealth between a great variety of peoples, cultures, and ethnicities, being for all these groups a sacred time [2].

Thus, the Bondo tribe from India, in a funeral ceremony, they have the ritual of burning of their dead people, and on the third day, in the same place where they were burned, a cup made of a leaf called “Dana” is placed with some food because they have the belief that the spirit of the dead person is close to consume food [3].

It is also believed that the Celts celebrated the feast of Samhain in honor of the harvests and the coming of the new year. Their elementary primitivism and enduring legacy to the Halloween feast, particularly related to omens, propitiations, and links to the other world, are emphasized [4]. It is notorious that the human species has been able to maintain a continuous relationship with its deceased loved one through visualization, imagination, and dreams [5].

In addition, human beings have created rituals that allow them to maintain ties with the deceased, such as memorials and anniversary celebrations [6]. In England,

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in the Middle Ages, in the postmortem commemoration, food was given as a gift, with emphasis on community, commensality (time shared at eating time) with neighbors and parishioners, and even where there was nothing declared in a will, executors often considered it their duty to finance food for the funeral, for the mass of the month and for the anniversary [7]. All of these rituals help family members to have the courage to continue their lives and perform the tasks entrusted to them [8].

In Mexico, to celebrate the dead, there is one of the undoubtedly most peculiar, popular, widespread, and deeply rooted traditional holidays, as well as being a popular tourist attraction that has been studied by [1, 9–14], and others. Thus, in the state of Puebla, specifically the city of Cholula, children participate as observers of this Day of the Dead celebration. The parents and grandparents of the children believe that in this way they acquire the skills and knowledge to preserve their culture in their adult life. It is not considered a time of sadness, on the contrary, they see it as an instant of joy because their loved ones return home to share with them. For this, an altar is prepared in their honor where a banquet awaits them. Aromatic flowers are scattered in the place which provide a smell that guides the dead to the altar, where they will find the favorite foods of the dead, photos, fruits, dead bread, candles, water, salt, incense, and if it is the case of a dead child, their favorite toys are placed [15].

The celebration of the dead in the Andean region has its particularities and coincidences. The special conjunction is the arrival of the rains, so the mother earth recovers its fertility and beauty [2]. A particularity is the festivity of the day of the dead in the town of Coipasi, Bolivia. Here, they combine the incorporation of dynamic cultural factors (alternative rites) and the conservatism of tradition. The *Todos los Santos* festival is celebrated during the first 4 days of November, although the first and second are the most important days. November 1st is the day chosen by the evangelicals to remember their dead, unlike the Catholics who are already in full festivity and getting ready for the following days [16].

Likewise, the celebration of the Day of the Dead in the locality of San Pedro de Atacama takes place around the table for the dead, which is placed in the living room of the house, which is the largest room where a table covered with a white tablecloth is placed, the cross is brought from the cemetery that has previously been blessed in a Catholic mass and taken to be placed on the altar table [17].

In the same way, the Otavalo indigenous community, in the province of Imbabura, Ecuador, celebrates the Day of the Dead, rooted in their ancestral belief with the adaptation of Catholicism. The celebration takes place on November 2nd of each year. Very early in the morning, the community massively attends the cemetery,

dressed in their best attire, and as a family; they clean the weeds from the grave and settle around the tomb to share food [18].

There is no doubt that all these cultural manifestations depend on geographic determinism. Therefore, the celebrations in each locality are carried out with materials offered by their territory. The most common inputs are flowers, tablecloths, ornaments, candles, photographs of the deceased, festive foods, and drinks. This cosmovision establishes dialog and promotes respect among the different communities, instilling pride and identity.

Thus, the Day of the Dead in Ecuador is a manifestation of ethnic and cultural diversity. It reveals the story of their practices and beliefs. In addition, it is directly related to the agricultural cycle of the community [19, 20].

With what has been described above, it is important to highlight and safeguard these social practices that are part of the intangible cultural heritage. Preservation is the immortalization of living and designed things. It is a channel for transmitting messages from the past to the future. The primary challenge of preservation lies in finding niches in the past that can be maintained in the future [21]. Likewise, “preservation ensures that tangible and intangible cultural resources are preserved for future generations” ([22] p. 1).

Kwon [23] mentions that the new era began with cultural growth and economic expansion. In the twenty-first century, each country secures its national identity and its excellent and unique cultural value by focusing on cultural education to suggest a new perspective for the future. Ott et al. [24] consider that education plays an important role in ensuring a future for these endangered habits, customs, and practices. On the same analysis, Pozzi et al. [25] point out that, following UNESCO’s recommendations, efforts have been made in the field of conservation, through projects carried out by organizations in partnership with national governments, but they are still very limited. There are still major deficiencies and gaps in academic research on the communicative effects of intangible cultural heritage [26].

It is important to recognize that heritage is part of the intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation and systematically reproduced by communities and groups according to their environment, giving them a sense of identity and continuity, thus helping to promote respect for cultural diversity and human creativity [27]. It is emphasized that despite its fragility, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of increasing globalization [28].

In Ecuador, the National Institute of Cultural Heritage (INPC) is the public body responsible for researching, regulating, advising, and promoting sectoral heritage management policies for the preservation, conservation,

and appropriation of tangible and intangible heritage. In spite of the fact that in its Ecuadorian Cultural Heritage Information System (SIPCE), there are records related to the celebration of the dead and the *Table of the Dead*, more detailed information on this social use, ritual, and festive act is needed to be distributed to the educational community and to society in general.

Therefore, this article analyzes the current moment of the elaboration of the *Table of the Dead* at the celebration of the day of the deceased in the Tugaduaja community, in the province of Santa Elena, Ecuador (Fig. 1). It is an ethnographic description of the activities they carry out in the feast of the deceased. The remembrance towards the loved ones who have died, has made possible the creation of different customs that identify this locality. The elaboration of food is one of the main activities that the families develop, especially the foods that those who have left the earthly life liked. The readings that arose through coexistence and daily practice among the inhabitants allowed to configure the relationship between the dead and the living and try to explain the importance of food in terms of its preparation, the generosity in the exchange of meals, and

the spiritual connection that represents the table of the dead for the inhabitants of the community.

The Table of the Dead

The *Table of the Dead* is a traditional ritual that takes place in the province of Santa Elena, on the Ecuadorian coast. This customary celebration takes place on November 1st and 2nd of each year as part of the feast of the deceased or also called *Día de los Difuntos* (Day of the Dead). Day one is dedicated to deceased children (Fig. 2). The second day is for dead adults. According to the interview with the Vice President of the Tugaduaja commune (Mirna Suárez 2018, oral communication, 1 November), it is a tradition that forms part of the identity and pride of the inhabitants of the Ecuadorian coast, especially the Tugaduaja community.

The ritual in this community begins days in advance. Every family that has a deceased relative begins with the provision of food. They leave the community towards the capital of the province (Santa Elena), to buy food that is not found in the village. On this occasion, the Suarez family has gone with the aim of buying yellow

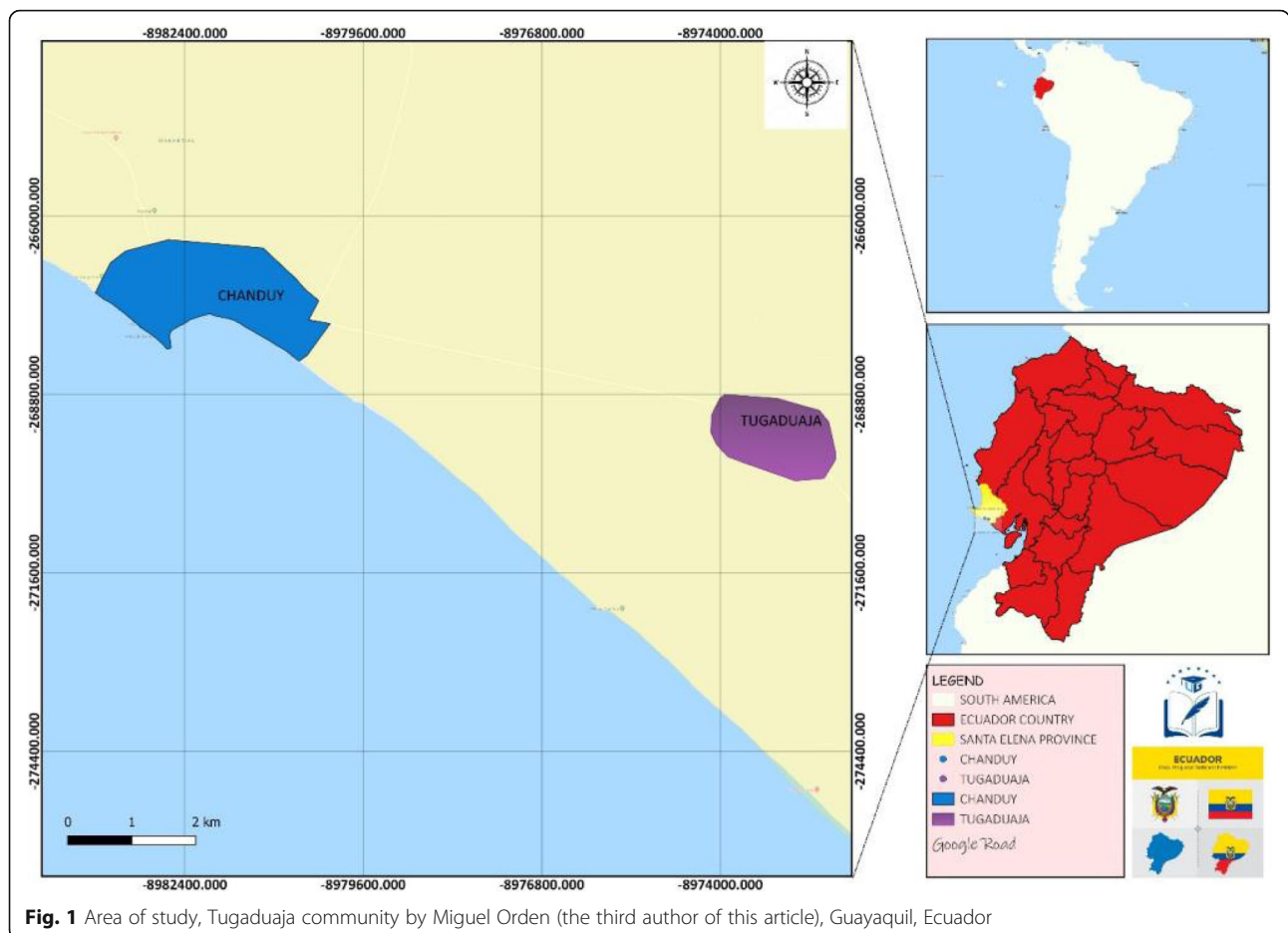


Fig. 1 Area of study, Tugaduaja community by Miguel Orden (the third author of this article), Guayaquil, Ecuador



Fig. 2 *Table of the Dead* dedicated to deceased children, courtesy of Karen Moreno, Babahoyo, Ecuador

corn and other provisions that are not found in local stores. So, they get ready for one of the most important celebrations of the year.

On day one, the families get up early to prepare and cook meals that their children liked. Among the foods are anthropomorphic breads, biscuits, corn custard (which is a dessert prepared with corn), rice pudding with chocolate, fried banana, jelly, juices, and fruits. The food and drinks are placed on a table, offered to their loved ones who have moved on to the afterlife.

The second of November is intended for deceased adults (Fig. 3). Families get up early and start all the preparations and cooking of the food their relatives preferred, in the same way as they did on the first. Meals and drinks are prepared on a table covered with a white tablecloth. The most common foods are corn custard, rice pudding with chocolate, roasted sweet potato, salt bread, sweet bread, shrimp ceviche, baked pork, dry



Fig. 3 *Table of the Dead* offered to deceased adults, courtesy of Dessireth Moreira, Babahoyo, Ecuador

goat, rice with chicken, *guineos* (ripe bananas), apples, avocado, black coffee, soda, and even alcoholic beverages such as beer and aguardiente. It is usual for this table to be placed in the room where the deceased person slept.

Ethnic perspective

In a conversation with Juanito Apolinario, President of the commune (November 1, 2018). The inhabitants of this place have inherited this custom from past generations. The living honors the memory of their dead relatives with the elaboration of varied delicacies. Food is the best link between the earthly world and the beyond.

The tasks are divided; the grandmother commands the activities in the kitchen while daughters and granddaughters help in the preparation and cooking of the meals. In the meantime, the boys do other work that requires greater strength. One of these activities is the production cycle of lime for cooking and peeling corn. In addition, the man washes and grinds the cereal to a very fine dough. This raw material is the basis for making the traditional sweet corn. This dish cannot be absent from the dead table.

On these holidays, in addition to waiting for the dead, relatives who live in other parts of the country visit. Together, they make a common fund of money to buy the raw materials that will be part of the meals of this celebration. The joy of seeing their loved ones and making saucers together for the dead man's table is a sign of fraternity and affection.

History of the *Table of the Dead*

Apparently, the ceremonialism associated with the dead is an inheritance of the Las Vegas culture, ancient inhabitants of this territory. Stothert et al. [29] indicate that "the intensification of both fishing and agriculture may have ensured the development of ceremonial activities, the building of alliances and reciprocal exchange" (p 39). Las Vegas funeral ceremonialism indicates that people invested more time and effort in community social activities. Families developed integration mechanisms, including mortuary rituals inferred from Las Vegas tombs [29]. Ceremonial gatherings involve both the consumption of special foods and the giving of food as a gift [30].

In the Lovers of Sumpa Museum, in the city of Santa Elena, ritual practices developed by the cultures that inhabited this territory are exhibited. The museum guide (Génesis Suarez 2019, oral communication, 10 July) explains that they unearthed the dead to paint some of their bones. To perform this ritual, they used stones, charcoal, or lime. The living also painted stripes on their faces, arms, and legs. This practice symbolizes magical protection for the souls of the deceased and the living. According to Stothert [31], the tradition of worshipping the dead is confirmed by the discovery of burials at the

OGSE 80 archeological site in the current territory of the province of Santa Elena. The burials found human bones, spoon-shaped shells, pebbles rubbed with red pigment, round stones, flattened stones, traces of red pigment, shells of mollusks, shells of snails perforated as if they were containers, canine teeth of peccaries and foxes, flat stones similar to a grinding stone, stones of marine beach, and so on. It could be said that these ceremonial practices were of vital importance to worship their dead.

The study *Commemoration of the Dead in the Ecuadorian Sierra*, carried out by Hartmann in 1973, found similar practices in the Ecuadorian highlands. For example, it is mentioned that ([32] p. 193):

Regarding the pre-Hispanic tradition of commemorating the dead, Spanish chroniclers report that in the Inca calendar, an entire month was scheduled for solemn mortuary ceremonies. According to the interpretation of some authors, this month, known as “ayamarcai” (to carry or to transport corpses) in Quechua, corresponds to the month of October, according to others, to the month of November of our calendar ([33] p. 59 [34]; p. 256).

With the arrival of the Spaniards, the celebration held on the first and second of November of each year coincides with the dates consecrated for the dead by the Catholic Church in the seventh century. The church incorporated traditional European harvest time festivals into its calendar. Pagan elements can still be seen in several European celebrations [35]. New foreign manifestations of death cults and ceremonies for the dead also contributed to the character of celebrations in Latin America, which combine Spanish and indigenous Catholic religious beliefs and customs that, in many ways, are opposed to each other [35, 36].

The Indian often remembers his deceased relatives and relatives, his concern for the salvation of their souls and his eternal rest is reflected in the prayers and responses he commissions, as well as in the masses celebrated for the souls of the deceased. This intimate relationship that exists between the living and the dead is manifestly evident on the occasion of the Day of All Souls or Deceased people ([32] p. 180.)

In the book “*Así fue mi crianza*,” by Lindao and Stothert, in which the author, a native of Chanduy Parrish, recounts memories from throughout his life and especially from 1930 to 1968, the traditional rural life of the sector is described, with a special interest in his grandparents. It explains how the *Table of the Dead* was prepared at the celebration of the dead or any saint, as they were called at that time [37].

Symbolism of the *Table of the Dead*

Setting the *Table of the Dead* is an opportunity to receive relatives who left the material world. It is a

connection between the living and the dead. Nostalgia and affection are translated into the production of food and drink, arranged on a table. It is a way of letting people know that the family does not forget their loved ones.

In the SIPCE, on one of the occasions of the Day of the Dead celebration in the Colonche parish, in the province of Santa Elena, the following communication by the archeologist Karen Stothert is included:

The inhabitants of Santa Elena have worshipped their dead since the time of the Las Vegas culture, that is to say that 8000 years ago they were already concerned about having the dead with them within their community or home as part of their identity, and this ancient tradition spread throughout America. It is part of the widespread belief that all the welfare we need to live comes from the ancestors, and that to maintain the cycle of life, the living must maintain the flow of communication with the dead; that implies feeding the dead in order to receive rain, fertility and well-being (Stothert, Karen, personal communication from the technician of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage of Ecuador in July 2009) [38].

For the inhabitants of the Tugaduaja commune, this celebration has a sacred meaning. They prepare the *Table of the Dead* for their dead relatives to come and eat. Their relatives say they hear noises or see shadows around the table. That means they have come to taste the prepared delicacies. At that time, no one should interrupt the ceremony. There are even families who place a curtain around the table. Respect, love, and nostalgia remain in their families.

Muerteo

Muerteo is the name that the inhabitants of the communities of Santa Elena have created to refer to the action of visiting the houses that have prepared the *Table of the Dead*. It consists of tasting foods and drinks that the host offers. The houses are filled with visitors, and all lend themselves to enjoying the food, in memory of the deceased.

On November 1st, the children prepare themselves, dress elegantly, take a plastic or cloth bag and go out to visit the different houses where they have decorated the *Table of the Dead*. In the main door, in unison they recite in Spanish, “Angels we are from heaven, we come, we ask for bread.” The hosts welcome them and ask them to enter their house. Some hosts pray in the company of visitors, then offer them food and drink. The children eat the meals and keep the leftovers in their bags; they appreciate the courtesy, say goodbye, and move on to the next house [39].

November 2nd is the day dedicated to adults who have died. Family members, in the same way, gather very early

in the morning to make the different meals that their loved ones liked. Corn custard has a special meaning so it can never be absent in the *Table of the Dead*. To elaborate this delicacy takes a few days, due to the process of peeling, cooking, and milling of the corn. The cooking takes place the day before. The rest of the meals are ready around midday. Then, they prepare to wait for the visitors, who begin the *muerteo* around two o'clock in the afternoon. In the same way, when they arrive at some house, they mention "we are angels, from heaven we come, we ask for bread." This is how they get ready to walk from house to house, eating and drinking whatever the hosts offer. The villagers tell us that some *muerteos* end at eleven or twelve o'clock at night.

In the past, *muerteo*, also called "we are Angels," often ended in dances, because the liquor was consumed and was presented at the *Table of the Dead*. Many times, people were drinking and dancing until dawn on the third day of November. This is how it was celebrated in olden times [37].

In that sense, the cordiality of the inhabitants of Tugaduaja makes visitors feel welcome. All the affection placed in the elaboration of food is translated in the generosity that the hosts have with own and strangers. These days, people from neighboring communities and other parts of the coast arrive ready to *muertear*.

Traditional meals at the *Table of the Dead*

The celebration of the deceased in this sector is a customary activity that honors the dead by offering a variety of food and drinks. In the days leading up to it, they stock up on raw materials and begin preparations for this traditional event. Each house that has a dead relative makes the favorite meals of the deceased.

The *Table of the Dead* differs depending on the preferences the relative had in life. The banquet may consist of *ceviches*, soups, rice, noodles, sweets, bread, fruit, fruit juices, and even alcoholic beverages such as *chicha*, beer, or spirits. The festive foods that cannot be forgotten are the roasted sweet potato, dead man's bread, corn custard, and goat stew.

Dead man's bread

Dead man's bread is a festive food, present on the day of the dead. Families that have an oven come together to develop this product. Another option is to ask the village baker to do it for them. In the past, this bread was baked in a clay oven, but today it is no longer used, due to the appearance of gas ovens (Fig. 4).

The ingredients for dead man's bread are as follows: 3000 g of wheat flour, 80 g of yeast, 210 g of sugar, 250 g of egg, salt to taste, 1350 ml of water, and 10 g of butter.



Fig. 4 Dead man's bread by Efrén Silva (the first author of this article), Guayaquil, Ecuador

Preparation

Place flour on a table; add yeast, sugar, egg, salt, water, butter; knead for 1 h; leave dough to sit for about 30 min; remove 80-g portions; place in wood oven and cook for 30 to 45 min.

Corn custard

It is a festive dish that is made and consumed in the celebration of the deceased. It is also known as *dulce de maíz*. The process is prolonged because the corn is cooked with lime mollusks such as oysters or snails, for subsequent peeling and grinding. According to the popular wisdom of the inhabitants of this sector, the corn custard should not be consumed hot. It should be left to cool so that it does not cause any stomach discomfort. Once ready, it is placed on trays and then on the table of the dead (Fig. 5).

Preparation of lime

According to Damp [40], who conducted archeological studies in the province of Santa Elena, "forty-four percent of the shells found around the Valdivia I houses in Real Alto were made of *Erithidea pulchra*, a snail that was not edible, but is a good source of limestone, which was probably used in the preparation of corn as food" [p. 72].

It is assumed that this knowledge associated with the production of inputs to improve the characteristics of maize is very old and has been maintained over time, although, in this community of a thousand inhabitants, only one family makes this lime.

Processing begins with the collection of shells (oysters) and dried manure from cattle. The manure that will serve as fuel is placed on the ground. The shells are placed above the first layer; in this way, they alternate until a kind of mound is formed, which covers the shells



Fig. 5 Corn custard by Efrén Silva (the first author of this article), Guayaquil, Ecuador

of the mollusk. The inhabitants of this sector prefer this fuel because it burns slowly, around 3 h, allowing the shells to cook completely. When the indicated time has passed, the hot shells are placed in a wooden drawer. The shells are bathed in water, covered with a kitchen tablecloth, left to rest, and finally dried in the sun (Fig. 6).

The ingredients for corn custard are as follows: 2 kg of ground yellow corn (peeled with lime), 5 l of syrup with

sweet spices (cinnamon sticks, sweet pepper, clove), 2 kg of powdered milk, and 200 g of raisins.

Preparation

To peel the corn, place the dried yellow corn in a pot with water and oyster or other mollusk lime. Boil for 2 to 3 h. Let cool, scrub, and wash to remove the outer layer of corn and excess lime. Grind several times until a very fine dough is obtained.

In another pot, make the syrup with the sweet spices. Leave to cool. Once cold, gradually add to the corn dough and stir. Pass this mixture through a fine sieve. Add the powdered milk, mix well. Once mixed, cook the mixture over low heat, stirring constantly so that it does not burn. Cooking takes about an hour. The sweet is ready when it has curdled into a delicate consistency, similar to a flan. Decorate with raisins (Fig. 7).

Goat stew

This dish is prepared and consumed in special celebrations such as baptisms, marriages, and on the Day of the Dead. It consists of goat meat cooked in a refried onion, green pepper, tomato, cilantro, and passion fruit juice or *chicha*. It is served with yellow rice and plantain.

Goat breeding is another activity inherited from previous generations. The farms of Santa Elena and Chanduy (the head of the parish of the Tugadua community) were very important in colonial times for the provision of meat for the *Corregimiento* de Guayaquil [41]. It would be believed that this activity has been carried out since those times, due to the fact that the goat is not native to these lands (Fig. 8).

The ingredients for goat stew are as follows: 2 lb of goat meat, 1 tomato, 1 red onion, one half green pepper, salt, cumin, *achiote* (annatto seeds), 1 passion fruit, beer (optional), 2 tablespoons Peruvian pepper, and *hierbita* (fresh cilantro).



Fig. 6 Preparation of oyster lime. **1** Manure and shells placed on the ground. **2** A kind of mound is formed. **3** Shells bathed in water and covered with a kitchen tablecloth. **4** Lime powder, by Efrén Silva (the first author of this article), Guayaquil, Ecuador



Fig. 7 Suárez family in the preparation of corn custard by Efrén Silva (the first author of this article), Guayaquil, Ecuador

Preparation

Clean the goat meat, remove the fibers. Cut into portions, set aside. Chop and fry with half the vegetables. Blend the other half. Mix the meat with the refried meat, salt, pepper, annatto, and the liquefied vegetables. Cook all the above ingredients until the meat is tender. Blend the passion fruit with the Peruvian pepper. Strain, add to the preparation, and boil for 10 min. At the end, add the finely chopped herbs.

Food consumption

The large quantities of food produced are kept in the pots on the stoves to remain hot, refrigerated, or at room temperature, depending on the type of food.



Fig. 8 Goat stew by Efrén Silva (the first author of this article), Guayaquil, Ecuador

Family members gather around the stove and dining room to eat the foods they want most. The completion of the arduous task in memory of their loved ones fills them with much satisfaction.

After consuming the food with family and friends, they prepare to receive the visitors. These can be people known from the community, or strangers from other places. Anyone is welcome to this food festival. Generally, each family prepares more than five different meals. They are dispatched, as visitors arrive. Served portions are complete meals, as well as sweets, breads, and drinks.

The excitement of visiting each house is notorious. Groups of friends and families enter the houses to receive food. Many times, the villagers already know which foods have been prepared, so the consumption also has a selective sense, in addition to biological. In any case, this feast in memory of the deceased reaffirms the identity and pride of the inhabitants of this sector.

Conclusions

Man in his earthly existence refuses to forget or be forgotten, so he sees the need to transcend in his great deeds or teachings and remain present in the minds of others. Around the world, cultures manifest the desire to remember and get closer to their loved ones who have passed away, and as long as they remember them, they stay alive in an earthly parallelism. In Tugaduaja, people still maintain the custom and annually participate in this event that has transcended time, adapting some of their belongings and modern foods to recall the tastes of the deceased. The families, neighbors, and even visitors participate in this event with joy and it is expected that the new generations participate, learn, and safeguard their identity. The women of each home are the guardians of this custom, while the men are expected to aid them and participate.

The *Table of the Dead* is part of the idiosyncrasy and identity of Tugaduaja. It is a material belonging to the intangible cultural heritage that contributes to dialog and respect for other cultures and ways of life. It is a true feast where special foods are shared and consumed that are not done on a daily basis. It is a system of reaffirming social relations between acquaintances, strangers, and relatives through generosity and hospitality, typical of villages far from cosmopolitan cities. It is a celebration in honor of the affection, respect, and consideration for the loved ones who left the earthly world.

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Authors' contributions

Efrén Silva Gómez. - Schedule, investigation sheet, exploration, literature review, writing, publication. David Quezada Tobar. - Exploration, literature review, writing. Miguel Orden Mejía. - Exploration, literature review, drawing of the map, writing. Estefanía Quezada Tobar. - Exploration, literature review, writing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

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Competing interests

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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