

Remembering the Ancestors



MEXICO

BELIZE

GUATEMALA

Tikal

HONDURAS

Lake Atitlan

Sumpango

Santiago

Guatemala City

Antigua

EL SALVADOR

PACIFIC OCEAN





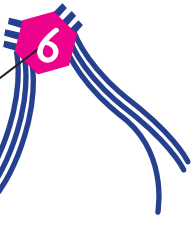
How do you remember your ancestors? Do you tell stories about them? Do you display their photographs? Do you decorate their graves with flowers?



Mayan Indians believe that the spirits of their ancestors can return to their homes on earth for one day each year. Family members welcome the spirits with flowers and their favorite foods. They spend the day visiting with the spirits in the cemetery. This tradition is called Day of the Dead, *el Día de los Muertos*. It takes place at the beginning of November.



In two mountain villages in Guatemala, the villagers add something special to their welcome. They make giant kites, *barriletes*, from tissue paper and bamboo. The kites are bright and very, very big. Some are more than fifty feet wide. The sun shines through the layers of tissue to make the kites glow. Their beauty sends messages of love and respect to the visiting spirits.



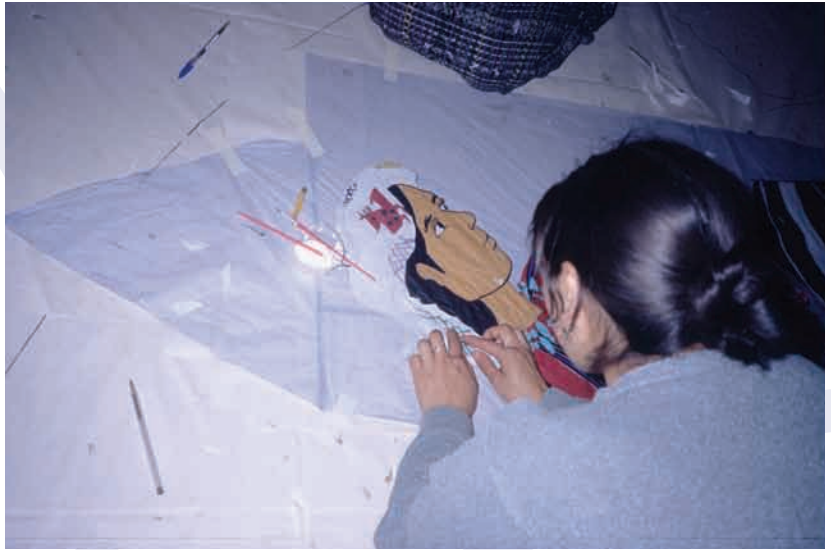
How can you join in this tradition? As a little child, you first fly a little kite that your parents make or buy for you. A few years later you can make your own kite. You glue the tissue paper to a frame made from cane. You decorate the kite with tissue paper designs.



When you are older you can make an apprentice kite (an apprentice is someone who is learning a skill). Your kite will be about three feet wide. It may have pictures of the Mayan way of life. It may display a message. This boy's kite says, "The Face of Peace."



When you are a young man or woman, you may join one of the teams that make the giant kites. Some teams have lots of members. Some have just a few. Some are all female. Many are all male. Some teams mix women and men. In whatever combination, all team members work toward one goal—to finish their kite for Day of the Dead, *el Día de los Muertos*.



You will work with your team members for six weeks, every night after work and all day on Saturday. You will trace, cut, and paste thousands of small shapes from tissue paper. Because the kite is so big, you will work on one part of the design at a time. You will put all the parts together just before Day of the Dead.



On the night of October 31st, the strongest young men in each village dig holes for the poles to display the giant kites. The poles are long and heavy.

Everyone must be careful not to drop a pole. Early the next morning the kite frames are wired and tied together. Quickly the kites are pasted to their frames. They are raised on the poles for display. With tails and kite lines, some are ready to fly.



By midday thousands of people have crowded into the field, *campo*. Everyone admires the kites. They look like stained glass windows in the sun. People buy special food and cotton candy for the children. The kite makers compete for prizes. Judges from the village award trophies for small kites, medium kites, and large kites. Even the small kites are eighteen feet wide. They are the kites that may fly. The others are too heavy to lift into the air.

If the wind starts to blow, the fringe, *los flecos*, on the kites begins to rustle. “Let me fly,” it says. The team members gather. One person checks the kite’s tail, *la cola*. The kite needs a tail to keep it stable in the air. Without a tail the kite could wobble or dip or crash.





The crowd clears a path. The team members pull the flying line and run. They are thinking, “Will the wind be strong enough to catch the kite? Will the kite lift into the air?”



The wind does not lift their kite today. The wind is too light.

Are the ancestors angry? No. They have seen the bright kites made to honor them. The ancestors know that they are remembered. They will return each year.

And some years the kites will fly.



These kites were made by students at The Northwest School, Seattle, Washington in workshops with Guatemalan kite makers Federico Carranza and Luis Tejaxun in October 2003.



For Guatemalan kite kits,
www.drachen.org



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