

# Heritage value and touristisation of the Day of the Dead in Mixquic, Mexico: perspectives from local children

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## ABSTRACT

In recent decades, heritage research has increasingly underscored the importance of safeguarding intangible assets and considering the voices of marginalised groups, including children. Using social learning theory and environmental perspective, this study delves into the collective perspective of children from Mixquic, Mexico City, regarding the Day of the Dead (DD) celebration in their town, utilising drawings and interviews. The main findings unveiled: (i) the integral role of playful

activities, such as *el campanero*, in the social learning process concerning intangible heritage; (ii) the offering as the focal point in children's collective representation of DD celebrations; and (iii) recognition of tourism as a generally positive contextual factor in the celebration.

## Keywords

Mexico, Day of the Dead, Social learning, playfulness

## Introduction

Heritage holds significant importance in understanding societies, especially intangible cultural heritage (ICH), which remains 'alive' only through community action (Pérez-Guilarte and García-Morís 2023). However, ICH is often vulnerable to manipulation driven by political or economic agendas, resulting in the distortion of collective memories and social perspectives, sometimes diverging from their original intentions.

An understanding of social perspectives allows a critical examination of contemporary social changes

(Santisteban-Fernández 2011), facilitating a more nuanced interpretation of reality and offering insights into potential pathways for the future. In this context, children, being integral members of society, are not merely recipients but also active participants in and creators of heritage (Rossie 2012), with the capacity to play a proactive role in safeguarding, transforming and representing their own heritage (Smith 2013). This highlights the importance of involving children in heritage preservation and interpretation, ensuring a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to cultural conservation endeavours.

Studies exploring the relationship between intangible

heritage and childhood often adopt a horizontal teaching–learning approach where adults transmit knowledge to children (Montenegro and Aparicio 2008; Pérez-Guilarte and García-Moris 2023). In this line, other studies have emphasised the significance of incorporating playful experiences in museums to facilitate children’s learning (Kamal Othman et al. 2021; Sutcliffe and Kim 2014).

Culture is often merged with tourism activities, in relation to childhood, and various studies have analysed the connection between childhood and tourism from different perspectives. Some focus on children as travellers or influencers in family vacation decisions (Khoo-Lattimore 2015; Li et al. 2023). Others examine children’s participation in the tourism labour market or their experiences as residents in tourist cities (de Suremain 2019; Ertaş et al. 2021). While a few cases from Mexico are available (Monterrubio et al. 2016; Alvarado Solís 2019; de Suremain 2019), there is a scarcity of studies that specifically investigate how the interaction between intangible cultural heritage and tourism influences children’s perception, learning, and engagement in rituals such as the Day of the Dead.

This study examined the perceptions of elementary school-aged children (10–11 years old) from Mixquic, a semi-rural town in the Tláhuac municipality, south of Mexico City. The children were asked to share their views on the Day of the Dead (DD) using drawing – a potent tool for assessing children’s perspectives (Kampeza and Delserieys 2020; Ginzarly and Srour 2021) – and to provide brief interviews about tourism during the celebration days. To analyse the collected data, we applied Bandura’s social learning theory (1972) and Rapoport’s environmental meaning-oriented perspective (1990) using cognitive maps (Kitchin and Freundschuh 2000) to interpret visual material. Through this approach, we identified key elements in children’s perceptions of a celebration with deep ancestral roots occurring within the context of contemporary tourism.

This research aims to enhance our understanding of how child residents of a semi-rural environment perceive the heritage value and touristisation of the DD, a ritual acknowledged by UNESCO as ICH since 2008. Children’s involvement in the DD celebration has significance not only for its cultural aspects but also because it offers valuable insights into how ICH is passed down from one generation to the next. Additionally, it provides an opportunity to

assess whether the increasing influence of tourism affects children’s perceptions and participation in these rituals.

## Literature review

### *Intangible cultural heritage and childhood*

In 2009, UNESCO made a statement regarding the intergenerational transmission of cultural values and the link between culture, cultural identity and individual worth (ECOSOC 2009). It mentioned that children play a fundamental role as carriers and conveyors of cultural values across generations. Hence, all necessary measures should be undertaken to encourage and nurture children’s complete potential in cultural domains while respecting the rights and responsibilities of their parents and guardians. The enrolment of children with cultural heritage is relevant since it facilitates the development of children’s personality and cultural identity. It also fosters comprehension of the cultural values and customs of their own communities, as well as those of other communities and societies. Regarding intangible heritage, UNESCO has also made efforts to encourage the young population to appreciate, guarantee and disseminate heritage (of their own social groups or others) such as artistic or artisan work, festivals, knowledge and other kinds of living heritage (Logan 2012).

In recent decades, research on heritage issues has increased exponentially. This has highlighted not only the need to preserve and protect both tangible and intangible assets, but also the relevance of including the perspective of subaltern groups. It has become increasingly important for the public to be aware of the heritage of their region and to consider the needs and interests of its inhabitants (Logan 2012). For instance, studies focusing on heritage and children underscore the need to integrate the perspectives of children into the examination of heritage (Frost and Laing 2017). This is particularly significant as children’s distinct experiences are often overshadowed by those of adults (Darian-Smith and Pascoe 2013). The cultural heritage of children, including their work, play, creativity and human rights, is a rich and revealing aspect of heritage (Nightingale 2016). Preserving and passing down ICH through the lens of children’s perspectives is a vital component of cultural conservation (Logan 2012). Despite children actively shaping their cultures, their unique experiences frequently get sidelined in broader heritage narratives (Darian-Smith and Pascoe 2013). Recognising

children's entitlement to engage with cultural heritage as a fundamental right is crucial for their growth and learning; failure to acknowledge this right perpetuates societal and cultural marginalisation (Nuzzaci 2020). Hence, it is imperative to incorporate children's experiences and viewpoints into the conservation and transmission of ICH.

Currently, research concerning children's heritage predominantly focuses on the representation of their experiences in museums and monuments (Darian-Smith and Pascoe 2013) or investigates the methods through which children and/or families interact with and interpret heritage (Frost and Laing 2017). The field of tourism and heritage studies predominantly considers children as visitors to cultural heritage sites, with a primary focus on their educational experiences and informal learning (Ritchie et al. 2003; Ballantyne et al. 2011; Sutcliffe and Kim 2014; Yang and Lau 2019). This line of research revolves around factors influencing learning outcomes, as well as activities and strategies aimed at promoting and facilitating children's learning (Andre et al. 2017). Additionally, some scholars highlight the socio-cultural aspects inherent in the experience of heritage sites, including perceived benefits, on-site interpretation and social interactions (Lehto et al. 2017; Zhou et al. 2019).

Children's awareness about the preservation and transmission of ICH has not received sufficient attention (Smith 2013; Ginzarly and Srour 2021), and research on this topic is scarce.

### ***Children's perceptions of tourism***

Perception is a process influenced by physical stimuli and sensations (Vargas Melgarejo 1994) that typically occurs subjectively in humans; individual attitudes, expectations, and past experiences shape this subjective perception of reality (Durand 2008). Within this framework, perception is viewed as a learning process that generates knowledge about the environment.

One of the theories that considers learning from perception is Bandura's (1972) social learning theory (SLT). SLT posits that learning is influenced by various sources of information and emphasises observation, imitation, and motivation as key processes through which individuals acquire symbolic representations of events. Both punishments and rewards play crucial roles in motivating observers to evaluate observed behaviours (Nabavi 2012). By observing the actions of others, individuals construct

mental representations of how new behaviours are performed, which subsequently guide their own actions in similar situations. This process suggests that individuals can learn behaviours vicariously through observing others within their social context.

In tourism, the concept of social learning is often explored as a collective reflexive action aimed at enhancing the management of tourism spaces or businesses (Koutsouris 2009). Tourism, viewed as a learning activity, has been extensively examined, particularly in its applications to children. Some studies strongly suggest that interactions between children and tourism contribute to the knowledge children have about specific destinations (Alvarado Solís 2019; de Suremain 2019). However, the voice of children has been given limited attention in tourism literature (Ertaş et al. 2021; Sutcliffe and Kim 2014), and applications of social learning theory in children are scarce.

Research on children's perspectives on tourism has identified two main areas of study: one focusing on children's perspectives and decisions regarding the consumption of tourism spaces and activities (Tseng et al. 2023; Khoo-Lattimore 2015; Li et al. 2023), and the other positioning children as residents of tourism environments (Ertaş et al. 2021; Monterrubio et al. 2016; Alvarado Solís 2019; de Suremain 2019).

Multiple studies (Ertaş et al. 2021; Monterrubio et al. 2016) indicate that children's perspectives on tourist activities in their place of residence revolve around three main aspects: (i) economic considerations, describing tourists' contributions through spending in the village; (ii) socio-cultural aspects, highlighting shared spaces and infrastructure improvements resulting from tourism; and (iii) environmental concerns, where children observe the generation of waste by visitors and efforts by authorities to maintain cleanliness in tourist spaces. Additionally, it has been documented that the presence of and interaction with tourists reinforce children's pride in their place of residence (Alvarado Solís 2019; de Suremain 2019; Monterrubio et al. 2016) and contribute to strengthening their knowledge of their daily environment. However, these studies largely overlook *ritual* as a site of meaning-making – a gap that demands attention, especially in contexts such as Day of the Dead celebrations, where tourism commodifies cultural heritage.

### ***The social construction of space: cognitive mapping and meaning in touristified landscapes***

Previous research has mentioned the perception of the environment as a strategy for approaching heritage knowledge (López-Fernández et al. 2021; Pérez-Guilarte and García-Morís 2023). The environmental meaning-oriented perspective focuses on the idea that the physical and built environment has a profound impact on how people experience the environment in which they live. Rapoport (1990) argues that the physical environment communicates cultural meanings and values nonverbally.

'Cognitive mapping', closely associated with environmental perception, refers to the mental representations we construct of the spaces we encounter, shaping our understanding and guiding our spatial behaviours. Although the concept of cognitive mapping traces back to psychologist Tolman's (1948) experiments with rats, it was Kevin Lynch's groundbreaking work (1960) that expanded research into everyday environments from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Cognitive maps are dynamic mental representations of a place's layout – including streets, neighbourhoods and meaningful landmarks – blending individual experience with socially constructed meaning (Milgram 1977). Their content, accuracy, and structure evolve through personal interactions with the environment, influenced by variables such as gender, age, education, occupation, and transportation modes. While these maps are subjective, Lynch (1960) identified universal environmental anchors – paths, landmarks, nodes, districts, and edges – that organise their formation. These representations symbolically encapsulate beliefs and knowledge propagated and disseminated by culture.

Empirical research often employs sketch mapping, where participants draw remembered environments, and can advance the understanding of geographic context. For example, Curtis et al. (2019) demonstrate how this technique can identify hazardous or crime-related locations, highlighting its practical utility in urban studies. The technique functions as dual representations – both internal psychological constructs and external spatial depictions. Internally, it shapes individual spatial behaviour, decision-making and planning processes; externally, it reflects dynamic human–environment interactions (Qu et al. 2023). These representations are then systematically analysed for content patterns, element frequencies and

cultural markers (Kitchin and Freundschuh 2000).

A critical yet understudied dimension of cognitive maps is *meaning* – a property Lynch deemed challenging to investigate due to its subjective nature and susceptibility to contextual influences in urban environments. Despite these complexities, subsequent scholars such as Rapoport (1977b) have successfully integrated meaning into cognitive mapping frameworks. In 1990, Rapoport developed the concept through a hierarchical framework distinguishing (a) high-level meanings (worldviews, sacred concepts), (b) mid-level meanings (identity, status markers) and (c) low-level meanings (functional uses). These meaning layers become visible in spatial representations, revealing social dynamics and anticipated uses within environments.

The built environment is laden with cues that communicate meanings, deeply intertwined with people's cultural contexts (Rapoport 1990). These cues range from conveying basic information about the environment to communicating more complex aspects such as social hierarchies. Contemporary research has significantly expanded the framework of cognitive mapping through methodological innovations in environmental cue analysis (Tosun 2019). A key focus lies in the interrelationship between people, space and place, emphasising human subjectivity in spatial perception.

Cues often convey their meaning through dichotomies: up–down, large–small or open–closed. The simplest expression of this dichotomy is the presence versus absence of an element. In addition to cues, Rapoport (1990) also suggests other concepts for analysing meaning, such as the permanence of environmental elements. He distinguishes between: (a) spaces with fixed characteristics – that is, elements that are difficult to change, such as architectural features; (b) spaces with semi-fixed characteristics – that is, elements that are flexible and subject to change, such as household furniture; and (c) spaces with non-fixed characteristics – that is, highly movable elements, such as people.

Cognitive maps and graphs provide essential organising schemata, offering structural frameworks that facilitate navigation through physical, social and conceptual spaces (Peer et al. 2021). Recent studies have further explored their applications, including the use of collective cognitive mapping to examine how social media influencers' distinctive features influence adolescent

behaviour (Lajnef 2023). However, research on cognitive maps used by children remains scarce and environmental meaning may influence children's participation in rituals and leisure activities during intangible cultural heritage manifestations. The design of spaces, the layout of key elements and the architecture of venues may shape how children perceive and engage with these cultural events.

Exploring environmental meaning through cognitive mapping provides insight into how individuals interpret and interact with their surroundings. This understanding informs our examination of how cultural significance and symbols are adapted and transformed for tourism.

The touristification process represents a complex spatial and cultural transformation wherein multiple stakeholders reconfigure heritage sites for tourism consumption (Ojeda and Kieffer 2020). One consequence of this phenomenon is physical landscape transformation, where landmarks often lose authentic identity through standardisation, spatial arrangements prioritise tourist circulation over local use, and original meanings become commodified (Choay 2001). These changes create what Banaszekiewicz (2020) identified as 'heritage dissonance' – a conflict in the interpretations of cultural identity, history, and value that arises at heritage sites. Such dissonance is a dynamic, multilayered process marked by stakeholder clashes over the meaning and use of heritage. For example, the selective preservation and promotion of specific cultural elements for tourism may exacerbate inequalities within society (Sánchez-Aguirre and Alvarado-Sizzo 2023) and lead to structural dysfunctions (Hiernaux-Nicolas and Gómez González 2014). A second consequence of the reconfiguration of heritage sites for tourism consumption is cultural negotiation. The influx of tourists triggers changes in cultural norms, values, and traditions, potentially eroding local identities and occasionally creating tension between sacred and communal values. The case of Mixquic's Day of the Dead celebrations illustrates community resistance to this process, where adult residents consciously safeguard ritual integrity against tourist expectations (Sánchez-Aguirre et al. 2025).

In response to the challenges posed by touristification, there is a growing discourse that emphasises community involvement (Alvarado-Sizzo et al. 2024). Empowering local communities to actively engage in heritage management and tourism planning offers a promising approach to mitigate the negative impacts of touristification while maximising

benefits for all stakeholders. Community involvement also implies acknowledging diverse voices, including those of children, who represent future generations and bring innovative perspectives to potential transformations.

## Research context and method

The objective of this research is to investigate the social learning process surrounding the Day of the Dead among children residing in Mixquic, and to determine whether the presence of tourists exerts an influence on this process.

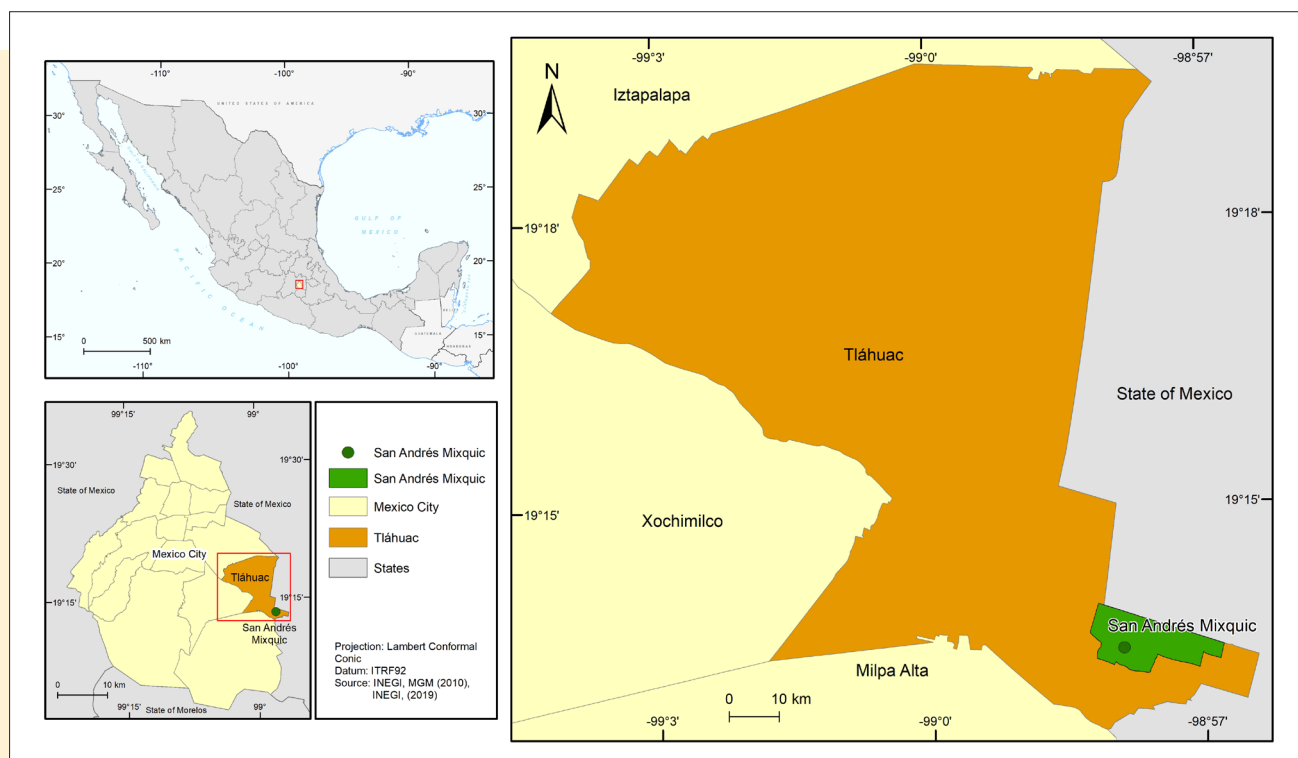
### *The Day of the Dead in Mixquic*

The Day of the Dead in Mexico is a syncretic commemoration that combines pre-Hispanic and Catholic elements to remember the dead. The indigenous festivities dedicated to the dead were recognised in 2008 as ICH by UNESCO. Although there is currently a great controversy due to the changes that the tradition has undergone because of media representation, tourism and globalisation (Alvarado-Sizzo and Romero-Gallardo 2018), this festivity is deeply rooted in the culture and socio-cultural formation of Mexicans. Because it is a singular celebration with a distinctive iconography, it has become a tourist event that in some localities attracts large numbers of visitors each year (Alvarado-Sizzo et al. 2024). In communities with a greater pre-Hispanic tradition, the local population firmly believes that during these dates (29 October to 2 November), the souls of the deceased are really among the living. This merits a special celebration that includes the placement of offerings and altars with food and drink to toast the dead, ornamentation of tombs in the cemeteries, and the lighting of candles to guide the souls in their arrival on Earth or in their return to the afterlife (Brandes 1998; Malvido 2006).

One locality where the Day of the Dead tradition is preserved, and a popular site with domestic and international tourists wanting to witness the commemoration, is Mixquic, a semi-rural site located in the southern part of Mexico City (Figure 1). The town of San Andrés Mixquic, in the Tláhuac municipality, has 13,910 inhabitants (INEGI 2020). Of that population, 22% are between 0 and 14 years old (groups classified by INEGI as toddlers and young population). This means that almost a quarter of the resident population is aged under 15.

### *Data collection*

To facilitate meaningful participation of children in



**Figure 1**  
Location map of Mixquic. Source: Elaborated by María de Lourdes Godínez Calderón.

research, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child suggests employing research strategies that are aligned with children's abilities and the mediums they are comfortable using (Puolamäki 2017). Drawing emerges as a potent tool for assessing children's perceptions, as it serves as their primary mode of expression. Drawings allow children to represent their reality, offering insights into psychological aspects such as their level of development and self-concept. From an environmental psychology perspective, drawings have been extensively utilised to understand how children conceptualise their surroundings. Through drawing, researchers can gain valuable insights into children's emotions and thoughts about their environment (Ginzarly and Srouf 2021). This method transcends cultural and language barriers, providing children with a platform to express themselves freely (Rontani 2012). Within this framework, drawing enables children to actively participate in knowledge-building and research endeavours (Kampeza and Delsérieys 2020; Ginzarly and Srouf 2021). In academic research, the drawing technique has been widely employed when working with children in tourism (Ertas et al. 2021; Monterrubio et al. 2016; Tseng et al. 2023) and heritage studies (Ginzarly and Srouf 2021).

During the DD celebrations, the 'Cristobal Colón' Public Elementary School in Mixquic, situated just a few metres from the cemetery, opens its doors to the public to exhibit handmade works by students from various grades depicting the festivities. On 2 November 2022, while we visited the town and the school, we employed the fieldwork observation technique (Emerson 1981). A few days later, on 10 November, we returned to the school to conduct interviews and to implement the drawing method with fifth-grade students. With prior authorisation from the school's director and written consent from the responsible teachers of each group, we worked with four groups.

In each group, we provided a brief explanation of the research objective and distributed coloured pencils and drawing paper. Seated in pairs, as they typically are in class, each child received a sheet of paper and was instructed to draw what the DD means to them. We asked them to notify us upon completing their drawing to begin short individual interviews.

The researchers wrote descriptions of each drawing on the same drawing sheet, followed by questions about: (i) the child's age and birthplace (to determine if their

family is native to Mixquic); (ii) how they celebrate the DD; (iii) what they like and dislike about the celebration; and (iv) their opinions on tourism and the presence of tourists during Mixquic's celebrations.

These discussions were documented by the researchers for subsequent analysis. The time spent with each child and group was fairly consistent, averaging approximately 1 to 1.5 hours in each classroom. Each researcher interviewed between 8 and 15 children per classroom, totalling 59 children, with 64% female and 34% male; 73% of them were born in Mixquic. Overall, the children were engaged in the drawings and very cooperative in answering questions. As a form of community feedback, we intend to present the research results at the school and to organise an exhibition of the produced and analysed drawings.

### **Data analysis**

To gather the contents and meanings of children's mental representations, drawings were processed with Atlas.ti 9. Content analysis was performed on the 59 drawings. Codes were assigned to categories based on their degree of correspondence. The analysis aimed to identify three groups of data: (1) the elements of the drawings and their frequency of occurrence; (2) the characteristics of the drawn elements and their frequency; and (3) the types of drawings and their characteristics.

To address the first group of data, a coding system was established based on the presence or absence of elements within each drawing. For the second group, a set of characteristics was associated with the elements of the drawings to reflect notions about environmental meaning: colour; size (large, medium or small, based on their relative size, with the most prominent element serving as reference); the relative position of the element (central, top or bottom, determined considering the centre of the drawing sheet; and the permanence of the element (classified according to Rapoport's categorisation (1990) as fixed, semi-fixed or not fixed features). When the coder was unsure, the transcription of the child's interview was consulted to ascertain the description of their drawings.

During the coding process, a category system was developed to classify the elements of the drawings based on their commonalities. The categories were formed based on semantic criteria to ensure coherent content communication. Six categories were identified: offering, words, icons, built environment, natural environment,

and people. Consensus was reached among the coders, who assigned units to the various categories through simultaneous collaborative coding. Finally, the frequencies of categories and subcategories were determined.

For the third group of data, a thematic content analysis was employed, focusing solely on the presence and absence of elements, disregarding their relationships. Analytical tools proposed by Rapoport (1990) were utilised to identify distinctive dichotomous. Thus, the drawings were reviewed to identify the presence of certain elements while their opposites were absent. Six elements were defined: offering/no offering; explicit/symbolic; colour/no colour; intrinsic/extrinsic; natural environment/built environment; with people/without people. In this exercise, each drawing is a unit of analysis, and not their single elements, aiming for a comprehensive examination to achieve a global understanding of children's representations.

The responses to questions regarding how they celebrate the Day of the Dead, what they like and dislike about this celebration, and their opinions on tourism and the presence of tourists during Mixquic's celebrations were analysed using simple frequencies obtained with the tokenisers package (Mullen et al. 2018) in R version 4.3.3. Word clouds were generated from Wordart (available at <https://wordart.com/create>) to visually represent the frequencies.

The obtained data from non-participant observation, the analysis of drawings and short interviews were interpreted according to theories proposed by Bandura, Lynch and Rapoport.

## **Results**

### **Fieldwork observation**

During our fieldwork in Mixquic in 2022, which was aimed at observing the local commemoration of the Day of the Dead, it was evident that this ritual is characterised by essential family cooperation, with children actively involved in various ways. They participate in tasks such as arranging the altar, cleaning and decorating the tombs, and engaging in playful activities exclusive to these dates.

One such activity is dressing up to go around the houses of the town asking for '*calaverita*' (similar to Halloween trick-or-treating). Another tradition is '*el campanero*' (the bell boy) where groups of children and teenagers tour the altars of the town, praying for the deceased in exchange for *tamales* (corn bread) or fruit from the families.

As these days are marked by family gatherings, with many emigrant locals returning to the village, children find these celebrations particularly significant. This importance was confirmed through conversations with local adults, who fondly recall participating in these festivities during their own childhoods, with many of their cherished memories being associated with these dates.

Additionally, we observed a notable influence of the 2017 Disney–Pixar animated film *Coco* in the offerings displayed at the school exhibition. Characters from the movie were represented in several of the offerings, reflecting the impact of media popular culture on this traditional celebration.

### Drawings Items appearing in the drawings

The analysis of the Day of the Dead drawings (DDM) revealed a rich array of 469 items categorised into six types (Table 1), which provide insights into the diverse elements that make up the collective representations of the commemoration, distributed as follows:

- Offerings:** The most prevalent category, this included food, altars, flowers, portraits, decorative paper, candles, incense, skulls, *catrinas* (dressed-up skeletons) and *alebrijes* (handcrafts).

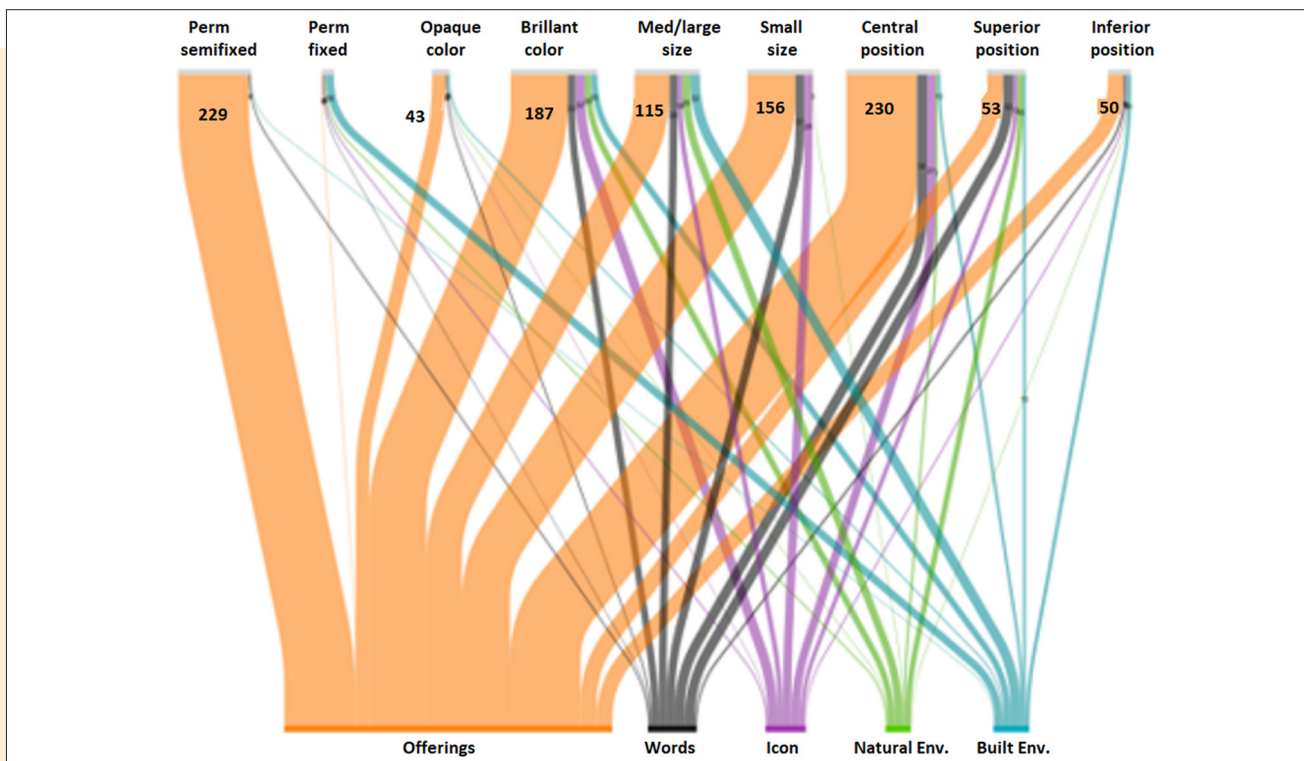
- Words:** Encompassing terms related to the DD, descriptive phrases (e.g. 'Mexican Offering'), names of individuals, affective expressions (e.g. 'Happy DD') and opinions (e.g. 'For me, DD is a beautiful tradition'). Less frequent were kinship words, which communicated the relationship of the drafter to the person to whom the offering is dedicated (e.g. 'My Uncle').
- Icons:** Representing symbols or images used to convey ideas or concepts, with the most frequent being the Cross, followed by hearts.
- Built environment:** Consisting of tombs, temples, buildings and public spaces, which are not part of the offerings but often appear adjacent to them or contain them.
- Natural environment:** Involving natural elements, primarily the daytime sky and the sun.
- People:** Including few depictions of individuals, with one group engaged in activities such as making or sharing food and candies, while the other group features people without specific activities depicted.

### Characterisation of the items

The drawings predominantly featured black as the primary colour, followed by red, green, orange, blue and yellow, collectively constituting 59% of the coloured

**Table 1**  
Frequencies of items in the Day of the Dead Drawings

	Item	F	%		Item	F	%		Item	F	%
Offering	Food	67	23.67	Words	Day	21	35.00	Built Environment	Grave	17	48.57
	Altar	49	17.31		Descriptive	16	26.67		Church	7	20.00
	Flowers	40	14.13		Nouns	12	20.00		Buildings	4	11.43
	Decorative paper	39	13.78		Affective	7	11.67		Door	2	5.71
	Portraits	33	11.66		Opinion	3	5.00		Tombstone	2	5.71
	Candle	22	7.77		Kinship	1	1.67		Tent	1	2.86
	Flower path	10	3.53		Total	60	100.00		Public space	1	2.86
	Furniture	7	2.47		Icon	Crosses	20		39.22	Font	1
	Incense	6	2.12	Hearts		12	23.53	Total	35	100.00	
	<i>Calaverita</i>	3	01.06	Faces		6	11.76	Sun	6	21.43	
	Pumpkin	3	01.06	Skulls		5	9.80	Daytime sky	6	17.86	
	Fireworks	2	0.71	Human figure		3	5.88	Grass	5	21.43	
	<i>Catrina</i> (dressed-up skeleton)	1	0.35	Star		2	3.92	Nighttime sky	4	10.71	
	<i>Alebrije</i> (handcrafts of Oaxaca)	1	0.35	Animal		1	1.96	Stars	3	14.29	
	Total	283	100	Bone		1	1.96	Moon	2	7.14	
	People	In activities	9	75		Angel	1	1.96	Stone	2	7.14
		Without activity	3	25.00							
Total		12	100	Total	51	100	Total	28	100		



**Figure 2**  
Co-occurrences between items and drawings characteristics. Source: Elaborated by the authors with Atlas.Ti.

elements. Black was frequently employed for outlining, particularly in the category 'Words'. In the category 'Offering', green, red and orange were the most prevalent colours, while white, yellow and red dominated the built environment category. Green, blue and yellow were prominent in the natural environment category. For depictions of people, white, red and blue were commonly utilised.

In terms of size, small elements comprised a significant portion (49%), primarily related to offerings such as food, flowers, portraits and candles, typically placed on the altar. Medium-sized elements included decorative paper, words associated with the DD, altar structures, tombs, and adjacent flowers, as well as the flower path. Large elements, accounting for the majority (52%), predominantly represented altar structures, built environment features like tombs and buildings, natural environment elements such as the sky and grass, and depictions of people.

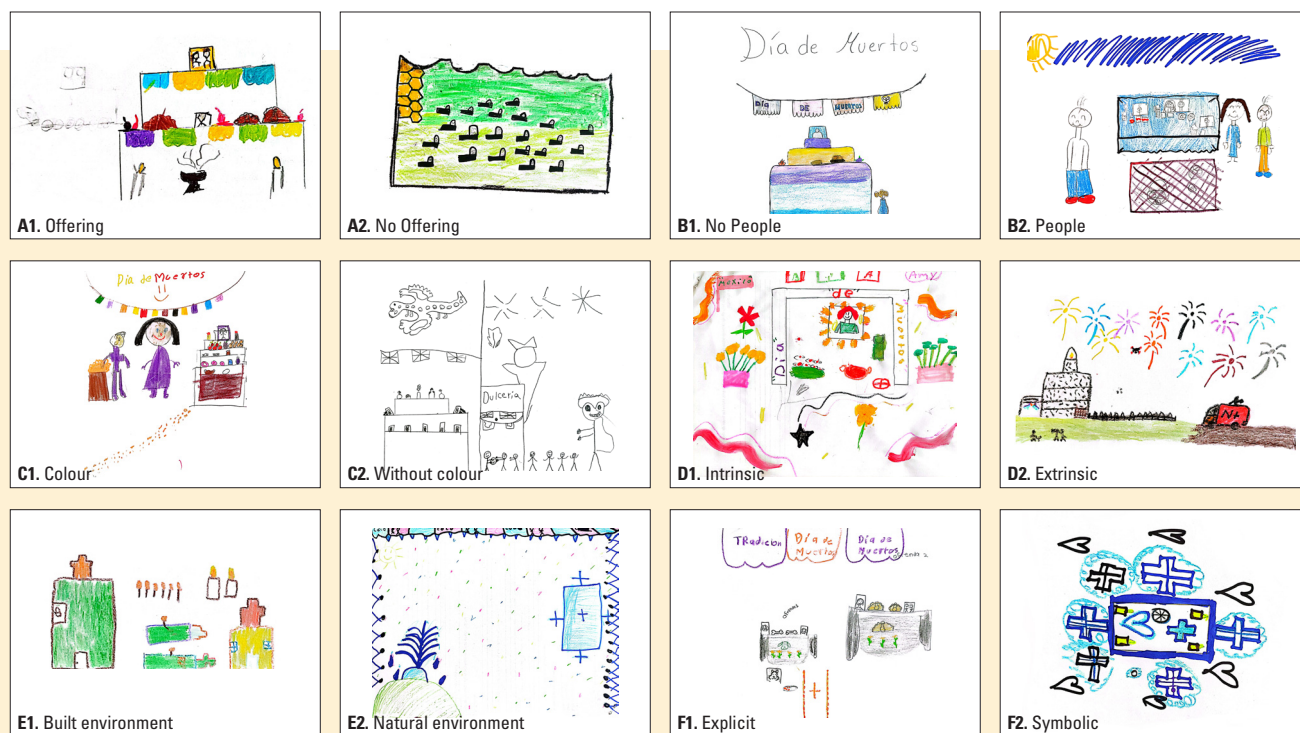
The positioning of elements within the drawings was primarily centralised (44%), focusing on fundamental offerings such as the altar structure, food, flowers, portraits, decorative paper and candles. Less frequently,

these items, along with others such as incense, were placed at the bottom, as well as icons (crosses), people and grass. In the upper part, decorative paper often extended across the drawing, along with natural environment elements like the sky, stars and sun. Icons such as hearts and faces (emojis), along with words referring to the DD and names of individuals, were also located here. Most elements exhibited semi-fixed characteristics (70%), predominantly related to offerings. Figure 2 provides a summary of the characteristics of the Day of the Dead Drawings items.

### **Types of drawings**

The majority of drawings (79%) depicted offerings, underscoring their profound significance in children's mental representations of the DD. However, a notable portion of drawings deviated from this theme, featuring instead buildings, temples or elements related to burial practices. Figure 3-A1 presents a typical drawing from the offering category, while Figure 3-A2 illustrates a drawing from the non-offering category.

Most drawings lacked depictions of people (79%), as shown in Figure 3-B1. However, some drawings did portray individuals engaging in festive activities, such as



**Figure 3**  
Types of drawings. Source: Collage elaborated by the authors based on the children drawings.

preparing and sharing food and candies or observing the celebrations and offerings, as illustrated in [Figure 3-B2](#). The prevalence of offerings in comparison to depictions of people suggests a heightened perceptual salience of these elements. Only one drawing was devoid of colour, while the rest featured diverse colour palettes, as depicted in [Figure 3-C1](#) and [3-C2](#).

These three types of drawings represent exhaustive categories, encompassing all drawings within the dataset. Moreover, the categories (offering/non-offering, with people/without people, colour/without colour) are mutually exclusive, with each drawing falling into only one category. However, other categories do not share these characteristics, as some drawings may belong to more than one type. For instance, one drawing might incorporate items from the built and natural environment. Therefore, the subsequent analysis adopts a more nuanced criterion, emphasising the prominence of certain features and items within the drawings. This approach unveils potential conceptual types for understanding children’s mental representations, without aiming to illustrate a specific trend in the drawings.

Several drawings highlighted the locality of Mixquic,

with some even incorporating words to denote this. However, certain drawings included items that extended beyond Mixquic’s boundaries. In [Figure 3-D1](#), the word ‘Mexico’ can be seen, suggesting that the offering and the festivity are conceived beyond Mixquic. In [Figure 3-D2](#), the panorama appears to extend even further, showing how the media disseminate information about the site to more distant places.

Children’s drawings also include items from both the built environment (mainly buildings, temples, cemeteries, tombstones and graves) and the natural environment (such as sky, stars, sun, moon, and grass) ([Figure 3-E1](#) and [3-E2](#)).

Children’s drawings exhibit both concrete and abstract elements. The former are those whose presence in the drawing corresponds to their presence in the offerings or in the spaces of Mixquic (during the DD). Some drawings not only include items but also incorporate words and phrases to accurately describe what is being depicted ([Figure 3-F1](#)). Abstract elements are symbols that represent something more intangible but significant, whose real presence is not expected in the offerings or spaces. These items include crosses, hearts, facial expression icons (emojis) and skulls



connection of Mixquic's children with offerings, a tangible aspect of the celebration, and the corresponding altar. In most drawings, the altar structure holds a central position, dominating in size and proportion other elements, with the remaining components arranged around or upon it.

Considering their frequency and prominence in the drawings, these altars can be conceptualised as cognitive maps representing a space of manipulable objects. According to Freundschuh (2000), this space encompasses objects smaller than the human body, which can be held, turned, rotated, etc., and do not require locomotion to be experienced. Since these representations are formed from experiences with places, it is plausible to infer that children in this locality perceive and understand the significance of offerings during the celebration, even when they are arranged on specific dates of the year.

Our interpretation of places is influenced by various frames of reference, one of which is temporal (Downs and Stea 1977). Lynch (1972) discusses the impact of time on mental representations of places, noting that certain events, such as celebrations, occurring at specific places with distinctive appearances at particular times, leave a lasting perceptual impression. These events extend beyond the present and, in the case of children, enrich their experiences with places, making them more meaningful and fulfilling.

The offering acts as the central element around which collective representations of the DD are structured, holding significant importance for both the celebration and its community, profoundly influencing the sense of place and the respective image formed by the child. This finding aligns with Silva et al. (2019), who discovered a substantial amount of cultural elements, such as churches, in children's drawings about their locality, indicating that their representations were laden with meanings of cultural and social capital. This perspective resonates with the concept of environmental meaning (Rapoport 1990). Offerings correspond to a higher level of significance, embodying worldviews about death and encompassing religious connotations. Moreover, they predominantly feature bright colours and are situated at the centre of the drawing, around which all other elements are structured. Despite offerings having elements with semi-fixed characteristics (remaining only during the celebration period), they are deeply ingrained in children's mental representations, serving as the primary focal point in the drawings.

Bandura (1972) proposed that learning is influenced by various sources of information. In our context, family emerges as a fundamental aspect of the Day of the Dead celebration, as mentioned by half of the interviewed children when describing how they celebrate DD. They mentioned family gatherings, visits from relatives, hanging out in the main square, and visits to the cemetery as important activities of this celebration. In the fieldwork, we observed that the elaboration and placement of offerings emerge as a familial activity involving children, constituting a ritual passed down through generations.

The built environment represented in the Day of the Dead Drawings, mainly as graves, is highly linked with the belief that loved ones come from there to join the living and return there when the DD season is over. The natural environment, represented mainly as the sun and the daytime sky, coincides with what children commonly depict in their drawings, according to the range of age of the study sample. In the context of DD, it is interesting that, from the adult point of view, the emphasis or distinctiveness of the DD ritual in Mixquic is associated with the '*alumbrada*' (Zamora Jimenez 2021), an activity that takes place at night, but for most children, the DD takes place during the daytime. Both of these representations, the built and natural environment, are linked to 'cosmologies, worldviews, philosophical systems, and the sacred' (Rapoport 1990, 221).

The analytical framework of environmental meaning, based on dichotomies, allowed for the distinction of different types of drawings, providing useful categories for future analyses of children's representations of places. Through these categories, valuable notions of meaning can be identified. For instance, the results indicated that the mental representations of Mixquic are imbued with higher-level meanings (Figures A1 and A2), which may be more deeply ingrained in the mind than the people (Figures B1 and B2), and where the colours of the environment play an important role in identifying and representing the place (Figures C1 and C2).

Red, green and yellow emerge as predominant colours in the drawings, appearing not only within altar structures but also in the most frequently depicted elements of offerings such as flowers, food and decorative paper. These colours seem to embody a spectrum of meaning, with red symbolising activity, warmth and vibrancy, green representing calmness and hope, and yellow positioned

between the two, symbolising playfulness, kindness and optimism (Heller 2008). The use of these colours reinforces the co-creation that inhabits in cultural intangible heritage expressions (Xu et al. 2023), where the children's imaginative engagement with heritage often unveils implicit aspects that adults may overlook (de Suremain 2019).

Our findings indicate that, from children's perspectives, the DD encompasses not only historical and cultural values but also playful experiences and family activities. The bellboy, as part of the DD activities, emerges in the non-participant observation, in some drawings and in the interviews. Heritage, often revered as something to be admired, also serves as an interaction element within social groups (López-Fernández et al. 2021), thereby reflecting children's imaginative engagement with the internationally recognised intangible heritage of their community.

Beyond the recognition of heritage by UNESCO, it becomes crucial to hear the voices of newer generations (Sánchez-Aguirre and Alvarado-Sizzo 2023). Listening to children and understanding their thoughts and feelings may serve to safeguard these values and identities. We observed that the children get involved in the '*campanero*' with other children of their age; they share costume ideas and share or exchange the candy, *tamales*, fruit or money they have been given. During the short interviews, they were willing to share with the researchers everything they knew about the DD. This reinforces the findings of previous studies, where the transmission of heritage value is not only vertical in an institutional project but also horizontal among children and between children and adults (Alvarado Solís 2019).

Children must be regarded as carriers and pioneers of heritage. Heritage education should emphasise human skills and values beyond mere acquisition of cultural knowledge (López-Fernández et al. 2021). We observed that children are deeply involved in the elaboration of the offering. They report to us knowledge of its elements and of how they developed the ability to participate in decorating their own homes, according to tradition, and to enjoy dressing up in costumes. They also feel proud of the tradition, as they see numerous visitors and tourists taking photos of the town, and they like to interact with tourists, asking them for candies. It is crucial to empower children to construct their own interpretations of heritage within their post-modern reality (Pérez-Guilarte and García-

Morís 2023), where tourism has become an important dimension.

### ***Mixquic's children's perceptions of the touristification of the Day of the Dead***

The engagement of children with ICH goes beyond their immediate cultural surroundings. It empowers them to participate in related activities, express their cultural perspectives and gain a more in-depth understanding of their environment. This understanding transcends boundaries, as their involvement with tourism in their local area enhances their cultural exploration. By diverging from conventional knowledge, children offer fresh and creative insights into the intersection of tourism and ICH, enriching their understanding of historical influences and contemporary realities (de Suremain 2019). This interaction fosters comprehensive analyses that bridge the gap between traditional practices and present-day experiences, nurturing a deeper cultural appreciation among younger generations (Pérez-Guilarte and García-Morís 2023).

In tourism, leisure and entertainment play pivotal roles in destination assessment. Although our findings don't directly address children's travel preferences, they underscore the significance of recreational spaces in children's experiences. In Mixquic, the DD isn't merely a solemn ritual but also a source of enjoyment for children. They engage with tourism by donning costumes, seeking treats, and participating in family traditions such as crafting and placing offerings. This playful engagement with cultural practices enhances children's involvement in their heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and appreciation for their cultural identity.

The literature indicates both positive and negative impacts of tourism on children's perspectives as residents of a tourist destination. Positive aspects include economic benefits, learning opportunities, cultural pride and emotional fulfilment (Ertaş et al. 2021; Yang and Lau 2019). Our findings suggest that children view tourism activity positively, considering it a source of reward and external validation of value. Drawing from social learning theory, rewards play a crucial role in shaping observers' judgements of behaviour (Nabavi 2012). Engaging in activities such as the bellboy during DD celebrations becomes enjoyable, especially when interacting with tourists who offer candies or coins, thus positively reinforcing judgements of tourist behaviour. Witnessing

people from outside the community taking photos of the town and its activities during DD seems to evoke pride among children. However, negative aspects highlighted in other studies include issues such as child sex tourism/trafficking and environmental pollution (Ertuş et al. 2021; Yang and Lau 2019). In our findings, the negative perception was linked to the crowds that tourism activity generates in the town during DD.

## Conclusion

For children of Mixquic, the social learning process surrounding the Day of the Dead is deeply intertwined with familial traditions as well as exposure to tourism. Children absorb the intricate rituals and customs associated with DD from an early age, both within their own households and within the wider community. Central to their understanding of DD are the offerings, where they often participate in the planning and decoration. The prominence of offerings in the collective imagination about the DD highlights their importance as symbols of cultural identity and tradition. Elements such as food, altars, flowers, decorative paper, portraits and candles, deeply ingrained in collective representations, serve as an effective means of conveying meaning and fostering attachment to the place. These findings underscore the cultural richness inherent in children's drawings and their ability to communicate complex concepts.

Imitation plays a significant role in the learning process (Bandura 1972), as children frequently emulate the actions and behaviours of adults during DD celebrations, assisting in the preparation of offerings, as well as mimicking the behaviour of their peers during playful activities. Children actively participate in and internalise the cultural practices they observe, cultivating a deeper connection to their heritage. Our findings highlight the importance of play-based activities in the social learning process of heritage among children.

Motivation is also important in the social learning process, as children are propelled to engage in DD rituals by a strong sense of belonging and cultural identity. Additionally, the presence of tourists during DD in Mixquic introduces novel elements to the festivities, offering children further opportunities for observation and learning. Although tourism did not feature prominently in the children's representations of DD, it nonetheless influences the social learning process by introducing new

traditions such as giving candies, which underscore the dynamic nature of ICH.

The phenomenon of tourism encompasses various processes of appropriation and utilisation of cultural and natural assets by different social actors. This necessitates a shift from mere economic considerations to fostering deeper, more immersive experiences and convergence between tourists and local communities. Concerns about the modification and commercialisation of cultural assets to meet tourist expectations often lead to the artificialisation of heritage, which can result in its detachment from its original context. Furthermore, the impact of tourism extends beyond the local community, shaping childhood perceptions through media representations and interactions with tourists, while still retaining the celebration's intrinsic significance and value.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on qualitative methodology, which precludes the generalisation of findings. However, it serves as an illustrative example of a semi-rural setting with characteristics similar to other Mexican and Latin American locations, suggesting that similar approaches could yield insightful studies on children's perspectives regarding ICH and tourism in other contexts.

In future studies, informed consent should be given by the parents of the children or even by the children themselves, not only by the teachers. This will help to support the community viewpoint. Additionally, a wider understanding of gender – to avoid bigendered classifications – should be included.

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