Background Reading Activity: El Dia de los Muertos

*El Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) is a holiday that honors family members who have passed away. It is a special way to remember the dead without being fearful of death.

Celebrated in *Mexico* and in some regions of the United States, this unique holiday originated with ancient *Mesoamerican* cultures (Aztec). The *Aztecs* observed death with special rituals and practices that sometimes lasted more than a month. When the *Spanish Conquistadors* arrived in Mexico in the early 1500’s, they tried to convert the indigenous cultures (Aztec) to *Catholicism*. The result is a blending of cultures celebrated on *All Saints* and *All Souls* Day (November 1-2)- which are Catholic holidays. The celebration includes the cleaning and decorating of grave sites, special foods like mole and pan de muertos, decorating sugar skulls, and the *ofrenda*.

The *ofrenda* is a special alter that honors deceased loved one’s. It is usually found in homes and sometimes in public locations as well. With three to four tiers--resembling the Aztec pyramids used in religious rituals--the ofrenda contains elements from the *earth* (*special foods, flowers-scent lures the soul home*), *wind* (*papel picado*), *fire* (*candles*), and *water* (*quench the thirst of the weary soul*.) The alter helps to welcome the soul back to earth during the celebration.
El Dia de los Muertos: Reading Questions

1. What does *El Dia de los Muertos* mean in English?

2. El Dia de los Muertos is a blending of which two cultures?

3. Describe how El Dia de los Muertos is celebrated today:

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4. What is an *ofrenda*?

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5. What are the elements found on an *ofrenda*?

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6. Why do people celebrate El Dia de los Muertos?

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