

DAY OF THE DEAD

Day of the Dead in the United States

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Abstract

The Day of the Dead (El Día de los Muertos) is a Mexican holiday that is celebrated throughout many countries, but mostly in Mexico. This very important holiday focuses on the gathering of friends and family in order to honor those who have passed. The Day of the Dead celebration has a long history to the Mexican people, where it is believed to have originated with the Aztec festival to the goddess Mictecacihuatl. I will be using sources from academic journals to discuss the origin of Day of the Dead and to explore in-depth what this celebration is really about. This paper will also discuss the different viewpoints that Hispanics in particular, Mexicans have on death compared to Americans. Finally this paper will talk about how Day of the Dead is celebrated in the United States, the commercialization of this celebration and whether or not this is a universal celebration for all Chicanos.

Keywords: Day of the Dead, Día de los Muertos, Chicano Celebrations.

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Mexico is known for many things. From its food, to its music, and even the people that live there. But there is perhaps one thing that makes it stand out and that is there celebrations. Mexico's biggest and most famous holiday is without a doubt Dia de los Muertos or Day of the Dead. The Day of the Dead celebration- and yes, it is a celebration, is about the gathering of family and friends to honor their loved ones who have passed. This paper will discuss not only the origin of Day of the Dead, but also what this celebration is really about and the different views Americans and Mexicans have on death. Finally this paper will talk about how Day of the Dead is celebrated here in the United States and whether or not all Chicanos in America celebrate it.

The Day of the Dead has origins in two peoples. First with the Aztecs and the second with the Spanish Catholics who conquered them. Most of the traditions, like the use of skulls (which represent death and re-birth) originated with the Aztecs of Mexico (Miller, 2008, para. 5).

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The Aztecs believed in the afterlife, meaning they didn't think that when people died life ceased to exist. Instead they believed that people's souls were carried on into the afterworld (McArdle, 2014, para. 4). Once a year, the Aztecs would not only have a celebration for their ancestors, but also for the goddess of death, Mictecacihauatl (Meek-tay-cah-SEE-wah-tl). The Lady of the Dead as she was also known, was a goddess in Aztec mythology that ruled the afterlife and her role was to watch over the dead (McArdle, 2014, para. 6). This ancient Aztec festival would soon go through minor changes when the Spanish conquistadors arrived.

After the Spaniards conquered the Aztecs, they tried to make them adopt their Catholic beliefs including the belief that death is the end (Miller, 2008, para. 9). The Spanish didn't understand why the Aztecs celebrated death and they didn't try to. As Catholics, they thought that the Aztecs were, "pagan barbarians" and tried to end their rituals, but they failed (McArdle, 2014, para. 6). Although the Day of the Dead celebration has since merged with Catholic ideas, it still maintains its basic principles and beliefs. According to Haberstein and Lamers, "in Mexico everywhere the Day of the Dead celebrations combine a curious admixture of ancient Indian and Catholic beliefs and practices" (Brandes, 1997, p. 274). One thing the Spanish changed with Day of the Dead celebration was the length of it. Before the Spanish arrived, the Aztecs celebrated the Day of the Dead for a month (the ninth months of the Aztecs solar calendar), but after they came the festival was shortened to two days (Miller, 2008, para. 15). The two days it is now celebrated on are November 1st and 2nd, the days that correspond to the Catholic holidays of All Saint's Day and All Soul's Day. While the Day of the Dead holiday was shortened it is still going strong. But one thing that still gets people about this holiday is what this celebration is really about.

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Many Americans along with other Western cultures still don't know what the Day of the Dead celebration is really about. One common thought that people think is that it is Mexico's version of Halloween. This is because Halloween for centuries has shared a resemblance to Day of the Dead. Jack Santino says, Halloween which was also back in the day celebrated on November 1st, "was also a day of the dead, a time when it was believed that the souls of those who had died during the year were allowed access to the land of the living. It was a time when spirits were believed to be wandering" (Brandes, 1998, p. 370). This is the same exact that the Day of the Dead has. The people of Mexico believe that the souls of their loved ones are able to come home for the day. Another element that makes them similar is the important parts of sweets. Halloween and Day of the Dead both have the use of sweet treats in their holidays. But while Halloween is about dressing up and getting free candy, the Day of the Dead is about honoring those who have died by preparing and laying out food that they liked when they were living, including making sugar skulls and pan de muerto, "dead bread" (Brandes, 1998, p. 182; Perrin, 2010, para. 1). The Day of the Dead celebration is about remembering the good and happy times ones has had with the ones they loved. It's not a sad holiday what so ever, it is a warm family holiday instead. But once people find out what this holiday is really celebrating they get a little freaked out and even more confused, which has led to the stereotype of the "morbid Mexican" or that they are "obsessed with death" (Brandes, 2003, p. 127 & 130). To help understand why Mexicans celebrate death one needs to first know the Mexican belief on death and how different it is from the American view of it.

Hispanics have a different view of death compared to most western cultures. In particular Mexicans and Americans have a vastly different view on death. According to Stanley Brandes, "It is said that Mexicans live side by side with death and are therefore able to confront death

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honestly and directly. They scorn death, they mock death, they are disdainful and irreverent in the face of death” (2003, p. 128). Americans on the other hand don’t like talking about death. They are fearful of death and avoid the topic whenever possible. Contrary to American society’s attitudes toward death, Mexicans view death as an important part of their identity (Gutiérrez, 2009, para. 3). Mexicans embrace death, which is something reflected in their annual celebration of Day of the Dead. According to Phillip Ariés, death back in the Middle Ages was something everyone was familiar with even children, but not the subject has become too taboo and is usually avoided (Gutiérrez, 2009, para. 2). The following passage by Octavio Paz, probably best explains the Mexican view on death:

The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrate it; it is one of his toys and his most steadfast love. True, there is perhaps as much fear in his attitude as in that of others, but at least death is not hidden away; he looks at it face to face, with impatience, disdain, or irony... (Brandes, 2003, p. 128).

In other words Paz is saying that Mexicans embrace death and even though they may fear it, they don’t hide from it, something that the Western cultures do.

Brandes also says that, “Mexicans fail to distinguish life and death and seem unperturbed by death, while Western Europeans are squeamish before the reality of death, repulsed by the idea of death, and differentiate markedly between life and death” (2003, p. 130). It is also important to not why Mexicans have this view of death. A quote by Frances Toor, best explains why the Mexican people have this view of death. He says, “The Mexican, fatalists that they are, accept death uncomplainingly but also bravely. They fraternize, play, joke with death even while

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they weep. In their blood is the spirit of adventure of their conquerors...Also in them is the blood of their ancestors, who met death of their own volition for the sake of their gods” (Brandes, 2003, p.134). Toor is basically saying that the Mexican people’s views on death is in their blood. The blood that was shed and the lives that were lost now run through them and give them the views on death they have today. For Mexico death is about moving on, not coming to an end. Day of the Dead has become so popular, that it is even making a name for itself here in the United States.

Many people throughout America have also started to participate in the celebration of Day of the Dead. According to Regina Marchi, “Many people outside of Latino communities have begun participating in Day of the Dead festivities because they provide outlets for remembering loved ones admits a culture that ignores death” (Marchi, 2011, p. 369). In fact there are many U.S. cities that celebrate the Day of the Dead they include: Seattle, Austin, Phoenix, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Missoula, Boston, Portland, Atlanta, and many more (Perrin, 2010, para. 4). But in America it isn’t celebrated traditionally as it is in Mexico. For example in New York City at the Brooklyn Children’s Museum, they celebrate with puppet making, Mayan hot chocolate, and other treats. They also have Day of the Dead art exhibits and mariachi performances (Perrin, 2003, para. 5).

In Los Angeles every Mexican community has their own festivities, from a family get together to a neighborhood block party. Los Angeles also has a celebration at their oldest memorial park, the Hollywood Forever Cemetery which has people dress up as a calaca, which is a traditional Day of the Dead skeleton (Perrin, 2003, para. 7). The Day of the Dead has become so popular in Mexico that according to Carlos Hernandez, “You can even get Dia de los Muertos stuff at Wal-Mart” (Contreras, 2011, para. 6). But because this celebration has become so

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popular it is starting to become commercialized here in the U.S. For example one of the largest Day of the Dead events is at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery. This is an event with large shows of entertainment and sponsors (Chavez and Martinez, 2013, para. 9). While at this event you may find personal altars; you may also find large altars dedicated to celebrities buried there like Marilyn Monroe. Alejandro Chavez says, “It is more of an entertainment event rather than an intimate traditional celebration and is viewed as an anything goes commercialization of the tradition” (Chavez and Martinez, 2013, para. 9). Even the Nestles Corporation a big sponsor at the event, is planning on building the largest altar to get into the Guinness Book of World Records. The altar will display skeletons drinking Nestles chocolate. The commercialization of this celebration is a problem because they are taking away what this holiday is really about and they are not doing it in the traditional way that it should be done. While this holiday is growing popular in America with non-Latinos, some Mexicans living in the U.S. don’t celebrate it and for various reasons.

In Mexico Day of the Dead is very important. Schools close, work is closed for the day, so everyone can celebrate this holiday. Nancy Alvarez, a Mexican-American working in Camden says, “I’ve been here 20 years and I don’t do anything. It’s a big thing in my country. In Mexico, it is a big holiday, everyone is off on Nov.2. You can’t do that here” (Shelly, 2013, para. 3). Another reason why some Chicanos don’t celebrate is because while a lot of the traditional holiday decorations have made it over to America, some haven’t and are difficult or nearly impossible to recreate. There is also a problem with the cemeteries. In Mexico it is tradition to visit the gravesites and clean it up and decorate it with flowers and candles. In America that is hard to do because people don’t approve of candles at cemeteries as they look like they are doing “devil worshipping” (Shelley, 2013, para. 4). Another part of the tradition is to spend the night at

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the cemetery. Levi Guerrero says, “I remember staying one or two nights in the cemetery with my family and my mom” (Shelly, 2013, para. 15). This is also a problem as some cemeteries have hours of visiting and are usually closed at night, as people aren’t allowed to stay the night at cemeteries. There is also dealing with the strange looks people give you when they find out you stayed the night at a cemetery. As Alvarez pointed out this is one problem with the cemeteries another one is the fact that you may not even have a body. Many newly arrived Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have their bodies shipped back to Mexico, making traditional cemetery visits impossible (Shelly, 2013, para.8).

Another reason why some Chicanos in America don’t celebrate Day of the Dead is because here in the United States, Day of the Dead has a rival in Halloween. Many families choose to do one and not both. Levi Guerrero says, about Day of the Dead, “I thought about doing it for years, but I got caught up in Halloween” (Shelly, 2013, para. 13). Many first generation Chicano kids probably want to do Halloween as that is what every other kid is doing. They get dressed up as their favorite character and get free candy and which kid doesn’t like free candy. Not only that, but it is probably easier for parents to go along with their kids wanting to go trick-or-treating as that is what the dominate group is doing and maybe they just want their kids to fit in.

The Day of the Dead is a wonderful holiday that has a very important meaning to it, it’s a celebration about honoring those who have passed. With origins from the Aztecs to the Spanish Catholics, this holiday has become a symbol of Mexico’s identity. Because of the growing curiosity of what this holiday is about it has started to become popular here in the United States, maybe even a little too mainstream. And while not all Chicanos are celebrating it here, hopefully with the growing Hispanic population they will start and keep the tradition going.

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