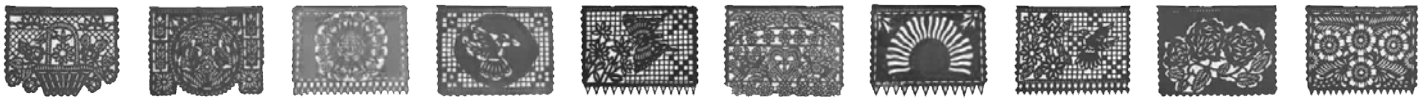


About Día de los Muertos

"The word death is not pronounced in New York, Paris or in London, because it burns the lips. The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love."

-Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude, 1961.

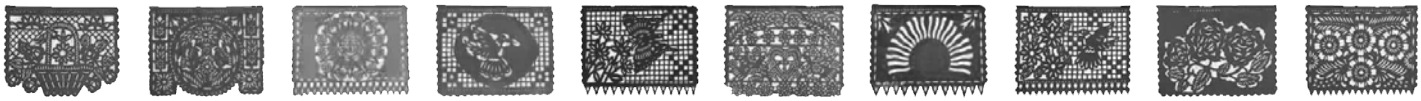
Overview

Día de los Muertos is an important cultural celebration in Latin America, with a particularly strong history in Mexico. It is also a meaningful custom for many Spanish-speaking people living in the United States.

Día de los Muertos is a day of commemoration - an opportunity for individuals to come together to focus on their loved ones who have passed away, and to honor, revere, and celebrate their memory. Far from the somber tones of many Western European or North American funeral services, Día de los Muertos is a time of celebration. It is believed that upon these two nights of the year the deceased may return and visit with the living. Many of the practices associated with the holiday are meant to guide the deceased back to the homes of the living and, once there, help them remember the sensations and experiences they had while they lived. For a brief time, the living and the dead are reunited - a suitable cause for celebration.

The holiday takes places on November 1 and 2, coinciding with the Roman Catholic practices of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day, respectively. In Spanish, All Saints' Day is known as the Día de Todos los Santos and All Souls' Day as the Día de las Animas. Together, the two dates are conceptualized as the Día de los Difuntos or, more commonly, as the Día de los Muertos. For those who celebrate Día de los Muertos, the first day is reserved for recognizing young children who have passed away while the second day is meant to honor all others.

The practices associated with Día de los Muertos are complex and rooted in the intertwined histories of the ancient and modern indigenous peoples of the Americas, the conquering practices of the Spanish explorers, and the more current, contemporary iterations of modern communities. In short, it is a fusing together of cultural practices and religions. Understanding its historical background can lend to a deeper appreciation



for its modern value and meaning.

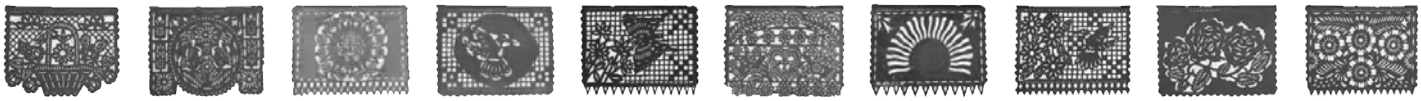
Pre-Hispanic Indigenous Influences

Long before current practices of Día de los Muertos, the southern United States, Mexico, and countries of Central America were home to many indigenous peoples, many of whose practices formed the basis for what we now know as Día de los Muertos. These founding elements were produced in a region known as Mesoamerica, an area that is generally acknowledged to include Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador (FAMSI), though several scholars also cite Nicaragua and Costa Rica as part of its boundaries. "Mesoamerica" is an historical term; there is no such region in existence today. Instead, when scholars refer to Mesoamerica, they refer to a historical commonality of culture and language shared by the peoples of the region. Many of the cultures in the region shared similarities, including the "cultivation of maize, the use of two calendars..., vigesimal number systems (based on the number 20), pictographic and hieroglyphic writing systems, the practice of sacrifice, and similar linguistic and grammatical qualities" (Bridgeman, 2013).

Over the course of centuries, Mesoamerica has witnessed many of the greatest civilizations known in the New World. While there were many notable peoples which together shaped the history of the region, most scholars recognize five major civilizations of Mesomaerica: Olmec, Teotihuacan, Toltec, Aztec (also known as the Mexica) and the Maya.

The Olmec were dominant from c. 1500 to 400 BC in the southern Gulf Coast of Mexico; the Teotihuacan from c. 150 BC to AD 700 in the Basin of Mexico; the Toltecs from AD 900 to 1250 in Central Mexico; the Maya from AD 250 to 950; and, the Aztecs (or Mexica) from AD 1325 to 1521 in the Basin of Mexico. Each of these cultures left an enduring legacy, but it is the religious and spiritual practices of the Aztec or Mexica which are most relevant to an understanding of Día de los Muertos.

The Aztec, although frequently misunderstood as a unified and hegemonic force, originally began as a heterogenous collection of tribes known as the Chichimecs. The Mexica, those who eventually emerged as the rulers, were one of the tribes of the Chichimecs. In looking for a permanent home, the Mexica migrated into the Basin of Mexico, where they encountered hostility from the current inhabitants. In response and retaliation, the Mexica formed a military alliance with a kingdom to the north, Tlacopan, and a kingdom to the east, Texcoco. Through this merging, what has since come to be called the "Triple Alliance," the Mexica became the dominant force in the region (PBS, 1999). They overcame their "former rivals, and together



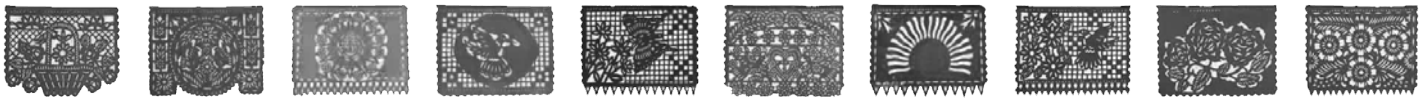
conquered an empire. Eventually they gave their name to the place as Mexico, while their city Tenochtitlan became what we know today as Mexico City" (Moreno, 2007).

Given their late rise to civilization and dominance over other cultures, the Aztec offer the most recent and lasting influence on Día de los Muertos of all the pre-Hispanic, indigenous cultures that existed in Meso-america. It is the syncretic mingling of Aztec beliefs and practices, alongside those of Roman Catholicism, that creates the unique practices of Día de los Muertos which are customary today.

Death, which is the central theme behind Día de los Muertos, held a complicated physical and figurative place in Aztec culture. "According to the Codex Vaticanus A, the underworld was made up of nine layers, eight of which were underneath the Earth's surface. The nine layers were the inhabitable Earth, the passage of waters, the entrance to mountains, the hill of obsidian knives, the place of frozen winds, the place where the flags tremble, the place where peopel are flayed, the place where the hearts of people were devoured, and the place where the dead lie in perpetual darkness" (Moreno, 2007). The ninth layer was known as Mictlán Opochcalocan.

More broadly, the entire region was known as Mictlán, and it was the final destination for all people who had died of natural causes. Other realms of the underworld included Tonatiuh, "the sun in the sky, for warriers who died in combat, people sacrificed to the sun, and women who died while giving birth for the first time; Tlalocan, the rain god's mountain paradise, for those whose death was caused by water or water-related forces like frost or cold sicknesses; or Chichihualcuauhco, which was exclusively reserved for infants who died while still nursing from their mothers, that is, who had not yet eaten from the earth" (Carrasco, 2012). To proceed through the nine layers of Mictlán took an individual four years, after which time it was said that the soul of person ceased to exist entirely. Regardless of social position, the majority of the Aztec population were destined to journey through Mictlán. Only the few who were able to reach the other realms of the underworld were granted immortality (Moreno, 2007).

According to the Codex Borgia, Aztec culture incuded specific veintena festivals held in relation to the seasonal cycles, "especially those involving weather, plants, and agricultural activities" (Milbrath, 2013). There were 15 veintena festivals held throughout the year. Those celebrated during the harvest period in August and the subsequent months held much in common with the current practices of Día de los Muertos -- including an emphasis on the duality of life and death and a focus on the fruits and flowers of the harvest cycle.



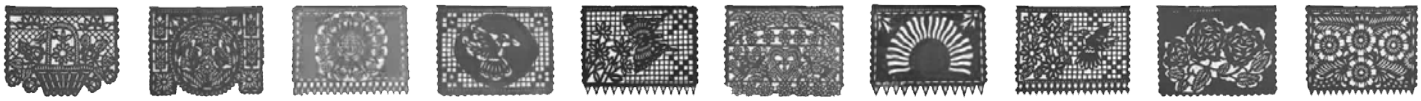
In sum, many of the practices of the Aztecs have carried forward into the present time - from parts of their cosmological fixation and interest in death, to the seasonal celebrations focused on the agricultural cycle and harvest.

Spanish Influences

By the time that the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés arrived in Mexico in 1519, the Aztecs' empire included approximately twenty-five million people - a formidable force with which to defeat invadors. Nonetheless, once Cortés allied his forces with the Aztec's enemies, the Tlaxcala, the Aztecs were eventually defeated and forced to retreat. Tenochtitlán was captured and ransacked by 1521, with the foundations of what is now Mexico City laid over its rubble.

The military conquest was not limited to arms and warfare; rather, it "was quickly translated as the triumph of Catholicism over the Mexican gods" (Pardo, 2006). As Catholic misionaries "fanned out across the land in the wake of the conquistadores, [they] brought a cosmology parallel in some ways to that of the Aztecs. Made familiar enough to be palatable, their ideas came to coexist rather than supplant existing beliefs" (Greenleigh, 1998). Their efforts led to varying degrees of fusion between Catholicism and the pre-existing indigenous beliefs (Geertz et al., 2007).

With the advent of Roman Catholicism, the indigenous people of Mexico were exposed to new ideologies not drastically unlike their own. "For example, they believed in an eternal life in which souls continued to live in an afterworld. The difference was that there was no hell. You were not punished after death. The Aztecs also believed that their great god Huitzilopochtli was born of a virgin goddess. The cross was a sacred sign. It symbolized the cardinal points of direction. The Indians also practiced rites similar to baptism, confession, and communion. A priesthood was dedicated to the administration of religious affairs. Other kindred symbols included temples with altars, statues of various gods, and religious processions. The Spaniards used these parallels to their advantage in their systematic effort to conquer in the name of the cross. During their confrontation with the indigenous cultures, the Spanish sensed the power of the celebrations honoring the dead which were at least 5,000 years old. Finally, they realized that conversion could not obliterate tradition, and certain customs would remain. What eventually developed through this tolerance of the old religion was a fusion of Catholic symbols, beliefs, and rituals with those of the conquered people. The celebration of the Mexican Day of the Dead is the best example of this blending of traditions" (Mújica et al., 1999).



Contemporary practices

Today, the practices of Día de los Muertos evince a unique blend of customs drawn from the indigenous peoples of Mexico as well as the Roman Catholic practices brought and imposed by the conquistadores. The modern "attitude toward death in present-day Mexico folk culture is the product of a combination of pre-Hispanic with Spanish beliefs and practices...the fusion of the European cultural patterns with the pre-existing beliefs offers a third and perfectly individualized complex of practices and ideas" (Brandes, 1998).

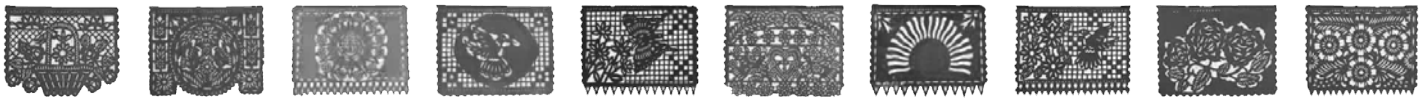
Día de los Muertos, true to its heterogenous and competing origins, is nowadays celebrated in a plethora of different ways depending on the location, tradition, and the cultural composition of each community. Variations occur, as well, due to the degree to which different communities and regions were exposed and subjected to the colonizing effects of Catholic acculturation (Nutini, 1988). Nonetheless, despite the differences, most communities in Mexico celebrate the holiday. For a brief time, normal activities are suspended in favor of this tradition (Moss, 2010).

Across these communities, there are at least two primary elements of commonality that hold true across the different spaces. The first relates to the timing of the event and the second to the physical creation of an altar.

First, Día de los Muertos is always held on November 1 and 2, coinciding with the agricultural cycle and the combined liturgical feasts of All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. During these days, as well as the preceding and succeeding week, "individuals and families are renewed by remembering their roots and paying homage to those who have departed. For a transient moment, the living and the dead are joined in shared existence" (Nutini, 1988).

The second element of commonality is the creation of an ofrenda, or "offering" made in homage to the deceased. Ofrendas are either built on a flat, table-like surface or constructed as stairs. In both cases, the spaces below and above the ofrendas are considered symbolic, respectively, of the underworld and heavens. The surface of the altar represents the earth in between and the land of the living. The entire construction symbolizes the cosmological universe in which we exist.

Decorations laid atop the ofrenda vary, but often include a cloth to cover the altar, photos of the deceased, the favorite foods of the deceased, and small mementos to commemorate the memory of those who have



passed away. The purpose is to display on the ofrenda items that were meaningful or attractive to the deceased so that the deceased might want to return and celebrate with the living. Each item is imbued with meaning for the deceased and for the traditions of the holiday; no item is lightly placed without significance.

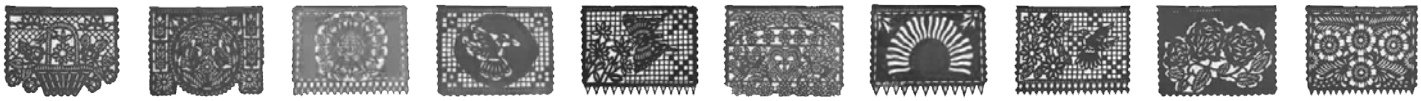
As the renowned Mexican writer, cultural philosopher and activist Elena Poniatowska once wrote:

> "The offering consists of corn, a sacred plant that assures the continuity of life. If the dead was fond of beer, then a dozen bottles of beer are lined up on the altar. There are Coca-Cola altars, Bacardi Rum altars, the luxury of death has no limits: altars of cut-pattern violet tissue paper where the dead can see his photograph sitting among candles, his rifle and his hat, his cartridge belts and his belly band, his dog-if it didn't die of sadness-candy fruit, water to scare away the bad spirits, beans, black mole sauce from Oaxaca, or mole poblano, to his individual taste, casseroles *of rice, or tejocotes in syrup, ate candy, fruits, coconuts from the tropic, appetizers: enchiladas, covered with white dry cheese, onion and cilantro, tacos rolled up very neatly, hot pepper sauce, lard, tortillas, tostadas de pata, totopos, marquesotes, and tamales, because the body has its reasons" (PBS, 1999).*

Ofrendas may be the private construction of an intimate, family celebration or they may be built atop tombs in cemeteries. In the former case, homes are turned into welcome zones to encourage the deceased to return; in the latter case, cemeteries are cleaned, swept, and decorated. In more recent years, ofrendas have also become, at times, large, public displays built for the entire community. In the last case, they serve a dual function as public art for community organizations and schools.

In addition to the food and other memoribilia, there are several components that signify the deeper philosophies about life and death which underlie the celebration. First, the ofrenda may also incorporate the "four essential elements of nature...according to indigenous beliefs...earth, wind, water, and fire. The earth is represented by symbols and aromas of the harvest season...wind is evoked by the use of papel picados (artfully cut paper) fluttering freely in the breeze...water is placed in an open container so the souls may quench their thirst after the long journey; and fire is symbolized by the ever-present burning candles that guide the souls home, and they are also representative of the souls themselves" (Hall, n.d.)

In addition to the four natural elements, "salt is also placed on the altar in containers and serves to purify the spirits. Copal, an incense made of tree resin, is aromatic and its smoky tendrils rise like spirits in the night, further sweetening the air...cepazuchtl flowers (marigolds) form the bright and golden path further guiding the spirits on this night" (Hall, n.d.).



Although the ofrenda is the primary common element across Día de los Muertos celebrations, the holiday is generally celebrated as well with copious food and celebratory activities. Food varies, of course, depending on the region. In Colombia, a traditional soup called sanocho is served alongside beans, fried pork rinds, rice, chicken, and small doughnuts. In Mexico and parts of the US, however, traditional recipes for Día de los Muertos include alfeñiques (sugar skulls), atole (a type of thick hot cocoa made with masa), and pan de muerto (a dessert bread shaped into bones).

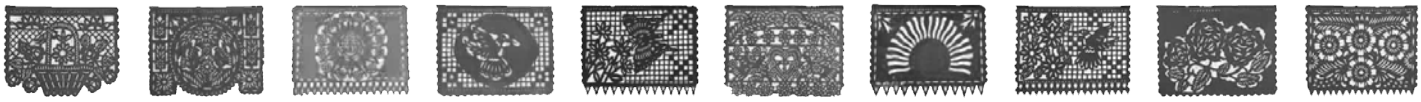
In many communities, the private celebrations of the family are complemented by public displays. Cheerful and irreverant decorations of skeletal figures and puppets, pan de muerto, alfeñiques, and flowers are commonly sold. Alongside the cempasuchitl, baby's breath and red cockscomb make frequent appearances.

Wherever and however Día de los Muertos is celebrated, it is a day to revere and remember the deceased, to make sure they know that they are never forgotten and are truly celebrated.

New Iterations and Appropriations

Día de los Muertos is a holiday with significant meaning across Latin America, although, as has been explained above, it remains particularly relevant to Mexican communities and people. "The observance of Day of the Dead traditions throughout Latin America for more than five hundred years makes this celebration a point of cultural continuity for peoples of diverse Latino ancestries living as racial minorities in the United States. Some 40 percent of U.S. Latinos have ancestry from Latin American countries other than Mexico, and as new Latino immigrant groups participate in Day of the Dead activities, they manifest their regional traditions, transforming these celebrations into pan-Latino events. For example, Honduran and Bolivian immigrants have held Day of the Dead activities featuring native foods and dances in Cleveland, Ohio; Chilean immigrants erected Day of the Dead altars in Minneapolis, Minnesota, to remember those who were disappeared during the dictatorship of Augosto Pinochet; and the Guatemalan community of San Rafael, California, hosted a Day of the Dead kite flying celebration at a local cemetary" (March, 2009).

Día de los Muertos, once unknown to US communities, is now "part of the educational curricula of many U.S. schools and universities and is one of the most popular annual exhibits in art galleries and museums. Receiving prominent media coverage because of its colorful rituals, the celebration in its new socio-political context honors the growing demographic of Latinos in the U.S. and encourages moral reflection on issues of political importance. Many Day of the Dead activities honor popular Latino icons (i.e. artist Frida Kahlo,



labor union organizer César Chávez, salsa star Celia Cruz) and a significant number draw attention to sociopolitical causes of death affecting the Latino community (i.e. gang violence, war, labor exploitation). Through public altars, art installations, street processions and vigils commemorating the dead, participants contest the privatization of sadness and frustration experienced by sectors of U.S. society disproportionately affected by an unnecessary loss of life. At the same time, the celebration is a unique medium for teaching about Latino identities and histories." (Marchi, 2011).