El Día de los Muertos
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Key Concepts to Understanding

El Día de los Muertos

- Fusion of Roman Catholic tradition and indigenous Latin American celebrations honoring the dead
- Death as part of the life cycle
- Joyous event celebrating life and death
General Characteristics of El Día de los Muertos

• “Dia de los Muertos” (Day of the Dead)
• “Día de los Todos Santos” (All Saints’ Day)
• “Día de los Difuntos” (Day of the Deceased)
• “Día de los Angelitos” (Day of the Little Angels, in honor of children who have died)
• Altars
• Cemetery
• Offerings
Roman Catholic Roots

• Pope Gregory IV: All Saints’ Day, 9th century
• Abbott Odilo of Cluny: All Souls’ Day, 14th century
• Brought to Latin American in the 16th century
Indigenous Latin American Rituals

• Indigenous groups in Latin America had their own rituals to honor the dead
• Reciprocal exchange between living and dead
  – Offerings to please dead and ensure their blessings in earthly endeavors
• Linkage to agricultural cycle
• Yaxchilán: Lintel 24
Pre-Columbian Rituals to Honor the Dead in Central Mexico

- Mictecacihuatl (Lady of the Dead)
- Mictlantecuhtli (Lord of the Dead)
- Aztec month of Miccailhuitontli
- Skulls: a symbol of regeneration
- Aztec view of death: a phase of life
  - soul does not die, goes to Mictlan (underworld)
  - returns one day each year
Ancestor Worship in Mesoamerica

- Mesoamerica: Central Mexico to Honduras
- Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya: caves as portals to the underworld
Mixtec Ancestor Worship

Codex Nuttall
• documents royal Mixtec genealogies and historical events
• 800-1300 A.D.
Codex Nuttall: Consulting Ancestors

Religious specialists: consulted to communicate with ancestors
Andean Ancestor Worship

Ancestor worship - the core of Inkan religion

Tawantinsuyu

Inka and other pre-Inkan groups mummified their dead through a process of drying

- caves (machay)
- vaults (chullpas)

Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala: *Nueva Coronica y Buen Gobierno* (1980) [1615]
Inka Veneration of Mummies

- Ancestors = protective spirits, sacred objects (*huacas*)
  - Maintained in their palaces as if they were alive
  - Direct link to gods
  - Consulted as oracles
- Aya Marca Ramni: month dedicated to ancestor worship
- Offerings of llama meat, coca leaves, *chicha* (maize beer), and cloth
- Spanish burned royal mummies
El Día de los Muertos in Mexico
Printmaker José Guadalupe Posada

• Satirical representations of skulls and skeletons in the late 1800s

• Frida Kahlo’s artwork
Mexico: Altars

Altars are unique to each person

- Photographs, favorite foods, flowers, candles
- Incense: to attract spirits
- Salt and water: for purification
- Candles: to light the way
Importance of Marigolds

- *Tagetes lucida*
- *Cempachuchil* (20-petals)
- Used to honor dead by Aztecs
Papel Picado
Other Special Traditions in Mexico

- Pan de Muerto
- Calacas
- Calaveras
  - sugar skulls
  - poems
Guatemala: *Barriletes*

- Santiago, Sacatepequez, November 1
- Kites guide spirits, conduit of communication
Barriletes
Cemetery Celebrations in Guatemala

- Pine needles
- *Flor de muerto* (*Tagetes patula*)
- *Copal pom* (incense)
- Marimba music
Guatemala: *Las Santas Calaveras*

- San Jose Petén
- Said to be skulls of Mayan kings or priests: petitioned for favors
- Procession on November 1
- Offerings: hen, tamales, *ixpaasa*, liquor
Guatemala: *Fiambre*

- Late 16\textsuperscript{th} century
- Moorish occupation of Spain (8th to 15th centuries) to the Spanish settlement of the Americas
- Ingredients vary but commonly include native American foods, cured meats and pickled vegetables, olives, chickpeas
- “fiambre” alludes both to the cold meats in the dish as well as to a cadaver
- Primarily a ladino custom
Andes

• Importance of vertical zones for Aymara and Quechua
• *Uma Pacha* = underworld: llama meat, fish
• Lowlands: coca leaves, bananas, *chicha* (maize beer)
• Highlands: *chuño* (dried potatoes), *ocas*

• *Pinkullus*
• Importance of receiving dead first three years
Andes: *T’anta wawas*

- *wawas* = babies
- Sweet yeast breads flavored with cinnamon
- Placed on altars and graves
Bolivia: ñatitas

- “Little souls”, “flat noses”
- Human skulls
- Provide protection for owners, as well as blessings for health and prosperity
Bolivia: ñatitas
Recent Influences

• Protestantism
  – Growing throughout Latin America

• Tourism
  – Mexico: Janitzio (Michoacán), Xococotlán (Oaxaca)
  – national and international tourism
  – regulated by the state
  – Night of the Dead Tours
  – Santiago Sacatepequez, ñatitas
  – Feria-like atmosphere, loss of focus on honoring dead
Recent Influences

- Halloween
  - Most influential in Mexico; resistance
  - Día de los Muertos and Halloween: cognates
    - Celtic festival of Samhain, Celtic New Year
    - Wandering spirits: All Hallows’ Eve
    - Samhain traditions were incorporated into Christian celebration as in Latin America
Key Concepts: Summary

• Fusion of Roman Catholic tradition and indigenous Latin American celebrations honoring the dead
  – Aztec, Mixtec, Maya, Inkan and other groups had rituals to honor the dead
  – Campaign to Christianize Latin American natives led to fusion

• Death as part of the life cycle; dead still part of the world of the living
  – Offerings based on reciprocity
  – Dead still exert influence on the living and earthly affairs

• Joyous event celebrating life and death
  – Cemeteries filled with dancing, feasting, and music
Further Reading


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