The Unseen Folklore of Dia de los Muertos

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The Unseen Folklore of Dia de los Muertos

When I was involved in my high school’s Spanish club, our biggest event was the Dia de los Muertos celebration. Dia de los Muertos, or better known as Day of the Dead, gave us an opportunity to prepare Mexican food, decorate the school, and dress up in colorful Hispanic garb. To my unintentionally ignorant peers, Dia de los Muertos was just seen as two celebration filled days that honor deceased family members and friends in Hispanic culture. What my schoolmates did not know was that underneath all the celebrations and festivities that occur during Dia de los Muertos, there are several underlying messages that Latin Americans have been trying to convey for thousands of years. Through the celebration of death, Hispanics have discovered what life is really about: family, equality, and tradition. Despite Dia de los Muertos primarily being a commemoration for deceased loved ones, the underlying folklore of the holiday cherishes diversity and unification through traditions such as ofrendas, La Catrina art, and calavera face painting.

In Hispanic culture, family is one of the most important and cherished aspects of life. Being from a large Hispanic family myself, I can attest to the notion that we will find any reason to commemorate a living family member or ancestor. Family is so extremely valued and honored in Latin American culture that death makes our relationships with each other even stronger. This inseparable bond of loved ones through life and death is what spurred one of the most iconic traditions of Dia de los Muertos: ofrendas. Ofrendas are elaborate, vibrant altars that often boast
large arches and offerings that honor a passing of a loved one. The four elements of the Earth are an essential tradition of an ofrenda. According to Google Arts and Culture, “Water is served in a clay pitcher or glass to quench the spirit’s thirst from their long journey. Fire is signified by the candles that are lit. Wind is signified by papel picado (tissue paper cut-outs). The earth element is represented by food, usually pan de muerto (bread of the dead).”

Alongside the Earth elements, friends and family shower spirits with memorable photographs, incense, fruit, assorted flowers, and personal items. All of these offerings contribute to the overall goal of honoring loved ones and sending the simple message of “I will love you and remember you always.” This loving tradition began ages ago; it first dates back to the Mesoamerican times, when the Aztecs believed that once the physical body died, the soul would continue to live in another realm of the universe. Back in the day, many would use ofrendas to summon back ancestors’ souls and lead them back home. Due to colonization of what is now modern day Mexico and European influence on the Aztec culture, religion and the altar’s purpose have changed erratically, but the main idea has not. Ofrendas and the tradition of Dia de los Muertos is one of the few Mesoamerican traditions that successfully slipped through the cracks of the Spaniard's religious control of Mexico. Although the Spaniards learned to understand the tradition of the ofrendas, many cultures are still unaware of their purpose today. In order to dig deeper into the misconceptions of ofrendas, I used qualitative research techniques to understand others opinions on this holiday more thoroughly. I interviewed Mexico native and old friend Majo Rodriguez on how Americans view traditional ofrendas. “In modern day Mexico, ofrendas are used as a way to say ‘We miss you dearly.’ But people who do not celebrate Dia de los Muertos misread it as us trying to summon spirits and see if they will eat the food that is displayed on the altars. Many

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1 Google Arts and Culture  
2 David Carrasco, *Daily Life of the Aztecs*
Americans that I have encountered have it all wrong.”\textsuperscript{3} Despite what other cultures may think, this ancient tradition is a way to bring families closer, and honor those who have passed on. The core of the ofrenda is to remember those who are important to you, and that family is one of nature’s greatest blessings.

The issue of equality in Hispanic culture is one that has been around for generations. From the very beginning of what is now Latin America, there has been a hierarchy battle for centuries on end. This power struggle for egalitarianism began seeping into traditional Dia de los Muertos art. Mexican artist Jose Guadalupe Posada is one of the most iconic political artists who used his talent and passion for Dia de los Muertos to illustrate the issue of discrimination and the importance of equality. His most famous piece, La Calavera De La Catrina, is still immensely popular in Hispanic culture today and represents a plethora of issues that have plagued the people of Mexico long before my time. La Calavera de la Catrina features an elegant skeleton dressed in an intricately designed, traditional french hat. The sketch itself is simple, but the message that lies behind it is tremendously rich in complexity. Although the artwork itself represents many different messages in the La Dia de los Muertos culture, one struck me as significant in today's society. Posada used this art piece to send the message that no matter your social class or ethnicity, we will all end up equal in the end of life. The Spanish phrase “Todos somos Calaveras,” or “we are all the skeletons,” further illustrates Posada’s idea that death will defeat the pecking order that society set for us. David Favela from Border Press Brewing described his own understanding of La Calavera de la Catrina as “through Posada’s famous etching, La Catrina, I learned the absurdity of class and pretensions, we all die regardless of our status, wealth or lineage...Life can be absurd, but love transcends.”\textsuperscript{4} Posada’s message on

\textsuperscript{3} Majo Rodriguez
\textsuperscript{4} David Favela, Border Press Brewing
equality and the importance of status is still extremely relevant today in Hispanic culture. Many Americans generalize Mexicans as lesser than and unworthy, but in reality, no nationality is better than another. Dia de los Muertos uses La Calavera De La Catrina as imagery for what the holiday is all about; equality and unity. This tradition brings people together and is an essential reminder that no social group or race is more superior than another.

When people think of Dia de los Muertos, many automatically think of skulls. Although skulls have been apart of Dia de los Muertos for centuries, the newest tradition of skull face painting is arguably the most meaningful. Participants around the world create beautiful masterpieces that accurately represent traditional sugar skulls. Although this tradition is the newest of them all, it evolved out of a Day of the Dead practice that was created thousands of years ago. In the beginning, Hispanics would use skull masks to close their Dia de los Muertos celebrations until the next year. The purpose of the mask were to scare away all of the souls that were brought back for the festivities. Due to European and Christian influence, this tradition faded away but has made a modern comeback in recent decades. Although tradition of mimicking classic Day of the Dead skulls is back in style, it has come back for different reasons. Recently, people have begun to use skull face paintings to symbolize the ability to look death in the face and not be scared of it. This tradition gives participants the opportunity to overcome one of the worlds biggest fears; our own expiration date. Since the two day holiday focuses the majority of its efforts on the idea of death, it is expected and normal to get caught up in the idea of it. This tradition is a way for participators to feel secure in their undetermined future and know that in order to accept death we must release it into the hands of a higher power. This custom also explores the feeling of curiosity we have about afterlife. During the reign of the Aztec Empire, early Dia de los Muertos traditions used skulls as a way to connect to their next life.
When I asked my Mexico-born great grandma Nellie about the skull face painting tradition, she responded with “Growing up in Mexico, skulls had a completely different meaning there than they do in America today. When Americans think of skeletons and skulls, they often think of morbidity and loss. Due to my experience with Dia de los Muertos growing up, I saw skulls as a symbol of eternal life and curiosity. I see death as the door that opens to another part of my life. Although many of us may have differentiating opinions on where we are going after life on Earth, the skull represents the thought that we are open and unafraid of what is yet to come.”

Like my grandma, people who paint themselves with skulls are open to the idea of the unknown and are less concerned with the when, how, where, and why of death. This lesson from Dia de los Muertos is one that all cultures, religions, and groups could potentially benefit from, and is a beautiful tradition that has showed participants a way to enjoy life in the moment and not worry about the future.

In the words of San Diego Councilman David Álvarez, “Día de los Muertos celebrations teach history, culture and, most importantly, values that transcend generations.” Although certain celebrations of Dia de los Muertos are often times misinterpreted, the people who participate in them find exponential knowledge and life lessons throughout the tradition. Dia de los Muertos is a day dedicated to spending quality times with loved ones, respecting those who have passed on, and finding the meaning of life through the ideology of death. Although Latin America is often mislabeled as being an inferior area of the world, the community within it focuses on what matters most in life: warm fellowship and unity in values. Through traditional celebrations such as ofrendas, La Catrina art, and calavera face painting, participants of Dia de

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5 Nellie Duran
6 San Diego District 8 Councilman, David Alvarez
los Muertos find beauty through death and cherish the holiday’s hidden folklore of togetherness and equality.
Work Cited


