

HISPANIC

Heritage Month



HISTORY OF

El Dia De Los

MUERTO

Indigenous people wouldn't let "Day of the Dead" die.

written by **Carlos Miller** of *The Arizona Republic*

edited and added to by **Mrs. Guerrero** of *Harry L. Bain*



HISTORY

More than five hundred years ago, when the Spanish Conquistadors landed in what is now Mexico, they encountered natives practicing a ritual that seemed to poke fun at death. It was a ritual the indigenous (or native) people had been practicing at least 3,000 years. A ritual the Spaniards would try unsuccessfully to eradicate. A ritual known today as El Dia de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead.

The ritual is celebrated in Mexico and certain parts of the United States. Although



Figure 1 A collection of candy skulls ready for a Dia de los Muertos celebration.

the ritual has since been merged with Catholic theology, it still maintains the basic principles of the Aztec ritual, such as the use of skulls. This many lead some who know little about the actual event to view Day of the Dead as the Hispanic world's answer to the United States' version of Halloween, but the two occurrences are very different.

Today, people wear wooden skull masks called *calacas* and dance in honor of their deceased relatives, their relatives that have passed away, when celebrating Day of the Dead. While Halloween decorations and costumes may be worn to frighten or to be humorous, the skull accents of el Dia de los Muertos are all connected to calling back the memories of those who have passed on. The wooden Day of the Dead skulls are also placed on altars that are dedicated to the dead. Sugar skulls, made with the names of the dead person on the forehead, are eaten by a relative or friend, according to Mary J. Adrade, who has written three books on the ritual.

The Aztecs and other Meso-American civilizations kept skulls as trophies and displayed them during the ritual. The skulls were used to symbolize death and rebirth. The skulls were used to honor the dead,

whom the Aztecs and other Meso-American civilizations believed came back to visit during the month-long ritual.

Unlike the Spaniards, who viewed death as the end of life, the natives viewed it as the continuation of life. Instead of fearing death, they embraced it, accepted it. To them, life was a dream and only in death did they become truly awake.

However, the Spaniards considered the ritual to be disrespectful. In their attempts to convert the natives to Catholicism, the Spaniards tried to put a permanent end to the ritual. Like the old Aztec spirits however, the ritual refused to die.

To make the ritual more Christian, the Spaniards moved it so it coincided with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day (Nov. 1 and 2), which is when it is celebrated today.

Today, Day of the Dead is celebrated in Mexico and in certain parts of the United States and Central America. "It's celebrated different depending on where you go," says Christina Gonzalez, senior lecturer on Hispanic issues at Arizona State University.

In rural Mexico, people visit the cemetery where their loved ones are buried. They decorate gravesites with marigold flowers and candles. They sit on picnic blankets next to gravesites and eat the favorite food of their loved ones. These behaviors may be seen by those that do not follow these traditions as ghoulish, but those visiting the grave yards are not Halloween revelers looking for a good fright, but family members paying their respects to those they miss.

"Here the people spend the day in the cemetery," said Esther Cota, the parish secretary at the Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. "The graves are decorated real pretty by the people."

In the United States and in Mexico's larger cities, families build altars in their homes,

dedicating them to the dead. They surround these altars with flowers, food and pictures of the deceased. They light candles and place them next to the altar.

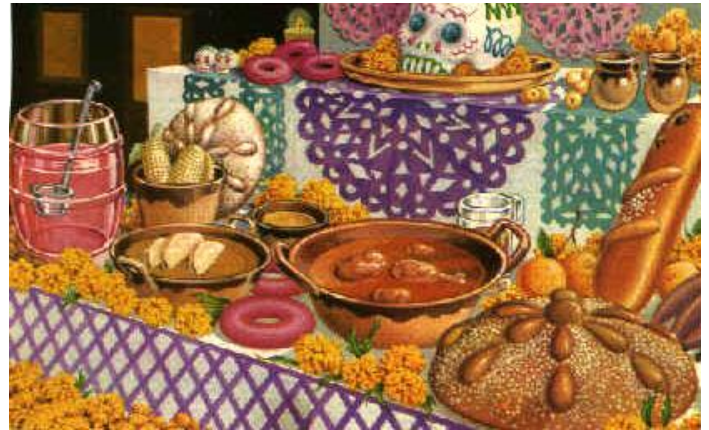


Figure 2 A painting of an ofrenda, or altar, set up to honor and celebrate the memory of household ancestors.

"We honor them by transforming the room into an altar," says Zarco Guerrero, a professional artist hailing from Mesa, Arizona. "We offer incense, flowers. We play their favorite music, make their favorite food."

While Spanish influence on this ancient holiday is apparent, perhaps some would say it has become a part of the celebration itself, to accept and invite change. As the rituals continue to alter as they move from one time period, one country to another, the original intentions of the Mezo-americans who were trying to remember those they had lost has not disappeared, but has been enriched.

Read more:

<http://www.azcentral.com/ent/dead/articles/dead-history.html#ixzz2gIZTCxEN>

Name

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HR

1) Using context clues and your previous knowledge, come up with a definition for the word *encountered* as used in the first paragraph.

2) What is the main idea of the fourth paragraph, beginning with “The Aztecs and other Meso-American...”?

3) According to the fifth paragraph, how did the attitude the Spanish Conquistadors have about death differ from the feelings of the Meso-Americans. Please state this in your own words.

4) At first glance, The Day of the Dead celebrations present in many parts of the Americas may seem very similar to the Halloween rituals that originated in Europe and were altered once here in the US. The article however, assures us that the two celebrations are very different. How are the Halloween celebrations of the main stream United States different from el Dia de los Muertos?
Use the space below to plan. This question is a compare/contrast question, so making a list may be helpful. Create a list (part of your grade) of ways that Halloween and el Dia de los Muertos are different. Then turn the list into an open ended. List at least three differences with details.

Halloween

Dia de los Muertos
