DIA DE LOS MUERTOS

Introduction:

Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a day of celebration for the people of Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Central America, and more recently for Mexican Americans. The history of Day of the Dead is embedded with Pre-Hispanic and Spanish customs. These customs shaped the common elements of traditional Mexican Dias de los Muertos. Today, Day of the Dead has been increasingly popular with Latinos in the United States. Though many of the traditional elements have remained how and where Day of the Dead is celebrated has changed.

Ancient Mesoamerican customs and beliefs:

For ancient Mesoamericans, life and death were not two independent states of being. Death did not mean the end of one’s life but rather through death, new life was created. According to Gabriela Olmos, Day of the Dead may be associated with cyclical nature of agriculture. Trees, plants, and crops grow from the ground in which the dead were buried. Honoring the dead is not a new tradition in Mexico and Central America. Thousands of years prior to the Spanish Conquest numerous ethnic groups of the region including People of the Triple Alliance, Mayans, and Toltecs had specific times that they commemorated the deceased. Special months were dedicated to honor the deceased based on whether it was the death of a child or the death of adult. Other months were specifically associated with how the person died like a drowning, in childbirth, or in warfare. During these months of celebration, the indigenous people believed that the deceased would return and they would need to offer them gifts. According to Carmichael and Sayer, providing flowers, food, incense, dances, and music was a way of gaining the favor of the deceased.

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The Spanish Arrival:

Though the arrival of the Spanish drastically changed the lives of the indigenous people, their beliefs did not simply cease. The rituals of worshipping and venerating the dead were changed to correspond with two Spanish holidays: All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls’ Day (November 2).

Spirit’s return:

Weeks before Day of the Dead, families start preparing for the return of their loved ones. Families visit cemeteries to have a picnic and clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones. Graves and cemeteries are adorned with Cempasuchitl (a marigold flower native to Mexico), candles, and incense. The petals of the Cempasuchitl are used to make a pathway. Their scent and color attract the spirits and lead them from the cemetery back to their home.

The Ofrenda:

The welcoming of the spirits back is seen in the home with the creation of an ofrenda (altar or literally an offering). On the ofrenda, many significant objects are placed as gifts to the deceased loved ones. Of these many objects, the altar holds four important elements: water, wind, fire, and earth. Water is given to quench the spirit’s thirst from their long journey and is usually put in a clay pitcher or a glass. Fire is signified by the candles and wind is signified by papel picado (“punched” paper). The earth element is represented by food, usually pan de muerto (bread of the dead). Other food and drinks are left on the altar like mole (sauce with many spices and herbs), fruit, chocolate, atole (corn-based drink), and whatever the deceased person liked. Copal incense is commonly seen on ofrendas. Copal was used in many ancient indigenous rituals and used to “transmit praises and prayers.” For deceased children, toys and calaveritas de azucar (sugar skulls) are also placed on the altar. In addition, flowers are placed on the altar as well as pictures of the deceased and religious items. These offerings ensure that the dead will have everything they need for their journey back.

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Day of the Dead in the United States:

With the exceptions of border communities in Texas and Arizona, celebrations of Dia de los Muertos have become fairly recent celebrations. The Chicano movement is credited for the emergence of Day of the Dead in the U.S. The movement gave Latinos pride in their ethnic identity and heritage and enabled them to combat the negative stereotypes. The renewed interest in Day of the Dead enabled Latinos to “remember personal and communal antepasados (ancestors) [and] strengthened [their] sense of historic past.”

Symbols:

Antepasados – ancestors; the ones who are given offerings by their families and friends.

Atole - a hot beverage made with ground corn powder or cornstarch

Calacas – skulls and skeletons that are shown in a variety of activities

Calaveritas de azucar – sugar skulls that are elaborately decorated, sugar represents the sweetness of life and skull represents

Cempasuchitl – yellow or orange marigolds that are seen on graves and altars and whose smell and color are believed to attract the spirits and lead them back home

Ofrenda – “offering,” another word for altar where food, candles, flowers, pictures and mementos are left for the dead

Pan de muerto – “bread of the dead,” baked into different shapes (human, bones, etc) and usually put on the altar

Papel picado – “punched paper,” paper banners decorated with elaborate designs

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