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La Muerte es Dulce

Dia de los Muertos, more commonly known as Day of the Dead in the United States, is the time of year where the souls of the deceased make the long journey and return to the land of the living to visit their loved ones. The living prepare for their homecoming by participating in the folk-Catholic practices of altar making, *offrendas* and cemetery decorating.

La muerte es Dulce, death is sweet. My hypothesis as to why people celebrate the macabre holiday, is because it is a celebration of life. The holiday teaches people to respect and value life by acknowledging that life is brief and death is imminent. We should not fear death, but embrace it and live our lives to the fullest. People find peace in knowing that the souls of their deceased loved ones will return back to the world of the living to celebrate with them as they did when they were alive.

I've conducted thorough research to find out more about the rituals and beliefs behind the macabre holiday; for example, the altars, offerings, material culture, belief systems, *cempasúchil* (orange marigolds) and food ways. Growing up in a Mexican immigrant family, as well as my mother's birthday falling on *Dia de Los Muertos*, I was always aware that the holiday was observed annually. It meant heading to the local supermarket to pick up a couple loaves of *pan de muerto* that I'd enjoy with hot chocolate. I remember helping my father plant *cempasúchil* flowers in the front yard for my mother. It reminded her of when she was a child living in *Tlahuac*, a small marshy suburb of Mexico City and helping her *abuela* (grandmother) decorate the tombstones of their deceased loved ones with the vibrant flowers of the dead. It wasn't until the recent passing of my maternal grandfather during finals week of fall term, that makes this holiday a little different for me this year. Him, being the first significant family member to pass in my life, I've come to see the holiday as a time to celebrate his life and will do so by creating my very own altar this upcoming fall. I'll be preparing for the return of my *abuelo's* soul, embracing my Roman Catholic faith and Mexican-American heritage through the syncretic holiday of *Dia de los Muertos*.

I consider my topic to be an example of religious folklore because the practices that are part of the *Dia de los Muertos* “coincide with the Catholic holidays called All Soul's & All Saint's Day, the indigenous people have combined this with their own ancient beliefs of honoring their deceased loved ones.” (MexicanSugarSkull.com) In the discipline of folklore, this *mezcla*, or mix of indigenous and Roman Catholic religious practices for the dead, is known as “syncretism”. The practice of altar making, *offrendas* (offerings) and decorating with *cempasúchil* flowers were customs practiced by indigenous groups that inhabited Mexico such as the Aztecs, Maya and Olmeca. Before the imposition of christianity by the Spaniards, the most elaborate altars to honor the dead occurred at harvest times when bountiful food offerings were possible (Marchi 13). This is why we see the marigolds, corn, grains, beans, fruits and pumpkins present at the altars. “Practices of honoring the ancestors were so deeply rooted in Indigenous Latin American populations that early Catholic missionaries found it impossible to eradicate “heathen” activities such as altar making, ritual drinking of alcohol, ceremonial dancing, and other oblations for the dead”(12) Roman Catholic elements of crucifixes, devotional candles, rosary beads, images of saints, Jesus, the Virgin Mary were later added to the indigenous altars to help ‘facilitate’ the conversion to christianity. The country of Mexico is predominantly Roman-Catholic and many venerate the Virgin de Guadalupe as the patron of Mexico. The virgin Mary appeared to *Cuauhtlatotzin*, more commonly known as Juan Diego on the hill of Tepeyac. Juan Diego was an aztec Indian and one of the first natives’ to be baptized and converted to Christianity after its introduction to Mexico by Spanish conquistadors and missionaries in the early 1500s. Juan Diego and the Virgin de Guadalupe both represent the syncretism between Catholicism and the indigenous Aztecs. Many refer to her, as the *virgin morena*, the brown virgin, referring to the brown skin of indigenous natives. Those who celebrate All Saints day and All souls day attend Mass on November 1st and 2nd. Roman Catholics believe that all souls go to one of three places when they die, heaven, purgatory, or hell. Those practicing Catholics participate in novenas and pray the rosary for the souls in purgatory and the *angelitos*, young children who have passed. The Day of the Dead is where these elaborate indigenous and Euro-Catholic beliefs and practices clash into the holiday we know today.

On November 2nd, fall term of my freshman year of college, I experienced my first *Dia de los*

Muertos celebration. I walked through the large bricked archway of the Jordan Schnitzer Museum. The familiar smell of the marigolds, Mexican hot cocoa, and tamales lured me through the main lobby, where tours for the art exhibition gathered. I continued to walk around, finding people with their faces painted, dance performers, and arts and crafts stations for the children. Everyone who attended was welcomed, and it made the event feel like I was immersed in the most authentic celebration possible in the City of Eugene. The main hall contained the communal altar that was set up by the M.E.CH.A. club (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) and students at the Oakhill School. The public were allowed to contribute to the communal altar by adding pictures of their loved ones, flowers, votive candles, and other offerings. The altar and the pieces exhibited at the Jordan Schnitzer museum were an expression of Mexican, and Mexican-American artwork for *Día de los Muertos* (Morales). Towards the end of the evening, the Jordan Schnitzer Museum invited everyone to the reception, where they served the public traditional Mexican food and drinks, such as tamales, rice, beans and *ponche*, *horchata*, and *atole*. Not only was this the first time experiencing a *Día de los Muertos* celebration ever, but it was also the first time experiencing my Mexican culture since I left the San Fernando Valley. I felt at home; I felt like I was back in Los Angeles in my grandmothers house. The smell of *cempasúchil* flowers reminded me of my mother and of my home; just as the smell reminded her of her grandmother and living in Mexico. Moving to Eugene as a freshman was a complete culture shock for me. It was the first time I was away from home, from my family and away from a community that celebrated diversity. I was already two months into my first term as a college student, suffering from homesickness and I was longing to feel at home, to feel *Mexican*. I remember being one of the few hispanic students in my dorm and at times the only one in my classes. It wasn't until I moved to Eugene that I realized I was a person of color. I am a hispanic student at the University of Oregon, a small percentage of students that help show admission directors that the University is 'diverse'. It was because of this categorization that made me embrace my Mexican-American identity even more. I consider Eugene the place where my identity as a Mexican-American really developed. By moving to another state for college, I was taken away out of my comfort zone, my home, which forced me to practice my Mexican culture. Knowing how important it was to speak Spanish, I started to practice speaking the language by conversing with the hispanic cleaning personal in the dorms, as well as with the cooks at Mexican food restaurants. I would ride my bike four miles down 7th street to the closest Mexican market just to enjoy a freshly made batch of *pan dulce* (Mexican

sweet bread). I started seeking out clubs and organizations that celebrated diversity and where I can meet other individuals who were like me, educated students of color. I joined the CMAE (Center for Multicultural Academic Excellence), where I found the community of students that came from diverse backgrounds who were also looking to succeed at the University of Oregon. There I met Antonio Huerta, a person whom I consider to be one of my mentors, and whom I owe for my success as a student. Several weeks ago I met up with Antonio asking him for help with my folklore research and fieldwork project. Knowing that he is a Mexican, I asked if he would like participate in my fieldwork by letting me interview him on his understanding and experience with *Dia de los Muertos*. Gladly, he said yes and set up a time and day for the interview. During our meeting he sent several emails to other *paisanos* (Mexicans) that would help me with my research. Of these references was Arturo Zavala, an academic advisor at the University of Oregon, and Armando Morales, a Spanish teacher at the Oakhill school agreed to meet with me and conduct interviews on their knowledge and experiences on the holiday. My fieldwork research consisted of interviewing professors, faculty, staff, and students at the University of Oregon by tape recording person to person interviews, over the phone interviews, or a list of questions they respond to. I've compiled photographs collected from the different informants that have aided my research on the subject. Since attending the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Arts's *Dia de los Muertos* event every year, I've participated in the event as an observer and view it through an etic approach. Once I create my own altar for my grandfather in the fall, I will approach this same holiday through an emic approach and see how my views or beliefs have changed or stayed the same.

As Antonio Huerta put it, altars are an "elaborate undertaking" for honoring and remembering the dead. Practiced by the indigenous people of Mexico during times of harvest to remember the dead, the altars have become a form of artistic expression that lures the souls back to to celebrate with their family and loved one for another day. Armando Morales was the pioneer of the public celebration of *Dia de los Muertos* in the pacific northwest. When Armando immigrated to Eugene, from Guanajuato, Mexico in 1978, he remembered that there were no public celebrations for the Day of the Dead. He was a part of the M.E.CH.A. club here at the University and proposed the idea of having a Day of the Dead celebration for a public cultural event. The *Mechistas* (individuals in MECHA club) did not know anything about the holiday, the traditions or beliefs behind it, and looked to Armando's experience to help them celebrate the Day of the Dead at the University.

Armando was taught as a kid how to build the altars, make *offrendas* and authentically celebrate the holiday just as he would back in Mexico. He said, “Just like that, the public celebration of Day of the Dead in the northwest began, here in this city.” The public celebration of the Day of the Dead began small, as people started to familiarize themselves with the holiday. It started to grow in popularity and dispersed, as he was asked to create altars in Salem, Woodburn and Portland. Armando said that when he traveled around the state, he left the seeds of celebration behind; the seeds continued to spread all over the state of Oregon and even Washington, making the the public celebration in the northwest what it is now. Armando was a reference by Antonio Huerta, and I finally understood why: he was the pioneer of the holiday, a culture-bearer, an artist of altar making, truly a professional. Armando emphasized his efforts in making his celebrations of the Day of the Dead as authentic as possible, nothing more, nothing less. The altars he creates, and the celebrations that he hosts are exactly what you would see in Mexico.

The altar is the main form of an *offrenda* (offering for the dead) that uses crates, tables or shelves to create a multilevel pyramid that represents the different levels of the underworld. The more indigenous altars, may have seven to nine levels which represent the different levels to the heavens. The top level(s) symbolize Heaven, where God, the saints, and angels live. Picture of the loved one, crucifixes, votive candles (a candle that is offered or consecrated in fulfillment of a vow) and statuettes of the Virgin de Guadalupe and saints can be placed on this level (Chicago Tribune).

The middle level represents the earth, the land of the living, where the souls of the dead come back, and celebrate (Chicago Tribune). This is where most *offrendas* are placed, such as food, mementos, toys and drinks. During the Day of the Dead, the souls of dead loved ones come back to enjoy spending time with their families and celebrate just like they would when they were alive. This is why *offrendas* of food and drinks are important for those celebrating the holiday, but more importantly for the souls returning. Arturo Zavala pointed out in our interview that Mexico as a country is very diverse, different states have different traditions and ways of celebrating the holiday. This diversity can mean offering up meals that are traditional to that specific state of Mexico. Antonio talked about having *birria*, a spicy stew made of goat meat that is traditional to his state, Jalisco. My mother talked about the dish *mole*, which comes from the nahuatl word *milli*, and was given to Cortez by Montezuma and the Aztec empire. *Mole con pollo*, traditional dish of Puebla and Mexico City is boiled chicken that is covered by a spiced chocolate sauce made with poblano

chili peppers and chocolate. Food offerings for the dead are foods, snacks, treats, candies that the dead loved one enjoyed when they were alive. The offering that is placed on the altar would be specifically for the dead loved one to enjoy when they return. Claudia talked about how every year, she cooks a batch of *frijoles*, beans, for her mother and places it on the altar. Beans, peanuts, jicama, corn and pumpkins were crops that the Aztecs heavily relied on, cultivated and consumed during the harvest times. They were mostly crops that were cultivated underground and represented the element of earth. *Pan de muerto*, Day of the Dead bread, is a baked sweet bun that is decorated with skull and crossbones and sprinkled with sugar. It is sold a month prior to the Day of the Dead, allowing it to be enjoyed by families all over Mexico. October was the time for me to head to my local supermarket and grab some Day of the Dead bread to share with my family. Another treat that is enjoyed during the holiday is the famous *calavera*, the sugar skull. The sugar skulls are made from cane sugar, but they can also be made with chocolate. Sugar skulls are carefully molded into skulls using casts and decorated with icing and chocolate (Mexican Sugar Skull Tradition.com). The sugar skulls are made for children or for *offrendas* for the dead and customized by having names written on the forehead. A couple years ago, during my freshman year, my mother sent me a Day of the Dead/Halloween care package and in it I found a sugar skull with my name on it. She also sent me a *calavera* made out of clay that was painted red. I have placed the clay *calavera* in my room, right next to my jaguar whistle that I got from my trip to Chichen-Itza.

It is customary to provide a cup of water on the altar because the souls of the dead are making the long trip back to the land of the living and need their thirst to be quenched. The glass of water represents the element of water and is a symbol for purity and cleanliness; for Catholics, it symbolizes the sacrament of baptism. There are drinks that are familiar to the indigenous people and that are also commonly offered up, such as *horchata* (cinnamon flavored rice milk), *ponche* (hot fruit punch), *atole* (corn meal drink) and *canela* (cinnamon tea). Alcoholic drinks such as *pulque* (fermented maguey honey), *tequila* (distilled blue agave) and *Mezcal* which came from the nahuatl word *mexcalli* meaning "oven-cooked agave" are seen as *offrendas* as well. If the loved one enjoyed drinking soda, like my grandfather, you can put an open bottled of Coca-Cola. If the loved one was athletic and liked to play sports offer up a bottle of their favorite flavored gatorade.

Offerings of treats and toys can be given to the souls of young children, also called *angelitos* or little angels. The child's favorite candy or toy can be offered as they look forward to their return and will gladly

enjoy them. Homecoming offerings reflect activities done during their leisurely time and can be seen through the offering of their favorite book to read or a deck of cards, to deal with etc. Arturo said that “if someone enjoyed smoking cigarettes, you could put a pack of cigarettes. If they enjoyed a certain song, you play or preform that song.” These traditions are about making their time back with the living as enjoyable as possible. The souls are happy to know that they are not forgotten. During the interview, Armando said that “the dead never leave, they’re always going be present,” and I found this to be true one night. I was listening to Salsa music, my grandfathers favorite genre of music, and had a feeling of overwhelming happiness. I was surrounded by a warm feeling, a sense of being protected, and being looked after. Whether it was just the music that made me feel warm, or a combination of the music and my grandfather’s soul who came back from heaven to comfort me during the night, I felt that he was there.

The third level symbolizes Mictlan, the aztec underworld ruled by the God *Mictlantecuhтли*: here, flowers for the dead and incense such as copal are placed to guide the souls back to their homes. Copal and sage are burned as incenses where the smoke emitted is symbolic for the prayers being elevated to the heavens (mexican-folk-art-guide.com). *Cempasúchil* comes from the nahuatl word *cempoalxochitl* meaning “twenty-flower”, which refers to the flower’s many petals (Suzanne). Their “dazzling orange color” and “penetrating aroma” is said to lure heavenly souls to Earth (9). These orange Marigolds are natively grown in the central and southern states of Mexico, where many refer to them, as flowers of the dead. My mother describes them as being “vibrant, and the smell is alluring like a perfume.” People put the flowers everywhere because just like the incense, they hope the smell of the *cempasúchil* flowers attract the souls of their loved ones. The combination of marigolds and rose petals can be arranged on the ground as a pathway leading to the altar (Marchi 9). Claudia talked about how the *cempasúchil* flowers are different. Since the flowers are ‘flowers for the dead’ they associated with dead people. Claudia said “You can go to someone and give them a sugar skull with their name on it and that is okay. But, it is not acceptable to give someone a bouquet of flowers. You're saying that person is dead, dying, or going to die soon.” I thought this was interesting: how a flower can be associated with the dead. On the other hand, roses are associated with the Virgin de Guadalupe. During the feast day of the Virgin de Guadalupe on December 12th, it is customary to give someone a bouquet of roses so they can offer them up to the Virgin Mary. Roses can also be an offering on the altar, and offering to the Virgin de Guadalupe and can be placed on the top level.

Armando discussed his knowledge regarding the Aztec's belief in the underworld. The Aztecs would bury their dead with blankets, water, food and any other supplies that would help them in their long journey through nine levels of Mictlan. There, the souls of the dead who died of natural causes would have to cross a river, several mountain ranges, and endure cold climates in order to make their way to the highest level, where they rest in peace. The Aztec warriors who died in war would go to the Mictlan that was ruled by *Huitzilopochtli*, the god of war. Those who died drowning would go to *Tlalocan*, which was a paradise ruled by the deity of rain *Tlaloc*. The babies who passed away would go to *cihuacoatl* the goddess of fertility, where there were many breasts, which infants could feed on for all eternity.

Papel picado (pecked paper) is decorative Mexican folk art where tissue paper or "papel de China" is cut into intricate identical patterns or designs and hung above altars, streets, or indoors. They are also called *banderitas*, flags, and represent the element that moves them, the wind. The Aztecs and other indigenous groups of Mexico would use *amate*, bark paper from mulberry or ficus trees to create their *papel picado*. Tissue paper was first introduced to the indigenous by the Spanish, as the coasts of Mexico were successful trading posts. For the Spanish imported goods from China such as tissue paper, and indigenous began to use this for their *papel picado*. Armando said that using tissue paper is a key to the beliefs behind the Day of the Dead. The tissue paper's existence just like ours is "*efimero*," it is brief, short-lived, it deteriorates and ceases to exist.

The aesthetics are appealing and are intended to welcome the souls back to the land of the living. Colors are vibrant and happy, the marigolds, the *papel picado*, the different smells that are part of the holiday are meant to be a celebration, of life. The holiday is celebrated annually, which is why people 'go all out', putting their heart and *soul* into making the holiday something special for the people that are being remembered. Arturo said that Mexicans are willing to drop five thousand dollars on hiring a mariachi group, not because they want to show that they spent a lot money, but because the memories that are being made are worth all of the money. The holiday reinforces a sense of collective identity and solidarity, known as 'communitas' (Marchi 61). The bonding that happens and the relationships that are built when people celebrate the holiday are memories that last a lifetime. Antonio and Arturo both discussed the idea of Mexican's being warm, welcoming, family orientated and "always looking for an excuse to get together." The holiday is another reason for the people to get together, both the living and dead.

After mass, families head down to the cemeteries to decorate and clean the grave sites where their loved ones are buried. They spend the rest of the afternoon pulling out the weeds, cutting the grass, repainting the tombstones. They decorate the resting place of their loved ones because it is their eternal home. In the United States, most cemeteries are closed at night, privately owned and are rarely visited by loved ones. Every single person that I interviewed talked about how most Americans viewed death as something scary; something that they don't want to think about, something that doesn't come up in conversation. Death to Americans is the end; whereas to Mexicans, it's the beginning of a new life. In her book Marchi cites Octavio Paz's reply in the essay *The Labyrinth of Solitude* as to why people associate Day of the Dead with Mexico. Octavio, a Mexican poet and Nobel Laureate, proclaimed Mexican, more than any other people, have a "special relationship with death." Mexicans "caress" death, "sleep with it", "celebrate" it...the relationships with death are intimate, more intimate than those of any other people" (Paz, 47-64). He continues with his argument saying that the Day of the Dead celebrations are the result of a "death obsessed" national character that was inherited from the Aztecs (Marchi 21). Marchi highlights the thoughts of the Mexican writer Carlos Monsivais, who argues that Mexico's "obsession" with death is a modern construct that arose in the popular imagination during the Mexican revolution. Soldiers who faced firing squads were stoic and with this attitude, denied their enemies the "pleasure of witnessing their discomposure." With all this in mind, I decided to ask my informants if they thought Mexico as a country was death obsessed or had some sort of special relationship with death and created my own conclusions. It was a tough question to ask: many had trouble answering it, but they agreed that death was prominent in Mexican culture. Claudia said "Mexicans are comfortable with death. We embrace it, we make fun of it! It's going to happen one way or another, so why not live your life." The common motif that my informants mentioned was that "life is brief, we are here for only a little bit, so why not be happy and enjoy life to the fullest." Arturo who is a Mariachi artist talked about a song that is often requested during Day of the Dead events: "Un puño de tierra" which also talks about the motif of life being short, so we should live life to the fullest. Many of my informants also compared the difference between Mexico's 'accepting' attitude and the United States 'taboo' attitude towards death. Antonio did not agree that Mexico was obsessed with death, but it is an "on-going conversation" that makes people comfortable with the reality of death. Arturo proposed that Americans have a "forever young attitude, they want to live forever. Men and women are doing what they can to look younger. You got a

middle aged man playing golf, trying to do what he did in his early twenties.” People have often said that the United States is “youth obsessed,” they're trying to find ways of looking younger through “anti-aging” creams or dyeing their gray hairs. Americans are scared to face death, to look at it straight in the face and to know that their mortality is inevitable. Death is censored to children: when a pet dog dies, a parent will tell their child that the dog “ran away and wont be coming back” instead of telling them the dog died. Death is taboo for Americans because it’s a hard pill to swallow, the idea of ceasing to exist, disturbs people. For Roman Catholics the idea of life after death is engraved in our hearts, because of our faith in reaching eternal life through Christ. To the indigenous, “Death was not considered the end of life, but rather the continuum of life” (Marchi 13). This was an idea that both Claudia and Arturo brought up during our interviews: both said death was a way of “entering the next level,” an “evolution.” The Aztecs believed in the after life, and for them it was something to look forward to. The heroes and warriors would go to Tlalocan, a paradise that was “glowing with eternal springs and gold” (Saunders). Before the imposition of Catholicism, vikings warriors did not fear death, but often look forward to dying on the battlefield as a hero. Death on the battlefield meant being able to enter Valhalla (Old Norse meaning “Hall of the Slain”), the equivalent of Heaven, where every warrior who was slain in battle gathers in a the great hall to drink endless mead and share their stories of victory. I brought up the idea of death when talking to a colleague who is an atheist, and he said that the idea of dying completely scares him. He believes that there is nothing after death, it’s the ultimatum, no paradise, no punishment, just nothingness. This ‘nothingness’ can cause people to be afraid of death, because people are spending their entire lives looking for meaning, just to end up six feet underground. When I asked a close friend if they feared death, she said “no” because of her Catholic faith, but she did say that she feared the physical pain that could possibly come with death.

It does not matter if you are the richest man or the poorest man, you cannot escape death. It doesn't favor one person over the other. I conclude with weeks of research that Day of the Dead, in reality, is a celebration of life. The holiday teaches people to value life by acknowledging that life is brief and death is imminent. We should not fear death, but embrace it and live our lives to the fullest. This idea has been a part of the Aztec culture and other indigenous groups, hundreds of years before the Spanish ever set foot on Mexican shores. The belief in a rewarding afterlife helps remove the negative stigma that surrounds death today. Day of the Dead makes the fact that we’re all going to die easier to accept because *la muerte es dulce*.

People who celebrate Day of the Dead find peace in knowing that the souls of their deceased loved ones will return back to the world of the living to celebrate with them as they did when they were alive. It closes the gap between this world and the next so that even for a brief time, we can be together *again*.

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