

Intro to Missions

_____ Date

_____ Your Name

Celebrating the Day of the Dead SNU media center call number: GR115. C45



In the U.S., Halloween is a time for costumes and silliness, but The Day of the Dead is a serious affair in Mexico where relatives remember and honor deceased loved ones.

Though the word “syncretism” is not used, the phenomenon is evident in the film where traditional Indian beliefs have been combined with Roman Catholicism.

Key Words or Concepts

This video helped fulfill the purpose of this course by . . .

What struck me most . . .

The Day of the Dead began in prehispanic Mexico as a festival to celebrate children and the dead.

The original celebration can be traced to Aztec festivities ritually presided over by the goddess Mictecacihuatl ("Lady of the Dead"). The rituals also featured a festivity dedicated to a major Aztec war deity, "Sinister Hummingbird". In the Aztec calendar, this festival fell roughly at the end of July and the beginning of August. In the post-conquest era, in an attempt to transform it into a Christian celebration, the Day of the Dead was moved by Spanish priests to coincide with the Christian holiday of All Hallows Eve (in Spanish: "Día de Todos Santos"). So, Mexicans now celebrate the day of the dead during the first two days of November. The modern festivity is a blend of ancient aboriginal and Christian features.

The Day of the Dead can range from a very important cultural event with definite social and economic responsibilities for participants, to a religious observance featuring actual worship of the dead (whether Catholic priests recognize/approve of it or not), to simply a uniquely Mexican holiday characterized by special foods and confections (as is the case in large cities.)

The day's activities usually center on visits by families to the graves of close relatives. Family members spruce up the gravesites, decorating them profusely with flowers, enjoying a picnic, and interacting socially with other family and community members who have gathered at the cemetery. Families remember the departed by telling stories about them.

The meals prepared for these picnics feature meat dishes in spicy sauces, a special egg-batter bread, cookies, chocolate, and sugary confections in a variety of animal or skull shapes. Grave sites and family altars are profusely decorated with flowers (primarily large, bright flowers such as marigolds and chrysanthemums), and adorned with religious amulets and (in smaller villages) with offerings of food, cigarettes and alcoholic beverages.

The warm social environment, colorful setting, and the abundance of food, drink and good company give pleasant overtones to this commemoration of the dead in spite of the fatalism openly exhibited by the participants. The festive interaction of the living and the dead is a way of recognizing the human cycle of life and death.

The traditional observance calls for a feast during the early morning hours of November 2nd, the Day of the Dead proper, though modern urban Mexican families usually observe the Day of the Dead with only a special family supper featuring the "Bread of the Dead" (pan de muerto). It is good luck to bite into the plastic toy skeleton which bakers hide in each rounded loaf. Friends and family members give one another gifts of sugar skeletons or other items with a death motif. The gift is more prized if the skull or skeleton is embossed with one's own name.

There are three important things to know about the Mexican Day of the Dead: (1) It is a holiday with a complex history, (2) its observance varies by region and by degree of urbanization, and (3) it is not a morbid occasion, but rather a festive time.