The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity

Mexico's Day of the Dead is a version of the widespread Roman Catholic feasts of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. This article analyzes how the holiday has come to be perceived, both within and outside of Mexico, as a unique Mesoamerican legacy, hence a symbol of the nation itself. Tourism and international relations have been largely responsible for this development. The recent spread of Halloween within Mexico has given rise to a symbolic competition in which Halloween is associated with the United States and the Day of the Dead with Mexico. The presence of Halloween symbols within Mexico is interpreted throughout Mexico as symptomatic of U.S. imperialist aggression.

As David Kertzer has demonstrated, ritual, religious or otherwise, is "an important means for structuring our political perceptions and leading us to interpret our experiences in certain ways" (Kertzer 1988:85). "The symbols employed" in ritual, he says, "suggest a particular interpretation of what is being viewed" (1988:85). In Mexico, the Day of the Dead, celebrated uninterruptedly from colonial times to the present, is on the surface a conspicuously apolitical event, a communal occasion on which families honor their deceased relatives. Yet this holiday in recent years has assumed an increasingly political cast, linking the celebration specifically to Mexico and Mexican national identity. The Day of the Dead helps to create an interpretation of the world in which Mexico is unique, culturally discrete, and above all different from the two powers that have dominated the country throughout its long existence: Spain and the United States. Of special significance in this regard is the Mexican reaction to Halloween. Halloween and the Day of the Dead, with obvious common historical origins, have come to symbolize nationally discrete observances. The rapid penetration of Halloween symbols into Mexico increasingly evokes Mexican nationalistic sentiments, embodied in a campaign to preserve the country from U.S. cultural imperialism.

This article, then, explores the Day of the Dead as a political event, which expresses, among other things, the complexities of Mexican–U.S. relations. The article also reaffirms a phenomenological view of tradition as, in the words of

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Before proceeding, it is necessary to define just what the Day of the Dead is. The Day of the Dead is a specifically Mexican term referring to the Mexican version of pan-Roman Catholic holy days: All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days, observed on November 1 and November 2, respectively. Strictly speaking, the Day of the Dead—known in Spanish as el Día de Anima (Soul’s Day), el Día de los Finados (the Day of the Deceased), or el Día de los Fieles Difuntos (the Day of the Faithful Departed)—refers to All Souls’ Day, which normally falls on November 2. Only when November 2 happens to coincide with Sunday is All Souls’ Day celebrated on November 3. The Day of the Dead includes such a range of interlocking activities that in colloquial speech it has come to denote not only November 2 but also, and more usually, the entire period from October 31 through November 2. The Day of the Dead is in actuality a sequence of Days of the Dead. Hence, we occasionally also encounter the term Días de Muertos, or Días de los Muertos—that is, Days of the Dead, in the plural.

Note that, despite the elaborate manner in which the Day of the Dead is celebrated, the Roman Catholic Church requires only the observance of special masses on November 1 in honor of all the saints and on November 2 in honor of the souls in purgatory. These masses, which originated as early as the 11th century (Cornides 1967:319; Smith 1967:318), assumed a permanent place of importance in the liturgical calendar (nearly equivalent in significance to Christmas and Easter) by the 14th century (Gaillard 1950:927–932). Today, the Church requires parish priests to recite one special mass on November 1 and another on November 2, although three masses on November 2 are more common: one in honor of the departed souls, a second in honor of a cause designated annually by the pope, and the third in recognition of a cause selected by the parish priest himself. These special masses constitute the only official part of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days celebrations throughout the Roman Catholic world, including Mexico.

Most observers would agree, ironically, that Mass in Mexico is the least-salient part of the holiday (see Brandes 1981). Come the end of October, a multitude of foreign visitors descends upon Mexico to witness colorful—some would say carnivalesque—ritual performances and artistic displays. Decorated breads, paper cutouts, and plastic toys, most of them playing humorously on the death theme, are evident everywhere. Sculpted sugar candies in the form of skulls, skeletons, and caskets suggest an almost irreverent, macabre confrontation with mortality. During October 31 through November 2, Mexicans clear, decorate, and maintain watch over relatives’ graves. Everything from expensive tombstones to simple earthen-mound burial sites are adorned with flowers, candles, and food, aesthetically arranged in honor of the deceased. In Mexico, most of the activities and artistic displays connected with this holiday—including special food offerings, cemetery vigils, altar exhibitions, and the like—are a folk elaboration entirely separate from liturgical requirements. The origin of these folk practices is a source
of scholarly and popular debate. What is clear is that, for Mexicans, foreigners, and peoples of Mexican descent, the holiday has come to symbolize Mexico and Mexicananness. It is a key symbol of national identity.

Mexican national identity is no easy subject for discussion. It has long been the object of lengthy deliberation and passionate debate, philosophical, historical, and otherwise. Scholarly and literary reflections on Mexican national character include penetrating and influential portraits by Samuel Ramos (1962), Octavio Paz (1961), and Roger Bartra (1987), among others. The whole topic has recently received sensitive treatment in the writings of Matthew Gutmann (1993), who demonstrates that ideas about supposed Mexican distinctiveness undergo transformation from generation to generation in the face of the country’s enormous cultural diversity. States Gutmann, “Analysts of a would-be uniform ‘national character’ (or culture) of Mexico often resort to origin myths, downplaying class, gender and ethnic divisions within the geographic boundaries of the nation state, and also discount the fact that new and significant cultural features have emerged since the Revolution and Independence” (1993:56).

The Mexican state has been confronted not only by a need faced by many other states, that is, the need to forge a national consciousness and unity among a multitude of diverse regions and peoples. It has also had to—or at least seen fit to—create a sense of national distinctiveness by contrasting itself to the two great powers to which it has been subject over the course of centuries: Spain and the United States. With respect to Spain, Mexico suffers particular difficulty in creating a sense of discreteness. Most analysts would agree, after all, that two of the most salient features uniting any people are language and religion. Mexicans, who overwhelmingly speak Spanish and practice Roman Catholicism, can claim neither of these features as a source of difference from the imperial conqueror. Insofar as Mexican relations with the United States are concerned, language and religion are indeed a potential cultural resource for forging a sense of national identity. More important in U.S.–Mexican relations, however, is Mexican suffering at the hands of the economically and militarily powerful neighbor to the north. From the 1840s, when newly independent Mexico lost approximately half its territory to the United States, to the present, which is characterized by overwhelming disparities in national wealth and the increasing presence of U.S. financial and manufacturing institutions in Mexico, Mexicans have had to struggle against all odds to maintain a sense of autonomy and equality. From one vantage point, Mexican dependency upon and domination by Spain and the United States have impeded the emergence of a fully autonomous nation. From another, however, Mexicans have been able to use these countries as ideological foils against which to emphasize their own undeniable uniqueness.

In its quest for a unique identity, Mexico has enjoyed one major resource: the Indian, past and present. Gutmann is correct to state that Mexican intellectuals tend to date Mexico today from the times of the Spanish conquest, “whether for the triumph of the Spanish in the case of Ramos, or for the defeat of the Aztecs in the case of Paz” (Gutmann 1993:53). Nonetheless, it is Mexico’s Indian heritage, as demonstrated through archaeological and ethnographic evidence, that clearly
separates the country from both Spain and the United States, and it is the Indian
heritage that the Mexican state has chosen to elevate symbolically. One effective
way to further a sense of discrete national identity is through art and museum dis-
plays (see Karp and Lavine 1991). In this respect, the National Museum of An-
thropology in Mexico City may be considered a glorious monument erected in
honor of Mexican uniqueness and authenticity. Its two floors are distributed to
show, first, the archaeological record, as displayed chronologically on the ground
story; and, second, contemporary indigenous presence, as displayed through
rooms devoted to key Indian communities, on the top story. Taken as a whole,
the National Museum of Anthropology is designed to exhibit, to nationals and
foreigners alike, an official view of an authentic Mexico, unaffected by contami-
nating outside influences.

In Mexico, as elsewhere (see Hague 1981; Herzfeld 1982; Wilson 1976), folk-
lore has been important in the quest for national identity. Folklore often reflects
popular ideas about the origins of a people. It also is believed to penetrate beneath
the superficial and culturally confounding layers of modern life to some authentic
core, thereby representing the essence of a people, its principal style and values.
Folklore, further, is often shared by a given group in contradistinction to other
groups. In all these respects, folklore serves nationalistic goals.

Ritual and festival in general are of course among the most prominent forms of
folklore in this regard. A people, be they national minority or state-defined na-
tion, can reinforce their separate identity through reference to presumably
unique ceremonials. These ceremonials come to be perceived as part of what
makes the group unique and reflects the group’s defining norms and values. It is
within this ideological context that we must understand Mexico’s Day of the Dead.

The Perceived Uniqueness of the Day of the Dead

The Day of the Dead is now and has long been a symbol of Mexico. But the na-
tionalistic dimension dates from relatively recent times, probably no further back
than the present century. Almost certainly, from the time of the Spanish conquest
in 1521, Mexicans observed All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days, feasts that then as now
were required of all Roman Catholics. Special masses, as part of the obligatory lit-
urgy, were intrinsic to the celebration, as they still are. There is good evidence
(Brandes 1988:88–109), too, that at the time of the conquest, All Saints’ and All
Souls’ Days were occasions in Spain and elsewhere in Europe for visiting cemeter-
ies; presenting offerings of flowers, candles, and food to deceased relatives; and
soliciting or begging in ritualized form.

With regard to All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days in New Spain, however, so little
written documentation exists that it is impossible to determine the precise ways in
which Mexicans celebrated this holiday. We may assume that, whether through
formal Church decree or informal processes of culture transmission (Foster 1960),
All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days in colonial Mexico more or less followed European
practices. However, the precise regional distribution of ritual activities and their
relative acceptance among diverse linguistic communities and social classes are
matters for speculation alone. We do know that in the 1740s, in the Valley of Mexico, All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days began to assume the flavor of the contemporary event. It is from this time that we first hear from a Capuchin friar named Francisco de Ajofrín (1958:87) of the commercial production and sale of whimsical figurines made of the sugar paste known in Mexico as alfeñique. Ajofrín’s pivotal account, too, incorporates the first known use in Mexico of the term Day of the Dead. Both the existence of sugar-paste figurines and the reference to All Saints’ and Souls’ Days as “the Day of the Dead” are characteristic of the Mexican celebration (Brandes 1997).

The degree to which the overall celebration of the Day of the Dead is in reality unique to Mexico is a source of ongoing debate, a debate that cannot be resolved here. It is necessary to repeat, however, that key elements of the contemporary popular celebration of All Saints’ and Souls’ Days in Mexico—elements including family cemetery vigils; the erection of home altars; the preparation of special sweets; the presentation to the deceased of flowers, candles, and food; and the performance of ritualized begging or solicitation—can be found throughout much of the Roman Catholic world, including Latin America and southern Europe. Ritualized begging is even common on All Souls’ Day among Indian pueblos in the Southwestern United States, pueblos conquered and influenced by Spain (Espinosa 1918; Parsons 1917). What seems to me unique to Mexico are three features of the celebration: first, the name Day of the Dead; second, the abundance and variety of whimsical sweet breads and candies; and third, the humor and gaiety that pervade the holiday.

Much of the reason for uncertainty about the origins of the Day of the Dead is an absence of adequate source material. The Day of the Dead, like Carnival, always presented a threat to the official political and religious establishment. Hence, during the colonial era, the Spanish rulers attempted to tone down, if not entirely eradicate, the popular celebration of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days. Writes historian Pedro Viqueira,

The nocturnal visit which village men, women, and children made to the cemeteries, the festivities and drunkenness that took place there, could only scandalize and above all horrify the illustrious elites, who looked to expel death from social life. This fiesta, which drew boundaries between the living and the dead and partially inverted their roles, showed up the presence of death in the midst of life in an era in which the elite of New Spain . . . tried to forget its existence. [Viqueira 1984:13]

It is not surprising, says Viqueira, that in October 1766 the Royal Criminal Chamber (Real Sala del Crimen) prohibited attendance at cemeteries and also imposed a prohibition on the sale of alcoholic beverages after nine in the evening (1984:13).

Nearly one hundred years later, following Mexico’s independence from Spain, the Day of the Dead still seemed to pose a threat to public order and stability. In 1847, liquor stores were closed for all but two or three hours on November 1 and 2, as a security measure. The North American Star, a newspaper serving the U.S. community in Mexico City, declared on November 2 that “yesterday, the first
day of the festival, went off with perfect quietness, with no disturbance of any kind, that we could hear, and we presume we shall be able to say the same to-day and to-morrow” (1847). Despite the observed calm, the holiday apparently caused some anticipation of social unrest. It is precisely this unrest, whether or not justifiably feared, that undoubtedly produced some degree of press censorship. Throughout the colonial era and the 19th century, Mexican newspapers and other popular sources provide only the most limited, sanitized coverage of Day of the Dead activities. From these sources we obtain the elite view of the event, which consists primarily of accounts of formal religious activity. Textured ethnographic detail, which might allow an assessment of which aspects of the holiday derive from Spain, which from ancient Mexico, and which from the colonial encounter, are virtually absent.

What is of main interest here is not, however, the actual historical derivation of the Day of the Dead but rather its attributed derivation and connection to Mexico. Consider, for example, that the second chapter of Octavio Paz’s Labyrinth of Solitude (1961) is entitled “The Day of the Dead.” For Paz, this ritual occasion shows that the Mexican “is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love” (1961:57). Paz believes that the Mexican looks at death “face to face, with impatience, disdain or irony” (1961:57). In this respect, the Mexican view of death is very different from either the North American or European views:

The word death is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips. . . . The Mexican’s indifference toward death is fostered by his indifference toward life. He views not only death but also life as nontranscendent. . . . It is natural, even desirable to die, and the sooner the better. . . . Our contempt for death is not at odds with the cult we have made of it. [Paz 1961:57]

Paz, one of the most widely read and penetrating Mexican men of letters, clearly uses the Day of the Dead as a lens through which to discern a peculiarly Mexican view of death. It is a perspective shared by numerous other Mexican intellectuals, including Caso (1953:122), Covarrubias (1947:390), Díaz Guerrero (1968:15), Fernández Kelley (1974:533), and Lope Blanch (1963:8). Foreigners, too, have long identified what is for them a specifically Mexican attitude toward death. For Soviet filmmaker Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein, this attitude is nowhere better displayed than during the Day of the Dead:

At every step [in Mexico] life and death fuse constantly; so too do appearance and disappearance, death and birth. On the “Day of the Dead” even small children stuff themselves with crystalized [sic] sugar skulls and chocolate coffins, and amuse themselves with toys in the form of skeletons. The Mexican despises death. . . . Most important of all, the Mexican laughs at death. November 2nd, “Death Day,” is given over to irresistible mockery of death. [quoted in Sayer 1993:45]

For Mexicans and the world at large, the Day of the Dead represents Mexico and things Mexican. Elektra and Tonatiúh Gutierrez sum up this attitude perfectly by stating that the only thing that the Day of the Dead has in common with All Souls’ Day is that “both are cases of a day sanctified to honor the memory of
deceased relatives” (1971:75). As indicated above, there are of course many other features shared by the European and Mexican celebrations. But these authors, like most, promote Mexico’s Day of the Dead as a unique phenomenon. The Day of the Dead and the attitude toward death that it represents have come to symbolize Mexico itself.

**The Day of the Dead and the Mexican Indian**

Mexico’s indigenous past and present, as I have stated, are what distinguish this country undeniably from both Europe and the United States. It is not surprising, then, that in the quest for national identity, the Indian should be closely associated with the Day of the Dead. This association appears explicitly throughout the literature. Perhaps more than any other Mexican ritual, the Day of the Dead has acquired the reputation of being either a basically preconquest Indian survival with a European Catholic veneer or a near-seamless fusion of preconquest and Roman Catholic ceremonial practices. Consider the statement of Haberstein and Lamers that “in Mexico everywhere the Day of the Dead celebrations combine a curious admixture of ancient Indian and Catholic beliefs and practices” (1963:592). The same goes for Childs and Altman, who claim that “the beliefs and practices associated with contemporary observances of Días de los Muertos, although not a direct and simple survival of pre–Hispanic ritual, have their roots in the ancient religions of Mesoamerica” (1982:6). They continue, “However successful the Spanish church may have been in the destruction of state cults, it is apparent on close scrutiny that much ‘Catholicism’ of contemporary Indian communities is pre–Hispanic in origin, especially the beliefs and customs related to death and the dead” (1982:6–7). Yet another expression of this viewpoint comes from Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Sandstrom, who claim that, at least for three indigenous linguistic groups in the central Mexican highlands (the Nahuat, Otomi, and Pehpehua), “even observances that clearly have a pre–Hispanic base, such as All Souls and Carnival, are syncretized with the Christian celebration of similar character” (1986:254).

The alleged pre–Hispanic base of All Souls’ Day is indeed “clear” in the minds of many scholars. Unfortunately, this relationship never receives systematic demonstration. Rather, there is a presumption of pre–Hispanic survival, manifested in a casual association of the Day of the Dead with Aztec ritual, on the one hand, and contemporary Indian funerary ritual, on the other. In The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico (1991), Carmichael and Sayer compile an enormous amount of documentary and ethnographic information regarding the Day of the Dead. A full chapter is devoted to pre–Hispanic beliefs and practices regarding death and mourning, without the authors establishing an explicit connection between past and contemporary events. Although they state that “to what extent these pre–Hispanic festivals and their associated rituals were transmuted into the Christian festivals remains a matter of keen debate” (1991:33), they never actually discuss the content of this debate. Their chapter entitled “The Pre–Hispanic Background” remains an implicit endorsement of the idea that the Day of the
Dead can in fact be traced to pre-Hispanic ritual. In a popular anthology entitled *Mexico: The Day of the Dead* (1993), Sayer reproduces a chapter from Evon Vogt’s description of funerals in Zinacantán, a Tzotzil-speaking community in the heavily indigenous state of Chiapas. Despite the fact that the Day of the Dead is decidedly not a funerary ritual, the inclusion of this chapter in the book implies that Zinacanteco ritual represents an exemplary indigenous expression of the Day of the Dead.

It is true that Mexican Indians have demonstrated, through both archaeological and ethnographic evidence, that they possess complex and subtle ideas about death and the dead. They also have always celebrated the dead through the performance of specific rituals. But the possession of elaborate ideas about death as well as the ritualized commemoration of the deceased are human facts, characteristic of all known societies past and present (see Metcalf and Huntington 1991). The celebration of death cannot itself be presented reasonably as evidence for an indigenous origin for the Day of the Dead. Nonetheless, Day of the Dead ceremonies are presented throughout Mexico as if they were unambiguously Indian. The alleged indigenous character of this fiesta means that it is automatically associated with Mexico and correspondingly dissociated from Europe and North America.

There are various mechanisms through which the Day of the Dead as an Indian holiday is publicly acknowledged and asserted. Among the most prominent is the popular belief that there exist a limited number of communities—all of these Indian communities—where the Day of the Dead is celebrated in its fully elaborate and authentic state. These towns include the Purépecha island of Janitzio in the state of Michoacán, the Nahua village of Mixquic in the state of Mexico, and the Zapotec village of Xococotlán in the state of Oaxaca. All of these communities, and others like them, share one major characteristic: they are famous nationally and internationally for their Day of the Dead celebrations and consequently draw enormous numbers of tourists from both Mexican cities and abroad. And yet anyone who visits cemeteries in Mexico City during the Day of the Dead can attest to the elaborate observance of this holiday in the country’s immense, highly industrialized and commercialized metropolitan capital. The decoration of tombstones, flower and food offerings, presence of relatives respectfully guarding vigil over their deceased relatives, and the like are as elaborate in Mexico City’s Panteón Jardín, Panteón Municipal, and Panteón Francés as can be found anywhere in the country. In city cemeteries such as these, however, the tourist presence is minimal. Middle-class Mexicans from Mexico City, Guadalajara, and elsewhere, searching for cultural roots, prefer to travel to the handful of Indian towns and villages that have become famous for the authenticity of their Day of the Dead celebrations. Often these Mexicans form part of international tour groups.

Mexican scholar Juanita García-Godoy, who has carried out extensive research on the Day of the Dead (García-Godoy 1994:33–34), decided for purposes of investigation to join two such groups that visited Day of the Dead ceremonies in Xococotlán in the state of Oaxaca. She reports as follows:
We were each given a bouquet of flowers, two veladoras (votive candles), and torches which consisted of a candle set into a split bamboo shaft and protected by orange cellophane paper. Before the tour departed from the meeting point, we were given a short lecture (once in Spanish, once in English, the latter much more brief and simple) about the importance of Días de muertos. We were reminded that we would be guests at a spiritually important event and counseled to behave appropriately. And we were instructed to place our flowers and candles on graves that were unadorned and untended; we would gain spiritual merit this way and be rewarded in the hereafter. A majority of the people on the tour were from the United States; there were a few from Canada, Europe, and Mexico. The male and female, bilingual guides were Mexican. [1994:33–34]

I visited Xococotlán during the Day of the Dead in 1996, at which time I was lecturing to a group of Americans on a University of California Extension School study tour. Even without making a firm head count, it was clear to us all that there were many times more foreigners wandering around the cemetery of Xococotlán on the night of November 1–2 than there were inhabitants of the town itself (see Figure 1). Xococotlán, with its multiple food vendors and the throngs of visitors crowding its narrow streets, had taken on a carnival atmosphere.

The same occurs during the Day of the Dead in Tzintzuntzan, with the difference that most outside visitors are Mexicans rather than foreigners. Tzintzuntzan, a community of about 3,000 artisans, farmers, and merchants, is located several hundred miles northwest of Mexico City on the shores of Lake Pátzcuaro in the state of Michoacán. Tzintzuntzan is famous for having been the capital of the ancient Purépecha Empire, a political entity that successfully resisted Aztec domination. No doubt because of its illustrious past, Tzintzuntzan is perceived as a Purépecha settlement. Tzintzuntzan’s reputation as a center of Purépecha culture, both ancient and contemporary, has been codified and propagated through an ethnological display occupying a full exhibition hall of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. This exhibit, a permanent installation, portrays Tzintzuntzan as the epitome of enduring Purépecha culture. The reality is that Tzintzuntzan is and long has been an overwhelmingly mestizo community, with only about 7% of villagers able to speak Purépecha throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Kemper n.d.). Even in 1960, the start of the decade that saw the construction and design of the National Museum of Anthropology, only 11.4% of the population could be identified as indigenous (Foster 1988:35). Yet the community’s fame as a center of Purépecha culture has increased since that time, rather than abated.

One reason for this persistent misidentification is the governmental promotion of Tzintzuntzan’s Day of the Dead ceremonies as an authentic indigenous religious ritual (Brandes 1988:88–109). Tzintzuntzan long celebrated the Day of the Dead exactly as did countless other rural communities throughout Michoacán and Mexico as a whole, that is, in relatively muted fashion. There were always special masses, of course. Families erected home altars in honor of the departed and visited the graves of recently deceased relatives, in whose honor they decorated the burial sites with flowers and candles. George M. Foster and Gabriel Ospina, who witnessed the event in 1945, describe activities on November 2 as follows:
About four o’clock in the morning family groups begin to wend their way to the cemetery, carrying arcos [decorated latticework displays] and other offerings of food, to take up their vigil by the graves of departed relatives. Again yellow marigolds are scattered over all graves and candles are lighted. Toward dawn perhaps 40 tombs are thus arranged, and the twinkling of several hundred candles in the dark suggests will-o’-the-wisps run riot. . . . After daylight other persons come, to talk with friends keeping vigil, to eat a little, and to see what is happening. By 11 o’clock most people have gone home and the graveyard is again deserted. [1948:220]

In 1971, governmental agencies intervened in such a way as to transform the event entirely. It was in that year that the Ministry of Tourism of the State of Michoacán, together with two state agencies—the Casa de la Cultura and the Casa de Artesanías—began a campaign to attract tourists to Michoacán. They selected 11 towns, among them Tzintzuntzan, as targets of tourism. Widely disseminated
posters and radio commercials, directed at an urban, middle-class public, announced the traditional celebration of the Day of the Dead in Tzintzuntzan and elsewhere. Images on the posters show an indigenous woman, flanked by tall candles, kneeling at a gravesite. In Tzintzuntzan itself tourists received a brochure with a cover bearing the title “Noche de Muertos en Michoacán” [Night of the Dead in Michoacán], with the prominent Purépecha translation, “Animecha Kejzitakua.” In the period since the intervention of state agencies, Day of the Dead, as a denomination for this holiday, became known as Night of the Dead, in recognition of the fact that villagers en masse began to spend the entire night of November 1–2 at the cemeteries. The agencies had encouraged this transformation and, in any event, tourists had come to expect it. Tourists, who began to arrive by the thousands in large buses and long automobile caravans, had been led by publicity to anticipate the presence of certain ritual activities, which now began to be practiced in conformity to their needs.

Gradually, over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, massive tourism increasingly defined the contour of Tzintzuntzan’s Night of the Dead. There was the all-night vigil, of course, although its potential picturesqueness was marred by the presence of television cameras recording the scene live for a national audience. Enormous, noisy electric generators were now strategically situated in the cemetery to provide illumination for the cameras. High above the town, on an esplanade spread out at the foot of five imposing pre-Columbian pyramids, the Ministry of Tourism established a “Festival of Dances and Pirekuas,” pirekuas being Purépecha songs. Using an 18th-century open-air chapel as stage, state agencies also mounted a production of José Zorilla’s 19th-century Spanish classic drama, “Don Juan Tenorio.” Drama and dance performers alike were brought in from outside, and, because a substantial fee was charged for this entertainment, it was tourists and tourists alone who attended. Along the highway leading through Tzintzuntzan, tourists could now buy food and drink from any of the numerous temporary stands set up to accommodate their needs. They could seek medical assistance by visiting the temporary Red Cross station situated for the occasion near the town plaza.

By the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the event began to change names yet again. It was now referred to commonly as “La Feria,” the Fair. One middle-aged villager reported her opinion of the changes that had taken place: “The event has become shameful. People hardly talk about the Night of the Dead anymore. They say Feria, or ‘Vamos a la Feria de los Muertos!’ [Let’s go to the Fair of the Deceased!] It’s practically scandalous!” This reading of the event probably reflected a minority opinion among townspeople themselves, who earned substantial income from the tremendous influx of tourists. In fact, young unmarried men, who used to toll church bells all evening and solicit contributions of food and drink from village households, now no longer played this time-honored role. They had become too busy helping their families run food stands for the tourists. “The event used to be so sad,” reminisced one elderly man, as if this emotion were somehow inappropriate to the occasion.

Despite radical transformations, the event since 1971 has been billed by the government of the state of Michoacán as both traditional and indigenous. It has
thus become famous nationally as a survival of ancient practices and hence a cultural treasure for the Mexican people as a whole. A similar process has occurred in indigenous communities—be they allegedly indigenous, as in the case of Tzin-tzuntzan, or actually so, as in the case of Xococotlán—all over Mexico.

The Day of the Dead versus Halloween

Any observer of Day of the Dead ceremonies in the 1990s would be impressed by the presence of Halloween symbolism. Prefabricated children’s costumes, mainly witch, devil, and ghost costumes, are displayed for sale in traditional markets all over the country. There are diverse plastic and rubber masks, everything from comical likenesses of Mexican and U.S. political leaders to red-faced Satanic figures, apes, and a plethora of unidentifiable beasts (see Figure 2). One can also find plastic jack-o’-lanterns in every imaginable size. These items are mixed indiscriminately among the more usual Day of the Dead ware, including special seasonal sweet breads, colorfully decorated sugar and chocolate skulls and caskets, wooden and papier-mâché skeletons with moveable joints, as well as long-stemmed, bright orange marigolds and tall white candles destined to be used as offerings at burial sites and home altars.

On the face of it, the presence of Halloween symbolism should cause no surprise. For one thing, Halloween, which occurs on All Saints’ Eve, has for centuries shared a close resemblance to the Day of the Dead. Jack Santino traces Halloween back to the Celtic (Irish, Scottish, Welsh) festival of Samhain, the New Year’s Day of the Celts, celebrated on November 1. This pre-Christian holiday, says Santino, “was also a day of the dead, a time when it was believed that

Figure 2. Oaxaca market display of rubber masks, October-November 1996. Photo by author.
the souls of those who had died during the year were allowed access to the land of the living. It was a time when spirits were believed to be wandering” (1994:xv). Many of the beliefs and practices characteristic of Samhain survived to the Christian era. These include the belief that October 31 was a time of the wandering dead and the practice of providing food and drink to masked and costumed revelers on this night, known to Christians as the Eve of All Saints or Hallows Even, a term yielding the familiar contraction Hallowe'en (Santino 1994:xvi). Santino traces the incorporation into the celebration of All Saints’ Eve of symbols of the dead, including skeletons, ghosts, and malevolent creatures such as witches and the devil. These figures, in a word, were the transmuted pre-Christian gods and goddesses, whom the early Christians used as a syncretic means to spread their new religion. “Because of these events,” Santino concludes, “Halloween is associated with All Saints’ Day and, by extension, with the church calendar” (1994:xvi).

Santino calls the Day of the Dead a “cognate” (1994:xviii) or, one might say, a functional equivalent of Halloween. Indeed, the historical origins of the two holidays, if not identical, are nonetheless closely intermeshed. For centuries, too, they have displayed an array of shared symbols of death, a kind of playing with death, including humorous replicas of skulls, skeletons, and souls, the latter taking the form during Halloween of ghosts and during the Day of the Dead of inanimate but ever present spirits. Special sweets are an important part of both Halloween, with its characteristic black and orange candies, and the Day of the Dead, with its pan de muertos (“dead bread”), and skulls and skeletons. Ritualized begging is significant in the two holidays as well. During All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days in Mexico as much as in Europe, bands of young men wander from house to house asking for food and drink. I myself have observed this custom in Tzintzuntzan, Mexico (Brandes 1988:94–95), and Bécedas, Spain (Brandes 1975:135), although institutionalized begging and charity giving has been traditional everywhere in the Catholic world on this day (see Aguirre Sorondo 1989; Brandes 1997; Espinosa 1918; Llabrés Quintana 1925; Parsons 1917). Halloween, of course, incorporates an especially aggressive form of begging known as trick or treat (Tuleja 1994).

These common origins and shared symbols by no means erase major differences between Halloween, on the one hand, and All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days, on the other. One major difference, of course, is that All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days remain a part of the sacred Roman Catholic calendar, while Halloween has long assumed a completely secular cast. Despite possible readings to the contrary, we might also say that All Saints’ and Souls’ Days are fundamentally occasions for adult ritual performance, while Halloween, at least as celebrated in the contemporary United States, is largely a children’s holiday. Over and above this differentiation, a major symbolic cleavage has appeared in the representation of the Day of the Dead and Halloween: in Mexico, the Day of the Dead has come to symbolize Mexican identity and autonomy, while Halloween has become a symbol of the United States and its cultural imperialistic designs. The actual origins and meaning of ritual beliefs and practices during Halloween and the Day of the Dead are more or less irrelevant to the growing significance of these holidays for national identity.
In her Ph.D. thesis, Juanita Garciagodoy states,

I cannot count how many informants have answered my questions as to the meaning of Días de muertos for them, their reasons for performing this or that aspect of it, their reason(s), for that matter, to celebrate it at all by saying, “Es muy mexicano,” “It’s very Mexican,” or, “Porque somos mexicanos,” “Because we’re Mexican.” [1994:28]

Then, speaking as a Mexican herself, the author continues:

Many of us feel more patriotic during this celebration and because of it. This is partly because we think our way of relating to death and the dead—and by implication, to life—is unique in the world, setting us apart from (and at least a little above) everyone else. We are más machos, braver, and we have más corazón, more heart, than other cultures. [1994:28]

As an international scholar, Garciagodoy well understands how the Day of the Dead contributes to Mexican national identity. But as a Mexican, she cannot help but experience the nationalistic sentiments increasingly associated with the holiday. In fact, at one point in her discussion she includes herself among a group of “nationalistic Mexican scholars,” as she calls them (1994:163). Nationalism leads Garciagodoy, like so many other Mexican intellectuals, not only to reaffirm the Day of the Dead as a symbol of Mexican national identity but correspondingly to reject Halloween; “Hallowe’en as a Threat to National Tradition and Identity” is in fact the title of one of her dissertation chapters.

Garciagodoy is hardly alone in her assessment. Consider the statement of Mexican physician and author Frank Gonzalez-Crussi (1993:36) that there are disquieting signs of Halloween’s ascent. On a recent trip to Mexico City on the Day of the Dead, Gonzalez-Crussi found that

the stores are stocked with objects intended for use at Halloween, many imported from the United States. In shop windows, hollowed-out pumpkins, most made out of plastic, with cutout holes that figure eyes, nose, and mouth, beam their ghostly smiles, abetted by the flickering light within. Groups of children come out of schools or private homes disguised as monsters, werewolves, vampires, and extraterrestrial beings. Have we come this far to see an imitation, in third-world gear, of the North American Halloween? [1993:36]

Exactly how has Halloween entered into the celebration of the Day of the Dead? Garciagodoy correctly identifies two main classes of Mexicans who now celebrate the Day of the Dead by drawing on symbols and customs more usually associated with Halloween. First are urban middle-class Mexicans, many of whom dress their children in store-bought, Halloween-style costumes. Judging from the costumes I have seen on sale at middle-class malls, as well as from what I have seen the children wear, I would say that almost all the costumes play on one of five themes: witches, ghosts, skeletons, vampires, and devils. Unlike in the United States, I have rarely seen a Mexican adult wear a costume—or even a portion of a costume. For example, in 1996 in the city of Oaxaca I observed a parade of hundreds of costumed schoolchildren, accompanied by dozens of teachers and
other adults. None of the grown men and women donned so much as a witch’s cap. The urban middle-class Halloween manifests itself, too, in disco dances, with advertisements and disco decorations based on icons like witches, carved pumpkins, ghosts, and the like, usually colored in black and orange. Newspapers all over Mexico display commercial advertisements aiming at a middle-class audience and incorporating Halloween symbols. Consider a computer store advertisement that appeared on 31 October 1996 in the national daily, Reforma. The advertisement appears with black background, white lettering, an orange jack-o’-lantern, and the silhouette of a cloaked death figure wielding a scythe. “Do our competitor’s prices scare you?” reads the ad. A Goodyear tire advertisement that appeared on 30 October 1996 in Reforma is drawn in white against a black, nighttime scene. Bats fly high above, scraggly cats arch their backs, and jack-o’-lanterns grin at the readers. “Macabre nighttime sale on tires,” the advertisement states. Expensive clubs all over Mexico City—Snob and The Men’s Club, for example—use the press to announce Halloween parties and dances at this time of year.

For the working class, the Halloween appeal is somewhat different. For one thing, although some children might put on an inexpensive mask, for the most part they go uncostumed. Halloween for these children—and the participants seem uniformly to be boys rather than girls—means a money-making opportunity. Carrying any sort of small receptacle that they can find, everything from a battered cardboard box to a miniature plastic jack-o’-lantern with handle (the kind that U.S. children sometimes use to collect candy), the boys beg through the streets and among the graves, asking for their “Halloween” (see Figure 3). The word Halloween is even entering the Mexican Spanish lexicon, spelled phonetically, “Jaloüín.” The children might also beg for mi calabaza—“my pumpkin.” Other than this form of simple solicitation, the working-class Halloween seems limited to the purchase of orange-, white-, and black-colored candy in the shape of witches, ghosts, and jack-o’-lanterns. Also, the occasional carved pumpkin or plastic jack-o’-lantern rests on gravesites, along with the usual offerings, during the Day of the Dead.

Most middle-class Mexicans are well aware that Halloween symbols are part of U.S. culture and probably use Halloween symbols consciously as a means of elevating their status. It is unclear that this can be said of the working classes, for whom Halloween seems to have become seamlessly sewn within the fabric of Day of the Dead proceedings. I asked a Mixtec Indian fruit vendor and his mestiza wife, who run a small store in Mexico City, why they were selling Halloween candies and whether their customers complain about the recent introduction of Halloween. The wife just laughed. “We Mexicans are muy fiesteros [great merry-makers]. We like everything that adds to festivities!” While watching schoolchildren carry out their Halloween march in 1996 in the city of Oaxaca, I asked a couple of teenaged passersby to tell me when the march was initiated. They answered, “Maybe ten years ago, or 15... or five.” They did not know. They did say, however, that if I really wanted to learn about “these customs,” I should go to the surrounding villages where they have been practiced as long as anyone can remember. Rural schoolchildren in Oaxaca do not participate in Halloween
Figure 3. Boys begging for their “Halloween,” Mexico City cemetery, 1996. Photo by author.

marches, nor do they dress as witches, ghosts, devils, and the like. These two teen-aged boys simply confounded Halloween with the Day of the Dead. For them, as for most Mexicans in central and southern Mexico, there is one major holiday at the end of October and beginning of November. The distinction between Day of the Dead elements and Halloween elements does not occur to them.

In fact, there are parts of Mexico where celebration of the traditional Day of the Dead is relatively recent. The northern states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Sonora, for example, were places in which Halloween has long enjoyed a visible presence. A middle-class, middle-aged friend of mine from the state of Coahuila remembers celebrating Halloween and Halloween alone as a child. He claims that there was no Day of the Dead in the 1940s and 1950s in Coahuila. Occasionally around the
end of October his family would take him to Mexico City to visit relatives. He remembers being horrified at the elaborate displays of skulls and skeletons he found there, attributing to the people of Mexico City a kind of morbidity lacking in his home state. In 1996, however, key clerics in the northern Mexican states actually prohibited the celebration of Halloween on the grounds that this holiday, which they declared secular and commercial, represented a threat to the sanctity and very existence of the Day of the Dead.

Numerically, there are probably few Mexicans who perceive Halloween as posing a threat to their national culture. But those who do are articulate and visible Mexicans, the intellectuals, representatives of the church and the state, and outspoken members of major cultural institutions. All over Mexico today, there appears evidence of formal and informal resistance to the Halloween invasion from the north. A large mural painted along a wall in Tepoztlán, in the state of Morelos, shows a soccer player kicking and knocking down an individual whose head is in the form of a jack-o’-lantern. The accompanying text reads, “No to Halloween. Preserve your cultural traditions” (see Figure 4). Also, town governments are beginning to mount competitions with prizes for best Day of the Dead altar. Among the contest guidelines for the city of Oaxaca competition is that “altars which present elements foreign to our tradition [elementos ajenos a nuestra tradición] will be automatically disqualified.” Throughout Mexico, in fact, similar competitions are becoming an integral part of Day of the Dead celebrations. The competitions are becoming traditional. There can be no more dramatic proof of Handler and Linnekin’s insightful statement that “one of the major paradoxes of the ideology of tradition is that attempts at cultural preservation inevitably alter, reconstruct, or invent the traditions that they are intended to fix” (1984:288). On 29 October 1996, the national daily La Jornada, famous for its photographic displays, showed a picture of a man out on a busy street dressed and masked in skeleton costume. The caption reads “Costumbre foránea,” or “foreign custom.” Ironically, the

Figure 4. Mural, Tepoztlán, Morelos, October 1995. Photo by author.
costume is not foreign to Mexico. Death figures don very similar garb in village dances, where they play the role of clown figures (Brandes 1979).

El Imparcial, a Oaxaca city newspaper, published a feature article on 31 October 1996 entitled "Halloween or No Halloween? A Fearful Dilemma." The term fearful was rendered here in Spanish as de miedo, which is such a clear reference to the scariness theme of Halloween that the article itself, which questions the validity of Halloween, actually reaffirms the influence of this holiday. The article describes a unified campaign by both Catholic and Protestant churches in Oaxaca to stamp out Halloween. A seven-year-old boy is quoted as saying,

I don't know what to do. In church they told me that it's not good to participate in Halloween because it has to do with evil spirits, and that's why the stores choose witch and vampire costumes to wear in the streets. The bad thing is that my friends already have their costumes and I do want to accompany them, but I don't want to do anything sinful. [El Imparcial 1996:1]

The article also tells about a third grader who heard at Mass that he should not participate in Halloween. In school, he was told that it was all right to do so, "as long as he first familiarizes himself with the Mexican traditions of the Day of the Dead" (1996:1).

For many Mexican intellectuals, Halloween represents the worst of the United States. It is reputed to be excessively commercial. Garciagodoy declares that

while Días de muertos is undoubtedly an occasion for extravagant spending, it does not enter the style of consumerism that characterizes US celebrants of Hallowe'en all year round. . . . As far as the inculcation of beliefs is concerned, I would speculate that the most important belief the exporters of Hallowe'en wish to inculcate is one in the acceptability of seasonal, disposable merchandise. [1994:131]

For Garciagodoy, as for other Mexican intellectuals, Halloween serves political interests as well. "I do not want to fuel the fires of xenophobia or cultural paranoia," she says,

but I would not want to trivialize the cultural impact of the exportation of holiday traditions which, surely inadvertently, serve American interests not only economically, but also by cultivating a strong pro-US element that will continue to insure political and diplomatic harmony between two countries with an extraordinarily long and porous border. It is not impossible that such an effect is consciously desired by a few powerful people on one or both sides of the Río Bravo [Rio Grande]. Still, to me it seems more likely that the cultural impact is a side-effect of the principal objective of economic gain. [1994:129]

Economic gain is in fact close to the heart of the traditional Day of the Dead proceedings as well. Since at least the 18th century, there has been a brisk market in sugar-candy figurines. Consider the words of Francisco de Ajofrin, dating from the 1760s and mentioned earlier in this article:

Before the Day of the Dead they sell a thousand figures of little sheep, lambs, etc. of sugar paste [alfñnique], which they call ofrenda, and it is a gift which must be given obligatorily to boys and
girls of the houses where one has acquaintance. They also sell coffins, tombs and a thousand figures of the dead, clerics, monks, nuns and all denominations, bishops, horsemen, for which there is a great market and a colorful fair in the portals of the merchants, where it is incredible [to see] the crowd of men and women from Mexico City on the evening before and on the day of All Saints.

[1958:87]

Ajofrín goes on to explain that sugar figurines and other “cute little things” (monterías) are made in rapid succession by “clever” artisans who sell them cheaply (1958:87). However, he warns the innocent consumer against advance payment; this practice, he says, often results in the receipt of tardy delivery or defective goods.

Clearly, even in colonial times, the Day of the Dead had a commercial cast. Nowadays in cities all over Mexico stores decorate their windows with humorous Day of the Dead icons. Newspapers are filled with advertisements playing on Day of the Dead themes, mostly skulls, skeletons, and the satiric verses that are themselves known as calaveras, or “skulls.” Traditional artisans throughout Mexico have for generations supported their families mainly through the production of sugar skulls and figurines. Judging from contemporary testimony, they do not object to the introduction of Halloween symbols, so long as their handiwork sells. Witness the testimony of one such artisan, Wenceslao Rivas Contreras, from Toluca, the capital of the state of Mexico and a famous center of alfeñique production:

I’ve often been told to stick to what’s Mexican, yet I enjoy trying my hand at different things. Ten years ago I added skulls in pumpkins to my range. Pumpkins are a feature of Halloween in North America, but I’ll make them if I can sell them, and witches as well! I want my displays to have variety, and my customers to have choice. In truth, although these various styles sell, skulls sell best—they belong to us, to Mexico! [quoted in Carmichael and Sayer 1991:115]

The Day of the Dead apparently has always incorporated a degree of commercialism. Even the most sacred portion of the fiesta, the special observance of Mass in honor of the departed souls, originally had an economic component. In colonial Mexico, for example, it was customary to give part of the food offering to the priest in return for the recital of these special masses (Carmichael and Sayer 1991:45).

Yet this aspect of the festivities, which has grown through time and persists in a major way to the present day, remains relatively unacknowledged in the collective mind of Mexican cultural nationalists. Cultural nationalists are comparable to those folklorists who, as Dan Ben-Amos states, identify and seek to purge so-called enemies of that which they themselves consider traditional (1984:107). For cultural nationalists in Mexico, Halloween is, in contrast to the Day of the Dead, a grossly commercialized and profane holiday. Halloween to these nationalists also contaminates the Day of the Dead by introducing foreign elements into otherwise ancient, sacred proceedings. In other words, Halloween and the Day of the Dead, holidays that stem largely from a common source and that still exhibit many similar features, have become metaphors for relations between the United States and Mexico, respectively. Halloween has become a symbol of gringo imperialism.

Given the long-term presence of U.S. communities within Mexico, as well as the lengthy border shared between the two countries, it is not surprising that Halloween
symbols have been evident in Mexico over the past several generations. It is only recently, however, that the markers of Halloween—particularly costumes and jack-o’-lanterns—have become an obvious part of the end-of-October celebrations throughout central and southern Mexico. It is certainly only now, in the 1990s, that there have emerged vociferous reactions from Mexico’s religious and intellectual elite and that there should be organized opposition to the incursion of Halloween symbols into Day of the Dead activities.

It is of course now, too, that the destinies of Mexico and the United States are closer than ever. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), ratified in 1993, has increased the presence of U.S. citizens in Mexico enormously. Sanborn’s, a gigantic department store chain located throughout Mexico and catering to the ever more prosperous middle and upper middle classes, has begun large-scale marketing of Halloween costumes and candies. As far as the working classes are concerned, the ever increasing migrant stream means growing numbers of Mexican returnees, who bring to Mexico an exposure and predilection for certain aspects of U.S. popular culture, including Halloween, which many of them learned about in U.S. classrooms, if nowhere else. This trend is fomented, too, through the omnipresence of U.S. programming on Mexican television, programming that familiarizes the Mexican public with typical U.S. holidays, like Halloween.

As a result of all these developments, Halloween has indeed become a palpable part of Day of the Dead proceedings. Mexicans who resent the growing U.S. influence over the Mexican economy and cultural scene respond effectively by focusing on a concrete, discretely defined event like Halloween. Halloween’s success, to these Mexicans, represents Mexico’s failure. In truth, the Day of the Dead has correspondingly become an important part of Halloween celebrations in the United States. Turner and Jasper demonstrate in vivid detail their assertion that “Mexican-derived Day of the Dead traditions are currently enjoying immense popularity in galleries and museums north of the border” (1994:133). The increasing presence of the Day of the Dead within the United States causes little competitive concern within our borders, however, because the power relations between the two countries clearly are in the favor of Anglo Halloween customs. Anglos in the United States probably perceive Day of the Dead celebrations as a quaint curiosity, related to Halloween distantly if at all. For the Anglo majority, Day of the Dead customs are no doubt seen as a holiday ritual to be adopted or abandoned at their will. The Day of the Dead on this side of the border is certainly not an imposed tradition, whether perceptually or actually. But that story, yet another in the centuries-old saga of All Saints’ and All Souls’ Days, still remains to be told.

Note

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