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Dear Peter,

"Excuse me Miss, could you please make a donation to my skull?" asked the two-foot tall goblin as he extended an orange pumpkin pail. His stiff plastic face mask and gold sequin-covered gown were the type that thousands of American children don at this time of year. But this was Mexico.

"Yes, of course," I replied, depositing a ten peso coin .

"Thank you very much. Now please take a candy." The selection of candies he offered were so chipped and dried-out looking that even a child would have declined to take one.

The Halloween tradition has reached Mexico's urban areas; unfortunately , however, in a most distorted form. Mexican children think of Halloween as a day when begging is socially sanctioned. While some children dress up, most do not. Usually traveling in gangs, they stop cars or arrive at your door asking for "contributions for their skulls," (you would think they were going to buy them shoes or send them to school). Some carry shoe boxes carved with jack-o-latern grins. Still others use empty, undecorated tin cans; these too are referred to as skulls. Unlike in the United States, the Mexican childrens' main pursuit is coins not candy.

Besides the mercantile nature they attribute to Halloween, there are other reasons the Mexicans oppose this tradition. In an article entitled,"Halloween Should Be Combatted Both At Home And In The Schools For The Well Being Of Mexican Children", (Excelsior, November 3, 1982, Cultural Section, page 1), Mexican folksinger Amparo Ochoa reviled Halloween as a "well orchestrated invasion of consumerism". Why this attack? Because the Halloween costumes and candies sold in Mexico are quite expensive. But above all, it is fear that makes Mexicans react so violently to this tradition; they are afraid that it might some day replace one of their most important holidays, the Day of the Dead.

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The concern of the Mexicans is understandable. U.S.brand names dominate the local cigarette, liquor, car, and industrial machinery markets. At least a third of the movies showing at any given moment in the capital are American-made. The country's rock and roll radio stations play almost nothing but U.S. hit parade recordings. And Christmas, with Santa Claus and the traditional fir tree, have replaced the Mexican Day of the Three Kings celebration in most parts of the country. In aggregate, the Mexicans refer to this phenomenon as U.S. dultural imperialism.

If Halloween were to supplant the Day of the Dead, it would be a great loss. Halloween, while enjoyable, is of limited cultural significance. Perhaps it was inevitable that in the United States, a nation forever looking forward, even on All Saints Day we don't pay tribute to the deceased. We can barely be bothered with our senior citizens, much less our dead. In contrast, the Mexican Indian tradition, which in fact has existed since pre-Hispanic times, does pay homage to the deceased in a dignified, creative, and festive manner. Or at least historically it has; today the Day of the Dead is threatened with both distortion and extinction.

In Mexico's urban areas, the observance of the custom is already slipping away. Tens of thousands of peasants who left the countryside in search of better employment opportunities in the cities, have had to leave many of their traditions behind. The Day of the Dead festivities revolve around the cemetery where one's relatives are buried. For many, the trip back to their native villages is too long and costly. The lower and middle class Mexicans with relatives buried in the cities' cemeteries tend to limit their activities to laying flowers on their ancestors' graves, and eating sweet breads, sugar-paste coffins, and chocolate skulls (which, by the way, are just as expensive as the Halloween sweets). Among the urban upper classes, this Indian tradition goes largely uncelebrated: some of these people are of pure Spanish blood, and those who are not, those of mixed Spanish and Indian blood- the mestizos - would prefer to pretend that they are. In either case, they feel that it is below them to practise such common customs.

In the Indian village of Misquic (pronounced Miskey), a 90-minute drive south from Mexico City, the preparations for the Day of the Dead are elaborate. When we arrived there on November 1st, the day before the official holiday, dozens of families were busily at work in the town's cemetery. The women and children swept around the grave while the men built up the sides of the dirt mound under which the deceased lay. Some families had placed large slabs of concrete or granite over their ancestor's burial site; but many, perhaps the majority, could not afford them. Stonemasons have obviously been in short supply in Misquic: few of the headstones bore carefully chiseled block letters.

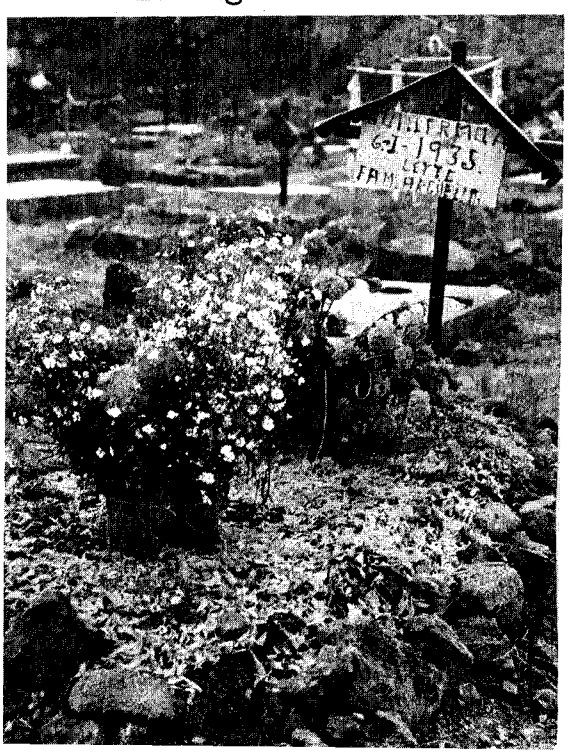
Once the mound had been molded to about six inches above the ground, the dark-skinned children covered it with rainbow-bright flower petals. The flower most often used was the zempasuchitl, a marigold-like blossom which in Mexico is known as the flower of the dead. Many families had placed oil cans at each corner of the grave; the sites with poured-concrete slabs had the cans sunk right into the grey blocks. As the afternoon wore on, the cans were filled with bountiful bouquets. The final touch was the three-foot tall dove-white candles; these would be lit after dusk.

The cemetery of Misquic is dominated by a most unusual monument: an altar covered with dozens of skulls and hundreds of arm and leg bones. Some peasants told me that when new graves are dug on top of old ones, bones are often found. These are then placed on the altar, forming a type of memorial to the "long gone". About a dozen mestizo visitors from Mexico City crowded around the pile of skeletal debris: some unbelievingly touched the craniums; others took pictures.

On the Day of the Dead, and several days before and after, memorial masses are said continually in the church that sits at the entrance to the cemetery. When we visited, at least a hundred people were packed in the front of the church. Only one - an old Indian women dressed in an intricately-woven grey shawl and a long black cotton skirt - was paying attention to the priest's orations. Excluding ourselves, the rest were mestizos. They, as we, had come to see the tables elaborately laid with offerings for the dead. Three tables had been placed at the foot of the altar. The first held guayabas, apples, oranges, and small chunks of sugar cane laid in intricate patterns. The second , which stood just behind the first and on legs some eight inches taller, displayed more of the same, yet arranged differently. The third, which stood higher than the second and even closer to the altar, was covered with fuchsia pink pastries and small metal statues of dogs and pigs.

Many of the mestizos were talking loudly. Instamatic cameras flashed incessantly. One proud father had positioned his baby's carriage in front of the tables; madly he snapped his fingers to make the child look at the camera. A young man dressed in jeans, a loose woolen poncho, and sandals was playing a flute. He appeared to choose the notes at random.

While still in the church's courtyard, I noticed a small sign facing out into Misquic's main street. It read, "The sale of any object is strictly forbidden on church grounds." Memories were immediately revived of convent-school religion classes, and Christ casting the merchants out of the temple. Here in Misquic they had also been thrown out; but not very far. Their Day of the Dead fair stalls stood just a few feet beyond the gates. The merchants had arranged themselves in four parallel rows, extending at least ten city blocks-length. Some stands sold objects for the dead: fruits, flowers, and fine beeswax candles. The vast majority, however, catered to the more temporal demands of the living.



Regional delicacies were ladled out of 20-gallon aluminum vats. They included birria, a rather watery lamb stew; pozole, a pork and corn kernal soup; and, menudo, a spicy tripe soup that Mexicans claim cures even the worst of hangovers. Crepe-like pancakes drenched in an apple, raisin and sugar-based syrup; blue-corn tortillas stuffed with refried beans; home-made potato chips; and, tacos brimming with corn fungus, squash flowers, stringy white cheese or wild mushrooms were also available.

One of the most popular items being sold was the tie-pin adorned with a plaster skull. Each skull came with jeweled eyes, and appropriate head gear: pink plastic curlers, a white cotton chef's hat, an American football helmut, or a black graduation cap. Another stand sold wall-hangings made of colored tissue-paper that depicted skeletons dancing, having their shoes shined, and sitting down to a feast. My favorite showed a gentleman skeleton on one knee proposing to his fair bony maiden. For the children, there were coffins with strings that made their occupants pop out, stand-up paper dolls depicting funeral processions, and dancing skeletons held together by springs.

Despite the playfulness of these Day of the Dead items, I don't think that the Mexicans take the loss of a friend or relative any easier than we do. I do believe, however, that for the Mexicans, death is not the same end-of-all that we perceive it to be. They see it,rather, as another phase in a longer process. They seem to believe that the dead live on, continue to party, dance, and fall in love - they just leave their bodies behind.

On November 2nd, each Misquic family prepares the favorite foods of their dead relatives. Small children, traveling in groups of five to ten, go from door to door, offering to pray for the family's deceased, and for their safe return from the other world for the evening's festivities. The children carry hardened squash shells complete with jack-o-latern grins lit up by candles; they look almost identical to the pumpkins that Americans place in their windows to attract Halloween visitors. As they leave each household, the children are given fruits, or pastries in payment for their prayers.

These are the type of Indian traditions that the Mexicans want to safeguard, and they should. But their error is to believe that Halloween is the principal threat to their Day of the Dead tradition. Being extremely proud and nationalistic people, Mexicans often prefer to blame their internal problems on foreign culprits. The country's current economic crisis, for example, is usually attributed to the exaggerations of the international press, Reaganomics, or the world recession. While these are some of the causes, the main causes are internal: two years of excessive government spending, of an over-valued peso, and of poor economic management. In the case of the Day of the Dead, Mexico's mestizo population not Halloween is the most dangerous menace.

For each stall in the Misquic fair that sold goods related to the Day of the Dead, at least four more were manned by mestizos peddling items with no relation to the holiday. What they sold were all-purpose trinkets that could equally be found at a circus, a bull-fight, a Saturday bazaar, or a country fair. Some sold paper hats emblazoned with such catchy phrases as "Kiss me if you can", "Looking for Boyfriend Between the Ages of 16 and 20", and "Remember Me Forever". Others sold balloons, bits of bright polyester clothing, and tawdry jewelry. For 100 pesos, you could have your picture taken sitting on a small white donkey drapped with a striped blanket. The large sombrero necessary to make the photo even more memorable was available at no extra cost.

Last year I traveled to the interior of the country , to watch

the Day of the Dead festivities in Tzintzuntzan, in the state of Michoacan. The region's Tarascan Indians spend hours in the graveyard, erecting large placards covered with delicately arranged flowers, pastries, and paper decorations. These tributes to the dead are then placed by the relative's gravestone, and at nightfall, dozens of lit candles surround the site. The Tarascan Indians also pack large baskets with the favorite foods of their dead relatives. Then, in the middle of the night, when the "presence of the spirits is felt", the family feast is spread out on a cloth, and the party begins.

Because Tzintzuntzan's November 2nd celebration has gained recognition throughout Mexico, thousands of tourists come to watch: some are foreigners, but the vast majority are city-based mestizos. The night I visited Tzintzuntzan's graveyard, many of the Mexicans I saw were drunk. They spoke and laughed loudly as they careened through the crowd. Unconciously, they often jostled the Indians who sat by the graves.

What's in the basket?" asked a burly, bearded man as he crouched down by an Indian women kneeling by a dirt mound.

"I will be glad to give you some, if you'll pray with me for the soul of my deceased brother," she replied quietly.

"No Senora," came the reply, "not until I know what is in the basket, until I know whether it's worth my while."

A tiny gravestone, about the size of a paperback book, went unnoticed by most. A single small candle was lit by its side. A handful of wild flowers and two baby crackers were its only adornment.

As I looked at the baby's grave, I remember hearing a desperate cry nearby. It was a young peasant girl pleading with a very inebriated man.

"I beg of you Senor, please! Please get off my father's grave!"

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