

Immigrants' Intangible Cultural Heritage

MEXICANS AND THEIR CULTURE ABROAD

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This is how we are, we are mortal
 We all must leave
We all must die in the earth
 Like a painting, we will all fade
 Like a flower
 We will wither
 Here on the earth
 Think about it, lords,
 Eagles and tigers,
Even if you were made of jade
Even if you were made of gold
 You would also go there
 To the place of the fleshless
 We shall all disappear
 No one will be left.
“Percibo lo secreto” (I See the Secret)
 (fragment)



The concept of intangible cultural heritage was defined by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to explain the preservation and safeguarding of cultural diversity in the framework of globalization. In recent years, globalization has generated the mobility of numerous cultural groups who have undergone a process of international migration moving their wisdom, values, thinking, and idea systems to other places that become new cultural and identity spaces.

Mexico, as a UNESCO member, participated for the first time in discussions on this topic, proposing in 2003 that the indigenous festivity for the dead be a candidate. The National



Mural in the Mission District.



Altar.

The Day of the Dead is a Mexican tradition that combines medieval Christianity with Mesoamerican roots.

Council for Culture and the Arts (Conaculta) argued before the UNESCO that this festivity was celebrated by 41 of Mexico's ethnic groups in 20 of 31 states, that non-indigenous populations also participated, and that the practice has even spread to the Mexicans residing in the United States.¹

OUR DAY OF THE DEAD

The Day of the Dead is a Mexican tradition that combines medieval Christianity with Mesoamerican roots, and the result of the lobbying is that it has been recognized as part of Mexico's intangible cultural heritage.

In San Francisco's Mission District—or "La Misión," as it is known in the Mexican community there—for more than three decades, every November 2, the dead are celebrated, as is the beginning of another life cycle. This is a cultural refer-

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Mission District mural by Homies Organizing the Mission to Empower Youth (HOMEY), 1997.



Mexica dancers in Mission District, 2013.

San Francisco's Mission District is a place where different cultures coexist, although Mexican culture predominates and shapes the neighborhood structure.

ence point for immigrants living in the city's Mexican neighborhood, but the lack of a local cemetery makes the celebration different from the Mexican tradition. In Mexico, on November 1 and 2, families gather in cemeteries to pay homage to their dead.

The Mission District was founded in the eighteenth century when the viceroyalty of New Spain expanded and missions were built in new regions of Upper California. In 1847, these territories stopped being part of the nascent Mexican nation and became part of California. During the Gold Rush, its economic and social development exploded, and with time, it has become very prosperous in the sphere of business and services.

Today, San Francisco's Mission District is a place where different cultures coexist, although Mexican culture predominates and shapes the neighborhood structure with businesses, venues for entertainment and leisure, schools, and cultural centers that are more involved in Mexican day-to-day living than U.S. American. So, when you walk through the neighborhood, you can see places that sell Mexican-style sandwiches-on-a-bun, or *tortas*, tacos, bakery goods, and murals that re-signify Mexican culture. Spanish is also the dominant language and most inhabitants have ethnic Mexican and Latino features, even though there is also an important U.S. American and European population.



THE FESTIVITY

In the Mission District, the visit to the cemetery on the Day of the Dead is replaced with a ritual that begins with the prayer of fire, dedicated to Huehuetéotl, the Mesoamerican god of fire. Then, participants are invited to join together in invoking the five directions, beginning with the North, the place of the Lord and Lady of Mictlán, the underworld of Aztec mythology, so they will grant wisdom. Then, they honor the East, fire, the place where the sun rises, and that represents childhood, youth, and passion, ruled by the feminine/masculine duality of Xoquiquetzal and Xochipilli, the protectors of love, the arts, and poetry. Then, all participants

look to the South, or the land of rain and Mesoamerica; and then the West, or the wind, the place where the sun goes down. Finally, they invoke the fifth direction: the Center, which represents the Mayan mantra *In lak'ech* ("You are my other I").²

This festivity in the Mission District is a cultural phenomenon made up of an infinite number of expressions and practices. In addition, Mexican and Central American migrants add elements that reflect their own experience, like the proximity of death during the border crossing and the loss of identity in the migratory process due to the cultural immersion in their new places of residence.

Richard Bauman considers performance a form of collective communication with two artistic phases: the action and the event. The action, from the perspective of folk art, helps bring together different cultural elements at a specific moment, which in turn becomes an event that envelops the performer, the form of art he/she expresses, and the audience in a present that joins the unfolding of the ephemeral and the constant.³

Therefore, it is interesting to analyze the Day of the Dead in San Francisco's Mission District from the perspective of performance art, because this manages to differentiate it from other communication phenomena that are also expressed as events. In it, communication is intense and allows the actors

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Opening of the Day of the Dead procession, Mission District, 2013.

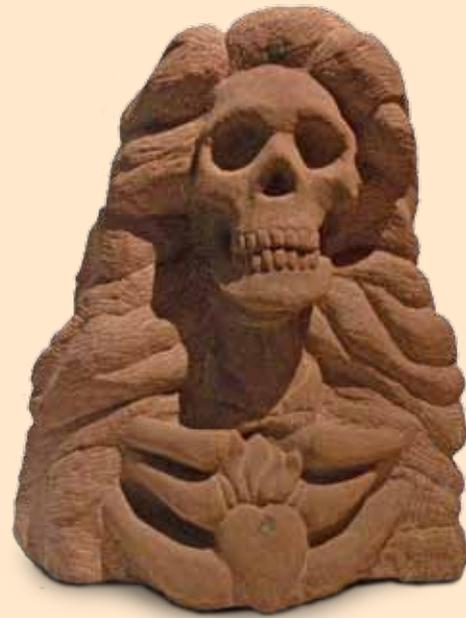
and audience to join together for an instant. That is, each of those present can participate in diverse ways to recreate a Mexican tradition expressed differently from what takes place in Mexico.

DIALOGUE BETWEEN CULTURES

At the same time that the celebration takes place in two languages, it also springs from two cultural currents and traditions, the U.S. American and the Mexican, and manages to consolidate an authentic form of local expression that is popular, multicolored, and disjointed, all at the same time. In this sense, it should be underlined that U.S. American cultural tradition has an attached and abstract interest in the concept of death. That is, even though the ritual, festive atmosphere is permeated by the Mexican idea that the dead return on that day to accompany their loved ones, the U.S. American participants center their interest on the figure of death and his dark, sinister side, which is why they dress and disguise themselves in a way that alludes to it; however, they are also interested in joining the festivities and understanding the Mexicans' beliefs, which they find very attractive. And that is why they are invited by the Mission District community to participate.

It should be emphasized that San Francisco is one of the United States' most liberal cities, expressed in its inhabitants' openness to communicating with diverse cultures and social groups. That is how the Latino, white, Asian, and Afro-American communities create spaces for living and playing together, like this event that is no longer exclusive to the Mexican community. There, they all collaborate, contribute, and dialogue about what death and the dead mean to everyone.

Discovering the immigrants' intangible cultural heritage is an interesting way to analyze and understand the make-up of the identity of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos, given that it forces us to think about the social uses that immigrants make of traditions, ideas, values, and world views inherited from their cultures of origin, and about the fact that in the context of migration, they re-create them in a different space. This new territorialization of culture implies a different practice of that heritage.



Altar to Harvey Milk, Mission Cultural Center for Latino Arts, 2013.



Mission District mural.

The experience of Mexicans in the United States goes far beyond just crossing the border and sending remittances to their families.

A MULTICULTURAL VISION OF MIGRATION

Mexicans' experience in the United States goes far beyond just crossing the border and sending remittances to their families at home. The process of creating the identities of Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos brings with it feelings of oppression, inequality, and poverty, and is intimately linked to the passage between life and death: anyone who crosses the desert and does not die must withstand the next step, which is the racism and social and cultural segregation in their destinations, whether it be the United States or Canada.

Globalization has transformed culture in local, national, and transnational spaces, as well as practices, customs, and traditions, like in the case of the Day of the Dead. A multi-culturalist vision of migration helps us understand the concept of immigrants' intangible cultural heritage as a broadening out of cultural diversity, because it focuses on the convergence of cultures that promotes the creation of diverse identities, as well as new uses and practices of cultural heritage.⁴ ■■■



NOTES

¹ *Patrimonio de la humanidad. La festividad indígena dedicada a los muertos en México* (Mexico City: Conaculta, 2003), <http://www.conaculta.gob.mx/turismocultural/cuadernos/pdf16/articulo1.pdf>.

² Francisco X. Alarcón, "Ritual Procession," author's archives, August 26, 2013, on line at <http://mbasic.facebook.com/notes/francisco-x-alarcon/tahui-poems-for-the-day-of-the-dead-ritual-procession-of-san-francisco-california/10151941541980734/>.

³ Richard Bauman and Charles L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* vol. 19 (1990), pp. 59-88.

⁴ Will Kymlicka, *Ciudadanía multicultural* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1996).