Introduction

Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) is a day of celebration for the people of Latin America, particularly in Mexico and Central America, and more recently for Mexican Americans. Rather than grieve over the loss of a beloved family or friend, they choose to commemorate the lives of the dearly departed and welcome the return of their spirits. The history of Day of the Dead is embedded with Pre-Hispanic and Spanish customs. These customs shaped the common elements of traditional Mexican Día de los Muertos. Today, Day of the Dead has been increasingly popular with Latinos in the United States. Though many of the traditional elements have remained how and where Day of the Dead is celebrated has changed.

Ancient Mesoamerican customs and beliefs

For ancient Mesoamericans, life and death were not two independent states of being. Death did not mean the end of one’s life but rather through death, new life was created. According to Gabriela Olmos, Day of the Dead may be associated with cyclical nature of agriculture. Trees, plants, and crops grow from the ground in which the dead were buried. Honoring the dead is not a new tradition in Mexico and Central America. Thousands of years prior to the Spanish Conquest numerous ethnic groups of the region including Aztecs, Mayans, and Toltecs had specific times that they commemorated the deceased. Special months were dedicated to honor the deceased based on whether it was the death of a child or the death of adult. Other months were specifically associated with how the person died like a drowning, in childbirth, or in warfare. During these months of celebration, the indigenous people believed that the deceased would return and they would need to offer them gifts. According to Carmichael and Sayer, providing flowers, food, incense, dances, and music was a way of gaining the favor of the deceased.

The Spanish Arrival

Though the arrival of the Spanish drastically changed the lives of the indigenous people, their beliefs did not simply cease. A process called syncretism (a blending of Spanish and indigenous beliefs and practices) was instituted and seemed to only effect indigenous beliefs superficially. The clergymen likened the indigenous gods to the Catholic saints. The rituals of worshipping and venerating the dead were changed to correspond with two Spanish holidays: All Saints Day (November 1) and All Souls’ Day (November 2). Also, Spanish had practices that were similar to Indian like offerings for the dead. By incorporating the beliefs of the Indians, the Spanish were able to quickly convert the majority of Indians to Catholicism.

Spirit’s return

Weeks before Day of the Dead, families start preparing for the return of their loved ones. Families visit cemeteries to have a picnic and clean and decorate the graves of their loved ones. Graves and cemeteries are adorned with Cempasuchitl (a marigold flower native to Mexico), candles, and incense. The petals of the Cempasuchitl are used to make a pathway. Their scent and color attract the spirits and lead them from the cemetery back to their home.

The Ofrenda

The welcoming of the spirits back is seen in the home with the creation of an ofrenda (altar or literally an offering). On the ofrenda, many significant objects are placed as gifts to the deceased loved ones. Of these many objects, the altar holds four important elements: water, wind, fire, and earth. Water is given to quench the spirit’s thirst from their long journey and is usually put in a clay pitcher or a glass. Fire is signified by the candles and wind is signified by papel picado (“punched” paper). The earth element is represented by food, usually pan de muerto (bread of the dead). Other food and drinks are left on the altar like mole (sauce with many spices and herbs), fruit, chocolate, atole (corn-based drink), and whatever the
deceased person liked. Copal incense is commonly seen on ofrendas. Copal was used in many ancient indigenous rituals and used to “transmit praises and prayers.” For deceased children, toys and *calaveritas de azucar* (sugar skulls) are also placed on the altar. In addition, flowers are placed on the altar as well as pictures of the deceased and religious items. These offerings ensure that the dead will have everything they need for their journey back.
Day of the Dead in the United States
With the exceptions of border communities in Texas and Arizona, celebrations of Día de los Muertos have become fairly recent celebrations. The Chicano movement is credited for the emergence of Day of the Dead in the U.S. The movement gave Latinos pride in their ethnic identity and heritage and enabled them to combat the negative stereotypes. The renewed interest in Day of the Dead enabled Latinos to “remember personal and communal antepasados (ancestors) and strengthened [their] sense of historic past.”

Many elements symbolic of Day of the Dead in Mexico are incorporated in its celebration in the United States like the use of calacas (skulls or skeletons), marigolds, candles, and elaborate ofrendas. However, where ofrendas are placed indicates the difference between U.S. and Mexico’s Day of the Dead. In Mexico, altars are typically found in homes and churches, however, in the United States altars are seen as part of museum exhibits. It is becoming more common that ofrendas combine traditional objects with more contemporary elements. According to Kay Turner and Pat Jasper, ofrendas in U.S. show a “mix of popular with tradition materials, sacred with secular, and personal with national and political agendas.” This year, the Mexican Fine Arts Center housed an entire section on political topics. Students of the Talcott Fine Arts and Museum Academy created an ofrendas dealing with immigration titled “Death of a Dream.” The students included traditional objects like sugar skulls, papel picado, pan de muerto, and marigolds. In addition to these traditional items they had objects that signified the dangerous journey immigrants face. There were water jugs representing warrior masks, papel picado with a border scene and barbed wire fence, and in front of the ofrendas is a chain-link fence. Many of the students knew people who took enormous risk to find a better life in the U.S. They are not only making a political statement but honoring those who died trying to cross the border.

Conclusion
Remembering and celebrating the deceased has been a significant part of life in Mesoamerica for thousands of year. Even with the drastic changes brought on by the Spanish conquest, the indigenous people were able to retain this long held practice and combine it with Spanish aspects to create what is now known as Día de los Muertos. Similarly, Latinos in the United States have developed a new version of Day of the Dead that has significance for their new lives in the U.S. Though Day of the Dead is continuing to evolve, the underlying sense of commitment in honoring the deceased has remained.

7 Turner and Jasper, 134.