History of Day of the Dead

By Vanderbilt Center for Latin American Studies

Native peoples throughout the Americas had been celebrating their ancestors at specific times of the year for centuries. Rituals honoring the dead focused on a reciprocal exchange in which the living offered food, music, flowers, liquor, and other goods to the dead to please them and ensure their blessings in earthly endeavors, such as a successful harvest or marriage. Death was not viewed as an end but rather as a part of the life cycle by these natives of America. Their concepts of life and death meshed neatly with the Día de los Muertos traditions brought by the Spanish.

These celebrations date to the 9th century when Pope Gregory IV set November 1 aside to pray for saints, declaring it as All Saints’ Day in the liturgical calendar. Approximately four hundred years later, Abbott Odilo of Cluny designated November 2 as All Souls’ Day, a day to pray for departed souls, especially those in purgatory. The religious observation of All Saints’ Day and All Souls’ Day spread quickly throughout Europe and was brought to Latin America in the 16th century by Spanish priests, conquistadors, and
settlers.

Today these dates are observed in the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal religious calendars. In Latin America, they are celebrated as happy days with elaborate and joyous festivals unique to each region. In central Mexico, the Aztecs honored the dead through celebrations and ritual offerings dedicated to the goddess *Mictecacihuatl* (Lady of the Dead) during early August. The Spaniards moved these rituals to early November to coincide with the Catholic observation of All Saints’ Day.

In ancient Mesoamerica (the region that stretches from Central Mexico to Honduras), the native groups of Mixtec, Zapotec, and Maya people saw caves as channels to the underworld, the place where the dead reside. Caves in Mesoamerica still serve as important sites to communicate with dead ancestors through ritual offerings of food, incense, and turkey blood.

In South America, the some of the people to originally live there were called the Inka. They mummified their dead through a drying process and stored them in caves (called *machay*) or vaults (called *chullpas*). The month of November (called *Aya Marca Raymi*) was dedicated to ancestor worship, and at this time mummies were taken from their tombs, dressed in fine clothing, and given offerings of llama meat, coca, *chicha* (maize
beer), and candles of llama fat in exchange for their blessings for marriages, fertility, and successful harvests. When the Spaniards came to South America, they banned these rituals and burned ancestral mummies, and encouraged religious services for the dead instead.

Latin Americans continue to see death as part of the life cycle. The deceased participate in family life, exerting their will through blessings and return visits during the Día de los Muertos celebrations. Although each region of Latin America has unique ways of honoring the dead, they are all directed towards welcoming and pleasing deceased relatives to ensure their blessings.