

# An Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

By

Dan White, November 6, 2023

Catrina came to our home two years ago. We found her in a shop in Tubac, a favorite destination for us about 20 miles south. Catrina is about 2 feet tall, elegantly dressed, and fragile. When she is in the room, you cannot take your eyes off of her.

Catrina's full name is Calavera Catrina. Calavera means "skull." Catrina is slang for "the rich" or "ostentatious." Our Catrina is a ceramic skeleton, an exemplar of the most ubiquitous symbol of the Dia de Los Muertos, celebrated on November 1 and 2. Beginning in October, she came to live in the living room.

I learned recently on a *National Geographic* website that the Dia de Los Muertos tradition originated with the Aztecs and Toltecs, centuries before the Spanish people arrived in Mexico. For them, death was a natural phase in life's continuum, so they considered mourning the dead disrespectful. The dead were alive in memory and spirit, and Dia was the day when they came back to earth for a while.

Once Spaniards came bearing their Catholic faith, they blended the Aztec/Toltec tradition and All Saints and All Souls Days into one celebration. It is no accident, then, that an altar is the central location for Dia celebrations, but it is not a religious altar. Rather, these altars are like landing fields for the returnees, built in homes and cemeteries, frequently laden with offerings.

According to custom, the spirit visitors will return each year so long as someone, anyone, remembers them. Forget one some year and its visitations are done, forever. At its root, Dia de Los Muertos is a "reaffirmation of Indigenous life," according to the *Geographic*, but particularly in the Southwest and Mexico, it is a reaffirmation of the lives of ancestors.

So, why the skeletons? Especially skeletons in fancy garb, like Catrina, or otherwise fancifully dressed, like the guy with a cap on his head and a baseball bat in his hands who sits on my dresser and stands next to a shorter version of Catrina.

The Mexican political cartoonist, Jose Guadalupe Posada, gets credit. He was asked once to create a figure to accompany a literary *calavera*, traditionally a short poem published with obituaries in the newspaper to "poke fun at the living." Good *calavera* were sarcastic and biting, always aimed at those who thought themselves better than others.

Posada created Calavera Garbancera, the skeleton of a woman in fancy French dress, to poke fun at the Mexican elite who tried to copy "European sophistication." The *Geographic* article offered that "'*Todos somos calaveras*,' a quote commonly attributed to Posada, means 'we are all skeletons.' Underneath all our manmade trappings, we are all the same."

People of a Certain Age, does history indicate that people really believe that?

Calavera Catrina, or “elegant skull” as her name literally translates, is a reminder that we ought to.

According to the *Geographic*, in 2008, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) “recognized the importance of Dia De Los Muertos by adding the holiday to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.” “Cultural heritage is not just monuments and collections of objects...cultural heritage also includes living expressions of culture—traditions—passed down from generation to generation,” according to UNESCO.

In this instance, the “living expression of culture” is a blend of traditions from two cultures, each tradition pertaining to the dead. Both cultures recognize a soul inhabiting a physical body for a time, then “freed” to the afterlife. The Aztec/Toltec people saw death as a natural phase of life and thus not an occasion for mourning. The Catholic people saw death as a step toward eternal life, assuming that the rituals of the church had been observed.

Keeping the dead alive in memory and spirit, the pre-Hispanic tradition, is consistent with practices in many cultures around the world where ancestors are revered as well as remembered. Is it possible that the increased interest in tracing one’s ancestors evident in American culture today is a manifestation of a similar impulse to “know one’s people?”

The annual observances of the anniversary of the airplane attacks on September 11, the ritual of placing a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier every Memorial Day, refreshing the flowers on a loved one’s grave; all of these represent efforts to “not forget,” to keep alive the memory and spirit of those now dead, illustrating that our culture is not so different with respect to the departed. So long as someone, anyone, remembers, the spirit is alive.

We all know the mortality rate among humans. Death is, indeed, a “natural phase in life’s long continuum.” But it is hard not to mourn when the one we love is no longer physically by our side.

In the Dia tradition, spirits are welcomed back, even if just once a year. However brief the visit, celebrants might well recall the visitor in human life, sharing joys and sorrows, living life with them. Remembering joys of the past supplants the cares of the present. This is a reason to dance, to celebrate.

As for the skeletons? Narcissists are sure that they are better than others. Those who don’t think much of themselves are sure of their lesser worth. In the end, though, they are both wrong.

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