

Mexico and South Korea: Death Rituals

Mexico and South Korea are two different cultures. They are not only apart from each other in a geographic sense, but their origins and their history differ a lot from one another. Koreans follow a Confucianist tradition –based upon the Chinese heritage– whereas Mexico is built upon the mix of the Spanish-Catholic tradition and indigenous customs.

Every society has their own rituals and beliefs when it comes to what could be understood as universal life events, such as birth, family, marriage, sickness, old age, and death. The main goal of this essay is to showcase the affinities between Korea and Mexico and their death rituals, and how somehow these cultures aren't as different as they would seem to be.

A funeral rite can be described as the protocol regarding the funeral of a deceased person. Most ancestral societies believed time as immemorial, and funeral rites and costumes bear witness to this belief: men survive the experience of death, and it is just a shift of the human spirit. Such ideas are expressed differently depending each culture's world vision.

A Confucian death ritual in East Asia involves two sets of acts: the funeral itself and the *ancestor worship* (제사). On the other hand, the Mexican death ritual involves two days: November 1st, where All Saint's Day is celebrated, and November 2nd or Day of the Dead. The first one is the Catholic and Christian festivity, whereas the latter is the indigenous celebration. Nowadays, both traditions are merged, one giving place to the other, as a result of the Spain colonization.

Confucianism

In order to talk about Korean funeral rites, it is important to note that most funeral ceremonies in Korea come from an ancestral heritage that they share with China: Confucianism. Even though nowadays they've been oversimplified and changed, the origin remains intact. It was during the Joseon Dynasty that Korea adopted these rituals since Confucianism was the social norm; therefore, death turned out to be seen as "the last gate of a man's life", understood just as a transition from the human spirit.

The ancient Chinese tradition thought there were two kinds of souls in the human body: *Hun* and *Paik*. The first one was believed to have escaped from the human body and lived in an ancestor tablet, that then had gone up to the sky; the latter was believed to be living inside the body even after dead, merging with the soil the corpse was buried in. It was believed that if the spirits failed to eat the ritual food, it would become a ghost and appear in the human world.

Traditional Confucian funeral

The traditional funeral culture of Confucianism is a *three-year funeral*. In the third year, the biggest memorial service is held, and, in the meantime, there are small memorial services and ceremonies for the deceased. Nonetheless, it is important to note that most ceremonies would be held after 49 days after a person's death, since it was believed that what the deceased did before he died were to determine their next life within 49 days. Therefore, the rites were held after this period.

During the next three days after the passing away, the family will receive condolences. Previously, mourners would spend the night together, awake, to guard the body and protect it. When the coffin was being carried, the carriers would sing songs for the dead. When the funeral occurs, the attendees wear different clothes depending on their relationship with the deceased person, for instance, the female part of the family wears a black Hanbok.

Korean rituals

Zhao Huan

In Korea, traditionally, the body will stay in the house for three, five or seven days. One of the relatives would take a coat of the deceased to the roof and call the dead's name three times before the coat was taken back as a cover of the corpse, in order to mourn the death and in hopes he will not yet leave the world.

This rite is known as *Cho-hon, Zhao Huan*, which could be translated into "recalling or summoning the soul". After it, the relative shall cover the corpse again to conduct the *Kobok*.

There are different types of ancestor rituals in Korea, such as *Gijesa* (기제사), *Charye* (차례), *Seongmyo* (성묘) and *Myosa* (묘사). The first one is a household ritual, held the morning or night before the anniversary of the deceased: *Kiil* (기일). Usually this ritual involves a memorial service, performed during *Chuseok* or *Charye*; the family members of the deceased visit the tombs the day before Chuseok and clean it, they offer food, fruit, wine and make bows (*Seongmyo* (성묘)) in front of them, meanwhile *Myosa* (묘사) is performed at the tomb in the lunar month of October in memory of their ancestors. Another ritual is *Sije* (시제), which are seasonal rites held for ancestors up to five generations, usually performed once a year during the tenth lunar moon.

The *charye* (차례) is the practice of offering tea, fruits, and cookies. However, this usually refers to making holiday foods on folk holidays and holding rituals for ancestors in Korea. *Chuseok* (추석) is a major harvest festival and South Korea, celebrated on the 15th day of the 8th month of

the lunar calendar on the full moon. As a celebration of the good harvest, Koreans visit their ancestral hometowns and share a feast of traditional Korean food such as 송편.

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The essential idea of *ancestor worship* is that the afterlife is a natural extension of the earthly world, so the deceased has an unbroken bond with their living descendants. In other words, ancestral worship and rituals took place in the belief that dead ancestors would continue to interact and that sometimes ancestors would benefit them. In Korea, this tradition is commonly known as *Jesa* (제사) and the following are some representative memorial services:

- *Kiil* (기일)
- *Sije* (시제)
- *Charye* (차례)
- *Chuseok* (추석)

The ritual involves the preparation of many kinds of foods, such as wine, taro soup, meat, fish, different types of vegetables, fruits and rice cake or *songpyon*, particularly the favorites of the deceased. Everything is displayed around the the *shinwi* (신위 – memorial tablet), which symbolized the spiritual presence of the ancestor; placed at the center of the table. After midnight, or in the evening prior to the anniversary, the descendants set the *shrine*, with food laid out on a specific order from west to east and in three rows, two candles are put on both ends of the table, as well as an incense holder in the middle, and a written prayer in front of everything.

The altar food is later distributed between neighbors and friends. This food is believed to be “ritualized”, which is said to be good for happiness and prosperity.

Mexican tradition

There are many different traditions regarding death, most of them originating in human sacrifices as it was seen as the most honorable way to die. Even though sacrificing humans hasn't been practiced since Spain colonized Mexico, as it was not only seen as barbaric but was against Catholic beliefs, it is impossible to explain the Day of the Death without the indigenous custom.

In the Mexican Pre-Hispanic tradition, time was a never-ending succession of cycles: birth – death – the destruction of the world. They believed life on earth was just a fragment of life, usually referred as a dream, questioned in traditional poetry:

*We come only to sleep,
We come only to dream.
It is not true, it is not true
That to the earth we come to live.
We are to become as the weeds in every spring.
Our heart has greened and sprouted
Some flowers will our body give,
And then it shall forever wilt.*

(Cant. Mex., f. 14v., lin. 3 ss. De Tenochtitlan)¹

Therefore, death wasn't seen nor understood as the end of the deceased nor as a process for salvation –such as what the Catholic tradition believes in– but as requisite for prolongation of life.

The Aztec tradition believes the world is made up of three parts: the overworld (*Tlalocán*), the world (*Tlaltípac*) and the underworld (*Mictlán*). *Tlaltípac* is the place where the living resides and it is made up *Cipactli*, a strong soil that was in charge of nourishing both humans and nature. Therefore, it was believed humans came from nature itself, and that was why all bodies were usually buried (sometimes cremated) in soil, so they would return to their original form.

It was believed that the once who died of natural causes or diseases were destined for *Mictlán*, which consists in nine levels, known as *Chiconahuamictán*². It was believed that the journey from the first on to the ninth took four years, passing through many challenges. It was until the dead would accomplish each one and arrived at the last level that their soul (*tonalli*) would be freed and they would descend to the presence of *Mictlantecuhtli* and *Mictēcacíhuatl*, the god and goddess of death. The ones who died due to causes related to the rain of god, *Tláloc*, would go to *Tlalocan*; warriors and sacrificed war prisoners went to the *House of the Sun* (sunrise); meanwhile, women who died during childbirth went to *Chichihualcauahco* (sunset).

Most burials in Mesoamerica differ from one another, nonetheless there are similarities between each other. During the 500 B.C., funerary arrangements usually included vestiges of pottery and utensils that served as offerings or gifts; these depended on the age and gender of the deceased, though the bodies were always placed together, regardless of their age or gender. In some cases,

¹ Recovered from: Fernandez, P. (Dec. 1974) Death in Mexican Folk Culture. *American Quarterly*. 26(5) pp. 1.

² The names of each level are the following: *Itzcuintlán* (the place where the dog inhabits), *Tepeme Monamictlán* (place where mountains meet), *Itzépetl* (obsidian mountain), *Cehueloyán* (place where there is a lot of snow), *Pancuetlacialóyan* (place where the person turns as a flag), *Temiminalóyan* (place where arrows are shot), *Teyollocualóyan* (place where your heart is eaten), *Apanohualóyan* (place where the water crosses) and *Chiconahualóyan* (place where there are nine waters).

offerings also included body parts that were separated and placed into baskets, which indicates they were human sacrifices.

Later, funerary rituals became more complicated in concept as well as in the offerings. During the Middle Pre-Classic Period, human remains appear surrounded by polished jewelry worked in jade, obsidian, serpentine and other stones. The use of offerings supports the belief that life continues and therefore the deceased needs every-day tools and essentials, such as food.

Contemporary traditions

It is usually said that in Mexico people mock the death, that no one fears it and it is treated with humor. Whether that is true or not, it is a fact that death is an important aspect of our traditions and festivities. Meanwhile for the outer perspective it may be strange and, in some cases, even offensive, the tradition is the combination of respectful, spiritual and humorous. The Mexican iconography represents death a lot, with skulls and skeletons in folk art handcrafts, with sweets and bread resembling skeletons and playful poems known as *Calaveritas*.

The Day of the Dead is surrounded by a variety of activities, such as the preparation of specific kinds of foods, such as *calabaza en tacha*, *pan de muerto*, *calaveras de azúcar* and different meals depending on the region, all of them served in special dishes colored in black (as a sign of mourning); nowadays, it is also very common to prepare the preferred dish of the deceased, as it is believed they will visit their beloved ones in that date.

Among the special sweets which are produced only for this occasion are the famous *calaveras de azúcar* (sugar skulls) which, as the name states, is a skull made out of either sugar or chocolate, decorated with colorful paper and labeled with the buyer, the deceased one or a friend as a form of gift. This sweet comes from the ancient *Tzompantlis*, special stone structures where the skulls of the sacrificed ones were exhibited.

Along with food, the offerings (*ofrendas*) are usually heavily decorated with the dishes, alcoholic beverages, candles, special representative objects, photos of the honored one –displayed in several shelves– and *papel picado* (perforated paper), a decorative craft made out of colorful tissue paper with elaborate designs.

The altar is usually displayed either at the home of the family or at the cemetery. On *All Saint's Day* people would spend the night after decorating the graves; the atmosphere is solemn due to the prayers given as people await the coming of their beloved one during the whole night. The next morning, during the *Day of the Dead*, a vigilante would walk away with the food, for then to be eaten by the family members, creating a party-like atmosphere.

The fact that the living ones eat the food that was prepared is very important, since it symbolizes the connection between the dead and the living, the coexistence of the natural and supernatural, the transitory and the essential worlds. The dead belong to the latter one, since it's their essence which digests the food they were offered, while the living benefit from the material substance of it. It was believed that the food would be flavorless, since its essence had been taken.

Final thoughts

Even though it is known that each culture has their own traditions regarding death and funeral rites, it is intriguing how Mexico and Korea seem to share so many similarities in their view of death and their connection with the living. The affinity in the way they both give similar offerings, have a similar outlook on what the food that's offered means and the guarding of the graves, as well as the bowing/praying is uncanny.

The biggest differences, maybe, fall in the dates the deceased ones are remembered. Meanwhile Koreans perform their rituals during the anniversary of the dead one, in Mexico the anniversary doesn't involve any particular act; nonetheless, both of them share important dates for the honoring of the dead ones.

After spending four months in Korea, I was able to realize there are way more similarities between Mexico and South Korea than I imagined. The election of this topic is merely practical, since it would be impossible to describe all the cultural resemblances that I was able to observe. It is interesting to note how both, Korean and Mexican traditions, believe there is an eternal and constant connection between the living and the dead. While the Confucian traditions continue to worship their dead ones as they haven't ever stop being in their lives, the Mexican culture believes both of them have similar needs even if one of them belongs to the supernatural.

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