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Search: "day of the dead" AND mexico

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STANLEY BRANDES

The Day of the Dead, Halloween, and the Quest for Mexican National Identity

Mexico's Day of the Dead is a version of the widespread Roman Catholic feasts of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. This article analyzes how the holiday has come to be perceived, both within and outside of Mexico, as a unique Mesoamerican legacy, hence a symbol of the nation itself. Tourism and international relations have been largely responsible for this development. The recent spread of Halloween within Mexico has given rise to a symbolic competition in which Halloween is associated with the United States and the Day of the Dead with Mexico. The presence of Halloween symbols within Mexico is interpreted throughout Mexico as symptomatic of U.S. imperialist aggression.

AS DAVID KERTZER HAS demonstrated, ritual, religious or otherwise, is "an important means for structuring our political perceptions and leading us to interpret our experiences in certain ways" (Kertzer 1988:85). "The symbols employed" in ritual, he says, "suggest a particular interpretation of what is being viewed" (1988:85). In Mexico, the Day of the Dead, celebrated uninterrupted from colonial times to the present, is on the surface a conspicuously apolitical event, a communal occasion on which families honor their deceased relatives. Yet this holiday in recent years has assumed an increasingly political cast, linking the celebration specifically to Mexico and Mexican national identity. The Day of the Dead helps to create an interpretation of the world in which Mexico is unique, culturally discrete, and above all different from the two powers that have dominated the country throughout its long existence: Spain and the United States. Of special significance in this regard is the Mexican reaction to Halloween. Hallow-