

Has Day of the Dead fallen victim to cultural appropriation in the UK?

(AND IF IT HAS – IS THAT A BAD THING?)

Opinion

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It was when Smirnoff announced, in October, plans for a limited edition ‘Day of the Dead’-decorated bottle of spicy Tamarind vodka that I thought things might have gone too far.

Offering the explanation to Packaging News that it demonstrated how you can “take a long-established ritual like the Mexican Ofrenda, and reimagine it for the next generation,” something inside me felt more than a little uncomfortable.

Partly thanks to James Bond’s memorable opening chase sequence in the 2015 film Spectre, which took place in Mexico City through a Day of the Dead parade, the festival of Dia de los Muertos is now absolutely everywhere.

You can buy Day of the Dead cookies, costumes, sugar skulls – and even Day of the Dead-themed Cortez trainers from Nike. Wander through any UK High Street and half the shops have Day of the Dead-

themed window dressings including, somewhat improbably, Whittard’s of Chelsea – which is offering a sticky toffee-flavoured white hot chocolate, emblazoned with a Dia de los Muertos design. Not sorted out your plans for Halloween? Pinterest offers ‘151 great Day of the Dead party ideas’ – and Amazon can send a cheap costume to you, for the event, within 24 hours.

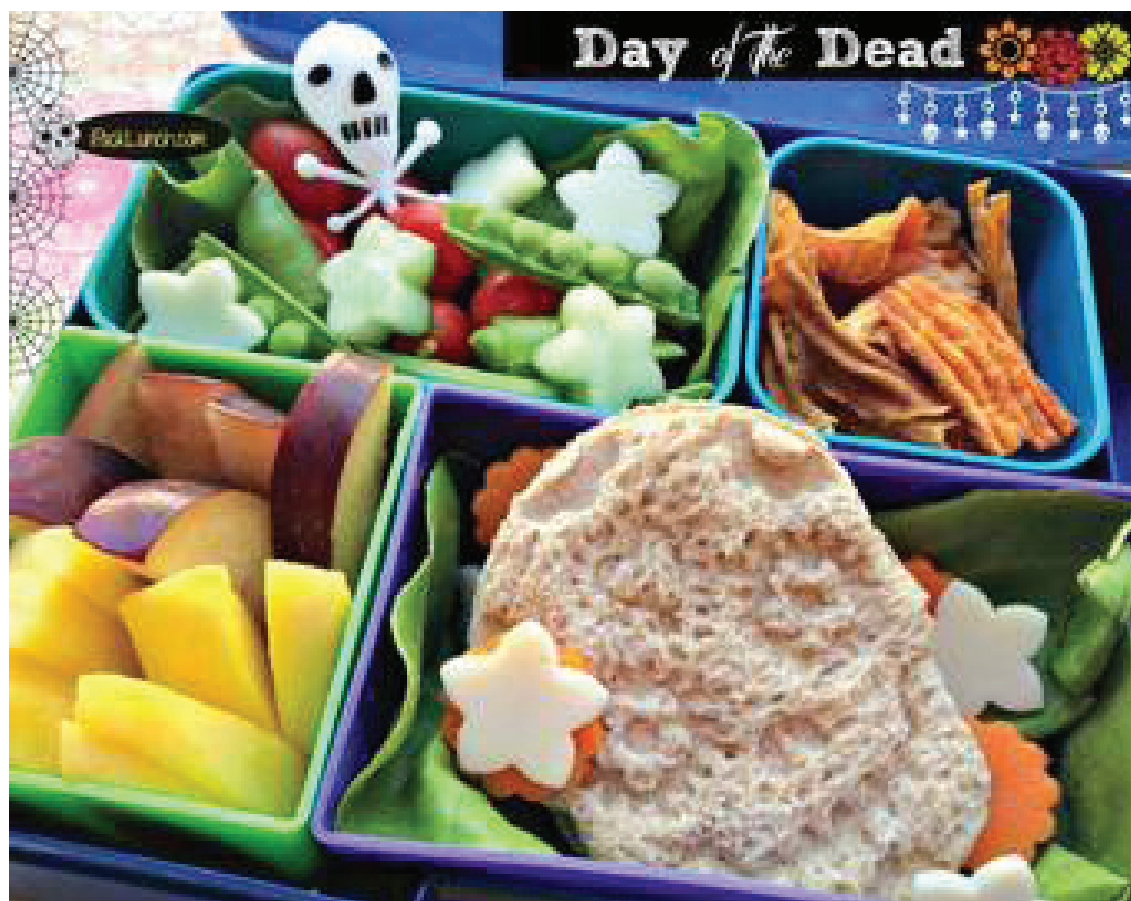
Somewhat depressingly, there are even ideas for theming your packed lunch.

Across the UK there are increasing numbers of Day of the Dead-themed parades, some on the day itself which, in 2019, is 2 November, others a few days earlier to coincide with Halloween. For example,

‘Toxteth Day of the Dead’ in Liverpool – which is organised by Liverpool Arts Lack, which includes Bill Drummond and Jimmy Cauty, former members of the band KLF – included a parade through Toxteth paying tribute to people of Liverpool who have had a “significant impact but are no longer here”.

Although the Toxteth parade does, at least, feel as though it has the right principles at its heart, at what point does all this brightly-coloured activity, which is not part of the UK indigenous culture, become cultural appropriation – which is the term that describes the act of taking or using things from a culture that is not your own, especially without showing that you understand or respect this culture?

Dia de los Muertos is a traditional celebration where people honour the lives of loved ones who have



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died. It has huge personal meaning and cultural significance for millions of Mexicans, so to host a Day of the Dead-themed Halloween party, dress up in sugar skull makeup, or design consumer packaging for an alcoholic drink - without a proper understanding of or respect for its history and traditions - is surely pretty disrespectful?

On the other hand, at a time when we are desperately trying to encourage people in the UK to talk more openly and feel more comfortable with the topic of death, could our current national obsession as with Dia de los Muertos offer something of an open door, through which we might take Britons towards a more comfortable place in terms of talking about the end of life?

Mexico-born Londoner Paola Feregrino organises a Day of the Dead night at The Book Club in Shoreditch every year, which includes storytelling about the history and traditions of Dia de los Muertos, as well as traditional celebrations. She offered some guidance to Metro newspaper, recently, on how to get involved with Dia de los Muertos without causing offence.

“Dia de los Muertos is different from Halloween – it celebrates the dead rather than being afraid of the dead,”

she said. “Most people think of death as something grim, depressing and simply something we don’t really talk about. For us Mexicans it’s different: of course, we get sad when a loved one passes away, but we love remembering them at their best, after all, that’s what they would’ve wanted.”

Her advice? “Take this as an opportunity to learn and engage with Latin culture. If you want to go to a party, firstly find out if the event is curated by a Mexican, they will be on hand proudly inviting you to remember, to see, to listen, and to connect with those in your heart that have passed.”

The secret then is not simply to order a £14.99 ‘Day of the Dead Senorita’ costume and skull bunting from Amazon and take to the streets on 31 October - it must be more about encouraging a greater understanding of what Dia de los Muertos means to Mexicans, how it helps them to process and live with their feelings about death and those that have died – and what this means for our own lives here in the UK. As well as more thoughtful opportunities for adults to engage with the topic, it could also be a natural addition to a national curriculum in schools that already embraces topics such as

Ancient Egypt and Anubis, the God of Embalming.

At the end of October, a campaign by the Dying Matters Coalition highlighted a connected issue about UK Halloween traditions – namely the risk that we’ve entirely forgotten the roots of Halloween in remembering the dead and focus solely on the ‘trick or treat’ party nature of the festival. The coalition ran a campaign on social media called #IRemember, highlighting that, although Halloween and Day of the Dead have become big cultural events for adults and children, both have their roots in the idea of remembering the dead, and it’s important not to lose sight of this.

Toby Scott, Campaign Manager for Dying Matters, said: “We’re not trying to stop people having fun at Halloween, but we want to encourage people to share their reminiscences on social media too.”

All of this suggests that if, as a community in the UK, we can see this current fascination with Dia de los Muertos as a chance to learn rather than steal from traditional culture - and engage with death traditions in a respectful way - might it just help us to learn to better deal with our own feelings about death too?

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