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Into to JPN Folklore

New Year's Customs

Though I live in the United States of America, my family still celebrates many of the traditional holiday customs from Mexico and Central America. For my study abroad time in Japan, I will not be able to celebrate these special customs but in turn I learned more deeply about the Japanese traditions. Despite the loss of religious significance, Japan and Latino Americans both begin their festivities before Christmas. For Latinos, we participate in four specific events/holiday: Las Posadas, Christmas, New Year, and Dia de los Reyes. Though there are not direct equivalents in Japan, there is a similar timeline of festivities or celebration.

Las Posadas is a celebration that begins before the winter solstice, including it inside it's 9-day duration from December 16 – December 24. This particular event retells the story of Joseph and Mary searching for a place to rest before Mary gives birth to Jesus Christ. Typically, one or two extended families will come together and create a small mobile nativity scene, bringing it house to house in their neighborhood to pre designated homes. They will sing songs at each home, until finally they arrive at the last home where the nativity is set in the

living room and the families gather around it to pray the entire Rosary. This is repeated for 9 consecutive nights. In Latino holiday celebrations on Christmas Eve, the presents from “Santa Claus” are opened at midnight between the 24th and 25th. Before presents are opened all family members attend a “midnight” mass at the local Catholic church. The day of the 25th is reserved for spending time with family, relaxing and talking about the previous 10 days activities. It’s commonplace for women of the family to cook a tremendous amount of tamales and other foods that are easy to keep fresh and reheat. This allows the women to rest alongside the family and appreciate the spirit of the holiday. The supply of food must last until well after the New Year, so it’s not uncommon for families to produce 200-300 tamales for the holidays.

After Christmas, Latinos prepare to bring in the New Year. The traditions surrounding New Year’s eve and New Year’s Day is similar to the spirit of Posadas and Christmas in that it’s for families to spend together. On New Year’s eve, members of the entire extended family will gather in one home to eat and celebrate the end of the year. Again, women will have made a great deal of food so there is not much work to do in the kitchen. At midnight it is a tradition in Latino households to eat 12 grapes to symbolize each month of the new year. Eating these grapes guarantees good luck and wishes granted throughout the year. Fortunately for Latinos, the fun does not end on New Year’s day. On January 6th, they also celebrate Dia de los Reyes. This day represents the three wise kings arriving to welcome the newborn Jesus Christ with their gifts. Not all

families celebrate this in the USA and it's more commonly celebrated in Mexico and other Latin American countries. For this day there are a variety of ways to celebrate but all of the ways include children leaving their shoes out the previous night so that the three kings will leave them presents in or near their shoes. On the day of the celebration, families will eat "rosca de reyes". This cake is similar to a fruit cake but it is not as dense, the baker will usually hide a small baby Jesus inside and it can mean many different things for the person who finds it in their slice. In most countries, it means the recipient must host a dinner for their family. Overall these holidays though they may seem like they're centered around religion, they are actually celebrations of family and togetherness.

In Japan Christmas is not a family day, it's a romantic day for couples. But, the similarity between New Year's celebrations in Japan and the various Latino traditions. The first similarity I experienced here in Japan is that there is a tradition of making plenty of food before the New Year arrives, including but not limited to the good fortune giving "Osechi-ryori". At midnight on the new year, bells are rang 108 times at Buddhist temples to represent the 108 worldly desires that humans have. Additionally, the first day of the year is welcomed with a visit to a shrine, "Hatsumoude". This seems to correspond closely with the ritual of midnight mass in the Mexican catholic culture.

Some aspects of the New Year's celebration seem to be similar but only on a common sense level. Latino families expect a great deal of company during the holidays so many households will deep clean everything before any family

gatherings happen. I feel that isn't not enough similarity to "oosouji" because it does not symbolize any cleansing or purification in a spiritual way and it is not done in every establishment, including businesses. In Japan there is a ritual cleansing to purify one's surroundings before the near the brand new year arrives. Hoping for a fresh start, even business owners will clean their stores and declutter. Another difference I saw was during the first shrine visit of the year, it is customary to purchase a "omikujii", fortune telling paper strips. These will give light to what type of luck one will have for the year, and if it is a bad luck strip, it can be tied at the shrine in hopes that the bad fortune or curse will not stick to the individual. In terms of good fortune there is another day that happens after the new year, "dondoyaki", which follows a similar timeline to Dia de los Reyes, though the custom is completely different. In the dondoyaki ritual, the Japanese will bring their previous year's good luck charms and burn them in a sacred bonfire at a temple. This is the only respectful and proper way to dispose of good luck items.

I feel that the Japanese culture has a lot of different rituals and customs to follow year round, the culture here is deep and rich which offers a lot of an outsider to look at and understand. A major difference between my own culture at home and Japan is that my culture is very deeply connected to Catholicism. Though I am not a Catholic, I still follow many of these yearly customs because it is more a tradition than a gesture of faith. The Latino versions of the holidays are centered around the family and the home. Though there is a religious difference,

Japan also centers their New Year's holidays heavily around the family and the home. Throughout the year Japan does have other special days that celebrate family, ancestors, children and other familial themes. I find the Latino culture to lack these celebrations unless they are specifically a Catholic celebration such as a baptism, first communion, confirmation, or wedding. We do celebrate a coming of age at 15 that does involve a specific type of Catholic Mass however the celebration is not centered around the Catholic Faith. This similarity with "Seijin no Hi" in Japan is interesting though the age gap is large and 15 is not a legal age anywhere in the USA. An interesting idea to consider is that while Mexico and other countries are obviously influenced by Spain, through colonization, Japan seems to be largely untouched by outside cultures. I find this to be untrue because Japan shares some rituals with its neighboring Asian countries, especially China. In this way, I feel that maybe Japan is it's own kind of melting pot like the USA.