

Conexión (San Antonio, TX)

September 2, 2015

Gira de misiones y los Indios

Por Scott Huddleston

Mirando hacia las ruinas, la vasta zona verde y la blanca iglesia que sigue siendo una congregación activa en Misión San Juan, **Ramón Vásquez** contemplaba lo difícil que habrá sido para los primeros indígenas ser parte de un nuevo modo de vida.

“Se puede imaginar que algunas de nuestra gente declararon, ‘La vida como se conoce termina hoy y debemos ir a esta misión’, para la seguridad y estabilidad en la frontera de Texas en los 1700, “ el expresó.

“Otros manifestaron , ‘Vamos a morir, tal como vivimos ahora, y nunca entraremos a esa misión'. Y se quedaron afuera”.

Esa decisión - someterse a una nueva cultura y religión bajo el imperio español, a cambio de protección contra invasores hostiles y morir de hambre - puede ser difícil de aceptar en la sociedad libre de hoy. Pero **Vásquez**, director ejecutivo de los Indios Americanos en Texas en las Misiones Coloniales de Texas, quiere ofrecer una visita guiada para que se aprecien los sacrificios, contribuciones y dilemas de sus ancestros.

El grupo sin fines de lucro ha discutido la gira por lo menos hace diez años, antes de que UNESCO nombró las misiones un Patrimonio de la Humanidad en julio. Y ahora la organización quiere dar giras al público en otoño. Ya ofrecía giras como parte del paquete de vacaciones de “Descubrimientos Históricos” para gente que vive fuera del estado que ofrece el Convention & Visitors Bureau, con las primeras comenzando el 24 y 27 de septiembre.

Cassandra Matej, la directora ejecutiva del bureau, señaló que la agencia se asoció con el grupo de **Vásquez** para “ofrecer visitas personalizadas a las misiones de San Antonio guiadas por los descendientes de la tribu” como parte de un paquete enseñando “la historia épica de San Antonio”.

Vásquez dijo que ya se ofrece visitas privadas a la misión pero quiere extenderlas al público local, posiblemente en octubre. Un tour de 2½ horas probablemente costará alrededor de \$50, y una de 4½ horas que incluye comida, música y demostraciones artesanales costará \$75.

Los tours beneficiaran a la Nación Coahuilteca Tap Pilam, una tribu de 250 cuyos antecesores eran una combinación de indígenas, muchos conectados por idioma y conocidos colectivamente como Coahuiltecas, que construyeron la misiones y contribuyeron a la agricultura temprana y a las tradiciones culturales del sur de Texas.

La comunidad Tap Pilam, que por años ha estado envuelta en un largo proceso para ser reconocida por el gobierno federal, ha mantenido sus canciones y ceremonias pero “virtualmente perdió” su idioma, indicó Jesús José “Jesse” Reyes Jr., un antropólogo y miembro de los Indios Americanos en Texas, y, como **Vásquez**, un descendiente de Tap Pilam. El grupo habla un dialecto llamado Pajalate que es un “idioma reconstruido”.

Las visitas comienzan en Misión Concepción, paran en las misiones San José y Espada y terminan en Misión San Juan. Aunque el Álamo, ubicado en el centro, es una misión histórica y parte del Patrimonio Mundial, no está incluida en la gira por las demoras de espera en el sitio de la batalla de 1836, informó **Vásquez**.

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San Antonio Express-News (TX)

November 2, 2015

Día de los Muertos ; Celebrations rooted in groups of Mesoamerica

Elaine Ayala

Centro Cultural Aztlán, one of the city's oldest Chicano arts organizations, will cap off Día de los Muertos tonight with its annual exhibition of large-scale altars.

As they have for many years, Urban-15 dancers will fill the Deco District gallery with movement and sound. Incense will waft over celebrators as beautifully dressed catrinas (elegant skeletons) remind participants of the eventuality of death, even as they poke fun at it for bypassing them for another year.

By many accounts, Centro Cultural's 38th annual show is the city's longest-running Muertos celebration, but as with the city's multiplying events, they're all still relative newcomers to rituals owed entirely to the indigenous people of Mesoamerica, scholars say.

Consciously or unconsciously, San Antonio and other U.S. cities and even some Mexican ones are reclaiming Day of the Dead, said area historians, anthropologists and other scholars, and there's still much to learn from rituals more reverent, spiritual and symbolic than ours.

Historian Teresa Van Hoy of St. Mary's University said that in western and southern Mexican states such as Michoacán and Oaxaca, for example, indigenous people and mestizos build altars that acknowledge three "realms (or levels) of existence": the earth and underworld (think marigolds); human existence (portraits of the beloved); and the divine (Our Lady of Guadalupe).

Van Hoy said beverages such as tequila and mezcal are placed on altars because the indigenous believed that using them provided "portals" to the deceased and erased "the thin barriers between the realms."

That so many traditions unfold at night offers another lesson. The fall of darkness is "understood to be when the veil between worlds are at their best, at their thinnest," Van Hoy said.

This isn't just mysticism: Ancient people actually lived with the dead. Throughout the world, they buried their loved ones in their homes, interacting with ancestors "on a regular basis," said Trinity University anthropologist Jennifer Mathews.

That may be why Mexicans are more at ease with the subject and more comfortable holding court in cemeteries. Mathews said that when she first started traveling there, she was shocked "to see all these people go on for days with mariachis at cemeteries."

She was dealing with the loss of her grandmother on one visit and found solace in the rituals. She laughs that now "all these white ladies" in her family set up Day of the Dead altars.

Rosana Blanco-Cano, associate professor of Spanish at Trinity, said it's no accident that U.S. cities such as San Antonio have adopted such practices. San Antonio has transnational connections to states such as Michoacán.

While many Muertos events are loud and celebratory - as they are in larger Mexican cities - Blanco-Cano said indigenous areas observe the holiday solemnly, some in complete silence.

In some villages, "people are not allowed to speak when you come into the town," Blanco-Cano said. Cemetery visits are instead meditative. "I don't want to use the word 'magic.' But it takes you to a different place, where you can feel those connections."

San Antonio historian Ward Albro, author of a book on the Day of the Dead in Oaxaca, said indigenous observances were untethered to mainstream religion and instead grounded in the season. The November commemorations on All Saints and All Souls Days are off by at least a month from the end of harvest time, said Albro, a professor emeritus from Texas A&M University-Kingsville.

Whether they received a good or a bad harvest, indigenous people built altars showing gratitude to antepasados , or ancestors, or asking for help in the next season. They were driven by “a certain sense of obligation,” Albro said.

In San Antonio, an indigenous group - descendants of American Indians who built the Spanish colonial missions - still commemorates the dead at harvest time before the fall equinox.

On Sept. 21, members of the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan nation gathered at the Alamo for its annual llanto (Spanish for cry), said spokesman **Ramon Vasquez**, describing it as a solemn tribute to “fallen warriors.” It's called Semana de Recuerdos, or week of memories.

For 25 years, they've gathered at sunrise to read the names of the American Indians buried there since the 1700s, he said. It's followed by song.

They're not alone. It's a commemoration of the dead that's practiced at many missions throughout the Southwest, **Vasquez** said.

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Video: Artist David Zamora Casas talks about the Day of the Dead altar he made in honor of his friend and mentor.

Previous coverage: San Antonio celebrates Día de los Muertos.
