

## Viewing Mexican Tradition of “Dia De Los Muertos” in The Animation Film “Coco”

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**Abstract;** Coco Animation Film is one of the animations that displays a typical Mexican tradition, namely "Dia de Los Muertos" or the feast of the dead. In general, this film shows how the culture of Mexicans believes in the feast of the dead. In addition, the film shows the holiday from the perspective of those who have died. The purpose of this study is to further examine the beliefs of Mexicans in describing what happens after death. The research method used in this study uses qualitative methods, namely research that tends to use analysis where the data that has been collected will be studied further. Data comes from text studies or literature studies. The results of this study indicate that this hereditary belief or tradition is very close to Mexican society and has become their identity. On this holiday, it is tradition for the family to display photos, serve food, drinks and activities that the deceased person likes. The things that are served become very synonymous with Mexican identity because they usually feature typical Mexican visuals and audio.

**Keywords:** animation, culture, Coco, death, Mexico

### 1. Introduction

Coco is an animated film. Animation in the modern sense no longer refers to artifacts and their creators (animators), but has developed into a technology (Suwasono 2016). From its quality, this Coco film was made with advanced technology belonging to the Pixar Animation Studio and was released by Walt Disney Pictures in 2017. The film itself was produced by Darla K. Anderson. Initially, Lee Unkrich came up with an idea, which he then collaborated with Adrian Molina as the screenwriter for the animated film Coco.

In the plot, this film first tells about a child in Santa Cecilia, Mexico named Miguel. Miguel has a dream of becoming a musician but is opposed by his family because his great-grandfather's career in music has abandoned his family. Miguel still insists on pursuing his dream and taking part in the talent show held as part of the event *Día de Los Muertos* which is a holiday that commemorates the dead. This festival sounds pretty gruesome because it commemorates the dead, but it's a far cry from being horrific. (Aini 2017) This ceremony is part of the culture and is carried out by Mexican people every early November, but some celebrate it on October 31 (Amelinda & Franzia 2020)

In the *Día de Los Muertos* tradition, families usually display pictures of people who have died in memory of them. Miguel accidentally broke the photo of his great-grandfather's family that was on display. From there Miguel saw a photo of his great-grandfather bent to hide the guitar that the deceased was holding. Miguel is excited to know his great-grandfather is a musician so he is confident to showcase his talent to his family. But Elena, Miguel's grandmother, was angry and broke Miguel's guitar. Long story short Miguel goes to the grave

of a deceased musician and takes his guitar so he accidentally enters the realm of the dead. From here Miguel sees the events of *Día de Los Muertos* from the perspective of the dead. In the end Miguel learned about his family thanks to visiting the afterlife and managed to return from that realm. Because of this incident, Miguel managed to improve the image of his great-grandfather, who was considered to have abandoned his family.

From Coco's film story, it can be seen that it features many scenes from the unique Mexican holiday, *Día de Los Muertos*. Even though it looks like Halloween, this holiday is different. Fimbres (2012) says "Día de los Muertos might seem like Halloween, but the two holidays are different. Halloween is often about scaring people. Día de los Muertos is a time of happiness and joy." On this holiday, Mexicans believe that after death, humans or spirits do not just leave, or in other words, do not disappear without a trace. They believe there is life after death. Therefore, according to their belief, people who have died need to be remembered and always remembered by displaying photos of their deceased, cooking and serving food, decorating and cleaning tombs, showing entertaining performances such as music, dancing and so on, and applying makeup on their face. The uniqueness of the appearance of the *Día de Los Muertos* holiday succeeded in making Coco's film memorable and fun to enjoy. It can be seen that Coco's film continues to present interesting visuals, unique culture and interesting distinctive music and also the Mexican language that intersperses with the English language. The Mexican culture in Coco's film is very interesting to study further.

## **2. Research Methods**

In the research entitled *Viewing Mexican Tradition of "Dia De Los Muertos" in the Animation Film "Coco"* The approach used is a qualitative method approach. As well as the object under study which is the visual and culture or tradition of *Dia De Los Muertos* from Mexico. In this qualitative approach, searching and collecting data is carried out. Then the data that has been obtained will be processed and undergo an analysis stage with the process of understanding and interpreting the meaning of the existing data. The analysis then used is a combination of visual analysis and anthropology. This has a purpose to examine how the visuals of the tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* depicted on the film *Coco* and how the tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* that actually exists in Mexican society. Basically the analysis was carried out in order to be able to see further and understand the beliefs of Mexicans in describing what happens after death.

In short, research begins with the most basic stage, namely data collection by means of observation and literature study. Then the data is processed in which there is an analysis stage in terms of color, elements and visual forms which are then studied with anthropology from that tradition. After doing the analysis, the next step is to see the relationship between the things that have been analyzed. Finally, after the results of the analysis are considered and well researched, meaning is carried out which is often called interpretation.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **A. Culture Seen from Figures and Plot**

On the object of research which is namely the animated film *Coco* can be observed the tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* of Mexico through its characters and plot. This animated film has characters and plots that are heavily influenced by the culture of Mexico. Lee Unkrich the director and his team have spent a lot of time exploring Mexican culture in making this animated film by going directly to Mexico for research. It is from exploring Mexican culture that the characters and whole plots related to tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* and can be present in the animated film. In the book "The Art of *Coco*" Lasseter, Unkrich & Molina (2017) says: Lee, Coco's producer Darla Anderson, and their fantastic team of filmmakers, led by co-director and writer Adrian Molina and production designer Harley Jessup, made multiple trips to Mexico to witness how the traditions of *Día de los Muertos* are observed and passed on. They visited big cities and tiny

villages, experienced parades in the streets and candlelit vigils in the cemeteries. They were invited to stay with families and share in their celebrations. The world of this film—both Miguel's village of Santa Cecilia and the spectacular Land of the Dead—is filled with the details and emotions of those visits. It was incredibly important to the Coco team to create an environment and a story that was not only vivid and beautiful, but also respectful of and true to the traditions of the people and the holiday.

The uniqueness of Mexican culture in commemorating or celebrating this death feast is the focus of attention. Usually death is often related to things that are somber, dark and sad. However, the celebration of this unique Mexican holiday of the dead is lively, colorful, and interesting. Starting from holding festivals, dancing, music and providing food and objects that people who have died give a cheerful color which leaves a distinctive, antique impression.

**a) Figure**

Of course, with a cheerful, lively and colorful impression on this feast of the dead, it needs to be visually displayed in the Coco animation film, therefore the characters that appear in the animated film have friendly visuals and are not scary even though the film tells about the realm of the dead. Even though it displays a lot of skull visuals, the character designers were able to manage the creation of the characters so that they could be accepted by Disney-Pixar moviegoers, the majority of whom came from all walks of life, be it young children or adults. The use of facial expressions, character personalities, expressive movements also add spice to the success of the characters representing traditional *Dia De Los Muertos* of Mexico so that movies and holidays have a cheerful, lively and colorful feel. Waeo, Lumenta & Sugiarto (2016) said "The role of the animator who works behind the process is needed to create motion animation that looks real because the quality of an animated motion greatly influences the storytelling process contained in a 3D animated film." The character designers have also succeeded in making characters that represent the story and culture in it. Basically, a good and true character is a character that has a strong impression and has characteristics and identity that represents the whole film. As Homan said (2014) "In designing visual communication, what is needed is not only creativity in creating a two-dimensional or three-dimensional visual work Whether it's ideas, stories or information, everything is conveyed by these characters as part of or representing an institution or person."



**Figure 1.** Visualization of the skull character of the animated film Coco Source: <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2017/11/pixar-coco-celebrates-mexican-traditions>

The characters that are present in the form of skulls that are not terrible also have a purpose. The skull is not only as people who have died, but also as people who have lived and interacted in this world, people who have shared their memories. Therefore, as conveyed in the film, to always remember those who have died and never forget the fact that they once lived to share experiences and memories. In addition, the skull figures are inspired by the tradition of painting faces resembling skulls *Dia De Los Muertos*. Mckeown (2022) says that:

However, the skull has a uniquely positive meaning in Día de los Muertos, very different from the skeletons and ghosts of Halloween. At the same time, in Mexico, the Aztec culture believed life on earth to be something of an illusion—death was a positive step forward into a higher level of consciousness. For the Aztecs, skulls were a positive symbol, not only of death but also of rebirth.

**b) Place**

In addition to the characters, this cheerful, lively and colorful impression is present in the setting and atmosphere. There are many things associated with the day of the dead such as Ofrenda, cemeteries or tombs, marigold bridge which connects the places of the dead with the realm of humans who are still alive, and the land of the dead.

- Ofrenda



**Figure 2.** Ofrenda in the animated film Coco Source: <https://culturalattache.co/2019/11/08/felipe-fernandez-del-paso-brings-coco-to-the-bowl/ofrenda-in-coco-courtesy-of-pixar-com/>

La Ofrenda or Ofrenda appears several times in the animated film Coco. This Ofrenda is a magnificent altar that connects the dead and the living. On the Ofrenda, family or closest people usually display photos of people who have died decorated with candles and marigold flowers as a form of remembering and honoring loved ones who have gone before. Beside photos and marigold flowers, such as items, favorite food and drinks will usually be stored on the altar for people who have died. As seen in the animated film Coco, this activity is carried out so that the spirits are remembered so they don't just disappear. The way Mexicans celebrate the day of the dead doesn't look mournful, in fact, usually there is lively dancing and music.

The marigold flower that is displayed and appears in the animated film Coco itself has a meaning similar to that in the book "The Art of Coco." Lasseter, Unkrich & Molina (2017) explains "Another important symbolic element is the marigold, or *cempasúchil*, which emits a unique aroma when crushed. It's believed this combination of smell and bright orange color acts as an aromatic siren, leading the dead back to their waiting families." The unique thing about this flower that welcomes the spirits is that it only exists in November, right at the time of tradition *Día De Los Muertos* is celebrated. Therefore, as Menté wrote (2011) in his book that marigold flowers are considered flowers for the dead until now they are called *flores de los muertos* or "flowers of the dead".

- Cemetery or Cemetery



**Figure 3.** cemetery or graves in the animated film Coco  
Source: <https://renderman.pixar.com/stories/the-world-of-coco>

Similar to Ofrenda, cemeteries are also often decorated with candles, marigold flowers, objects, favorite food and drinks of people who have died. The culture of the Mexican people will clean, take care and decorate the graves of loved ones. Here people will light candles on the eve of the celebration. Usually the celebration is divided into two days, November 1 for children and November 2 for adults. In the animated film Coco itself, there is a scene where at night the cemetery is not scary and very crowded. Precisely this place is a place to remember the memories of people who have gone. The atmosphere was lively, full of people who were silent to wait for the presence of the spirit of a loved one. This is a form of respect so that the spirits are remembered, never forgotten and always be remembered.

- Marigold Bridge or Marigold Flower Bridge



**Figure 4.** Marigold Bridge or bridge from marigold flowers

Source: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/how-cocos-imaginary-land-and-dead-was-influenced-by-mexican-history-1057931/>

When Miguel's dog, Dante, destroys a photo of his great-grandfather in Ofrenda, Miguel sees Ernesto de la Cruz's guitar, a famous musician in the photo. He assumed that Ernesto de la Cruz was his great-grandfather. This made Miguel confident in his interest in music and decided to be honest with his family. However, his family who hate music get angry and destroy Miguel's guitar. Miguel is disappointed because he wants to take part in a music event. Finally Miguel decided to borrow Ernesto de la Cruz's guitar from his grave which turned out to make Miguel half alive and half dead. He has human form but is in the dimension of death. Then Miguel meets his dead family and discovers a new problem, Dante who's broken the photo prevented his great-grandmother from crossing into the human realm.

From that incident, a magnificent orange bridge was shown. The bridge is made of marigold flowers and connects the human realm with the so-called spirit realm Land of the Dead. Miguel crosses the marigold bridge with Dante the dog who can see spirits. This marigold flower bridge is the beginning of the adventure in the animated film *Coco* in the realm of the dead.

After crossing the orange bridge from the human realm it will show you a place such as a named terminal or station Department Of Family Reunions. In this place the spirits of the dead will be checked whether their photos are displayed in Ofrenda. If their photos are displayed, the spirits are allowed to cross into the human world and chat with their families and enjoy food and drinks given to them by loved ones. In the depiction of the world of death and its systematization, there is no specific criterion in which the animated film *Coco* creates very creatively.

- The Land of the Dead



**Figure 5.** Places of people who have died or “The Land of the Dead” Source: <https://thetech.com/2017/11/21/pixar-coco-movie-review>

As previously discussed, *Coco*'s animated film does not have a fixed standard of depiction of the underworld and is very creative in its creation. So from that in visualizing The Land of the Dead the animated film *Coco* focuses on people who have died in Mexico. So that in its manufacture it closely describes the Mexican culture in it. The cheerful, colorful houses stacked in *Coco*'s own animated film were inspired by a place in Mexico called Guanajuato. These stacked houses are deliberately made like towers and are connected to each other by cable cars which are then given festive colors and lighting. This is not only for the beauty of the surrounding atmosphere but has the aim that there is emotion that represents the message that death is not a sad thing without reducing the meaning and essence of tradition *Dia De Los Muertos*.

Lasseter, Unkrich & Molina (2017) says: *The iconography of Día de los Muertos, as we experience it today, is strongly inspired by the turn of the-twentieth-century artwork of José Guadalupe Posada and we embraced this Victorian aesthetic as a unifying thread running through the film. You can see Posada's influence in the skeletal character and costume designs, the murals and graphics, as well as in period locations like the Marigold Grand Central Station.*

### c) Atmosphere

*Coco* doesn't just take stories and culture from Mexico, but *Coco* re-paints Mexican culture beautifully and still evokes feelings (Sadewa 2018). *Coco*'s animated film expertise is blended with *Dia De Los Muertos* tradition making death that should be somber and mournful be transformed into something festive and colorful. The warm atmosphere of color, music, and story makes this film successful in discussing death without any burden of sorrow in it.



**Figure 6.** Coco animated film scenes Source: The Art of Coco

The festive atmosphere is obtained from the bright, bright colors. Basically Mexicans like to use striking colors and become part of their identity. The festive mood can be found in objects such as art, clothing and fabrics typical of Mexico with its distinctive colors. It is this color palette that inspired the animated film *Coco*. The orange and purple colors that dominate this film are obtained from marigold flowers and traditional decorations or ornaments *Dia De Los Muertos*.

*Coco's* animated film has succeeded in combining the colors they got from Mexican culture into something harmonious. The distinctive atmosphere that is built from music, color and story becomes the identity of *Coco's* film. As a result, everything in this film is very interesting because of the harmony in combining all aspects. The color chosen in this film is also able to build the atmosphere and emotions needed as well as being a control point to control the balance of the film. Lasseter, Unkrich & Molina (2017) said "And in scenes where the super-dense quality of the world needed taming, we used murk and fog to subdue the complexity and direct the audience's eye." The atmosphere in the animated film *Coco* itself is also influenced by how the characters act. A thick Mexican accent with distinctive body language adds to the atmosphere of Mexican culture. As Joang said (2017) "Personality is how to explore the figure of animated characters so that they have a distinctive and strong character."

In addition to the personality or movements of the characters, decorations and decorative ornaments add value and affect the atmosphere of the film. This *Coco* animated film really uses visuals like the feast of the dead in Mexico takes place. They present skulls, candles, marigold flowers and so on just like on a holiday and create a special atmosphere. As Paz said (1961) "We decorate our houses with death's heads, we eat bread in the shape of bones on the Day of the Dead, we love the songs and stories in which death laughs and cracks jokes".

#### **4. Conclusion**

Tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* can be seen through *Coco* animation which has presented the culture of Mexico with interest. The team that makes the film do so wholeheartedly where they spend a lot of time immersing themselves in Mexican culture and even going live and living with Mexicans to understand their culture. They witnessed many interesting things that inspired the film. How does the Mexican culture view death and spirits, how is the audio and visual of their culture, and other uniqueness. The unique Mexican culture of celebrating the feast of the dead really describes how Mexicans view death. Usually people will view death as something scary, terrible, gloomy, dark and full of sorrow. However, tradition *Dia De Los*

*Muertos* manages to open up and show a new point of view with its lively, colorful, and attractive impression. Things like music, dance and festivals add to the festive feel. This unique, antique culture is not limited to a festive event, but holds the meaning that honoring people who have died does not need to be done in a rigid way. Besides tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* gives a message to always respect and remember the past people without grieving and letting go gracefully. Mexicans also interpret death as a good thing, where death is interpreted as a good step towards a higher level and going to a better place. Therefore, it is not appropriate to dissolve in grief if you are abandoned by a loved one. Skull characters or figures inspired by the culture of painting faces resembling skulls represent messages from *Dia De Los Muertos* tradition as the visuals are friendly and not scary. Even though it displays a lot of skull visuals, the character designers are able to manage the creation of the characters so that they can be accepted by all walks of life. Facial expressions, character personalities, expressive movements give more value to the success of the characters so that films and holidays have a cheerful, lively and colorful impression. *Dia De Los Muertos* tradition which can also be seen in the setting of the place and the atmosphere of the film has the same impression. Ofrenda, cemetery or tomb, marigold bridge The Ofrenda or altar acts as a place to store photos of people who have died and has a festive decoration. In the film itself, you can see Ofrenda decorated with candles, marigold flowers and stored goods, favorite food and drinks as a form of remembering and honoring loved ones who have gone before. In addition, marigold flowers that are bright, showy, have a strong scent and only grow this November will be sown to guide the souls of the departed. Cemetery or graves are also treated like Ofrenda, which is decorated with candles, marigold flowers, objects, favorite food and drinks of people who have died. Cemetery will also be cleaned and maintained. This activity is carried out so that the spirits continue to be remembered and remembered so that they don't just disappear. The film also depicts a bridge made of marigold flowers. This bridge serves as a link between the human realm and the so-called spirit realm The Land of the Dead. If you cross the bridge, you will arrive at a place such as a named terminal or station Department Of Family Reunions. This place is a transit of spirits to the human world, the ticket is that their photos must be displayed by people who are still alive. Then The Land of the Dead serves as the abode of the spirits. From all aspects that are harmoniously combined, the animated film *Coco* is able to convey *Dia De Los Muertos* tradition attractively because of its festive and colorful atmosphere. There is also a warm atmosphere of colors, music and stories that are perfectly packaged. The colors used are also taken from Mexican culture through long and in-depth research. The complete film results are very interesting because of the harmony in combining all aspects. The emotions and culture in the film have been packaged very well. By looking at tradition *Dia De Los Muertos* In the animated film *Coco*, many are inspired to honor and remember loved ones who have died. In addition, the lesson that can be drawn is in remembering memories left by loved ones, it is not better to drag on in grief. Memories left behind should be enjoyed gracefully.

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