International Border: Ceremony & Healing

End-of-Life Approaches, Innovation, and Coping Mechanisms in Tucson’s Mexican Immigrant Community
In Tucson’s local Mexican immigrant community, there is a unique cultural commitment to honoring the dead, celebrating life, and gathering family and community around the mourners. This is our focus as the Southwest Folklife Alliance’s Continuum program explores the diverse everyday practices of grief, trauma, and death in our region. SFA collaborated with Red de Redes, an alliance of 6 grassroots immigrant groups that come together to work for justice, build capacity, and create community.

SFA explored how Mexican end-of-life traditions are both celebrated and altered by local immigrant realities. We found that Mexican folklife traditions related to death and mourning endure and evolve in response to separation from family, community, and homeland. We highlight their resilience and ingenuity as they work to uphold the rich folklife that binds them to those who have passed on and preserves traditional knowledge for generations to come.

We hope these shared reflections build a sense of belonging amongst Mexican immigrants far from their homelands and offer valuable resources for community members facing the loss of a loved one or nearing their own end of life.

— Dr. Maribel Alvarez
While Mexicans adhere to many different faiths, including evangelical Christian sects among others, the vast majority are Roman Catholics, a remnant of centuries of Catholic missionary presence. Today, Mexican end of life foods and traditions practiced in southern Arizona reflect the fusion of elaborate pre-colonial Indigenous ceremonies with the order and symbolism of Catholic last rites. These unique practices of connectivity and personal and cultural expression have won the broad attention of researchers, folklorists, and artists.

According to Father Ricardo Elford who has been supporting local Mexican Catholics during times of loss for several decades, “the first thing you’ll notice at the time of death is the huge family presence, spilling into the halls, even at the hospital in intensive care.” The priest is called upon to administer last rites with an anointing of holy oil believed to cleanse and prepare the person’s soul for death.
Wake, Funeral, & Burial

For many Mexicans, the urge to send the deceased back home for burial is powerful, despite the high cost and complexity of the binational transfer. For those buried here in Tucson, Mexicans commonly hold a wake. Traditionally this was done in the home, with family and friends bringing prepared dishes, cooking caldos and tamales throughout the night, and paying respects to the deceased. Increasingly, local funeral homes also host these visitation ceremonies. Father Elford says “Mexicans are realistic with death, they don’t hide it. The kids are always there at the velorio to look in on the dead bodies.” The next day families hold a mass or ceremony in one of Tucson’s dozens of Catholic or small Christian churches, and then the bodies are buried, often together with some special possessions.

Novenario

Wherever the deceased may rest, Mexican immigrants often practice the social and religious tradition of the novenario. For nine nights after a death, a lay person leads the mourner’s community through five repetitions of the Rosary and guests accompany the family of the deceased and enjoy snacks such pan dulce and champurrado. The ninth night culminates in a shared meal, boasting specialties such as menudo, pozole, mole, salads, and vegetable dishes.
Altars

Throughout Tucson, in gardens and public spaces and behind closed doors, Mexican immigrants create their own sacred spaces in the form of altars, where they pray, reflect, and remember those who have passed. Altars are typically adorned with candles, flowers, photos of lost loved ones, and a cross or rosary beads.

Day of the Dead

Local cemeteries such as Holy Hope and South Lawn come alive every November 1-2 when Mexican-origin families flock to adorn the graves of loved ones with marigolds and other flowers, candles, and favorite foods and libations, inviting the dead back from the spirit world. Those separated from the graves of their loved ones may participate in other activities, such as marching in Derechos Humanos’ annual pilgrimage honoring disappeared border crossers.
Grief & Innovation in Response to the Border Wall

Political and geographical barriers disrupt immigrants’ ability to maintain traditions during sensitive times of loss. Laszlo Vega, chaplain with Casa de La Luz Hospice explains “this is extremely true for folks who are here undocumented, because they are afraid to go home for family gatherings and to say goodbye because they might not get back over border.” Immigrants respond to these challenges with creativity and flexibility, crafting new traditions such as Skyping funeral services for people on the other side of the border or having funeral services in both countries.

Service providers work hard to mediate the challenges of distance and immobility. Chaplain Sanders says that according to his immigrant clients, “Tucson is an exemplary community in terms of trying to serve that population.” Examples of such support include social workers writing letters to immigration authorities to request a temporary visa for family members to travel from Mexico, and hospice centers offering free services to uninsured families and recruiting Spanish speaking personnel to ease end-of-life loneliness. Some local mortuaries have developed sophisticated systems to streamline the binational transfer of the deceased.

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Nonetheless, it is undeniable that immigrant’s separation from family creates what Casa de La Luz Hospice chaplain Tom Sanders refers to as “extra grief issues” that often prolong and deepen suffering. Father Elford describes “endless talking about the pain,” from guilt over not being able to return home, to missing shared meals and warmth, to the financial burden of funerary and burial services. In particular, the physical separation from the body of the deceased weighs heavily on those unable to visit gravesites. This is due to the importance of burial in enabling the resurrection of the soul of the deceased as well as the role the body plays during communal grief rituals. Immigrants have few avenues to express their grief, since support services are often inaccessible due to language barriers, lack of insurance, and lack of eligibility due to immigration status.

Red de Redes community member Gerardo Ruiz recalls the pain of losing his mother and brother from afar, and says: “we will carry our grief with us until the moment we can finally see that person’s grave. But pain won’t lift until we can see where their remains lie and sing to them.” SFA’s host Monica Velasco adds that when you don’t get to say goodbye “it’s really hard, because sometimes the person has died and we don’t remember, we can’t accept it or process it emotionally because we weren’t there.” The families of the hundreds of border crossers who die or disappear in the desert every year are forced to mourn their lost loved ones usually without any body at all. Their remains fill the shelves at the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner, or are cremated and buried as unknowns. Local groups like Colibri Center for Human Rights, No More Deaths, and Derechos Humanos work to identify the dead and help bring closure to families suffering with this ambiguous loss.
Field Work: Binational Folklife in Death and Mourning

SFA interviewed Cecilio and Malena, both members of the Red de Redes community about their experiences with grief and end of life traditions. Their words shed light the diversity of folk practices in Mexican origin communities and how immigrant’s end-of-life ceremonies change and endure in response to the militarized border.

Malena

Malena was born in 1977 in a small Sinaloan rancho. She moved to Tucson 17 years ago to join her husband, seeking an alternative to the delinquency that plagued her community. She works long hours as a house keeper but has been able to give her three daughters a good education and a safe life. Sadly, since her tourist visa expired in 2009, Malena has been unable to cross the border and didn’t get to say goodbye to her beloved mother when she fell gravely ill last February.
Malena – It hurts me so much because I couldn’t be with my mom when she was dying. She had been here just two months before and she said to me “mija, I don’t think I will be able to come back again.” And I hugged her and I said to her “no, mamá, I will be here waiting for you.” And it hurt me so much, not being able to be there with her during those last two months when she was so sick. I called every day, I put her on video chat and I talked to her. But then the last week I couldn’t talk to her because she was in a coma and then I lost her.

Cecilio – My mom died when I was nine years old and it was really hard because I saw what happened to her. She was pregnant and so she and the baby both died. I barely talk about this because sometimes it feels like remembering it is like going back and reliving her death again. After my mom died we lived with aunts and my grandmother and I had to take care of my four brothers and sisters. We suffered a lot. Since I got to Tucson I have lost aunts and uncles and cousins, but I wasn’t able to go back to be with them. Many other people like me suffer deeply in this way, that when someone in the family gets sick we can’t get back to be with them. You can support them financially but it’s not the same.
What traditions of mourning have you followed here in Tucson?

Malena – We did the novenario and many people were here with me: my cousin and his wife and many friends who are now like part of my family. We Catholics do the novenario to bring peace to those souls that have gone to heaven. The last night of the novenario is the only night that you decorate, there are always lots of candles, and red and white flowers, as if the body was still lying there. I planted some of the plants outside and some lived. On the last night, most of the guests brought food, and it was all food that my mom had loved to eat like bread and coffee. But my mom wasn’t picky at all, a tostada with beans and she was happy! The thing that people most connected to her was capirotada, because she always made that.

Cecilio – I didn’t do anything here when my family members died because I’m here alone and I wasn’t really comfortable enough here. All I could do was give my economic support to those back home and my words of comfort for them, because that was all I had.

How would your grief process have been different if you had been in Mexico?

Malena – Since a year has gone by now, they did a mass for my mom at her graveside. I couldn’t go, I just have the video and photos. They go to her grave every few days because it’s so close by. Many people brought plants and flowers and they planted them there by her grave. They go water the plants there and on mother’s day they will go there and play music. And it’s so hard to not be there with them.
When my dad comes to visit now, he’s ready to leave after a few days and he says “Mija, I need to go home because your mami’s plants will dry up if I don’t.”

Cecilio – In Hidalgo, when someone dies, you hold vigil for two days in the person’s home so that friends and family can come see them and say prayers for them so that supposedly they will rest in peace. After the two days are over, when you are taking them to be buried, you set off fireworks every 50 meters or so, announcing their arrival. After that, every month you do a mass and then after a year has gone by you take them a large cross that you leave for them at their grave forever.

What helped you during your time of grief?

Malena – For about two months I went to therapy with a woman who comes up from Hermosillo and offers therapy here for a discounted rate. I had stopped doing many things during that time because I just wasn’t in the mood to do anything. I stopped eating and lost about 10 pounds. And the therapy helped me a lot because when you express your feelings, it makes you feel better. I know sometimes we don’t want to share our personal stuff, and we aren’t really aware about therapy, but it’s really good for us to go. I think more therapy would have helped me - I feel like I still need it now.
What has been the role of Dia de los Muertos in your life?

Malena – For me, Dia de los Muertos is about remembering your loved ones again. We do it to be with them, so that they can see that they still have a place in our hearts and in our minds. We have celebrated it here with Paisanos Unidos - we made an altar at the Southside Worker’s Center, and brought pan de muertos, candles, and food to share and photos of those we had lost. We did a short procession and then we ate together and shared. Here in the house, I light candles for my mom and bring her flowers. When I lived in Mexico we would go to the graveyard on Dia de los Muertos, because I had a brother who had already died. We would play music and bring flowers. We were not at home, we were there at the graveyards. We’d say, “come on, let’s go the graves.”

Cecilio – As a child in Mexico I celebrated Dia de los Muertos every November 1st and 2nd and we took a lot of decorations to the graveyard, like flowers and candles, and maybe a bottle of alcohol. Once I got in trouble with my dad because I was always curious and I wanted to see how the dead came back to eat, so when the table was all set up with candles and all kinds of food and drink that the muertitos had liked, I went and sat at the table to wait for them. But my dad saw me and said “what are you doing there? If you’re there they won’t come eat!” Where I’m from the tradition is that after those days pass, everyone goes around and shares the food they had made with neighbors, and friends, and compadres. There were tamales and beans, atole, and coffee, and alcoholic drinks, fruits and vegetables. Here in Tucson I have gone to the graveyard with my wife’s family so they can take flowers to their grandparents. It’s calmer here and very different - there are no fireworks!
What has your participation in Red de Redes meant to you?

Malena – Before Paisanos Unidos I didn’t know that I had any rights here. When you start to know more you realize that you can do a lot of things without being scared, like get a birth certificate for your child. In Paisanos, I met many people who have personally helped me a lot and now I’m more involved. See I’m not really close to my neighbors, and at work I just see my clients, and at school you just drop the kids off and that’s it. There is no way to meet people. But in the groups you have more contact with people. It’s rare that I would say I have a lot of friends but now I can say “she is really my friend.” When my mom died, Monica was here every night at the novenario and many other women came too. Even if they are not all your close friends, they are a group who can be by your side during your pain. Having people around me during that time is what I most remember, because I thought I would feel alone but it wasn’t true.

Cecilio – I’ve been coming to the Worker’s Center since 2003, when there wasn’t even a center, we would just wait on the street by 9th Avenue and 22nd street. I consider Red de Redes like a support because we are united and working together toward a cause. Gerardo was the one who told me about it, and I knew a little bit about the municipal ID campaign they were working on. I like the group because we are helping the community and at the Worker’s Center sometimes we have bad luck and they detain us and it’s important that we have support. When I go to Red de Redes I feel like I am amongst family, a family that is fighting for something.
Immigrant Friendly & Bilingual Resources

Clínica Amistad y Salud
Free basic medical care and mental health counseling
101 W Irvington Rd #3c, Tucson, AZ 85714
(520) 305-5107

St. Elizabeth’s Health Center
Medical, dental, and counseling on sliding price scale
140 W. Speedway Blvd., Suite 100, Tucson, AZ 85705
(520) 628-7871

Casa de la Luz Hospice
Bilingual hospice chaplains and discounted rates for the uninsured.
7740 N. Oracle Rd., Tucson, AZ 85704
(520) 544-9890

Arista HealthCare
Bilingual bereavement services
2312 N. Rosemont Blvd #103
Tucson, AZ 85712
(520) 333-0333

Holy Hope Catholic Cemetery
3555 N Oracle Rd, Tucson, AZ 85705
(520) 888-0860
South Lawn Cemetery
5401 South Park Ave
Tucson, AZ 85706
(520) 337-0987

Mexican Consulate of Tucson
“Traslado de Restos” program assists qualified applicants with partial cost of transferring the deceased to Mexico
915 E. Broadway Boulevard.
Tucson, Arizona, 85711
(520) 882-5595

Spanish Online Grief Guide
https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/duelo-muerte-conyuge
1. Derechos Humanos Promotoras
Workshops on “know your rights” and leadership development.
Contact: Marugenia Carrasco (520) 661-5363

2. Southside Workers Center
(Monday-Saturday 6-11am)
Protected pick up site for day laborers. Offers workshops on wage theft, leadership development, and occupational safety.
Contact: Jessica Rodriguez (520) 955-8165

3. Mariposas Sin Fronteras
Legal and advocacy support for LGBTQ+ immigrants and detainees.
Contact: mariposassinfronteras@gmail.com

4. Fortín de las Flores
Immigrant women’s leadership development and solidarity network.
Contact: Fortín de las Flores Facebook Page
102 E. 31st Street Tucson AZ 85713

5. Tierra y Libertad Organization
(meets weekly on Thursday evening)
Youth and community leadership development through Barrio Sustainability programming and peer-to-peer training.
Contact: Nelda Ruiz (520) 301-0262

6. Paisanos Unidos
(meets weekly on Sunday afternoons)
Leadership committee, access to lawyers and notary public, trainings on “know your rights”, immigrant solidarity network.
Contact: (520) 331-1889
243 W. 33rd Street Tucson AZ 85713
Hoy me encuentro muy lejos, muy lejos
De la tierra que me vio nacer
De mis padres y de mis hermanos
Y del barrio que me vio crecer
La nostalgia me destroza el alma
Y quisiera volverlos a ver...

Yo ansío con todo mí ser
Regresar a mi pueblo querido
Y mi Dios me lo ha de conceder
Pa’ morirme allá con los míos

Es muy triste encontrarse lejos
De la tierra donde uno ha nacido
Y más triste si no están presentes
Los amigos y los seres queridos...
This booklet is part of the Southwest Folklife Alliance Continuum Program – an ethno- graphic documentation of expressive practices in Southern Arizona communities as they relate to end of life.

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