



FIESTAS

Holiday celebrations in Mexico and Central America are called *fiestas*. Fiestas offer exciting opportunities for elementary students to bring together the cultural concepts, understanding, and skills necessary for studying other countries.

Fiestas are special days in Mexico and Central America. There is a fiesta for every national, international, and local holiday or interest. For those days that are important to many, a holiday from school or work is often given to honor the day and recreate the important events. There are even personal fiestas for birthdays, weddings, and baptisms.

Although there are virtually dozens of ways to celebrate the same holiday—varying from country to country, region to region, and town to town—certain elements are common to every fiesta: parades, parties, arts and crafts, food, and music. Suggestions for arts and crafts, food, and music are provided for each fiesta. You may want to include parades and parties as part of each classroom fiesta celebration, too.

Share some of these Mexican and Central American fiestas and the varieties of celebrations within each to help children experience a sense of global awareness and discover an understanding of how and why customs are important.



INDEPENDENCE DAY



September 15-16

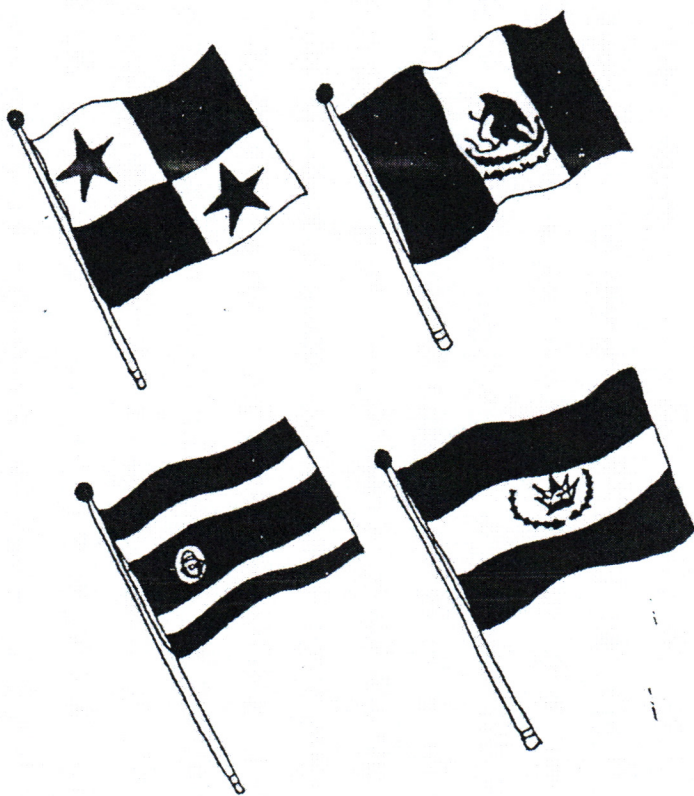
The colonial history of Mexico and Central America is very different from the much shorter colonial periods of the United States. From 1512 to 1821, Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama were ruled by Spain. At that time, the entire area was known as Mexico.

Three centuries of Spanish rule gave Mexican and Central Americans little experience in self-government. In Spanish colonies, the king was supreme. He appointed viceroys (governors) to carry out his law. Councils issued laws, supervised the church, and regulated trade and trade routes. Initially, Mexicans and Central Americans were excited and loyal to the Spanish king. Soon, however, the people began to feel that Spain had taken away all their power. The Mexicans and Central Americans felt they were treated unfairly and wanted to be free from the bonds of Spain. Differences of opinion arose and soon people of different regions began to turn against one another as well as Spain.

In the 19th century, most Mexican and Central American countries revolted and became independent republics. In 1810, Father Dolores Hidalgo and others decided

to cry out, fight, and even die for freedom from Spain. On the afternoon of September 15, the revolution against Spain officially began. Independence was finally gained by 1821. The new independent countries of Central America were formed.

Independence Day is celebrated throughout Mexico and Central America. Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Belize, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua celebrate on September 15 with parades and fiestas. Panama gained its independence much later, in 1903, and celebrates its independence in November.



♥♥ DIA DE LA RAZA ♥♥

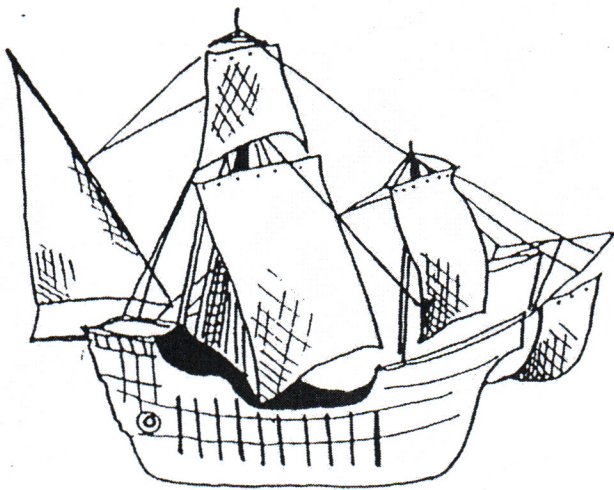
October 12

Before Columbus arrived in America in 1492, all of the Americas were inhabited by Native Americans—the Maya, Aztec, Inca, Huichol, and Cuna. The arrival of Columbus in the Americas in 1492 marked the initial blending of Native American cultures with European cultures. Although Columbus was not the first European to explore this area, he was the first to keep records, return to his sponsoring nation, and give the land to its conqueror, Spain.

Christopher Columbus was born in Genoa, Italy. At the time of his first voyage in 1476, he was only 19 years old. Columbus was intrigued by the stories of the Indies—lands filled with spices, gold, gems, and other beautiful, rich, precious things. But while others traveled to the east to find these exotic lands, Columbus believed he would reach the Indies sooner by sailing west.

On September 12, 1492, he set sail for the Indies with three ships—the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*. When he landed in the Bahamas, he thought he was in the Indies. He called all the natives he met there Indians and claimed the land for Spain.

In 1503, after several more voyages, Columbus landed off the coast of Honduras. He claimed this area for Spain as well. He then went to Panama and Costa Rica. Although Columbus didn't colonize Mexico or Central America (Cortez, Pizarro, Balboa, Magellan, and other explorers colonized the new world), he is identified as the first central European to set foot on the Western Hemisphere.



By 1837, the countries of Mexico and Central America had broken away from Spain, but that didn't change the enormous Spanish influence on every aspect of their civilization. Religious practices today are a blending of Catholic and Indian. Native foods are often used with those that originated in Spain. There are many traces of the old mixed with the new. October 12 is observed as a national holiday in most of the Americas. It is called *El Día de la Raza* (The Day of the Race), celebrating the many racial strands in the history of Mexico and Central America since Columbus' discovery of the Americas. There are usually many fiestas, some lasting several days!

♥X♥ ALL SOULS' DAY ♥X♥

November 2

There are many beautiful, funny, and even some sad celebrations throughout Mexico and Central America. Early in November in Mexico and Central America, the holidays All Souls' Day and All Saints' Day are celebrated. Although these are traditional Catholic holidays, they also coincide with an old Aztec celebration of death.

Part of an early Aztec ritual involved placing food on the graves of the departed. The dead loved one was believed to go on a journey, but stayed close to his or her dear ones. It was believed that the dead came to their graves on November 2 to feast on their favorite foods. It was said that the spirits of the dead only came to take back the fragrance of the food, not the substance, which was later eaten by the living. Tamales were among the delicacies, then as now. Other rites pertaining to death and burial, such as placing flowers on graves, took place in those early times over a period of three days.

With the coming of the Spanish, old Native-American customs mingled with the new. The result was a holiday with absolute uniqueness in arts and crafts, foods, fiestas, and more!

Mexican and Central Americans celebrate All Souls' Day by making ofrendas (little shrines) to place in their homes and in churchyards to honor their loved ones who have died. Families work lovingly to make the ofrendas beautiful. Often, incense and rich yellow or somber black candles are burned. It is believed that the dead love beauty and peek into the living rooms of their families during "holy times" to see the candles and shrines.

Throughout Mexico, where many cultures flow together, death is both respected and feared. Death is common and loved ones are lost frequently. The personalities of the dead loved ones are believed to go on throughout eternity.

There is a particularly beautiful sense among the country people in Mexico and Central America in their communal with the dead. Death is not considered a part of any specific religion. All Souls' Day provides opportunities for the people to honor their departed loved ones.

Note: These activities involve subjects surrounding death. Some children may be sensitive to this issue. Send a note home to parents or guardians before beginning this section on All Souls' Day to explain the purpose of the unit. If, in your judgment, the activities in this lesson may be disturbing to children or parents, you might choose not to use them.

DAY OF OUR LADY OF GUADALUPE

December 12

The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe begins in 1531 in Mexico. It is said that soon after the conquest of Mexico, Mexico's first Archbishop ordered the destruction of all shrines that the Aztec had painstakingly erected to honor their gods and goddesses. Shortly after the destruction, Juan Diego, a poor young convert, said he saw a vision of Mary, mother of Jesus, on Tepeyac Hill. This had been the site of an Aztec shrine honoring Tonantzeh, the Aztec goddess of earth and corn. Diego's vision of Mary was in the midst of beautiful music and she had a lovely brown face. Mary supposedly told Diego to have the bishop build a church on the spot where she appeared.

The bishop, wanting proof of this vision, asked Juan to have a miracle performed by Mary. As Juan walked home, he was interceded by a friend who told him of the sudden and unexpected recovery of Juan's uncle, who had been very ill. Juan returned to Tepeyac Hill and found roses on the rock where there had previously only been cacti. Juan wrapped the roses in a blue tilma (cape) along with a picture of Mary to show the bishop. The bishop was convinced of a miracle and the chapel was built.

Huge fiestas are held all over Mexico and Central America to honor the Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The biggest festival is held at the shrine of Guadalupe itself, just outside Mexico City. People from all over the country come to this shrine annually to get healing water. Aztec dances are performed and a big market is set up with raffles, fortune tellers, games, and toys. Many boys and girls are in costumes. Others march in their school uniforms as part of the festive parade. Our Lady of Guadalupe corn cakes are a must at the yearly fiesta in the cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe as well. And, of course, there are flowers everywhere to add to the festive atmosphere.

No fiesta would be complete without lots of food! Fruits and vegetables, sticks of sugar cane, and gorditas (plump tortillas) are among some of the foods offered at Our Lady of Guadalupe fiestas. Some market stalls sell pupusas. Pupusas are thick tortillas ($\frac{3}{4}$ " filled with cheese or bacon. In addition, bakers start their doughs at 3-4 a.m., and hungry breakfasters arrive to smell, buy, and eat these wonderful works of art. The breads, rolls, and cakes are almost the same all over the country and keep popping out of ovens until the late afternoon.

Note: These activities involve subjects surrounding religious celebrations. Some children may be sensitive to this issue. Send a note home to parents or guardians before beginning this section. If, in your judgment, the activities in this lesson may be disturbing to children or parents, you might choose not to use them.

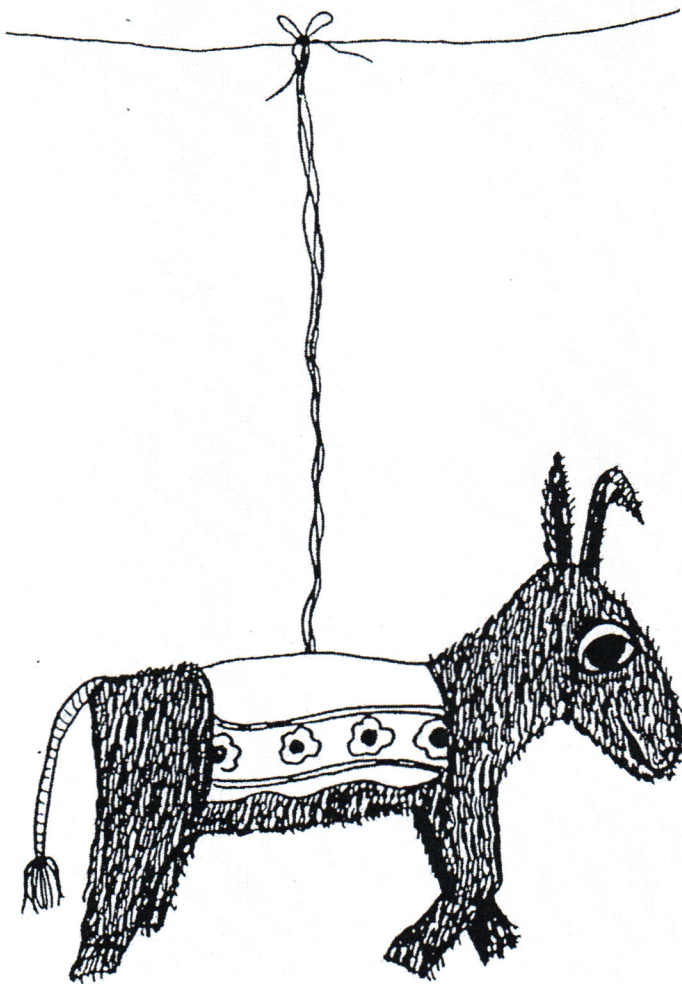
♥✕♥ POSADA ♥✕♥ PROCESSION DAY

December 16

The Posada Procession is held on December 16, the day chosen in Mexico and Central America to begin the festivities for the Christmas celebration. The procession is held for eight nights. Traditionally, friends gather together in small groups. They carry a nacimiento (manger scene) as they go caroling from house to house looking

for a place to stay. Children often pull a nacimiento in their wagons. By prearrangement, the carolers are turned down at many homes until they are finally invited into a designated home for the fiesta. Hosts serve the carolers cookies and punch.

Piñatas are traditional at Christmas time in Mexican and Central American cultures. A piñata is suspended from a beam or long pole. A rope is attached so that the piñata may be moved up and down. A child is blindfolded, given a bat or stick, and then turned around several times. Everyone sings "Dá! Dá! Dá!" ("Dá!" means "Hit it!" in Spanish) as the child tries to hit the piñata with the stick. The person holding the rope tries to keep the piñata out of the child's reach. All the children are given chances to hit the piñata until it breaks open. Then all the children are invited to scramble for the goodies that spill out!



When the Spanish conquerors were colonizing Mexico, they discovered a similar holiday celebrated by the Aztecs on December 17. The Spanish Christmas festivities blended some of the Aztec traditions with its own to fill the void left by the removal of that Aztec holiday.