

## *Abstract*

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The festivals when Mexicans venerate their deceased ancestors and national heroes (1.11) and celebrate the Virgin of Guadalupe (12.12) are often said to symbolise the very essence of Mexicanness. As a means of understanding the rituals more in a contemporary discursive debate I have conducted several interviews in the central areas of the country, the former centre of the Mexica/Aztec empire. Among the people interviewed there are various general ideas – touching the realms of both doctrinal Catholicism and folklore – visible in the understanding of the representations of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Day of the Dead. They touch a pronounced interest in pre-colonial periods and an understanding of continuity in cultural patterns throughout the colonial period. There is also a certainty that the colonial period changed Mexico in its fundamentals, and destroyed what was indigenous.

The purpose of this thesis is to analyse how and to what extent the two mentioned representations are manifested in the search for individual and collective identities in contemporary Mexico. To provide answers to these questions I have interviewed a number of, mainly, working class people in and around Mexico City. Their opinions and thoughts have subsequently been analysed against the historical Mexican background.

Departing in two theories of ethnicity and identity – the circumstantial theory, represented by Fredrik Barth, and the constructionist theory, represented by Stephan Cornell and Douglas Hartmann – I argue that the people interviewed by and large conduct their contemporary lives and articulate identity in the light of past events, be them family or nationally orientated. The people interviewed have read and discussed pre-Spanish traditions, and in that context they interpret the terms 'indigenous', 'native' and 'Mexicanness' quite differently. There is also a tendency among the people interviewed who criticise the Christian religion to acknowledge indigenous (in the sense of original and pre-colonial) features in the rituals, while those who believe in the advantages of the new religion neglect the indigenous influence. Hence they generally perceive the Virgin of Guadalupe as a Spanish contribution to Mexican religious life, while the Day of the Dead and its presumed indigenous features are said to symbolise more the Indian part of the country.

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