

Superstition and Halloween

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It is Halloween season and looking back a little on time, refreshes the memory and brings back souvenirs of our young ages. We may have not seen Halloween this way, coming from Haiti but we were old enough in the United States to bring our own kids, door to door to satisfy their quest for candies and goodies.

A return to the origins of these festivities will help us understanding, a little the evolution of this interesting period which brings so many happy and excited children at our doorsteps for a “Trick and Treat”. We learned about the association of cats, wolves or cocoos etc with the world of darkness.

As early as the 13th century, the Catholic Church linked cats to Satan, especially black cats. We have often heard from elders that any black cat running across the street on a dark night, is generally associated to bad luck (signe de mauvais augure). This animal (black cat) has been used as a model to advertise on Halloween and help bringing an unusual thrill to the life of our kids. Black cat has become synonym of bad luck and has been used to announce Halloween in company of a witch. This beautiful animal is now associated to Halloween as a symbol and carry a lasting image of the Superstition. Back home, a large brown butterfly at night may be seen as a sign of good augure because it is probably one of our ancestors coming to visit.

In anyway, Cats and Humans have lived together for centuries. One remembers the importance of cats in the ancient Egypt. They were considered as divine symbols. In the Greek mythology, cats were seen on the side of Hecate, a goddess of magic, sorcery, the moon, and witchcraft to assist her.

An official church document dated back to the 13th century called “Vox in Rama” was issued by Pope Gregory IX, on June 13, 1233, stating that black cats were an incarnation of Satan, I would refer the lector to a book written by Layla Morgan Wilde: “Black cats tell: True tales and Inspiring Images”. It was the beginning of the inquisition and the church sanctioned heretic and /or witch hunts. Although the inquisition was designed to squash the growing cult of Luciferians in Germany, it expanded rapidly across Europe.

Commonly this association of cats and Satan later became linked to witches in medieval Europe as reported by Cerridwen Fallingstar, a priestess and author of Broth from the cauldron: “A wisdom journey”.

Although the early Christian church in Europe, coexisted with witches and in a way, they were competing to gain the hearts and the minds of the people. The church decided to start hurting, prosecuting, killing and torturing witches in vast number. Fallingstar states that wishes honored the natural world and have great respect for the plants and animals. From that point, affection between animals and human began to be seen as diabolical and devilish.

America ‘s obsession with wishes is older than the country itself. It was rooted in fear, fueling false accusations of witchcraft. Witches are part of Fairy tales and Halloween traditions and Television and movies. Especially after false accusation, many witches were seen in the courthouses defending their causes. In the popular culture, more than a century ago, witches wear a pointy hat, a broomstick, and a black cat.

Some assimilated this pointed hat to the one worn by the quaker women. In the 17th century the women of all social classes wore tall, black wool hats which become conical in the mid-1600.

Halloween celebration is observed on 31 October, the eve of “All Saint’s Day”, Halloween also called “Allhalloween” is the time in the liturgical year dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints (hallows), martyrs and all the dead.

Many theories on Halloween tradition were influenced by the Celtic festivals (Gaelic-Samhain) with pagan roots but become Christianized by the early church. Others believe that Halloween began solely as a Christian holiday especially celebrated in Ireland and Scotland and through migration, Halloween became part of North America during the 19th century. Popular Halloween activities include “Trick-or-Treat” while wearing Halloween costumes, lanterns, bonfires, playing pranks, visiting haunted attractions, telling scary stories, or watching horror movies etc... Others may practice the Christian observance of All Hallows eve, to attend church service and light candles on the graves. Many may abstain from eating meat but replace it with vegetables, apples and potatoes.

Commemorations of all saints and martyrs were held in several churches on different dates but in the 4th century roman Edessa, it was held on the 13th of May. This is why, on the 13th of May 609, Pope Boniface IV re-dedicated the Pantheon in Rome to St Mary and all martyrs. Previously “Lemuria”, an ancient Roman festival to the dead was honored. In the 8th century Pope Gregory III (731-741) founded an oratory in St Peters for the relics of the holy apostles and all the saints, martyrs, and confessors. By 800, it becomes evident that churches in Ireland were holding a feast commemorating all the saints. It is possible that in 835, a member of Charlemagne court may have introduced the “1st of November”. This is a little the origins of Christians around the world visiting cemeteries to pray and place flowers or candles on the graves of their loved one. Such celebration by the end of the 12th century extended all over the world.

Over the years, some have taken the habit to bake soul cakes while praying to remember the dead (15th century) and often the children will go door to door collecting the cakes marked with a cross. Shakespeare mentioned the fact in his comedy “Two gentleman of Verona”. They may carry also lanterns to ward off evil spirits etc. A Christian minister (Prince Sorie Conteh) believes that the souls of the departed wanders the earth until all saint Day and Hallows’ Eve and this may provide them a last chance to gain vengeance on their enemies before moving to the next world. To avoid being recognized, some will wear masks and costumes. Other customs will bring dances in the ceremonial (danse macabre) like in a hidden carnival and people will wear masks and costumes. Many believe that may be the origin of Halloween parties.

In Brittain, the Calvinism doctrine of predestination attacked these customs and the state sanctioned ceremonies associated with the intercession of saints but prayer for souls in purgatory were abolished during the Elizabethan reforms while the All Hallow’s Day remained in the English liturgical calendar to commemorate saints. Protestants continued souling and candlelit processions and ringing the bells in church. Barns and Homes were blessed to protect the people and livestock from the malignant spirits as they traveled the earth but supported by the witches. In part of Italy, meals were left out for the ghosts of relatives. In Spain, they continue to bake pastries (bones of the holy) for the graves. In France and Latin America, Christian Processions and services during the period were offered in an all-night vigil. In Haiti, you may find foo around the cemetery, designed to feed the dead.

Today’s Halloween customs are thought to be influenced by folk customs and beliefs from the Celtic speaking countries. The origins of Halloween are lined typically to the Gaelic festival Samhain (31 October-I November) representing the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the winter or the “darker half “of the year’. It was the perception of a “luminal time” between the world and the otherworld... when spirits or fairies could more easily come into this world. They

seem to be a version of “degraded version of ancient gods.” Foods or drinks, or crops were left outside to appease the souls of the dead revisiting the homes.

In the 15th century, the festival included mumming and Guising in Ireland and Scotland with house-to-house visit in costume or in disguise with people reciting verses or singing in exchange for food. Others will dress up as fearsome personages called “gwrachod” in the late 19th and the early 20th century. Elsewhere in Europe, mumming was part of the festivals.

The Catholic colonists of Maryland and the Anglican colonists in the southern of the United States recognized All Hallow’s Eve in their church calendar while others oppose to it like the Puritans of New England etc. It is only after Irish and Scottish immigration during the 19th century that Halloween became a major holiday in the United States. Some houses were decorated as well as some public places, with skeleton, ghosts, cobwebs, headstones, or anything scary related to witches or macabre symbols.

In Ireland and Scotland, the turnip has traditionally been carved during Halloween but immigrants in North America preferred the native pumpkin softer and larger making it easier to carve. Although. In American tradition, Pumpkin carving is associated with harvest since 1837 but become associated to Halloween during the 19th century.

Nowadays, imageries of Halloween come from different sources like the Gothic culture, the horrors of the literature like Dracula and Frankenstein (1931) or the Mummy (1932), the images of the skull and skeleton. The “trick-or-Treating and guising have roots in the medieval practice of mumming which is closely related to souling. In England, Christians practice the souling during Halloween going doors to doors begging for soul cakes, in exchange for the prayers. In Philippines, it is called “Pangangaluluwa” on all Hallow’s Eve among children in rural areas in return to prayers and sweets. In Scotland and Ireland, “Guising”

(children disguised in costumes) going door to door. The first reference to guising in North America is in 1911 but will be seen later in Chicago 1920 and Alberta in 1927.

Trick-or-Treating did not seem to have become widespread in North America until the 1930's. Halloween postcards later became also popular even if for a while, "Trunk-or-treating" (Halloween tailgating) while children offer treats from the trunks of parked cars, in school parking-lots etc. Halloween costumes and masks modeling vampires, ghosts, witches, devils, princesses, ninja, Superman, Zorro etc. Finally, people were thinking that by dressing up as creatures able to produce fear and tremble, we were able to poke Satan. This has allowed us to use the dead and its decorations with skeleton as a reminder that we will die one day (memento mori).

Humorous tombstones in front of houses, displays on windows, caricatures depicting the spirit of Halloween, haunted houses or castles, hayrides, corn mazes, attractions, children museum... so many diverse activities to enjoy the festivities. Even Universal Studios in Florida, in Singapore, in Japan etc began sponsoring Halloween horror nights to attract the interested public.

Variation of food like to encourage abstinence, serve vegetarian food, candy apple, caramel apples, candies, monkey nuts, caramel coins, sweet candies, and even pumpkin pie etc. Occasionally, we will hear in the country the presence of poisonous food or candies given to the kids, razor blades placed in the apples to injure the kids, or any other malicious acts during the festivities. Hospitals were offering free radiological exposure of the collected candies to make sure that none of the offending items were found in the collected candies. Many parents assumed that such heinous practices were rampant pushing families in an uncontrolled hysteria. In the Irish community, one may find cakes in which a ring is hidden as a token for true love... a little like the king crabs during the time of Epiphany.

The Christians observe the vigil of All Halloween (All Hallows 'Eve) in Poland where the believers were once taught to pray out loud as they walk through the forest to allow the souls of the dead to find comfort. In Sapin, it was the priests reminding the congregants to pray for the dead on All Hallows 'Eve. In Ireland and in Canada, the day is meat-free day where pancakes or colcannon (mash potatoes and cabbage) are served to invite the spirit of the dead children (Angelitos) to return. Worshippers in Christian churches prepared themselves to feast following All Saints' Day with prayers after the night service. Candles (as valomeri) are lit.

Belizean children are dressed up as Biblical figures and Christian saints. But other believe that Halloween trivializes the occult and the practices and cultural phenomena incompatible with their beliefs. Similarly, many protestant churches view Halloween as a fun event for children while parents get dressed up with them to get candies for free, but it looked like the holiday was used to humor or ridicule the power of death. In the Roman catholic church, Halloween celebrations are common even allowing some schools to close on "Halloween brake" to popularize this period and take an opportunity to evangelize. Others considers it completely incompatible with the Christianity Faith, like for the Orthodox who recommend the observance of Vespers (evening prayers).

Other religions see it differently. It is not permitted in the Judaism because it violates Leviticus 18.3 while participating in these gentile customs, but they will celebrate "Yizkor" four time a year which is a similar holiday. Other rabbis do not see a reason why Jews should not celebrate Halloween. In Islam, it is believed that participation in Halloween is worse than participate in Easter or Christmas.

In Malaysia, Halloween is celebrated with a humorous theme to entertain and resist the spirit of death. In the Hinduism, they remember the dead during a festival called "Pitru Paksha" in which a ceremony is performed to keep the souls of their ancestors at rest in mid-September. Other Hindu have opposed the celebration of Halloween but another festival "Diwali" conflicts occasionally with Halloween. In the

Neopaganism, there is no consistent rule or view on Halloween. Some observe it through Samhain on the November 1, others enjoy Halloween or even trivialize or avoid it.

In Haiti, people take part in lighting candles and journeying to the cemeteries to visit the departed, drinking and pouring the rum on the tombs. The object of these extravagances is to simply please their dead parents in bringing food, especially spicy food. For the one practicing Vodoo, they find a reason to take their joy to the streets in mimicking the period of Mardi-Gras, parading in group of “Guedes” and dancing under the sounds of their traditional music with drums, trumpets, and “Cha-cha” etc. They may carry signs of drawings of “phallic symbols” or get dressed up like a Vodoo personage called “Baron Samedi” or carrying its special cross. They believe that the dead comes from a cold place of Death to feast with them. So, it is important to help them drink enough to keep them warm. In this way, they will be happy to eat the extra food with hot peppers.

In conclusion, unlike Christmas and Thanksgiving with their clear origins, Halloween is a little more evasive. We tried to separate fact and fiction, but the origins of this holiday tracing to the ancient Celtic festival are confirmed to a certain point. We flew over so many witches and Ghosts, phantoms and Guedes and we gladly touched the period of inquisition. We reviewed some of the politics involving, Popes, Kings, Clergymen but finally we sat on different periods involving the world history of Halloween. We appreciated the religious and pagan festivities from the 13th history to the present time, the costumes, the food used by the participants. It appears to us in deniably, that the Halloween festivities has derived from Samhain and if the date for the festivities have varied over the years, the portal between the realm of the living and the dead opened, allowing lost souls to return to Earth.

It took some centuries for this Holliday to travel across the ocean following massive migrations towards the Americas. This is my way in

reporting the path that Halloween has followed to reach the United States of Americas, our adopted country. May you enjoy the reading.

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