

QUOTIDIAN

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PRELUDE

Much has kept me from my editorial desk of late, but I simply could not resist doing a bit of research on that curiously un-American celebration, Cinco de Mayo. Each year, more and more of us take to the streets and drink Coronas and margaritas, without really understanding what May 5th is all about. It is much more than a celebration of a dusty military victory against overwhelming odds, but a case study in the cultural evolution between the Mexican and American people.

QUOTES OF THE WEEK

“He who praises you for what you lack wishes to take from you what you have.”
—Don Juan Manuel

“It is better to die on your feet than to live on your knees.”
—Emiliano Zapata

“Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I said something.”
—Pancho Villa (his last words)

THIS WEEK IN HISTORY

MAY 5, 1914: Erwin “Cannonball” Baker begins a historic 11 day cross-country motorcycle trip from San Diego to New York, which would ultimately change the way Americans viewed motorized bicycles. Baker’s trip was the result of a sponsorship by motorcycle maker Indian, which asked him to take a two-speed, 7 horsepower model on a demonstration tour of Cuba, Jamaica, and Panama. Following the promotional tour, Baker decided to take the same model across the U.S. He sent letters all around the country asking people to help him plot a contiguous route, since roads outside of urban areas were in uniformly poor shape. By Baker’s own account, he ran out of gas on the second day in the Arizona desert and was forced to push his bike in 119 degree heat; that was *before* he was set upon by wild dogs (which he successfully repelled with his .38 Smith & Wesson). Baker went on to do many more promotional races for sponsors, and adopted the tagline “no record, no pay.”

Baker received his famous moniker after this cross-country race, when a New York journalist compared him to the famous Cannonball Express train (fabled to have been so fast it took three men to say “here she comes,” “here she is,” and “there she goes.”).

Sources: The History Channel, Wikipedia, Motorcycle Hall of Fame.

3 WORDS

Memorize these by week’s end and you shall quickly develop an enviable lexicon.

This week’s theme: Spanish loan words.

peccadillo (peck-uh-DIL-oh)
noun

1. a slight offense

Ex. While much of Europe wrote off Clinton’s escapade with Lewinsky as a mere peccadillo, the American public was in an uproar.

Etym. Diminutive of the Spanish *pecado*, or “sin.”

barrio (BAR-ee-oh) *noun*

1. a district of a city or town in Spanish speaking countries

2. a Spanish-speaking area of a city or town in the United States, esp. in the Southwest.

Ex. The barrios are often the poorest parts of large U.S. cities.

Etym. Spanish for “neighborhood,” ultimately from Arabic *barriya*, “open country.”

lariat (LAR-ee-et) *noun*

1. a long light rope with a running noose used to catch livestock; LASSO

Ex. The rancher showed his new cowhand how to tie a lariat, so that he might go out and bring in the scattered livestock.

Etym. From Spanish *la reata*, “the lasso.”

ETYMOLOGY 101

The origin of: cannibal

The word for an animal that eats the flesh of its own kind entered English via the Spanish *canibal*, which in turn comes from the writings of Christopher Columbus. When Columbus landed in the West Indies, he encountered people in Cuba and Haiti who called themselves *caniba* and *carib*, respectively. Thinking he was not far from China, he supposed these people were subjects of the Grand Khan (“la gente del Gran Can”). Since the Spanish believed the natives were man-eaters (anthropophagites), the word *cannibal* in the European languages came to mean “a human who eats the flesh of another human.” *Cannibalize* did not refer to machinery and other things until 1943, when wartime shortages made it necessary to dismantle older or less important machines to make newer ones.

The origin of other English words borrowed from Spanish

In my search for the words of the week, I came across several interesting Spanish words that have made their way (often unchanged, aside from pronunciation) into our language. The word **burrito**, for example, is a diminutive of the Spanish word *burro* (donkey), and literally means “little donkey.” The word **comrade** comes from the Spanish word *camarada* (originally “chamberful,” then “chamber mate,” from the Latin *camera*, “vault, room in a dwelling”).

Many of us are familiar with that delicious frozen concoction that blends light rum, coconut cream, pineapple juice and ice, but do we know what it means? In Spanish, **piña colada** means “strained pineapple.” Ask for a strained pineapple at the bar and you’re more likely to get a strained expression from the bartender.

Alligator comes from the Spanish *el lagarto*, or “the lizard.” The wide-rimmed **sombrero**, which does an excellent job of keeping the sun out of its wearer’s eyes, is derived from the Spanish *sombra*, meaning “darkness,” “shade,” or “shadow.”

Source: *The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories*, Online Etymology Dictionary, About.com.

NEAT-O

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CINCO DE MAYO

May 5th is commonly confused with Mexican Independence Day, which was declared on September 16, 1810, over 50 years earlier. The real purpose of Cinco de Mayo is to commemorate a Mexican military victory over French troops on May 5, 1862 near the city of Puebla, Mexico.

In the several years prior to the Battle of Puebla (*Batalla de Puebla*), Mexico endured a war of reform in which parallel governments and their factions (liberal and conservative) fought to control the course of the nation. The liberals wanted to curtail the influence of the Catholic church and the military and move towards a more market-based economy, while the conservatives wanted to stick with the old ways. In 1861, Benito Juárez was elected president of the liberal government of Mexico for a four year term.

Years of civil strife had left Mexico’s central government impecunious, so one of Juárez’s first acts as president was to suspend payments of outstanding debt due the governments of Spain, England, and France. In an attempt to receive payment for these debts, the three nations united their efforts under the Treaty of London on October 31, 1861. Troops from all three armies arrived in the port city of Veracruz between December of 1861 and January of 1862.

It soon became apparent that France was interested in more than just getting paid, so the Spanish and English forces withdrew their troops and settled their debt issues diplomatically.

What interested French emperor Napoleon III more than a check from Juárez was a Mexican colony and its attendant influence over the precocious United States. Napoleon probably wasn’t a big fan of the Monroe Doctrine, and his wife (a Spaniard) saw a Mexican colony as a way of taking revenge for her country’s defeat 40 years earlier.

Napoleon figured that if the Mexican capital city fell, the rest of the nation would fall as well (something that happens frequently in Europe and Castle Risk). The French troops marched from Veracruz to Mexico City, but on the way happened to get beaten badly by a much smaller Mexican army at Puebla.

BATALLA DE PUEBLA

In the mid-19th century, the French army was among the



Benito Juárez

best in the world, but its overconfident commander, the Count of Lorencez, underestimated his less numerous opponents (the French outnumbered the Mexicans two to one). The weather also favored the Mexicans, since heavy rain had turned the roads muddy, thus slowing the advance of the French artillery. Lorencez, assuming the Mexicans would flee from heavy fighting, directed three charges at the center of their line; all were repulsed.

The Mexican army was led by Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza and Col. Porfirio Díaz (who would later become president). Zaragoza sent Díaz and his cavalry to meet a French flanking army, and the French cavalry followed, leaving their infantry alone in the center. In an ingenious counteroffensive, Zaragoza sent stampeding cattle ahead of his infantry (machete-wielding Zapotec and *mestizo* Indians) to break up the French lines, to great effect. The French

army withdrew at darkness and waited two days for a Mexican offensive that never came; Zaragoza was loath to encounter the French in the open, where his defenses could not protect him. Faced with inclement weather and unwilling to mount another attack, Lorencez withdrew his forces to Orizaba.

While the victory at Puebla was important for Mexico's morale, it was not decisive; the French went on to capture Mexico City and installed the Hapsburg prince Maximilian I in 1863. Maximilian did not arrive in Mexico until May of 1864, and even then his regime was not recognized by Juárez's liberal government. Many Mexicans (known as Republicans) continued to fight the French forces throughout Maximilian's brief reign. When the American Civil War ended in 1865, the United States began supplying the Republicans with arms. In 1866, due to Mexican resistance and American opposition, Napoleon III withdrew his troops and urged Maximilian to abdicate. Maximilian refused, was captured on May 11, 1867, and sentenced to death by firing squad.

WHY AMERICA CELEBRATES CINCO DE MAYO

The popularization of Cinco de Mayo did not happen overnight; rather, "it was a gradual process that one scholar suggests began in the United States" shortly after the Battle of Puebla. Mexicans living in California (northern Mexico at the time) celebrated the anniversary of the battle as a way of showing solidarity with their mother country.

Researcher Laurie Kay Sommers has broken the evolution of the holiday into three distinct stages. In the first phase—which lasted into the 1950s—Mexican civic and social clubs organized private *folklórico* dances, speeches on the significance of the event, and parades. These celebrations were celebrated locally within a city's Mexican American communities.

The second phase came with the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. American Latinos, inspired by the struggles of African Americans, began to demand equality for themselves in all areas of life. This growing self-awareness grew into the Chicano movement, "an effort by Mexican Americans to reembrace their indigenous roots." Cinco de Mayo was a perfect example of Chicano pride, and it fit well with the growing impetus to incorporate multicultural subjects into academic curricula. Cinco de Mayo gained more academic air time in 1968 with the passage of the Bilingual Education Act, which "dramatically increased federal funding for multicultural curricula."

The final phase in Cinco de Mayo's evolution came in the 1980s, when some American corporations began looking at the growing number of Hispanic consumers and considered how to appeal to them. Many Cinco de Mayo celebrations were celebrated by community-based organizations that welcomed corporate financing to help underwrite their events. In exchange for this financing, businesses got visibility and a positive image among Latino consumers. Once local marketing campaigns went national, Cinco de Mayo became an American holiday.

Source: Valerie Menard, *The Latino Holiday Book* (2004), Wikipedia. Excerpts from Valerie Menard's book.



LITERARY GENIUS

I had a difficult time finding a work from a renowned Mexican author. My first thought was to include an excerpt from *Don Quixote*, but that story was written by a Spaniard. One reason there is a relative dearth of well-known Mexican writers is because Mexico wasn't an independent nation until 1810 (Spain didn't recognize this independence until 1821), and even then it was subject to the whims of other nations (e.g., the Mexican-American war of 1846-48 and the French occupation of the 1860s). What follows is an excerpt from a poem written by the first Mexican to receive the Nobel Prize for literature. It is based on the Aztec calendar (the Sunstone), which measured the synodic period of the planet Venus (584 days – the number of lines in the poem).

FROM *PIEDRA DE SOL (SUNSTONE)*

by Octavio Paz

a crystal willow, a poplar of water,
a tall fountain the wind arches over,
a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,
a course of a river that turns, moves on,
doubles back, and comes full circle,
forever arriving:

the calm course
of the stars or an unhurried spring,
water with eyes closed welling over
with oracles all night long,
a single presence in a surge of waves,
wave after wave till it covers all,
a reign of green that knows no decline,
like the flash of wings unfolding in the sky,

a path through the wilderness of days to come,
and the gloomy splendor of misery like a bird
whose song can turn a forest to stone,
and the imminent joys on branches that vanish,
the hours of light pecked away by the birds,
and the omens that slip past the hand,

a sudden presence like a burst of song,
like the wind singing in a burning building,
a glance that holds the world and all
its seas and mountains dangling in the air,

body of light filtered through an agate,
thighs of light, belly of light, the bays,
the solar rock, cloud-colored body,
color of a brisk and leaping day,
the hour sparkles and has a body,
the world is visible through your body,
transparent through your transparency,

un sauce de cristal, un chopo de agua,
un alto surtidor que el viento arquea,
un árbol bien plantado mas danzante,
un caminar de río que se curva,
avanza, retrocede, da un rodeo
y llega siempre:

un caminar tranquilo
de estrella o primavera sin premura,
agua que con los párpados cerrados
mana toda la noche profecías,
unánime presencia en oleaje,
ola tras ola hasta cubrirlo todo,
verde soberanía sin ocaso
como el deslumbramiento de las alas
cuando se abren en mitad del cielo,

un caminar entre las espesuras
de los días futuros y el aciago
fulgor de la desdicha como un ave
petrificando el bosque con su canto
y las felicidades inminentes
entre las ramas que se desvanecen,
horas de luz que pican ya los pájaros,
presagios que se escapan de la mano,

una presencia como un canto súbito,
como el viento cantando en el incendio,
una mirada que sostiene en vilo
al mundo con sus mares y sus montes,

cuerpo de luz filtrado por un ágata,
piernas de luz, vientre de luz, bahías,
roca solar, cuerpo color de nube,
color de día rápido que salta,
la hora centellea y tiene cuerpo,
el mundo ya es visible por tu cuerpo,
es transparente por tu transparencia,

I travel my way through galleries of sound,
I flow among echoing presences,
I cross transparencies as though I were blind,
a reflection erases me, I'm born in another,
oh forest of pillars that are enchanted,
through arches of light I travel into
the corridors of a diaphanous fall [autumn],

I travel your body, like the world,
your belly is a plaza full of sun,
your breasts two churches where blood
performs its own, parallel rites,
my glances cover you like ivy,
you are a city the sea assaults,
a stretch of ramparts split by the light
in two halves the color of peaches,
a domain of salt, rocks and birds,
under the rule of oblivious noon,

dressed in the color of my desires,
you go your way naked as my thoughts,
I travel your eyes, like the sea,
tigers drink their dreams in those eyes,
the hummingbird burns in those flames,
I travel your forehead, like the moon,
like the cloud that passes through your thoughts,
I travel your belly, like your dreams,

your skirt of corn ripples and sings,
your skirt of crystal, your skirt of water,
your lips, your hair, your glances rain,
all through the night, and all day long,
you open my chest with your fingers of water,
you close my eyes with your mouth of water,
you rain on my bones, a tree of liquid
sending roots of water into my chest,

I travel your length, like a river,
I travel your body, like a forest,
like a mountain path that ends at a cliff
I travel along the edge of your thoughts,
and my shadow falls from your white forehead,
my shadow shatters, and I gather the pieces
and go with no body, groping my way...

Translated by Eliot Weinberger

voy entre galerías de sonidos,
fluyo entre las presencias resonantes,
voy por las transparencias como un ciego,
un reflejo me borra, nazco en otro,
oh bosque de pilares encantados,
bajo los arcos de la luz penetro
los corredores de un otoño diáfano,

voy por tu cuerpo como por el mundo,
tu vientre es una plaza soleada,
tus pechos dos iglesias donde oficia
la sangre sus misterios paralelos,
mis miradas te cubren como yedra,
eres una ciudad que el mar asedia,
una muralla que la luz divide
en dos mitades de color durazno,
un paraje de sal, rocas y pájaros
bajo la ley del mediodía absorto,

vestida del color de mis deseos
como mi pensamiento vas desnuda,
voy por tus ojos como por el agua,
los tigres beben sueño de esos ojos,
el colibrí se quema en esas llamas,
voy por tu frente como por la luna,
como la nube por tu pensamiento,
voy por tu vientre como por tus sueños,

tu falda de maíz ondula y canta,
tu falda de cristal, tu falda de agua,
tus labios, tus cabellos, tus miradas,
toda la noche llueves, todo el día
abres mi pecho con tus dedos de agua,
cierras mis ojos con tu boca de agua,
sobre mis huesos llueves, en mi pecho
hunde raíces de agua un árbol líquido,

voy por tu talle como por un río,
voy por tu cuerpo como por un bosque,
como por un sendero en la montaña
que en un abismo brusco se termina
voy por tus pensamientos afilados
y a la salida de tu blanca frente
mi sombra despeñada se destroza,
recojo mis fragmentos uno a uno
y prosigo sin cuerpo, busco a tientas...