



Photography Essay by Wendy E. Phillips

Above: caption to come

The Quinceanera is the celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday and is practiced in many Latino communities. Traditionally, the celebration proclaimed a young woman's maturity and her readiness for marriage. In contemporary times, the event is interpreted by some in the Latino community as an indication that a girl is mature enough to wear high heels, use make-up, and begin dating (Hurtado, 2003). The Quinceanera ritual has been preserved by many migrating peoples whose origins are in Latin America. In the United States for example, families migrating from Mexico continue the ritual practice even for girls who are first generation United States citizens.



Photo credit line.

The Quinceanera is celebrated in many regions of Latin America, including Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico (Castro, 2000). Interestingly, the Quinceanera is not widely celebrated in present day Spain. The ritual may be rooted in the indigenous traditions of the peoples of the region that is now known as Latin America. For example, rites marking an Aztec girl's transition to womanhood have been described (De Sahagun 1977). Other possible sources of indigenous influences may be related to the African contribution to Latin American cultures, rooted in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade. For example, in Mexico, the forced migration of Africans of West and Central African origins began in the 1500's. (Aguirre Beltran, 1986) Rites of initiation for girls from these African regions were common (Field, 1961) and may have persisted after the Africans' introduction to New Spain.



Photo credit line.

Perhaps, indigenous and African traditions were blended with the Catholic and social celebrations of the Spanish upper classes resulting in the Quinceanera ritual whose present form incorporates a Catholic mass and party celebration. The names of the escorts who participate in the ritual, "Damas", and "Chambalan" also suggest some contribution of French cultural tradition perhaps during the time of the French occupation of Mexico. The magnitude of the Quinceanera celebration ranges from a small gathering in the family's home to a huge cotillion like event with hundreds of guests and participants.

A girl may begin planning the Quinceanera as early as her fourteenth birthday. She identifies "godmothers" and "godfathers" who are members of the community and who will locate resources and pay for aspects of the celebration. The godmother of the gown pays for the girl's dress, the godmother of the cake pays the bakery fees, etc. The godmothers and godfathers may make a large celebration possible for a girl whose own family economic resources are not sufficient to cover the costs of the event. The preparation activities shared between the girl and her godmothers and godfathers may also serve to strengthen and unify the community who will support the young girl's transition to womanhood and who will be available to her as confidants and sources of support in the future.



Photo credit line.

The celebration begins with a mass. The church is decorated by the godmother of decorations who has offered her creative and monetary support for this purpose. The young woman, often referred to as "The Quinceanera", is accompanied by her escort. She may be preceded by seven or fourteen couples, the boys known as "Chambalan" and the girls as "Damas". The Mass follows the usual order, including the "Homily", the Catholic version of a sermon. A special blessing given to the girl by the priest may be inserted. Special symbolic spiritual gifts may also be given during the mass. The gifts may include a Bible and rosary, a cross or other religious necklace, and a ring. The Homily, is an opportunity for the priest to remind the girl of her spiritual commitments to her family, her community, and to God. At the end of a special Mass such as that for the Quinceanera, the participant may make a votive offering to an altar for the Virgin of Guadalupe, a representation of the Virgin Mary embraced by Mexican Catholics.

The party room decorations may include balloons and streamers, a gift table and a table for the cake. A special table is set for the girl and her attendants. The decorative themes demonstrate a constant tension between adornments and

symbols related to childhood celebrations and adult parties. For example, the representations of the girlhood doll are prevalent in gift table and cake decorations, while table settings include sophisticated champagne glasses and bottles, a shimmering “disco ball” and other lights and special effects reminiscent of an adult dance club.



Photo credit line.

The girl is formally presented to her guests, and dances a specially choreographed waltz with her male attendants, the “Chambalan”. The waltz culminates in the gesture of the boys together lifting the girl overhead on their interlocked arms. She dances a special dance with her father and also the “godfathers” who have provided economic support for the event.

Significantly, she is crowned with a tiara by one of her godmothers and may also receive the gift of a scepter. Other special gifts include a huge child’s doll denoting “the last time she will play as a child”. Another gift is the “surprise”, a huge box wrapped and elaborately decorated. This gift is sometimes a pair of high heeled shoes. The girl’s flat shoes are replaced with the heels by her father, representing the last time a father helps a little girl dress herself.



Photo credit line.

There may be a special song sung by the father for his daughter. A champagne toast is offered by the girl’s parents symbolizing her first adult drink. During the party, the girl acts as

hostess, greeting her guests, and making sure that they are comfortable. The celebration continues as a very adult event with music and dancing. At the end of the party, table decorations and favors are given to the guests as gifts.

To view complete photo essay contact photographer.

## REFERENCES

Aguire Beltran G. (1986) *La Poblacion Negra de Mexico*, Estudio Etnohistorico. Veracruz, Mexico, Universidad Veracruzana. Instituto Nacional Indigenista

Castro, R.G. (2000) *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans*. New York, Oxford

De Sahagun, B. (1977) *La Historia de las Cosas de Nueva Espana II*. Mexico, Editorial Porrua SA

Field, M.J. (1962) *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People*. London, Oxford University Press.

Hurtado, A. (2003). *Voicing Chicana Feminism: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity*. New York, NYU Press.

Wendy Phillips, earned her Ph.D. degree in Psychology at Georgia State University, is a visual artist based in Atlanta, Georgia. Her current projects include work in the Costa Chica of southern Mexico where people of African descent live, and includes documentation of their daily lives and African rooted traditions. She has also worked in Cuba, Peru, Honduras, and Guatemala. Her work was commissioned by the Atlanta Airport Art Project and is hanging in the International Terminal at the present time. Contact her at [michaelspotts@mindspring.com](mailto:michaelspotts@mindspring.com).