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Indian Family Renews a Tradition

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GUARERO, Venezuela—Family members gather around the tomb as the bones of a cherished son are gently removed and washed with whiskey and champagne. After two days of hard drinking and prayer, the remains are put back into the tomb to join ancestors.

For generations beyond remembering, the Wayuu Indians of northern Colombia and Venezuela have celebrated this ancient rite - the reburial of the dead. But the ritual, which has evolved to include liquor and a Catholic Mass, is fading from their dry, wind-swept land as most of the 300,000-member Wayuu nation take on the Western ways of modern society.

Anthropologists say the Wayuu hold the ceremony to prevent the souls of the dead from having to eternally wander the Earth. But the members of the Paz clan had trouble explaining the tradition when they gathered in this desert town near Venezuela's border with Colombia to rebury one of their own.

Many family members said the ceremony - performed for a 29-year-old father of four who was murdered nine years ago - was their last.

"Most of us are professionals now," explained Anelsy Paz, a sister of the dead man. "I think this is the last time."

NO NAME

Tradition prohibits mentioning the name of the deceased once his or her body is exhumed.

The ceremony began before dawn, because the old women who guard the traditions say the dead don't like daylight. But it took hours for all the relatives to arrive, and the tomb wasn't opened until well after sunrise, after the last four-wheel-drive vehicle pulled into the cemetery.

A cousin, a dental hygienist from Maracaibo, was chosen to clean the bones. She began by downing a shot of whiskey, and then another.

"I have to be drunk. That's not new - that's traditional, the way they always did it," Floriana Paz said, lifting a blue paper surgical mask with a latex-gloved hand so she could swig her whiskey.

The women, many wearing long, loose dresses called mantas, others in tight jeans and low-cut blouses, gathered around as Floriana went to work.

The men hung back, some wearing cowboy hats, with pistols tucked into their belts, standard equipment in the lawless frontier region. They pulled bottles of whiskey from a pickup truck to keep the liquor flowing.

As the casket was pulled out of the tomb, the dead man's mother wept, covering her face with a scarf. The remains were sprinkled with whiskey and champagne, the drinks he had enjoyed.

Floriana Paz carefully stripped the remaining flesh from each bone, though she was a bit vague on the meaning of the ritual.

"It's a beautiful tradition," she said. "But we're very Westernized; I was married to an American. We don't live this way anymore."

When she finished the cleaning,

the bones were packed into a marble box. The older women, many in their 70s and 80s with wrinkles carved in suntanned faces, gathered around the box for what the Wayuu call the "Second Sob." Weeping in a ritualized singsong, they covered their faces with towels, washcloths and scarves.

Children scooted in and out of the group, laughing and playing, oblivious to the ancient ritual.

The marble box was taken to the family ranch and placed on a flower-strewn altar in a thatch-roofed pavilion. A Catholic priest came to perform Mass.

TWO-DAY FEAST

Some 400 friends and relatives turned out for the two-day feast at the ranch. Twenty women cooked regional specialties, including stewed goat and mutton, homemade cheese, plantains and yucca, and a dish made from cow's blood. Out of respect for the dead, there was no music, but the gathering was kept well lubricated with 40 cases of whiskey and plentiful beer.

Anelsy Paz, the dead man's sister, spent three months preparing for the gathering, mostly out of respect for her ailing 72-year-old mother, Dionisia Paz.

"I wanted to do this before I died," the older woman said. "My daughters wouldn't have done it after I go. This is over now."