

ALL ARE PAGANS... EXCEPT US

We walk into the Amazon jungle village. Shocked to see skulls of various animals hanging on the poles we are convinced these must be elements of some demonic ritual. "What are these for?" we quietly ask the veteran missionary. "Oh they are just trophies of animals they have killed for meat from time to time."

I wonder why this should appear so strange and suspicious to me. We never question the USA hunters' practice of mounting trophy animal heads, fish, or birds on their walls.

The Yanomami girl takes a thorn and pierces her cheeks with several holes. She works a small thread through them until holes are formed. Small sticks about 3" long and 1/8" in diameter are worn in the holes. Ear lobes are pierced and the holes are gradually increased. A piece of bamboo with bird feathers or flowers stuck into each end is worn in the ear. Crude paint is smeared in a set pattern of stripes on her face.

The conservative Westerner pierces her ears and places metal objects in the holes. One less conservative pierces his/her ears, eyebrows, nose, tongue, or "belly button" and puts rings or studs in the holes. Both conservative and liberal carry on an elaborate morning ritual in which paint and powder are applied in colored layers on the face.

Graves of departed loved ones in China are decorated with bowls of food: fruits, rice, cakes. Westerners are puzzled at this impractical waste of food upon spirits who can not eat. At the same time, we do not recognize the incongruity of placing flowers before nostrils with no breath and eyes that can not see. A wiseacre Western tourist asked a Chinese man, "When are your relatives going to eat that food? The Chinese answered, "The same time yours smell the flowers."

All Souls Day in the Philippines is a reflective, religious, and festive time. Families gather at the cemetery. Relatives come from afar. Food is brought and meals are eaten there. Outside the gates of the cemeteries, street vendors hawk flowers, candles, and food.

In America almost every cemetery has a "Decoration Day"—especially in the South. In rural areas, the church or community cemetery is the focal point. Relatives meet. Picnic lunches are shared. Memories are relived. Plastic flowers bought at the local Saturday flea market are placed on the graves. The annual collection of funds to keep the cemetery free of weeds is taken.