Some wear glasses. Others have sombreros and a cigar. These are Bolivia’s “natitas”—human skulls with miracle-working powers. On Wednesday thousands of people and their skulls converged on La Paz’s oldest cemetery as part of a pre-Hispanic tradition. Some arrived with music bands or mariachis, others with food and drink. The skulls are usually adorned with sombreros, wool hats, or crowns made from flowers or cloth, while some worshippers fill the skulls’ eye cavities with cotton.

They light candles and recite prayers in the belief the skulls possess special powers. According to indigenous Andean tradition, skulls offer protection to believers, ensuring health and prosperity. “We have had about 10,000 visitors and around 700 ‘natitas’ were on display,” cemetery official Ariel Conitzer said. In Bolivia and other parts of Latin America, “nato” refers to a snubbed nose, like those of the skulls. Worshippers arrived early to pay tribute in the passages of the graveyard which dates from 1826, one year after the republic’s establishment. According to authorities, many of the skulls were extracted from graves or forgotten tombs in the same cemetery. Others have been passed down through the generations, and are normally kept at home inside an urn. “Here’s Andrea, Alex, Julia,” a man tells the ATB TV channel, showing a box with three skulls wearing colorful cold-weather hats and sunglasses. “They take care of us, they have a little room in the house.” The festival takes place eight days after the start of the Catholic “All Saints” celebration, and events are carried out in numerous cemeteries across the country.—AFP