



SANTA MUERTE SYNCRETISM

by Arturo Munoz

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About Tribal Analysis Center

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Santa Muerte (Saint Death) is a female “saint” in the form of a skeleton widely seen in Mexico as the patron saint of drug traffickers and criminals. No one knows when this cult originated - it may go back to the Colonial Period - but in the past two decades it has become increasingly visible and popular. The veneration of Santa Muerte is no longer limited to the criminal underworld; her worship has now expanded through the general population, particularly among poorer classes, or those at the margins of the law, such as prostitutes, thieves, and illegal immigrants. Certain *barrios* (neighborhoods) in Mexico City, notably Tepito, have become well known centers of Santa Muerte worship, with sidewalk shrines containing the skeletal figure, sometimes dressed ostentatiously as a bride, or wearing other ornate dresses, or covered more simply in a long cloak.¹ Often she appears carrying a scythe, evoking the grim reaper image.² Some analysts refer to Santa Muerte as the third most popular saint in Mexico today, after the Virgin of Guadalupe and San Judas. She attracts the same type of people who pray to the statue of Jesús Malverde, a Mexican bandit killed in 1909 in Sinaloa who has since become a folkloric saint of the downtrodden.³

Santa Muerte roadside shrines have been built along roads known to be smuggling routes, to help protect drug traffickers from the authorities, and from each other, as they carry their dangerous cargo northward. During an extensive counternarcotics campaign along the northern border, the Mexican military dismantled more than forty Santa Muerte shrines built along smuggling routes. In several well-publicized seizures of estates belonging to drug lords, Santa Muerte chapels or shrines have been found. Santa Muerte tattoos are etched on the bodies of many criminals

1. Reputed to be the most dangerous *barrio* in Mexico City, Tepito has been continuously inhabited since before the Aztecs arrived. Originally it was fishing village known as Teocultepiton, denoting the small temple built there (vestiges can still be seen in the Plaza Fray Bartolomé de las Casas). Conquered by the Aztecs, the village became absorbed into their great capital city, Tenochitlán, which would later become Mexico City. Even during the days of the Aztec empire, the authorities considered Tepito to be lower class and marginal; its residents reportedly were prohibited from selling goods in the central market of Tlatelolco. According to various accounts, Tepito developed an outlaw reputation during the Spanish Colonial Period and maintained it after Independence. Presently known as the “*barrio bravo*” (brave *barrio*), Tepito is notorious not only for its criminal element, but also for its thriving underground economy selling smuggled and counterfeit goods in numerous small stalls. An estimated 40 gangs operate in the *barrio* dedicated to kidnappings, car theft, and armed robberies. Prostitution is common as are illegal arms and drug sales. Santa Muerte is considered by many of the 70,000 residents to be the patron saint, with 20 shrines set up to honor her throughout the community. See “¿Cuáles son los orígenes de Tepito?” at <http://criteriohidalgo.com/notas.asp?id=34837>; also see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tepito>; <http://www.rnw.nl/espanol/article/m%C3%A9xico-el-terror-en-tepito>; <http://www.chilango.com/ciudad/nota/2013/06/05/10-consejos-para-ir-a-tepito-y-no-morir-en-el-intento>; <http://hurbanistorias.blogspot.com/2007/02/tepito-por-dentro.html>
2. See Santa Muerte photographs at http://content.time.com/time/photogallery/0,29307,1676932_1474290,00.html and <http://www.jansochor.com/photo-essay/santa-muerte-mexico.html>
3. “Culto de Jesús Malverde,” at <http://www2.uacj.mx/UEHS/Mapa/CultodeJesus.htm>

and *sicarios* (paid assassins). However, most worship of Santa Muerte is more prosaic, following the pattern of folkloric Catholic saint worship, to include carrying the statue in street processions. As with other Catholic saints, her devotees burn candles to her and bring her flowers and money. More in keeping with indigenous traditions, they also bring tobacco, food and alcoholic drinks as offerings, and blow smoke on her with their mouths, a clear manifestation of native shamanic practice.⁴ In Tepito, small amounts of heroin and cocaine reportedly are placed by her statue.⁵

Moreover, it appears that the growing numbers of people turning to the worship of Santa Muerte are not asking for success in criminal ventures. In his excellent review of the Santa Muerte cult, Kevin Freese catalogued the main types of favors requested. Most of them are what prayers to “normal” saints would ask for; money, love, *amarres* (spells to keep lovers and spouses faithful), commercial success, protection of home, children, business or vehicle, help for those in prison, and a spell to ward off the Evil Eye.⁶ Although it is referred to in Spanish as a *culto*, Santa Muerte has no formal organization or leadership, despite various self-proclaimed “priests” who have appeared. It is better understood as a form of grass roots *santería* (saint worship) emerging spontaneously from popular culture.

The Catholic Church officially condemns the veneration of Santa Muerte. The President of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, declared that this cult is a blasphemous “degeneration of religion”. He observed that “religion celebrates life, but here you have death,” adding that, “it’s not religion just because it’s dressed up like religion; it’s a blasphemy against religion.” The cardinal also referred to the fact that the cult is particularly popular among members of Mexico’s drug cartels and he accused “criminals” of invoking it. “The mafia, drug trafficking and organized crime don’t have a religious aspect and have nothing to do with religion, even if they use the image of Santa Muerte,” he emphasized.⁷ Therefore, in his mind, it is imperative to send out a clear message against this cult to the younger generation.

It is relevant to note that, in the beginning, some clerics also considered blasphemous the worship of the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s patron saint and by far its most popular religious figure. This vision of the Virgin Mary appeared to the Christianized Indian, Juan Diego, in 1531, ten years after the Spanish conquest. She spoke to him in the Aztec language, Náhuatl, appearing on the hill at Tepeyac, where the temple of Tonantzin had stood before it was destroyed by the *conquistadores*.⁸ Tonantzin, whose name meant “our mother,” was the Aztec goddess of fertil-

4. In the various photographs on the internet showing devotees blowing smoke on Santa Muerte statues, it is unclear whether these are ordinary worshippers or *curanderos* (traditional herbal healers) or *brujos* (literally witches, but more accurately translated as shamans who communicate with the spirits).

5. “Tepito por dentro,” at <http://hurbanistorias.blogspot.com/2007/02/tepito-por-dentro.html>

6. Freese, Kevin, “The Death Cult of the Drug Lords Mexico’s Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the Dispossessed,” at <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Santa-Muerte/santa-muerte.htm>

7. “Vatican declares Mexican Death Saint blasphemous.” at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-22462181>

8. At the time of the conquest and the immediate post-conquest period, the Aztecs usually referred to themselves as *Mexica*. This is the origin of the name Mexico. Bernal Díaz del Castillo’s eyewitness account of the conquest usually referred to them in Spanish as Mexicans (*mejicanos*). The term Aztec was popularized by 19th century authors,

ity of the land, and fertility of women. She also controlled the life cycle of all humans and thus knew when each person would be born and die. Moreover, she was the mother of the culture god, Quetzalcoatl, the famed Plumed Serpent who brought higher civilization to the native people of the Mexican heartland. Because of this, she was sometimes referred to as the mother of the gods. Like many pre-Hispanic deities, she appeared under different forms, to include Coatlicue, the Lady with the Serpent Skirt. This statue showed her wearing a skirt of snakes, while her head is depicted as a double headed serpent, recalling the popular Quetzalcoatl theme. On her back she wore a human skull evidently emblematic of her role in determining the moment of death. She was also depicted in other statues simply as an Indian woman wearing traditional clothes and headdress.

According to legend, the Virgin of Guadalupe instructed Juan to go to the Spanish Archbishop of Mexico City and reveal her divine mandate to build a church on the spot where she had appeared. Initially the Archbishop was incredulous and sent the poor Indian away, asking for proof of the apparition. When Juan returned with roses provided by the Virgin, collected in his serape, the Archbishop was stunned to see her miraculous image painted on this humble cloak as he unfolded it. The Archbishop ordered that a magnificent church be built where the Virgin requested. Juan's serape is displayed today in the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Indian woman painted on it is considered a true representation of the Mother of Christ.⁹ (A Virgin of Guadalupe had existed in Extremadura, Spain, since the 12th century, but she looked nothing like the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe and seemed to have no connection other than providing a Spanish name for a vision conjured up by Indians.)¹⁰

Not all Spanish clerics accepted the cult of the Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, which immediately took hold and spread throughout Mexico. Some viewed it as idolatry in disguise, the pagan worship of Tonantzin in the guise of a Christian Virgin, both referred to as the "mother" of their worshippers, and both associated with the moon (a crescent moon appears under the feet of the Virgin of Guadalupe.) Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, writing 50 years after the Spanish conquest, observed: "Now that the Church of Our Lady of Guadalupe has been built there, they call her Tonantzin too...The term refers... to that ancient Tonantzin and this state of affairs should be remedied, because the proper name of the Mother of God is not Tonantzin...it seems a satanic device to mask idolatry...and they come from far away to visit that Tonantzin, as much as before; a devotion which is also suspect because there are many churches of Our Lady everywhere and they do not go to them..."¹¹ In the 17th century, the mixture of paganism and Christianity was still much in evidence. Fray Jacinto de la Serna complained that the popular pilgrimages to the shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe in reality were for the wicked intent of worshipping the pagan "goddess, and not the Most Holy Virgin, or both together."¹²

particularly in William Prescott's 1843 English language history of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Today the term Aztec is used in a broad manner not only encompassing the true *Mexica* but also native people who in pre-Hispanic times were not considered as *Mexica*, though they did belong to the general civilization that the *Mexica* came to dominate. See <http://archaeology.about.com/od/mameterms/a/Mexica.htm>

9. See Virgin of Guadalupe images at <http://www.sancta.org/gallery/>

10. See <http://cofrades.pasionensevilla.tv/profiles/blogs/kkhkhj>

11. http://faculty.smu.edu/rkemper/anth_3311/Wolf_Virgin_of_Guadalupe.pdf

12. Ibid.

The mixture of indigenous and Spanish religious beliefs repudiated by Sahagún is defined in anthropology as syncretism or fusion, “blending traits from two different cultures to form a new trait.”¹³ Based on the ancient Greek word for “binding together” syncretism “is the process of mingling different philosophies, religions or traditions of belief and practice, resulting in hybrid forms...for example Sikhism, in which Guruk Nanak combined elements from Hinduism and Islam with his own powerful vision...Syncretism can be seen as a process of osmosis, such as occurred in the Mediterranean civilization of the Hellenistic or Roman periods, or as a more formal event, such as the establishment of the syncretic churches in colonial Africa, a fusion of Christian and indigenous traditions.”¹⁴ Vestiges of pagan beliefs and practices are evident in both Christianity and Islam. Pagans held annual celebrations during the Easter season for millennia before the resurrection of Christ. Mecca was a center of polytheistic pilgrimage, centered on the numerous idols housed in the sacred Kaba compound, centuries before the prophet Mohammed converted it into a destination for monotheistic pilgrimage. Moreover, syncretism involves not only outward manifestations as highlighted in pilgrimages and public rituals, but also privately-held attitudes, beliefs, and values

In the Mexico City *barrio* of Tepito, the church of the Immaculate Conception plays a syncretic dual function as a place of religious worship and also the site of an annual ethnic nationalist commemoration. The church is built on the spot where, according to legend, the last Aztec emperor, the heroic Cuauhtémoc, was captured by the Spaniards. In the Náhuatl language, the locale is known as Tequipeuhcan, “the place where slavery began,” as attested by a plaque above the sidewalk. Every 13 August, Tepiteños come to the church to hold a ceremony in commemoration of Cuauhtémoc’s defeat. Their ancestors put up ferocious resistance to the *conquistadores* and Tepiteños are proud that their *barrio* is where Cuauhtémoc made his last stand. They believe that he proclaimed his final exhortation to continue fighting the invaders on the spot where today Tenochtitlán and Constanca streets cross, in front of the church.¹⁵

13. <http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/anth370/gloss.html#S>; commonly described as “the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.” http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/syncretism

14. <http://www.encyclopedia69.com/eng/d/syncretism/syncretism.htm>

15. “Tepito: la historia de un barrio donde es caro el “impuesto a la ingenuidad” at <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2007/03/16/index.php?section=capital&article=041n1cap>; also see http://www.elporvenir.com.mx/notas.asp?nota_id=101023; a rehabilitation program for drug addicts in Tepito features learning and performing ancient Aztec dances, because it helps them “develop a sense of identity and belonging.” “Tepito tiene su Tenochtitlán,” at <http://www.eluniversaldf.mx/home/nota32002.html> and “La otra cara de Tepito,” at <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2013/782923.html>;

Much of the anthropological literature on syncretism has focused on cultural change or acculturation in the context of foreign colonizers imposing themselves on a subordinate native society, so that there is an inherent context of inequality between the two cultures involved in the interaction. However, it is possible for syncretism to take place between equals. Moreover, past anthropological research on syncretism has been criticized as being too static in outlook, positing syncretism as something that happens in the past and consolidates. Abundant evidence exists that the syncretic process continuously evolves, adapting to changing conditions, creating new forms of fusion.

In Mexico, the cult of Santa Muerte is a good example of continuously evolving syncretism. Icons and statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe are now appearing with a skeleton replacing the Indian woman, but clothed in the same dress, hands folded in the same manner and surrounded by the same traditional imagery. Likewise, popular tattoos of the Virgin of Guadalupe now feature the Santa Muerte skeleton in the guise of the traditional saint. No statistics are available to compare the number of traditional representations of the Virgin with the new Santa Muerte version, but the traditional image obviously still predominates, despite the growing popularity of the blasphemous version.

The heresy of Santa Muerte evidently meets psychological needs that the traditional Catholic faith cannot satisfy. It fills a spiritual void for individuals alienated from the dominant society and its discredited religious norms. In their planning to commit acts considered morally wrong, in order to get ahead or simply survive, these disenfranchised individuals cannot pray to the Virgin Mary, or to Jesus Christ, or any of the Christian saints for success. In contrast, Santa Muerte is amoral and has developed a reputation for answering the prayers of her worshippers, even if they ask for success in committing an evil act. At the same time, protection from evil-doers is more likely to come from a fearsome-looking skeleton than a beatific personage who can only do good.

This idea of praying to evil to be protected from evil comes from an ancient mindset often associated with polytheism or animism. For instance, in tribal, animist belief systems, every disease or every predatory animal that can cause harm usually is thought to have its own titular or ruling spirit, like the Lord of the Jaguars, or similarly the Lord of Fever. To protect oneself from disease and other harm, it is best to pray to that harmful titular spirit, not some do-gooder spirit lacking demonstrable power to prevent evil. Thus, among the Emberá Indians to this day, shamans treating snake bite quickly seek to placate the titular snake spirit and entreat him not to let the poison take effect.¹⁶ They would consider it useless to pray to the Virgin Mary. In this sense, Santa Muerte, despite its outward trappings of folkloric Catholic saint-worship, on a deeper level is an atavistic return to an indigenous belief system ostensibly suppressed centuries ago by forced conversion to Catholicism.

Although the images of Santa Muerte as the Virgin of Guadalupe/Tonantzin illustrate syncretism, it is probably more accurate to associate this cult with the Aztec goddess of death, Mictecacihuatl. Known as the “Keeper of Bones,” she ruled the underworld alongside her husband,

16. Munoz, Arturo “Handling Hungry Spirits: Shamanic Rituals of the Embera,” *Shaman’s Drum*, 43 (Fall 1996): 36-48.

Mictlantecuhtli, and was usually depicted as a skeletal figure, sometimes devouring humans. That depiction coincides with certain animist beliefs still held today, in which death occurs when an ill-intentioned spirit devours a human soul. Aztec priests sacrificing humans to Mictecacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli often flayed their victims. The festivals of the dead associated with Mictecacihuatl continued in syncretic mode during the Colonial Period, developing ultimately into the contemporaneous Day of the Dead celebrations held during the Christian All Saints Day (Halloween) period. These activities include making candies and pastries in the shape of skulls and skeletons for children to eat, mounting ornate floral displays, and holding processions with skeletal figures representing people from all walks of life.

A genre of art depicting Mexicans as Day of the Dead skeletons evolved over the centuries, epitomized by the late 19th century artist, José Guadalupe Posada, whose widely reprinted drawings of a female skeleton called La Catrina perhaps presaged the contemporary popularity of the Santa Muerte icon. Posada embraced the 1910 Revolution; his early drawings of Mexico's rich and powerful as skeletons could be considered as a ritual of rebellion. Today, the Day of the Dead folklore continues to reinforce the fatalistic concept that all humans are destined to die and that everyone is equal in death. However, the occasion is not somber; on the contrary, it is a fiesta. Entire families visit cemeteries in the evening to enjoy big picnics by the tombs of their loved ones. By bringing food, drink and flowers to the dead, they are communicating in a serene manner with their ancestors much as the Aztecs did, but under the guise of a Christian religious holiday.¹⁷

Unlike Santa Muerte, the dead on this occasion do not do favors for the living. The varied layers of meaning of the Day of the Dead festival are different from Santa Muerte worship, even if the skeletal images are similar. Nonetheless, the tradition of personifying death and interacting with the dead probably did influence the development of the Santa Muerte cult. The existence of a skeletal female deity, who ruled the underworld and possessed the power to answer prayers, may be the basis of Santa Muerte, even though most of her modern devotees most likely never heard of Mictecacihuatl.

Non-indigenous elements in the development of Santa Muerte should not be overlooked, particularly since three centuries of European colonization changed the indigenous culture in fundamental ways. Europe had its own death cult that took root during the plague and subsequent periods of war, disease and famine periodically ravaging European populations. Skeletal figures were prominent in art, religion and folklore, giving rise to one of the most popular manifestations of Santa Muerte, the grim reaper holding the scythe to harvest human souls. This is a very popular theme on the tattoos that Mexican criminals and *sicarios* wear on their arms and bodies. However, no one knows whether the present day worship

17. Contemporary Day of the Dead photographs show strong indigenous influence, as well as wide participation by non-Indians at <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/day-dead-2013-gallery-1.1504837#pmSlide=15>; <http://news.yahoo.com/ap-photos-latin-americas-day-dead-232459684.html>;
<http://darkroom.baltimoresun.com/2012/11/50-pictures-for-the-day-of-the-dead/#PhotoSwipe1384978253526>

of Santa Muerte is more influenced by the medieval European death figure or by Mictecacihuatl and the Day of the Dead tradition. Both probably are at play, reinforcing each other.

Moreover, some observers speculate that modern Mexican *sicarios* who make a public display of their worship for Santa Muerte are also influenced by the internet and the videos posted by Muslim radicals beheading their enemies. It may be that the current criminal craze for beheading victims in Mexico was spawned in part by new age terrorists from the Middle East. In this scenario, Mexican *sicarios* saw beheading videos on the internet and thought it was a marvelous idea, especially in light of increasingly deadly competition and rivalries among themselves. The same anxieties that fostered the contemporary rise of Santa Muerte, likely also fostered public displays of ferocity as a means of survival.

Whatever their inspiration may be for the unprecedented barbarity with which Mexican criminals today torture, murder and mutilate their victims, including flaying their faces, it is evident that many of them turn to Santa Muerte for a sense of supernatural protection. She does not call for barbaric behavior, but she does not condemn it or discourage it either. She is amoral as were most of the Aztec gods. For example, the rain god Tlaloc did not consider whether or not his worshippers adhered to good moral standards. He rewarded those who pleased him by making proper sacrifices, irrespective of their behavior on earth. Incidentally, he liked to have children burned alive in large braziers before his idol because their tears were like rain drops. This is the product of a pre-modern mind, to which Santa Muerte beckons a return.

Last year, police in the northern state of Sonora arrested eight people in Nacozari for killing two kidnapped ten year old boys and a woman in ritual sacrifices as an offering to Santa Muerte. The murderers were all members of the same family, led by the matriarch, photographed after her arrest holding a Santa Muerte icon. She instructed her relatives to slash the victims with a knife and an axe to collect their blood, which was then offered to a statue of Santa Muerte.¹⁸ Investigators have stated that the culprits all admitted to being fanatic followers of Santa Muerte and that she had promised to protect them and provide them with money in exchange for human blood.¹⁹ As it stands now, this case of human sacrifice is a glaring anomaly, but there is certain logic to it.

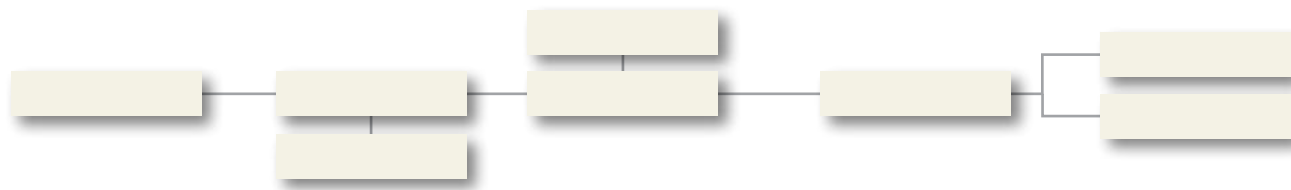
18. "Familia mexicana hacía sacrificios humanos en honor a la Santa Muerte," 30 March 2012 at <http://noticias.univision.com/mexico/noticias/article/2012-03-30/familia-mexicana-hacia-sacrificios-humanos#axzz219UzaxC4>;"Arrestan en México a 8 seguidores de la Santa Muerte por sacrificios humanos", 2 April 2012 at <http://pijamasurf.com/2012/04/arrestan-en-mexico-a-8-seguidores-de-la-santa-muerte-por-sacrificios-humanos/>

19. "Mexico Santa Muerte Murders: Nacozari 'Death Saint' Cult Sacrifices Lead Police To Investigate Family," 1 April 2012 at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/01/mexico-santa-muerte-murders-family-investigated-cult-killings_n_1395176.html

TRIBAL ANALYSIS CENTER

Traditional anthropological research conducted among tribes inhabiting remote areas where insurgents and criminals operate has become increasingly difficult to implement. Studies carried out among people living in small-scale societies now are nearly impossible due to the physical dangers associated with the civil and religious unrest found in those areas. Swat, for example, has become so dangerous that Frederick Barth's studies only could be repeated at the risk of the investigator's life. Similar research is not feasible among Burma's Rohingya tribes located on both sides of the border with Bangladesh, as well as with the Pashtuns in Afghanistan's interior and within Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where even Pakistan's army enters with reluctance.

Given the difficulties of conducting direct fieldwork in conflictive areas, the Tribal Analysis Center utilizes an indirect approach. Using multidisciplinary research, we seek to collect and analyze data obtained from a wide variety of sources, both current and historical. In the absence of new ethnographic fieldwork to update our base of knowledge, the Tribal Analysis Center compiles and summarizes existing research and documents on tribal societies, combining this material with contemporary press reports and articles. We assume that much can be gleaned from well-informed observers who are not anthropologists, ranging from journalists and travelers to government officials.



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