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Not Just a Narcosaint: Santa Muerte as Matron Saint of the Mexican Drug War

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Abstract
Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint who personifies death. Santa Muerte has been depicted as a narcosaint, that is to say a saint propitiated only by those who belong to drug cartels, in particular by the Mexican State. As a consequence, the Mexican army, under orders from the Mexican State, has obliterated thousands of shrines dedicated to the folk saint across the country. However, as we evince, the popular figure has followers in all camps involved in the drug war. Both narcos and those who fight them, prisoners and prison guards, venerate the folk saint, turning to her for spiritual favours, protection and even to predict death. This diverse group of people, although divided by their differing positions in the drug war, turns to her for parallel reasons, to explain, predict and control events. As such, Santa Muerte rather than being a narcosaint should be considered the Matron Saint of the Drug War.

Keywords Santa Muerte · Drug war · Mexico · Death · Prison

Religious Enemy Number One

In March 2009, the Mexican army obliterated approximately forty Santa Muerte shrines on the Mexican border with California and Texas in a desperate bid to expunge the Skeleton Saint's presence. This futile act that failed to extirpate drug-related crimes evinces yet again how the Mexican government has repeatedly lashed out at the folk saint associating her with the drug cartels. Albeit, as we demonstrate, this is an

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erroneous association for the Powerful Lady (*la Dama Poderosa*, one of her myriad monikers) who is venerated by all parties involved in the drug war. Nevertheless, the desperation of the Mexican government is understandable given the staggering death toll of the drug war. In 2016, 23,000 homicides were reported whilst figures shot up in 2017, with the government's interior ministry reporting 29,168 murders. The Justice in Mexico project's 2017 report on drug cartel–related violence estimated that half to a third of all deaths recorded are attributable to organised crime killings.

In the face of such atrocities, the Mexican government opted to attack the inanimate statues and shrines of Santa Muerte, which at least do not fight back. The attack was a symbolic one, on what the state perceives as 'narcoculture'. Of course, as scholars of religion, we recognise that all cultures consist of 'contested codes and representations' (Clifford and Marcus 1986) and that religious meanings, beliefs and practices fluctuate contextually according to audience and agenda. Accordingly, Santa Muerte is depicted and propitiated in different ways at different times by diverse devotees, who range from the drug lords who sacrifice humans to their 'cabrona' ('bad ass', another common sobriquet for the saint) to the policemen who light white and black votives to their 'madre' (mother) for spiritual armament against the bullets of those same drug lords. Nevertheless, the Mexican state has pigeon holed the Skeleton Saint into one immutable image. However, all parties use Santa Muerte to explain, predict and control events in their lives as we will evince.

We demonstrate in this article how far from purely being a narcosaint, that Santa Muerte has appeal across a cross section of the Mexican populace involved in the drug war, not only the *narcotraficantes* but also among those who lay their lives on the line to battle them. We argue that an analysis of the popularity of Santa Muerte, the female folk saint of death, to examine why this is the case, reveals the realities of all the camps involved in the drug war. All reside in a liminal state of uncertainty between life and death, as no matter which side of the law you are on, the threat of demise is always imminent.

Anthropologists posit that, since time long past, human beings have turned to religion to do three things: explain, predict and control elements within their lives (see, for example, Horton 1960, 1967). As Geertz (1973) has suggested, human beings seek to create order through religion so that they can cope with the chaos of experience, existence or even death. Langer states that 'man cannot deal with chaos. Because his characteristic function and highest asset is conception, his greatest fright is to meet what he cannot construe' (Langer 2009, p. 287). It is for this reason that to deal with such chaos, humans utilise religion to explain situations, predict events and carry out rituals in an attempt to control the future, their fortunes and the fates of others.

Humans through religious and/or magical reasoning fashion a unique philosophy of cause and effect by which to comprehend and explain events, as Evans-Pritchard (1976) famously argued in his renowned work on witchcraft among the Azande, whom he argued used the latter to elucidate uncanny misfortunes. In Mexico, given the chaos of violence, the constant threat of demise and the ubiquity of *mala muerte* (bad death), many resort to supernatural reasoning to explain the incomprehensibilities of such chaos in the post-colony. Devotees frequently refer to the actions of Santa Muerte as a metaphysics of causation to explicate the otherwise apparently inexplicable reasons for why someone seemingly miraculously dodged death, and yet another person met it head on.

Religion has also long been used to predict events. For Santa Muerte devotees, dreams or other symbologies appear to provide portents. Predictions are said to allow the faithful to foresee the future. Humans have long sought not only to predict events but also to control and influence them, as Malinowski long ago pointed out in reference to the Trobriand Islanders who took magical measures to ensure safety whilst fishing on the high seas and avoid death (Malinowski 1954).

Drug dealers and those whose job it is to fight them have both turned to Santa Muerte to explain, predict and control their circumstances. By worshipping the Skeleton Saint, as she is often called, devotees on both sides of the law explain seemingly miraculous events and also attempt to control their circumstances, by delaying death and ensuring that they will live to see another day. As Horton states, in prayer 'Man proposes', but it is 'God who disposes' or, in this case, Santa Muerte, by delivering or not the miracles the faithful request (Horton 1960, p. 210). If Santa Muerte does not acquiesce then, as we will see, explanations are proffered that devotees were not sufficiently dedicated, according to Santa Muerte metaphysics of causation. In toto, veneration of Santa Muerte reflects the ubiquitous precarity of life in the post-colony of Mexico and the ever-imminent possibility of a violent passing.

The research was multisited and conducted over the space of 10 years across Mexico in a wide range of states, from Michoacán to Oaxaca, as well as in Guatemala and numerous cities in the USA, from New York to Los Angeles. It resulted in the first and only academic book on Santa Muerte in English. However, further to the author of the book meeting an anthropologist during an academic conference, who had also spent time in Mexico studying Santa Muerte, we decided to collaborate and conjoin our research efforts. We agreed on the need to explore and expand certain arguments together, to build more deeply on themes only touched on in the book. We interviewed, both formally and informally, a wide range of Santa Muerte devotees as well as skeptics, ranging from prison cell wardens to policemen to sicarios. We also conducted participant observation on both sides of the border. Most of our interviews were in person, but we also conducted research online, interviewing devotees in particular on Facebook where there are now over one thousand Santa Muerte groups with tens of thousands of members. By collecting interviews and research data, we were able to conclude that, as we suggest in this article, Santa Muerte is matroness of the Mexican drug war, not just for narcos but also for all and sundry.

We will begin with a brief definition of Santa Muerte, situating her within the larger spiritual landscape of folk religion. Following this, we will address our methodology and theoretical stance. We will then examine the folk saint's importance within the penal system, to the drug war as a whole, and finally address the State's perspective before concluding.

Death as a Mexican Folk Saint

Before delving into her role as matroness of the Mexican drug war, a definition of the controversial Saint Death is crucial. Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint who personifies death. Whether as a polyresin statuette, depicted on a votive candle, on an incense pack or on a gold medallion, she is represented as a Grim Reapress wielding the same scythe and donning a shroud similar to her European male forebear (Lomnitz

2006, p. 148). In juxtaposition to Catholic saints, who have been canonised by the Church, folk saints are spirits of the demised who have not garnered official recognition but are deemed holy for their miracle-working powers by the local populace. As Graziano points out, 'the world of folk saint devotion … is one in which supernatural beings … are a prominent presence in everyday life. They intermingle with humans and have causal influence—magical and miraculous' (Graziano 2006, p. 6).

In Mexico and Latin America in general, folk saints, such as Jesús Malverde, Maximón, Niño Fidencio and San La Muerte (the Argentine counterpart of Santa Muerte), are the objects of extensive veneration and often favoured above Catholic saints (Graziano 2006). Whilst God may appear as a *deus otiosus*, distant and uninvolved, folk saints, unlike Catholic ones, lived out their lives on Latin American soil making them familiar faces among the often less relatable pantheon of official saints. Due to a mythology that is built upon cultural propinquity, they are far more easy to turn to and propitiate as their realities seem intertwined with those of their devotees (see Kohut and Meyers 1988).

These folk saints tend to derive from what Klapp (1954) has described as archetypal folk heroes; idealised personages with admired character traits and roles, such as defender of justice, or benefactor, or healer; and have often met a violent and, possibly, unjust death. They are often controversial figures, such as Jesús Malverde. He is a Sinaloan folk saint. Malverde derives from a legendary felon known as *el bandido generoso*, the generous bandit, said to have existed in the 1870s (Esquivel 2015; Lopez Sanchez 1996). Akin to Robin Hood, he was seen as a heroic outlaw who stole from the rich and distributed the plunder to the poor. Upon his ostensible hanging at the hands of the authorities, he became a local miracle worker and a folk saint. Juan Soldado is another highly controversial character who became a folk saint. He was a private in the Mexican military. He was convicted of the rape and murderer of an eight-year old girl. Although sentenced to death, locals believed him to be innocent and the scapegoat of the real felon, a high-ranking military official. Soldado's gravestone, after his demise, was said to have produced supernatural miracles for those who prayed over it (Vanderwood 2004). Whether Malverde, Soldado or other folk saints derived from local tales, these troubled characters appeal to the marginalised because they can relate to their difficult ordeals (Perrée 2014, p. 5), but furthermore, they can appeal to them to attempt to control their own uncertain futures; given the tragedy inherent to their mythemes, Mexicans imagine such saints would be compassionate towards their ordeals, especially as compared to official canonised saints whose lives have very little bearing on Mexican realities (Ortiz and Davis 2011).

There are often jocular appellations for such folk saints. Santa Muerte, for example, is known as *Hermana Blanca* (White Sister), la *Madrina* (the Godmother) and *Madre* for Santa Muerte. Such terms reveal the close, familial rapport there is between worshipers and their saint. Kristensen calls the saint a 'female family friend' who is adopted '… with all the love, anger, loyalty, betrayal and disappointment that this emotional attachment entails' (Kristensen 2015, p. 545). Folk saints are thus intimately conjoined to their devotees dioscurically by locality and social class, even deemed to be part of the family. Yet Santa Muerte is unique. She diverges from other folk saints, including the skeleton saints of Argentina, San La Muerte, and of Guatemala, Rey Pascual (see Navarrete 1982). For most followers, rather than being the spirit of a deceased Mexican woman, she is the personification of death (Reyes Ruiz 2010).

Nevertheless, her origins in Mexico, and renowned amorality—death is said to judge no one—much like that of Jesús Malverde, entail that she is seen as more relatable to those living on the margins and whose professions may involve questionable acts.

As Perdigón points out, *Santa Muerte* is a symbol of something atavistic that is intimately tied to the entire history of humankind: death (Perdigón Castañeda 2008, p. 57). Death has not only been familiar to all human beings ab ovo; moreover, violent death has become pervasive in Mexico due to the drug war. Overall, there is 'decreasing individual security' and thus veneration of Santa Muerte coincides with the moral economy (Smith 2019, pp. 80–81). It is little wonder that those most intimately involved in this chaotic context constantly seek to defy death, attempting to control circumstances supernaturally and predict possibilities of demise and danger. And when they do appear to have literally dodged the bullet, they commonly utilise supernatural explanations to account for this, as we will evince. The popularity of such folk saints, whether Santa Muerte or Jesús Malverde, should therefore be analysed in terms of the daily realities of their devotees, namely through an exploration of their demanding local realities, and of the way in which humans explain, predict and seek to control the uncertain situations they encounter in such milieu.

Santa Muerte has acquired followers among a motley crew, just as the Skeleton Saint has 'devotees who dedicate themselves to dangerous forms of drug trafficking, she also has devotees who work in the informal sector, struggling daily to overcome adverse social and economic conditions' (Fragoso 2011, p. 13, authors' translation). Nevertheless, as pointed out, the Mexican government has pegged Santa Muerte as solely a narcosaint. Since her veneration is mostly unorganised and informal, only becoming public 17 years ago, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of devotees in Mexico, Central America and the USA. In 2009, David Romo, the founder of the first Santa Muerte church in Mexico City, informed us that circa five million Mexicans venerated the folk saint. He based this figure on followers across both Mexico and the USA who gave him estimates of the size of the cult in their locales.

Devotion to death has mushroomed in the 9 years since Romo's estimate. Considering additional evidence of her popularity, it is feasible to estimate ten to twelve million devotees largely located in Mexico, Central America and the USA (Chesnut 2017). Sales of Santa Muerte goods, whether votives, effigies or holy oils, at the myriad shops (*botanicas* and *tiendas esotéricas*) and market stalls that sell esoteric accoutrements across Mexico, Central America and the USA predominate over those of other folk and Catholic saints.

Across Mexico, from Oaxaca to Michoacán, we interviewed the owners of botanicas who all attested to Santa Muerte paraphernalia outselling that of any other folk or Catholic saint. In fact, in many such shops, the range of votives and other objects for Santa Muerte devotion was much wider. Unlike those for other saints, the Santa Muerte candles offered consisted not only of the simple votive but also included myriad colours of so-called 'gel candles' that were more expensive and more ornate, evincing the demand there is for such products, the willingness of clients to pay for them and their desire to influence their daily lives through Santa Muerte supplication.

The Skeleton Saint's rapid expansion in virtual spaces, especially Facebook, proffers additional evidence of her flourishing following. As of 2018, over one thousand groups, both public and closed, were created by her devotees. Some groups claim over 100,000 members. No other folk saint or saint has acquired

such an online presence. Finally, the monthly worship service, known as the ‘rosary’, at Enriqueta Romero’s renowned shrine in the Mexico City barrio of Tepito, attracted several thousands of devotees until the murder of her husband in 2016 when it was put in abeyance. In November 2018, our informants in Tepito informed us it was re-opened due to popular demand.

Santa Muerte is particularly popular with those whose modus vivendi entails that their lives are in constant peril. The press has fixated on Santa Muerte’s association with, and large following by, members of the Mexican drug cartel who inhabit a hyper-violent cosmos where lives are endangered on a daily basis (Chesnut 2017, p. 7; Roush 2014). These criminals attempt to control the outcomes of their nefarious activities. They petition Santa Muerte for protection from the police and their enemies and for the safe transportation of their drugs from one place to another, as well as appealing to her in imprecations of vengeance directed at enemies. Nevertheless, it is myopic to reduce the folk saint’s popularity to her following of felons. Although Santa Muerte is venerated by members of drug cartels and prisoners incarcerated for drug related, as well as other crimes, who turn to her for a prompt parole, she is also venerated by the prison guards that oversee inmates (Kristensen 2015), as well lawyers and social workers involved in the penal process. As we shall describe, these persons turn to her for protection from the nefarious characters that their work entangles them with, attempting to control their future.

Additionally, the Skeleton Saint is supplicated for spiritual aegis from the drug cartels by members of the law enforcement agencies, such as policemen or soldiers whose jobs necessitate putting their lives on the line. Symbolically, the Bony Lady is multivocal and polysemantic, signifying different things to different people at different times. As Turner (1967) has described, symbols and icons utilised in religious ritual may possess many meanings and levels which alter according to context and audience. This is not unique to Santa Muerte but a phenomenon ubiquitous across Mexico. Price has pointed out that discourse relating to folk saint Jesús Malverde takes on different meanings and contours ‘depending upon who is telling the tale’ (Price 2005, p. 180). As we will propound, the saliency of Santa Muerte to the wide panoply of people involved in the drug trade is due to her malleability and ability to offer miscellaneous and even seemingly incongruous religious services to these personages; nevertheless, what unites all devotees, no matter how they construe Holy Death (as a narcosaint or a mother who protects them from narcos), is that all turn to her to explain, predict and control their circumstances.

Death as Lived Religion, Through Emic Eyes

Some scholars (Kristensen 2015; Roush 2014; Pansters 2019) argue that at the fulcrum of devotional practices are two ostensibly emic lexical notions which we have rarely encountered devotees using in our 10 years of research across Mexico. They argue against using the term ‘milagro’ (miracle) which devotees commonly use. The linguistic terms they prefer are *amparo*, *desamparo* that they gloss as ‘protection, and loss or lack of protection’ and *paro* (stoppage) (Pansters 2019, p. 31). These are at the core of their theoretical approach. They argue that *paro* refers to Santa Muerte’s ability to stop something that is deemed negative (for example, end an illness) but in ‘conjunction with the verb make or have *paro* also means to

have backup, support' (ibid). All of these authors have only spent time doing single-sited research at one shrine, that of Doña Queta at Calle 12 Alfareria, in Tepito. Thus, they have been under Dona Queta's influence and adopted her approach, which as we will detail is impelled by political motivations.

Pansters, a political anthropologist whose work only very recently extended to analyse religion (and this from a political approach[1]), has replicated Kristensen's schemata, albeit Pansters, as far as we are aware, spent but a couple of months doing research in Tepito and provided no ethnographic evidence to substantiate his adoption of these terms, only alluding to Bigliardi's work to affirm his conviction on the appropriateness of the terms and thereby refuting the concept of miracle (Pansters 2019, pp. 1–58). He insists that we must view faith through emic eyes, but his use of Bigliardi's apologetical work to substantiate his approach discredits it.

Bigliardi is a philosopher whose work is etic, and purely theological, and written from a Roman Catholic viewpoint, as the title of his most recent publication attests (2016).[2] He features scant ethnographic observations in his scholarship and appears to only have conducted research at a single site in Mexico State. His work is ethnocentrically based on Roman Catholic doctrine, and his substantiation of the term *paro* and refutation of the term 'miracle' to describe Santa Muerte's intervention in devotees' lives is predicated upon an approach to Santa Muerte faith that is based upon inappropriate biblical references and 'Reasoning along Thomas Aquinas' terms and definitions (Bigliardi 2016, p. 313). Logic based on the work of a Dominican Friar inspired by Aristotle[3] writing in the thirteenth century, Italy seems entirely unsuited for a modern Mexican religion that firstly is loosely organised and characterised by heterodoxy. As Pansters states, it 'has no unified or agreed-upon liturgical formats … (and is) constructed in noncentralized ways from below, giving rise to interesting differences across the country' (Pansters 2019, p. 26). As Bigliardi admits, 'it is multifaceted and fluid; it is inaccurate to reduce it to a specific institutionalized theology' (Bigliardi 2016, pp. 315–316). Secondly, this Catholic scriptural straitjacket is not appropriate for a faith clearly syncretic in its origins, meshing pre-Hispanic Indigenous and Catholic beliefs—and more importantly, praxis—with influences even from Cuban Santeria (Perdigón Castañeda 2008; Chesnut 2017; see also Bastante and Dickieson 2013, pp. 445–446; Gruzinski 1990; Fragoso 2011) and highly unfitting for a religion that has constantly been persecuted by the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Bigliardi's strict focus on theological and scriptural aspects enforces a doctrinally informed etic understanding that silences the voices of devotees. As he states himself

> In a personal interview given on January 26, 2015 the *madrina* …, although stating that she preferred the usage of the term *milagro* ('miracle'), gave me as an example that of a bus that overturns while a devotee has failed to catch it, or an

[1] And in one non-peer-reviewed article.

[2] The paper is entitled 'La Santa Muerte and Her Interventions in Human Affairs: a Theological Discussion' and appears in Sophia: International Journal of Philosophy and Traditions.

[3] Thomas Aquinas' work is influenced by Aristotelian understandings of theology as science whose logic is derived from propositions that are accepted as true on the basis of knowledge of God. Conclusions are then arrived at using reason. This sort of deductive mode of reasoning may be suitable for analysing faith in a Roman Catholic context but certainly has no bearing on folk religion in Mexico.

accident in which the devotee is the only one to survive, or a bus robbery in which all passengers are robbed except the devotee (Bigliardi 2016, p. 316).

We believe that if devotees prefer the term *milagro*, we should not attempt to change their use of language to suit our linguistic preferences or theological models.

We have done multisited ethnographic fieldwork across Mexico for over 10 years in states as diverse as Michoacán, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Puebla, across Mexico State, as well as Chiapas and Querétaro and thus have been able to gain a macro perspective that encompasses a wide demographic of devotees of death. As an anthropologist of religion and a religious studies scholar, our work is not based on theology nor scripture. We prefer to study lived religion diachronically and to take into account the perspectives of a wide panoply of devotees through participant observation, as well as informal and formal interviews with unbiased, open-ended questions.

We dispute the terms *amparo* and *desamparo* as emic notions and suspect they are etic, as during our 10 years of fieldwork, we have not encountered devotees systematically using such terms to explain positive events attributed to Santa Muerte. Furthermore, as Pansters points out, in 2008, a visitor had to 'convince' Doña Queta, who as we will describe is one of the most famous foundational figures in Santa Muerte's history, that Santa Muerte does not perform miracles but performs *amparo* (Pansters 2019, pp. 29–32). Pansters does not state which visitor, nor why. To further our suspicions, during our research over the duration of 10 years, we learnt that Doña Queta, aware that she is considered a spokesperson for Santa Muerte religion and to avoid conflict with the Catholic Church, has altered her view on miracles. The Catholic Church has systematically vituperated the Skeleton Saint and worshippers as satanic and claims miracles as the sole purview of its Saints, Marian advocations and Jesus (see also Argyriadis 2014). The Church, as we will detail, has significant power over the State and has been part of the impetus to have shrines annihilated. To avoid having her shrine persecuted, or worse, razed to the ground (as has happened to so many shrines), we suspect that Doña Queta, who for 7 years spoke of miracles, has diplomatically chosen to avoid such a term to ensure her temple and her position are not imperiled. In official interviews with the media or scholars, she consciously avoids using the term *milagro*; however, other devotees do not.

Instead of *paro*, *amparo* and *desamparo*, across the 9 states we did fieldwork in, the terms we most frequently encountered were 'milagro' (miracle), 'favor' (favour) and 'ayuda'. We note that these terms frequently appear in the work of Perdigon, a Mexican anthropologist, whose scholarship and fieldwork extend back over a decade, predating all other scholarships. In her book on Santa Muerte devotion which is based on research across Mexico, she has a chapter entitled 'la magia/milagro' (magic/miracles). Pansters states, quoting Bigliardi, that academics should not consider that Santa Muerte performs miracles as there is no foundational narrative, her interventions are seen as the result of supplications and finally events deemed to be caused by her intervention may be concrete and useful. However, if one is to adopt an emic approach as he suggests—much as theologically and etically one might not want to consider Santa Muerte interventions as miracles—we must pay close attention to the lexicon employed by worshippers of Santa Muerte. This is why we do not base our theory on *amparo* and *desamparo*, which may have relevance to certain worshippers in Tepito, but clearly not across Mexico given, that as we have already stated Santa Muerte faith 'has no unified

or agreed-upon liturgical formats … (and is) constructed in noncentralized ways from below, giving rise to interesting differences across the country' which furthermore 'leaves room for local specificities and bricolage' (Pansters 2019, p. 26).

Instead of theological claims and a focus on linguistic terminology, we prefer to base our argument on an analysis of devotees' activities and the way in which they use narrative to reflect upon their religious experiences (for more on this approach, see Skinner 2013). This allows us to explore how, at a grassroots level, devotees perceive Santa Muerte's impact on their immediate existence and circumstances, and as we have suggested, this can be summarised as explaining, predicting and controlling. This theoretical approach is useful as it is not based upon linguistics, semantics nor theology and goes beyond the ideas of stoppage and protection, informing us more fully of the macro perspective. That it is to say, it gives us insights into the context of Santa Muerte devotion. In the 'disorder of the post-colony' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2008) where 'hyper-violence flood the country' (Huffschmid 2012) which appears to be characterised by 'arcane and uncontrollable forces (and cause) a loss of protection' (Pansters 2019, p. 42), devotees turn to Santa Muerte to explain, predict and attempt to control this disorder, thereby replacing it with a metaphysics of order.

Incarceration, Liberation and Protection

Santa Muerte has a special appeal to prisoners and those whose job it is to oversee them. Doña Queta, also known as Enriqueta Romero, is a renowned figure among Santa Muerte devotees. She is the woman who took what was previously an occult, hidden religious faith from the shadows into public light by creating a street altar to Santa Muerte in front of her home in Tepito in 2001.[4] She erected a life-size effigy of Santa Muerte, which quickly became a devotional icon for tens of thousands of *chilangos* (argot for residents of Mexico City). This was gifted to her by one of her sons to thank the saint for his swift discharge from jail. In accordance with the theory that we espouse, Doña Queta, seeking to control her son's circumstances, turned to the Skeleton Saint for help, fearful, as she attested to us, for his life, given Mexican jails are liminal places *par excellence* where the threat of death is ever present. When her son was seemingly miraculously released, the saint's supernatural powers were attributed to be the reason according to a Santa Muerte metaphysics of causality.

Such is the saint's appeal to 'those in jail' that they are earmarked by Doña Queta for mass prayer at her monthly rosary service that takes place in her public Tepito shrine. Enriqueta Vargas was another eminent figure in the Santa Muerte faith until her death in 2018 when her daughter took over her duties. She was the head of Santa Muerte Internacional (SMI), a global network of affiliated public shrines that stand in sharp contrast to the otherwise loosely organised religion. One of SMI's most important proselytising actions and most popular activities, *tout court* is its prison ministry. Vargas called upon inmates at a men's jail in the State of Mexico and on the first day of each month as many prisoners supplicate Santa Muerte. Many do so with the hope of securing their safety during their incarceration and by seeking to control, namely reduce, the length of their sentences. For many, Santa Muerte has a privileged place

[4] For a detailed description of this, see Chesnut (2017, pp. 38–41); see also Kristensen (2015, pp. 548–51).

in the spiritual hierarchy, and as the personification of death is close to God, and above other saints (Perdigon Castaneda 2008).

In jails across Mexico, Central America and the USA, devotion to death is ubiquitous, eclipsing that of Guadalupe and even Saint Jude, the patron saint of lost causes (Kristensen 2015, p. 552). As Lomnitz points out, 'revealing allegiance to La Santa Muerte is inevitable for prisoners who are devotees … but the cult among prison guards will tend to be more concealed' (Lomnitz 2019, p. 186). Roberto, 45 years old and employed as a guard in the maximum security state prison of Morelia for the past 9 years, not only described to us the veneration of Santa Muerte among inmates but also delineated that the entire penal system shared this devotion. Of approximately 150 jail cells, Roberto surmised that in roughly forty, prisoners had cobbled together altars to the Skeleton Saint, whom they supplicated for a rapid release (Chesnut 2017, p. 13), as well as for protection from violence and death. Most of these prisoners were involved in drug trafficking. Cigarettes, cocaine, marijuana as well as prison moonshine (known as *turbo*) were featured among the oblations at her fanes. Tattoos[5] of Saint Death were inked onto inmates' backs, chests and arms by fellow prisoners as ex-votos incarnate for her in return for her spiritual aegis against danger and death. As Perdigon and Robles point out, this not only transforms the body into an altar but is also used as a symbol of protection, as people 'feel protected, as if someone was watching over them' (Perdigon Castaneda and Robles Aguirre 2019, p. 170; see also Denegri 1978).

Albeit, as we have described, devotees of Santa Muerte are not limited to narcos, for in addition to convicts, numerous guards, social workers and even lawyers professed devotion to death. When we interviewed Roberto in 2011 and 2017, he attested that ten of his forty-eight fellow guards worshipped the Skeleton Saint. He also described how increasingly many attorneys and social workers at the prison wore gold medallions of the saint on their chests. They did so as they feared for their lives and turned to Santa Muerte for safety and to ensure that they not be troubled or hurt in their dealings with inmates.

One of Roberto's colleagues, Mario, 40 years old, happily married and father of two children, had been working at the jail for 3 years. He described to us that he wore a scapular with the image of Santa Muerte on it beneath his warden's shirt to keep him safe. When he felt uneasy, he would reach into his shirt to touch it and offer a prayer to the Skeleton Saint. 'She watches over me every day' he stated, 'protecting me so that I am not hurt and that I return home safely, at the end of my day, to my wife and children'.

Sociologist Victor Payá has pointed out in his study of Mexican jails that they are hellish places where death 'is common and ever-present' (Paya 2006, pp. 240–241). He describes them as lawless milieu where sickness, suicide, madness and murder are ubiquitous. Much as we have observed, he also describes how rituals and altars to Santa Muerte are abundant. In such a parlous workplace, replete with drugs and shanks, the appeal of supernatural protection offered by the Bony Lady is self-explanatory and is proof that the saint's appeal cuts across a wide demographic. As Kristensen states: 'many prison officers worship her … many of the conditions for worshipping her are fulfilled there: the violence, the risk, the power relations at work beyond one's control' (Kristensen 2015, p. 554). It is precisely this desire for protection and the yearning to

[5] See also Perrée (2014, p. 42) on expiatory tattoos of Santa Muerte.

control the danger of death and prolong life that explain Santa Muerte's popularity and explain how in less than two decades Santa Muerte has become the matron saint of the entire Mexican penal system. Who better to appeal to than the saint who is said to reign over the dominion of death.

Not only do prisoners propitiate her to attempt to control the length of their sentence, they also ask her to keep them safe from sickness and death, and may invoke her to attempt to cause the death of another or even predict the demise of fellow prisoners. Enrico told his prison guard Mario, whom we have already encountered, that he knew his cell mate, José who was not a devotee, was going to die as he had a dream of José in which Santa Muerte appeared, looming over his cell mate's bed and pointing with her skeletal finger. A few days later, José was stabbed by another prisoner during the communal meal. Enrico stated that he was not surprised. We encountered many narratives that featured dreams and visions of Santa Muerte. Another such tale was recounted by Mariela. The wife of a prisoner whom we met through Mario. She described how one night as she was walking home from walk, Santa Muerte crossed her path, grimacing at her and wielding her scythe suggestively. Mariela asked the Grim Reapress if she had come to reap her soul. The Grim Reapress shook her head and disappeared. Mariela then suspected that someone she knew would die and feared the worse. A few weeks later, her husband died in prison during a fight that he was not directly involved in but got out of hand. These and other narratives based on dreams and visions went beyond the theory which we reject of *paro*, *desamparo* and *amparo*. They were more about predictions of future events.

Prison officers, lawyers and others whose jobs involve working in this perilous place also turn to her to attempt to control their situations and ensure their safety and well-being. As we saw in the case of Mario, the prison guard and Enriqueta Romero, the founder of the Tepito shrine who believed Santa Muerte had allowed for her son's early release, devotees, no matter whether law-abiding or law-enforcing, also use Santa Muerte discourse akin to a philosophy by which to understand good fortune and misfortune. Much as how Evans-Pritchard described how for the Azande witchcraft 'explains why events happen' and not how they happen (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p. 24). For both of the above parties, they were aware of how events had happened; for example, for Enriqueta Romero, good behavior had ensured her son's early release, but why this was granted, was according to her, thanks to the benevolence of the Skeleton Saint who had listened to her supplications.

Similarly, the inverse was also deemed true: Andres, the brother of a prisoner, Manuel, being held in a jail in Oaxaca City, claimed that his brother's girlfriend, Rosita, had died whilst Manuel was incarcerated as the latter despite being a previous devotee of Santa Muerte had turned to St. Jude during his time in jail and failed to offer to Santa Muerte an ex-voto he had promised the saint when she came through on a previous petition; this is often known as 'pagar una manda' or to keep a promise (see Perdigón Castañeda 2008; Perdigon Castaneda and Robles Aguirre 2019). Andres reasoned that this had angered the Bony Lady, causing her to no longer protect Manuel's girlfriend from danger. Although Andres was well aware that a car accident had been the immediate cause of Rosita's demise, why she had died and lost control of her vehicle was, he believed, because Santa Muerte was no longer watching over her.

As we pointed out, referring to Graziano's (2006) work at the beginning of this section, folk saints have long been imagined as influencing mortal life and are at the

fulcrum of metaphysics of causality. Santa Muerte, like her fellow folk saints, is deemed to supernaturally affect the lives of those who venerate her, and even those who do not. As such, devotees believe not only that by invoking her favours, she might bestow good fortune on them, but that also whether or not one is in her good grace's may determine life, or death.

Framing Death

As pointed out, Santa Muerte has typically been associated with narcos and criminals in the public eye. As our fieldwork and that of many other scholars confirms (Casal 2019; Chesnut 2017; Hernández 2016; Kristensen 2015; Perrée 2014; Martos 2019), her devotees are not limited to criminals. This correlation seems to be contemporary. Mid-twentieth century, anthropological field reports reveal that at her nascence, Saint Death was only connected with the crimson candle of love and passion (Sánchez Ambrosio 2007). Nevertheless, in punishing errant husbands and boyfriends by binding them and delivering them 'humbled' (*rendido*) at the feet of wronged women, the Skeleton Saint evinced her powers as a minister of vengeance. Until the 1980s, her role as an avenging angel was restricted to affairs of the heart.

The Skeleton Saint would relinquish her centuries-long clandestine existence at the end of the 1980s and early 1990s. Unfortunately, the first mentions of her in the media were not related to those women who have prayed for passion, nor police officers propitiating her for protection, instead sensationalist stories relating the saint to murder and narco crimes hit the headlines. For example, the Grim Reapress received her first press coverage in 1989 centering around Adolfo Constanzo, a Cuban-American narco, who led a band of traffickers in the Mexican border city of Matamoros. A police search for Mark Kilroy, a missing college student from Texas, led to Constanzo's ranch. The authorities discovered the grisly remnants of human bodies buried in the grounds of the property, as well as in ritual cauldrons. These included body parts of the missing student. The gang kidnapped and ritually immolated at least fourteen people on the ranch.

Constanzo and his gang engaged in an aberrant form of the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Mayombe meshed with Mexican occult practices. The Latin American press designated them as *narcosatanicos* (narcosatanists). Among the cauldrons and skulls recovered at the ranch was an effigy of Santa Muerte (RT, 24th September 2017). It is not apparent what her role was in the sordid set up; nevertheless, her media debut featured her as a sinister satanic deity associated with drug trafficking and ritualistic human slaughter. This reputation has endured from thereon out. Narcos continue to receive the most media attention for their devotion to Death. Nevertheless, as we describe, Santa Muerte appeals to a wide range of devotees who turn to her for variegated services.

Before delving further into Santa Muerte's complex role in terms of her polyvalent position in both propagating and protecting the Mexican drug trade on the one hand and in combating it on the other hand, it would be useful to consider the contours of an industry that has turned Mexico into what some designate a narco-state and one of the most violent places on earth. As a CIA report attests, the USA comprises the largest market in the world for illegal drugs (CIA 2010). Indeed, a higher percentage of

Americans have dabbled in narcotics than anywhere else on the globe. Forty-two percent of American adults have tried marijuana compared to 20% of Dutch (Lynch 2008). Given Mexico's geographical proximity to the globe's biggest black market, it is hardly surprising that the nation has become the main supplier of narcotics to its northern neighbor.

Drug Culture

Mexican regional predominance in the drug trade is recent. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, Colombia was the leading source of narcotics, with Mexicans merely transshipping their neighbour's cocaine. However, a multibillion dollar war subsidised by Washington against the Colombian cartels of Cali and Medellin, added to which the increasing expansion of Mexican mafias who sought to fill the shoes of their withering Colombian counterparts, combined to create a new configuration in Mexico. The cartels of Sinaloa, the Gulf, New Generation Jalisco, Tijuana and Juárez have burgeoned, as the demand for cheaper methamphetamine has superseded Colombian cocaine. The Molotov cocktail of illegality and hyper-profitability of the drug trade has exploded in an orgy of violence in Mexico, especially since 2007, as Mexican cartels compete (Dell 2015, p. 1738).

Once he assumed office in December 2006, President Felipe Calderón announced he would wage a full-scale drug war, mobilising the army and the police to combat the cartels (Kellner and Pipitone 2010). Albeit, certain critics vituperated his administration. They accused him of presiding over a partisan campaign that favoured certain cartels over others (Caputo 2009). Whatever the truth may be, Calderón's drug war amplified the violence, with an estimated eighty-three thousand Mexicans killed during his 6-year term (see Gonzalez 2010). Both intra- and intercartel fighting have seen upsurges. The elimination of capos often catalyses a power struggle within drug cartels, as armed to the teeth the factions vie for leadership. Erstwhilst, externally, rival gangs seek to exploit the leadership vacuum to their advantage. Calderón's drug war also ratcheted up the violence by transforming the police and army into the main agents of enforcement and interdiction.

Whilst the army sustained relatively few casualties, municipal police, for whom it is harder to remain anonymous than their state and federal counterparts, paid the price with catastrophic cartel counteroffensives. During fieldwork in Michoacán in July 2009, the most calamitous counterattack to date was launched by la Familia Michoacana cartel against government forces. In a period of 24 h, twelve municipal police officers were found dead on the shoulder of the highway joining Morelia to Lázaro Cárdenas, an important Pacific coast port. The police officers had been shot dead at close-range execution style. In toto, Calderón's explosive offensive against the drug gangs, endorsed by both Presidents Bush and Obama, ensued in a bloodbath. The situation has only retrogressed since the election of Pena Nieto (Chesnut 2017, pp. 102–123). It is no wonder, given the ubiquity of violence and death, that both narcos and those who fight them have turned to death in saintly form to attempt to explain, predict and control their circumstances as they attempt to dodge death and deal with the inexplicable chaos that surrounds them daily.

Fieldwork was undertaken with care, particularly in Michoacán due to the dangerous situation on the ground. Events, as described above, made us aware of the precarious political situation in Mexico, namely that as Bunker and Sullivan (2013) point out the drug trade poses a challenge to sovereignty and governance. It leads to political instability and hazardous living conditions ubiquitously. Due to this, life expectancy for males has decreased (Bromley 2016, p. 4). This entails that not only narcos but also many Mexicans living in cities and areas characterised by extreme violence—that is the result of narco-trafficking and government retaliation—seek spiritual solutions to overcome the daily danger of death. This was the impetus for further fieldwork, for as we watched political events unfold and the reactions of the Mexicans we met to these events, as scholars of religious studies and anthropology, we realised that Santa Muerte veneration was not limited to narco devotion.

It has to be said, however, that if the Calderón administration has singled out Santa Muerte in the war on drugs, it is as large numbers of narcos have been arrested with her accoutrements on their persons, or apprehended or shot at safe houses that contained her shrine. Detentions and killings of low-level drug dealers caught with evidence of veneration to the Bony Lady over the past decade and a half have become routine. Higher-ranking cartel bosses and sicarios have also been arrested donning pendants, tattoos, engraved revolvers and other paraphernalia embellished with images of the Death Saint. For example, the Mexican army raided the mansion of Gilberto García Mena, capo of the Gulf Cartel in April 2001, seeking to arrest the drug baron. They found the cartel leader hiding out in his underground bunker, a large Santa Muerte effigy adorning his garden (Gonzalez 2010, p. 72).

Santa Muerte Negra

Given that the drug trade is a hazardous one, drug dealers attempt to explain, predict and control their circumstances by appealing to Santa Muerte. In a quid pro quo relationship, they offer the saint oblations of tequila, but also often the drugs that they deal in such as cocaine and marijuana, in an attempt to influence the outcomes of the jeopardous situations that their quotidian consists of. Most obviously, throngs of devotees, working at all levels of drug industry, implore Santa Muerte to spare them from a horrific demise, seeking protection from her, whilst simultaneously casting evil upon drug enforcement agents and business rivals. Her whirling scythe is believed by narcos to thwart the path of bullets fired by cops, soldiers and rival nemeses. Additionally, they also supplicate the saint to guard their illicit merchandise, obfuscate pills, powder and paste from the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), Mexican army and federal police, among others, with her black shroud. When successful, they may explain their good fortunes by stating that the Bony Lady was on their side or inversely, and should they be caught, they may explain that their devotion had waned, and thus so did their good fortune. We also heard tales that dreams of Santa Muerte might be taken as good omens or sinister portents by narcos, and believed to predict events. Nevertheless, such stories were hard for us to verify given that we did not want to risk our lives by directly involving ourselves in participant observation among narcos; therefore, secondhand hearsay was all we could rely on.

Many narco-traffickers, whether it be of heroin, marijuana, cocaine and meth-amphetamines, work specifically with black Santa Muerte, whether in the form of black-coloured statues or votives. Whilst those not involved in illicit activities might work with Santa Muerte, many fear black Santa Muerte. We first met Dulce, a female Santa Muerte devotee of roughly 30 years old in what is known as a *naturalista* in Pochutla, in the southern state of Oaxaca. This is the term used locally for a shop that sells esoteric items.

Dulce was buying a yellow Skeleton Saint candle to improve her business. She told us that she made ends meet by peddling jewelry and other trinkets in local tourist hot spots. Santa Muerte's supernatural favours are bestowed according to a rich colour palette that consists of red for love, yellow or gold for finance and green for good fortune among other colours. Dulce told us that although the black candle was sometimes used for protection by some devotees she knew, it was considered to be the most nefarious of all the votives. Indeed, Santa Muerte is the only saint to possess such a candle. Always inscribed 'muerte contra mis enemigos', meaning death to my enemies or death against my enemies, this candle is utilised for all manners of iniquitous petitions.

Dulce gave us some insight into the local understandings of the metaphysics of Santa Muerte negra when in a fearful tone, she whispered 'I respect black Santa Muerte but I would never light such a candle nor work with *la negra* (the black one). Everyone knows if you ask for *hechizos de magia negra* (black magic) you risk great danger. Working with *la negra*, you can achieve powerful tasks and even destroy enemies, but the peril of using such dark sorcery is that it may turn against you and you may fall victim.'

Black candles are typically used for vengeance, to ask death, as the candle's caption 'muerte contra mis enemigos' suggests, to one's enemies and to ruin them financially or otherwise. The blackness of this candle is associated with the darkness of death and the saint's command over this tenebrous realm. Epithets such as *la Dueña de lo Oscuro* (Proprietress of Darkness) or *Senora de las Sombras* (Lady of the Shadows) allude to the saint's potencies. Dulce explained that in order to seek vengeance, one must etch with a needle or other sharp objects the initials of the person whom one wishes to hex with misfortune or death and then light the candle, ideally offering oblations to Santa Muerte in return for the depraved deed to be accomplished. An imprecation might also accompany the ritual.

We were later gifted a chap book by a devotee at a Santa Muerte shrine in Oaxaca. The chap book featured innumerable prayers, largely for attempting to control and influence variegated situations, including those that demanded vengeance. The most pernicious prayer within suggested that the devotee obtain some rope of about 8 cm to 10 cm and that they tie 3 knots a few centimetres apart whilst reciting the imprecation three times and burning three black candles with the enemy's name(s) carved in each candle. The prayer, to Nina Negra (the black girl) was recommended to bring chaos, darkness and destruction to one's enemies. Here follows our translation:

'Nina Negra
Listen to my plea for vengeance
With this knot seal this hexagon,
You will not sleep, you will not rest

Knots of anger, hate
Chaos brings you to your destination
Nina Negra
Listen to my plea for revenge
I tie this second knot which
Will bring you darkness
Slander, chaos, evil too
Bringing the darkness straight to you
Nina Negra
Listen to my plea for domination
With this third knot, join
Weaving chaos in your mind
Hexagon of anger, hexagon of hate
Finish him off, I'm not going to wait'
So now let it be done![6]

Indubitably, this prayer is intended for devotees who wish to bring about destruction and harm to their enemies. Although we have no evidence to support this, it is likely that narcos would use such pernicious petitions to attempt to control the fates of their foes.

Not Just a Narcosaint

It is not only in Mexico but also in the USA that Santa Muertista drug traffickers frequently make the news, further accentuating to the general public that the Skeleton Saint is only worshipped by drug traffickers. A federal grand jury in Tennessee prosecuted thirty-three people for possessing and distributing over two thousand pounds of marijuana in November 2008 across six US states. During the hearing, DEA agents and Washington County Sheriff's Office investigators claimed that members of the drug gang were utilising effigies 'from the Mexican culture' as a means to escape law enforcement agents and for good fortune. The report cited 'La Santa Muerta' [sic], and the 'Saint of Holy Death' [sic], as well as 'Jesus Malverde', who is commonly referred to as the 'Patron Saint of Narco Traffickers' (Truesdell 2009). The report claimed that the worship of such figures was becoming more ubiquitous across the USA and as such punctuated the penchant law enforcement and the press have for associating the Skeleton Saint with drug dealers. However, the misspelling of the Saint's name and reference to 'the Mexican culture' belie a misunderstanding of context.

Unfortunately, the press as rapacious as ever for sensationalism, combined with US law enforcement stereotypes, means that stories such as the one that follows have truly

[6] 'Nina Negra, Escucha mi súplica por la justicia, Con este nudo sellar este hexagonal, No dormirás, no descansarás Nudos de ira, de odio, Discordia te trae a tu destino, Nina Negra, Escucha mi súplica por venganza, Ato esta segunda hacen nudo dos, Te traerá la oscuridad, Calumnia, discordia, mal también

Trayendo la oscuridad directo a ti Nina Negra, Escucha mi súplica para tu dominio, Con este tercer nudo, unir, Tejer caos en tu mente, Hexagonal de ira, hexagonal de odio, Acabar con él, no voy a esperar'

Así que ahora hacerse manifiesto!

entrenched the image of Santa Muerte as a narcosaint. However, it is clear from the growing number of devotees who work for the police that Santa Muerte is not just a saint for narcos. It is not just Mexican drug dealers but police officers too, whose job description entails the quotidian palpable possibility of violent and imminent demise often at the formers' hands. Kristensen, as we have noted, cites Santa Muerte as the saint of prisoners, as well as their families residing in urban spaces but also mentions that 'police officers worship her' also (ibid, p. 554).

The international media focalises on Santa Muerte's role in a reductionist manner. She is depicted as a narcosaint spiritually sanctioning and supporting the dirty deeds of the cartel members dedicated to her. However, the innumerable army grunts and law enforcement officers that venerate the Bony Lady and claim she has saved them from cartel violence are overlooked. The owner of a stall in Oaxaca's central city market that sells packets of Santisima Muerte powder confirmed that although the Bony Lady's hollow gaze upon the package irked some clients, 'the packets were often purchased by policemen who hung them in their cars' (Norget 1996, p. 144) for protection and to ensure a holy death.

As drug-related violence in Oaxaca has heightened in the last few years, increasingly, police and others involved in law enforcement are turning to the Skeleton Saint, as they related to us. In 2018, during the Day of the Dead celebrations that the city is famous for, a procession entitled 'Light and Hope' featuring a float dedicated to the Saint of Death was widely publicly attended and propitiated, including by police officers. And it is not in Oaxaca alone that this is the case, across the country, members of the armed forces and law authorities worship the Powerful Lady.

A good death is seen as essential for crossing through purgatory and accessing heaven without impediments (Norget 2006, p. 163). Providing devotees with an auspicious demise is yet another of the many services that the multitasking matron saint of death proffers. Police officers turn to the saint as criminals do, to explain, predict and control their lives. Many seek to control the conditions of their death, asking the saint to allow them to die from natural causes and not a brutal death which would burden their families with the task of many more nights of prayer and rituals in order that they might enter paradise, and would entail their souls suffered ceaselessly until that time.

Carlos, a policeman who had worked in Oaxaca for 10 years and lived with his children and mother in a small house, stated how he feared a vicious demise that would not only upset his family but make his trajectory to heaven all the harder: 'Every day I see so many violent deaths because of my work but I have asked La Santa that when she comes to me that it be peacefully in my sleep or in some other tranquil way, as I do not want to be stuck in purgatory, suffering until the prayers of my poor family have been heard and I might be allowed into paradise'.

Saint Death, we therefore argue, despite her media image, is not so much the guardian angel of drug traffickers as she is the matroness of the drug war. Her veneration among police, prison guards and soldiers, those on the front lines of the Mexican government's war against the cartels, is as ubiquitous as it is among the narcos they are battling. At the entrance of the barracks of an elite police commando unit in Mexico City, a giant portrait of the Skeleton Saint stands (Holman 2007). In the State of Mexico, among the municipal police force of the city of Valle de Chalco, over half of the 380 officers are devoted to death (Chesnut 2017, p. 113), donning embroidered

images of the death saint on their uniforms. As was related to us by the chief of the force, 190 policemen have stitched on their shirts popular death-related adages feature alongside depictions of the Bony Lady. Maxims such as 'Fear not wherever you may go, since you'll die where you're supposed to' or 'When death appears in our path, she is welcome' and 'Any day is a good one to die' entwine with Santa Muerte iconography. These seek to explain and predict the futures of police officers.

Chief of Police Tomás Lagunes Muñoz, when asked about the supplication and propitiation of the Pretty Girl (another one of her many monikers) by his men resorted to Santa Muerte to explain and reason about the nature of his profession, stated: 'they say if you have a Santa Muerte on you that you're a devotee and stuff like that, but its meaning is that the police officers are exposed to losing their lives, and that's the place we're all headed—an encounter with death'. Valle de Chalco police related that members of the federal forces, such as the Policía Judicial (judicial police) and Procuraduría General de la República (attorney general's office), also embellish their garb with icons of the Bony Lady. Many policemen wear Santa Muerte as an acknowledgement, as the Chief of Police punctuated, that they may be headed for death; moreover, they emblazon their uniforms with the Skeleton Saint's image for protection, postulating that she may thwart the path of narcos' bullets and allow them to live another day to fight the enemy, as some on the force explained. The Skeleton Saint therefore does not offer protection merely to narcos but is believed to shield all those who devote themselves to her from a premature death (Perdigón Castañeda 2008) and all seek to control their fates.

In Tijuana, some police officers have utilised a Santa Muerte metaphysics of causality to explain the seemingly miraculous survival of their commander. They believe that the statue of Santa Muerte saved his life. Due to its position, adjacent to the USA, Tijuana is one of the hotbeds of the drug war. On the eve of April 16, 2008, five vehicles pullulating with cartel assassins were pulled up to Commander Jesús Hurtado's home (Chesnut 2017, p. 113). Hurtado and his bodyguard, alerted by a neighbour, opened fire, killing two of the attackers and fending off the rest. The two men suffered only superficial gunshot wounds. This and the fact that they were able to rebuff the barrage of bullets that emanated from more than twenty heavily armed hitmen were explicated by many on the local force as a miracle attributed to the three-foot statue of the Skeleton Saint at the commander's home altar.

'This is proof that Santa Muerte protects her loyal devotees. Commander Hurtado should have died given the odds, but she saved his life, she did not want to take him yet. She heard his prayers and knows that he is a loyal devotee and respects her, instead she took the sicarios', Raul, a police officer, explained. Rodrigo, his colleague, openly admitted that he was also a Santa Muerte devotee and agreed, 'it is certain that she shielded him from those bullets with her cloak, as she has shielded me before. We depend on the Madre Santa to keep us safe because every day we face multiple dangers but la Niña Bonita prevents bullets and knives from reaching us'.

Indeed, aside from an auspicious death, Santa Muerte devotees employed as agents of the law recount that they petition the Powerful Lady in large part for her spiritual aegis from drug gang violence. Much as they described that she dramatically offered her supernatural escutcheon to protect Commander Hurtado from the death squad sent to assassinate him, they also explained how they lit the black votive candle to plead her to shield them and their families from danger. Enrique affirmed, 'she is miraculous, and

it is not true that she is a nefarious saint who will take things from you if you ask for favours. She protects us every day and never asks me for anything in return. I light black and white candles and pray to her to keep myself and my family safe. She has never let me down'. The police officers detailed that the black candle provides supernatural protection, but as what we have seen, it is also used for nefarious purposes. Nevertheless, as was explained to us, the candle is used not just by narcos for iniquity but also by police officers and army personnel.

Although they were reluctant to talk about it, one wonders whether devotees whose job it is to fight the drug war might not also burn black candles for purposes of vengeance, just like their drug cartel counterparts. We believe, from the bellicose reactions, in particular when family members were injured due to drug cartel violence, that it would not be too far-fetched to imagine police officers burning black candles to avenge those injured. One could easily envision even a police chief, such as Hurtado, supplicating his Santa Muerte statue to redress the cartel sicarios who sought to assassinate him. In fact, an American devotee told us that when he was recently detained by municipal cops in the State of Mexico who discovered his affiliation with a certain local Santa Muerte temple, one of them unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a Bony Lady tattoo with an oversized scythe, which he said, 'was the blade of blood for enemies'.

Benjamin, a former State Police officer in Queretaro, described to us that Santa Muerte had safeguarded him on the job for many years to explain his survival. As we have already described much like Azande witchcraft, cause and effect is often understood in terms of the supernatural and specifically the actions of Santa Muerte. This understanding of causality comprises 'a natural philosophy by which the relations between men and … events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such event' (Evans-Pritchard 1976, p. 19). Although for the Azande witchcraft is usually used to explain bad fortune, many Mexicans explain good and bad fortune by relating to Santa Muerte and her mystical powers.

Benjamin concluded that if he not once took a bullet in the line of duty, it is because the gold medallion of the Powerful Lady rested every day upon his chest whilst on duty. He recounted to us one of the more terrifying incidents of his career. Near the border with Michoacán Benjamin was engaged in hot pursuit of an alleged narcotraficante. Roughly 90 min in to this high-speed pursuit, he and his fellow officers were able to force the felon off the road. The culprit alighted from his pickup armed with a high-powered rifle which he aimed at Benjamin's patrol car. Before the suspect was able to start firing at the six-foot-three Skeleton Saint devotee, a fellow officer fired, walloping the felon to the ground and killing him instantaneously. Benjamin defers his continued existence to Saint Death who due to his devotion, he claims, swung her Grim Reapress scythe taking the life of the suspect instead of his.

The white candle is also highly popular among police and army officers. It symbolises cleansing of negative energies, ridding of bad luck, breaking of hexes and protection from the ill intentions of others, which police officers deem essential for the successful accomplishment of many of their dangerous tasks on the job. Numerous are those law enforcement officers who believe that they can control their futures by burning this votive. They supply the Powerful Lady with offerings of tequila, cigarettes, flowers and other items that they believe bring them good luck, thereby, they state, allowing them to deal with the violence of the cartels without getting hurt.

Some members of law enforcement also fear the repercussions that their job may have on their family, given that sicarios might attack their loved ones as vengeance for cartel arrests. The white votive, they state, can protect a house from harm and is said to bring peace. It is also often burnt at the beginning of a project; hence if a police officer commences an important mission to wage war on cartels, this candle is the preferred option. Eduardo is a member of law enforcement who asked us to be discreet about his role that had him tasked with directly battling drug dealers. He also attempted to control events by propitiating the Powerful Lady, as he referred to her. 'At home', he explained, 'I have made a small altar in the back of my house to Santa Muerte, I have a statue of the Powerful Lady and whenever I have to go on dangerous jobs where I must face narcos and sicarios I offer her a glass of tequila, light a white candle and pray to her, so far she has never let me down'.

Such is the fear that police have of the perils of their job and the dangers it inheres for their families, that specific prayers exist which appeal to Santa Muerte to aid them with their concerns. For example, one popular prayer for protection commences: 'Santa Muerte, please do not allow things to go wrong, let me see in the light, and have the clarity to think and do the best I can. Santa Muerte, protect my family, I ask you for everyone's well-being, especially my mother's'. Prayers such as this one reveal that for many, such as police officers, Santa Muerte is not just a narcosaint who exclusively protects felons but a caring mother who one can entrust to watch over one's family and one's self in times of peril. They turn to her to control their fates, to dodge death or to ask for a peaceful demise. They also explain their colleague's and their own seemingly miraculous survivals through a Santa Muerte metaphysics of causation.

The Politics of Death

Having seen the appeal of Santa Muerte to thousands of prison guards, army personnel, police officers and others on the front lines of the war against the cartels, we arrive at the odd discrepancy confronting many of the front-line troops. The Calderón administration and, to a lower degree, the present one of Peña Nieto have depicted the Skeleton Saint as the preeminent religious symbol of narco culture and declared war against the Powerful Lady, even bulldozing dozens of her shrines on the US-Mexico border in March 2009. It is easy to deduce that more than a handful of the army personnel who were ordered to obliterate the shrines were themselves devotees of Santa Muerte. Given their belief in their matron saint's prodigious powers of vengeance, some of those soldiers must have been scared to death.

The bulldozing of shrines has continued under the Peña Nieto administration, much as his political party, the PRI, is not as aligned with the Catholic Church as Calderón's National Action Party (PAN) was. One particular government offensive stands out. In January 2014, Leticia Salazar Vasquez, the mayor of the narco-besieged border city Matamoros, demanded the destruction of several Santa Muerte shrines established on public property 4 years earlier. Vasquez did not proffer any public justification for the demolition of these sacred sites. As an affluent Evangelical Protestant and member of the conservative PAN, it is indubitable that she perceives Santa Muerte as a narcosaint who offers spiritual aegis to the two local dominant drug syndicates: the Gulf and Zetas cartels. Furthermore, in the weeks prior to the annihilation of the shrines, the local press

was printing stories about a Catholic cleric who had been assaulted with a baseball bat for ostensibly declining to conduct a Santa Muerte 'Mass' (Metcalfe 2014).

Yet, although affluent members of the government may see Santa Muerte as a narcosaint, for many, she is an Angel of Death and the 'saint of the desperate' (our translation, see Gaytan (2008) and Torres-Ramos (2015)). Over seventy believers decried the iconoclastic acts; furthermore, we witnessed that within the space of 2 weeks they amassed to rebuild two of the shrines obliterated (Chesnut and Metcalfe 2014). Once more, some of the soldiers commanded to destroy the shrines were likely devotees themselves. Given Santa Muerte's reputation for reprisal, these grunts have no doubt been fervidly placating her wrath by performing rituals and offering oblations to their saint.

Santa Muerte's debut as religious enemy number 1 of the State, according to some, began due to her perceived opposition to the PAN of former President Calderón. The PAN is the favoured political party of the Catholic Church and has publicly presented itself as pro-Church. Since the 1980s, the Church has been cognizant of losing its flock due to the growth of Pentecostalism and neo-Christian groups, especially among the large indigenous populations of the south and on the border with the USA. In the last decade, the Church has also denounced Santa Muerte as it has witnessed growing numbers of the faithful convert to what it deems a heretical folk saint. Furthermore, one that is a medieval-ish by-product of indigenous interpretations of Catholicism and syncretism with native religious practices and, more recently, with African-Cuban Santería. In obliterating the fanes of Santa Muerte, the PANista administration aided the Catholic Church by eradicating in one fell swoop congeries of competing sacred sites. During Peña Nieto's presidency, Santa Muerte was seen as premier narco saint, and although the PRI administration has attenuated the war against her to more sporadic actions, the saint is still seen as a narcosaint. Albeit, this wasteful destruction is in vain. It does nothing to exscind the drug cartels and overlooks the fact, that as we have demonstrated, devotees of death fall on both sides of the fence.

Conclusion

As has been described, Santa Muerte has been depicted as the matron saint of drug dealers by the media and even American law enforcement agencies. Nevertheless, she is, in fact, the matron saint of the drug war. Devotees consist not only of the criminal factions that include the drug cartel and inmates but also prison guards, social workers, attorneys and members of the law enforcement agencies such as policemen and soldiers. These persons turn to her for a wide range of services, from protection from enemies as well as death, safety for their family, release from jail and vengeance upon foes to supplications for a 'holy death'. All these persons, no matter what side of the law they are on, deal with the daily threat of death and inhabit a context of chaos, as such all seek to explain, predict and control their circumstances. All camps therefore have turned to Santa Muerte to explain through a metaphysics of causation apparently miraculous survivals, and unjust deaths; to predict certain circumstances and even death itself; but above all, to attempt to control their fates by asking Santa Muerte to allow them to dodge death or even bring death to an enemy.

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