

VENERATING DANGER: IDENTITY AND RITUAL IN THE CULT OF SANTA MUERTE

by

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Santa Muerte is a Mexican folk saint that is the female personification of death. The cult of Santa Muerte is characterized as being one of the fastest-growing religious movements in the Americas, with an estimated 10 to 12 million devotees. This large following was amassed quite quickly as the cult has only become widely public since 2001. This growing popularity for Santa Muerte hints at the many appealing qualities she has. Arguably one of her most enticing characteristics is her multidimensionality. Even though she is the saint of death she deals with a variety of issues and concerns that her devotees have. Santa Muerte is most commonly known for being the saint of healing, wisdom, prosperity, protection, love sorcery, justice, and even vengeance. It is through this multifaceted aspect of her character that many of her devotees feel like they can come to her for any reason. In this cult there is a strong emphasis on the materiality and physicality of Santa Muerte's multidimensionality. This is best expressed through the different colored votive candles that are each representative of a different aspect of Santa Muerte's character. Red symbolizes her work with love and troubles of the heart. The brown candle is used for wisdom and knowledge. The white candle is used for gratitude and purity. Purple is used for health-related concerns. Green is for dealings with the law and the need for justice. Gold is prayed to for prosperity and financial troubles. The last candle, which has the most controversial ties, is the black candle which can be used for both protection and vengeance. Santa Muerte's femininity and maternal qualities offer another source of comfort to her devotees, as she is often thought of as being a member of the family (specifically seen as a mother figure). Many of her devotees affectionately refer to her as La Madrina (Godmother), La Niña Blanca (The White Girl), La Flaquita (Skinny Girl/lady), and La Huesuda (Boney Lady). One of her most famous names is Santísima Muerte or "Most Holy Death," this name encompasses the divinity and reverence she is given to by her devotees. These nicknames showcase her

distinctively female identity that helps connect her to devotees through a very personal and intimate relationship. Presently, the cult of Santa Muerte's modern-day roots can be traced to the late 1990's and early 2000's. A pivotal moment in the expansion of the cult from an esoteric tradition was the public shrine created by Enriqueta Romero in Mexico City. This public shrine began the era of growth for the cult and allowed for Santa Muerte's unique multifaceted qualities to come out of hiding and affect the lives of millions of people across the globe.

Introduction

In what follows, I will be examining the novel folk saint Santa Muerte. My analysis of Santa Muerte and her cult focuses on the unique elements of her identity and devotional rituals that are not seen in other folk devotional practices. These ritual connections to Santa Muerte offer insight to the identity building and reaffirmation taking place amongst her devotees. To do this I will firstly discuss the origins of this enigmatic saint. I will carefully consider her connections to pre-Columbian religious figures such as Mictecacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli. I will also consider her initial occupation as a love sorceress as well as exploring theories of her European roots. This will showcase many of the syncretic elements of her character that shape the complexities and nuances of her identity. I then will be able to discuss how her origin mythologies play into her status as a folk saint. In this section I will be describing the commonalities seen in folk saint devotion and how Santa Muerte fits into this folk space, specifically looking at the traits that she shares with other folk saints. By highlighting these commonalities I will be able to emphasize the areas that Santa Muerte differs from other folk saints. These differences from other folk saints and cultic activities showcase Santa Muerte's appeal to her devotees as her identity is built upon her distinctiveness from other saints,

canonized and folk alike. Though describing Santa Muerte's origins and folk saint identity, I will have created a foundation to better conceptualize the ritual activities associated with this tradition.

For my analysis of ritual within the cult of Santa Muerte, I will be drawing from Ronald Grimes's elements of ritual. For the scope of this research, I am limiting my focus to the elements of ritual actions, ritual actors, ritual places, ritual times, and ritual objects. To aid in my research on ritual I will also be using Grimes's distinctions of the terms: performance, enactment, and practice. By setting up the theories of ritual within context to Santa Muerte, I will next be able to explain the ritual activities associated with her character as a love sorceress, avenger and protector. These sections will go into the nuances of Santa Muerte devotion and how her devotees create and reaffirm their worldly identities through ritual engagement with Santa Muerte. To help with showcasing the personal experience and relationships devotees have with Santa Muerte I will be pulling from the documentary *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*. This 2011 film, directed by Lucio Apolito, demonstrates a wide breadth of experiences and identities of devotees to Santa Muerte. It follows an ethnographic style that has the personal narratives of devotees as the focus of the film. The film follows devotees and non-devotees alike across the barrio of Tepito in Mexico City. This film demonstrates that devotion to this saint looks a variety of ways and that each devotee has their own unique and personal relationships to Saint Death. *Nuestra Santísima Muerte* offers a counter narrative to other media representations (in both Mexico and the United States) that constrain Santa Muerte and her devotees to only the world of criminality and violence.

Santa Muerte's Origins

Santa Muerte is an enigmatic figure with an even more mysterious origin. Devotees and scholars alike have given different answers to how and where Santa Muerte originated. The one thing that is definitive about her origins is that no one truly knows where she came from.

However, the most common myths and historical accounts that describe Santa Muerte's beginnings can be categorized by either attributing her origins to Medieval Catholic iconography or pre-Columbian roots in Aztec gods. The indigenous myths put her beginnings in Santa Ana Chapitiro, Mexico, however, there are historical accounts that show her appearance during the inquisition in the Americas (late 1790's). Similar to Santa Muerte, other skeleton figures have appeared across Latin America like San Pascual el Rey (also known as Rey Pascal) and San La Muerte. However, Santa Muerte is unique in comparison with these figures as her identity is distinctively connected to her femininity, but it is important to note these other skeleton saints as they can possibly give more insight into Saint Death's origin.

Medieval Catholic Associations

One of the most common theories about Santa Muerte's origin is rooted in the European Catholic iconography from the Medieval period, specifically the 14th century and after.¹ It was during this time that the Bubonic Plague was causing suffering and death across Europe. It is not shocking that themes of death began showing up in the popular culture of the Medieval period. One of these motifs of death was the *danse macabre*, which showed the universality of death. The images would show skeletons representative of every social class dancing. This showcased

¹ Piotr Michalik, "Death with a Bonus Pack: New Age Spirituality, Folk Catholicism, and the Cult of Santa Muerte." *Archives De Sciences Sociales Des Religions* 56, no. 153 (2011), 161.

that death would come for everyone, no matter the status or power they held. Santa Muerte draws many similarities to this theme of universal death. Many of her devotees are drawn to her as they recognize death is an equalizer that levels the ambiguous spaces of status and identity. As the physical embodiment of death, she is able to create this judgment free space for her devotees as eventually everyone will die. Santa Muerte is indifferent to how individuals live their lives and thus offers a space for her devotees to accept themselves and their worldly actions as she accepts them for who they are and all they have done. Another connection to the mid to late middle ages is that people were concerned with having a good or dignified death. "Preparation to a dignified death became one of the primal concerns for people who since medieval times gathered in confraternities (cofradías)."² These confraternities helped to institutionally deal with death and dying as they "were involved in various activities: they funded hospitals, collected contributions, organized funerals and prayed for the deceased confraters."³ What is most interesting about these confraternities in reference to Santa Muerte is that they would organize costume dramas. These dramas depicted religious ideas and themes in a visual form and was a tactic used by evangelizers in the Americas to spread Christianity to indigenous people.⁴ The content of these costume dramas can range but as Piotr Michalik writes,

The most popular iconographical representations of death in New Spain and Guatemala - a crowned skeleton (often portrayed as a queen), and a skeleton holding bow with arrows or a scythe - derived directly from late medieval European imagery. It was not long till the skeletal figures depicted in churches and placed among Catholic saints during festive processions and dances became venerated.⁵

The institution of confraternities also pushed the idea of and strategies for the obtainment of a good death. This same longing and desire for a good and just death is seen in the contemporary

² Michalik, "Death with a Bonus Pack," 161.

³ Ibid, 16.

⁴ These confraternities were very prominent in the Viceroyalty of New Spain and Captaincy General of Guatemala. See Michalik, pp. 161-162 for more information on confraternities.

⁵ Michalik, "Death with a Bonus Pack," 161.

Santa Muerte cult. Her devotees believe that Santa Muerte is able to provide them with a dignified death. This same motif of death coming for everyone continues to be seen all across Europe, typically depicted by the Grim Reaper figure. In general, the Grim Reaper, who is often seen carrying a scythe and wearing a black robe, shares similar physical traits with Santa Muerte. She is also often seen holding a scythe and is always depicted as a skeleton. In Spain, there is even La Parca, who is a female Grim Reaper figure. These European and Catholic depictions of death and dying in the form of skeletal figures seem to be connected to Santa Muerte's own iconography. It is not shocking how these historical moments and religious themes have been used to explain the beginnings of Santa Muerte and her cult. Today Santa Muerte's iconography also has direct influences from the Virgin of Guadalupe's imagery. Santa Muerte's connections to the Virgin are plentiful as she, Saint Death, is also seen by her devotees as a maternal figure that offers unconditional love to those who venerate her. These Catholic and European connections to the origin of Santa Muerte are not the only theories of Saint Death's beginnings.

Santa Muerte's Pre-Columbian Roots

Oftentimes scholars and devotees alike will link Santa Muerte's origin to pre-Columbian figures. Saint Death has been associated with the Aztec gods of death and the underworld, Mictecacihuatl and her husband Mictlantecuhtli. These gods reside in Mictlan "the lowest level of the underworld and location of the bones of the dead."⁶ The Aztecs believed that for the individuals who died of natural causes these gods could intervene in human affairs and their devotees could use "their power for earthly causes."⁷ Both Mictecacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli are depicted as skeletal figures and often shown in gruesome acts that showcase the physicality

⁶ Christine Whittington, *La Santa Muerte: Origin And Significance Of A Mexican Folk Saint*. 2011. Wake Forest University, Master's thesis, 12.

⁷ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 28.

and messiness of death. In Santa Muerte's present day iconography there are Aztec influences. The most pronounced of these influences is the use of owls in Santa Muerte's imagery. "The tecolote (owl in Mexican Spanish, derived from the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs) symbolized death in Aztec culture."⁸ This owl imagery has a dual meaning within this cult, with the owl being indigenously connected to death and the gods of the underworld, while also in European lore it symbolizes wisdom and guidance. This dualism of the owl is a great representation of the syncretism within Santa Muerte's identity as both a figure of Mesoamerican mythology and European Catholicism and lore. However, within this tradition, Santa Muerte's indigenous roots are more likely to be evoked by her Mexican devotees as her true origins. In some ways by tying Santa Muerte's origins to indigenous religion, this acts as an authenticating feature to her devotee's own identities as Mexicans. Some devotees suggest that "Her Spanish-style tunics and dresses, and her European accoutrements, the scythe and scales of justice, are but a façade thinly veiling her true Aztec identity."⁹ This however is not to say that most of her devotees are concerned with her origin or the myths surrounding her creation. Most devotees venerate Santa Muerte regardless of what beginnings are prescribed to her.

Santa Ana Chapitiro Myth

Even though Santa Muerte is considered one of the most popular Catholic folk saints in present day Mexico she does not have the typical origin stories that most folk Saints have. This is mainly due to the fact that she was never a human woman. However, there is one such origin story that she is connect to by the Purépecha¹⁰ (an indigenous community that resides in the state

⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁰ This indigenous group was never conquered by the neighboring Aztecs. See Chesnut, pp. 28-29 for more information on the Purépecha and the Santa Ana Chapitiro myth.

of Michoacán). Vicente Ramos, who is presently a very active Santa Muerte devotee in Morelia, made this connection to Santa Muerte's Purépecha origin in the small town of Santa Ana Chapitiro. Ramos explains that in the 16th century Santa Muerte was born to a Purépecha couple. Miraculously, Saint Death never appeared as a normal human baby but was born as a "full grown woman with a light complexion and chestnut hair."¹¹ The parents, fearing that she would be taken away from them by the Spanish, kept her locked away. However, one night she escaped and traveled from village to village. During her travels, the villagers were afraid of her as they thought she was some kind of spirit (she would appear in either a white or black robe). Rumors eventually spread of the wandering woman and this resulted in Inquisition officials arresting her for witchcraft. She was sentenced to be burned at the stake but upon her execution only her skin was burned to ash. The flames did not touch her skeleton leaving it fully intact on the stake. Soon realizing what had happened "Friar Juan Pablo yelled at the crowd, 'Don't be afraid, you have nothing to fear. On the contrary, give thanks to God that he allowed you to see our Most Holy Death (Santísima Muerte).'"¹² This origin myth that creates a human life for Santa Muerte places her within the Catholic conceptualizations of sainthood in both folk and canonical devotion. Within Catholicism, a saint must be a human that has died either through martyrdom or died after living a heroically virtuous life.¹³ In folk devotion there is a common motif of the saint dying a tragic death. Based on the Santa Ana Chapitiro myth Santa Muerte would fall into this motif of a tragic death, and thus she could even be considered a martyr. This unique origin myth for Santa Muerte is one that tries to situate Santa Muerte as a legitimate and doctrinally supported saint. For most devotees within this tradition the acknowledgement of the Catholic church is

¹¹ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 28.

¹² *Ibid.*, 30.

¹³ "Saints," *US Conference of Catholic Bishops*, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/offices/public-affairs/saints>

unnecessary for their devotion. In some cases, devotees prefer that Santa Muerte remains outside of the Catholic doctrinal frameworks.

First Historical Accounts of Santa Muerte

Even with all of these theorized origins of Santa Muerte there is no official proof of the validity of any of them. It seems that it is more likely that the identity of Santa Muerte was shaped by an amalgamation of European catholic iconography and indigenous religion.¹⁴ The only officially known origin of Santa Muerte starts in her first appearance in Inquisition records in 1797. These records detailed the idolatrous acts of a group of indigenous people in the town of San Luis de la Paz. The document describes how the native people would drink peyote “until they lose their minds; they light upside-down candles, some of which are black; they dance with paper dolls; they whip Holy Crosses and also a figure of death that they call Santa Muerte, and they bind it with a wet rope threatening to whip and burn it if it does not perform a miracle.”¹⁵ After this initial sighting of Santa Muerte in historical records she disappeared until the 1940s where she reappeared in prayer cards. These oraciones¹⁶ were used to ask for her help in love and troubles of the heart. Undoubtedly, Santa Muerte was a love sorceress during this time (and continues to be one). Preceding Santa Muerte’s appearance in historical records as a love sorceress, her other skeletal saintly peers, Rey Pascual and San La Muerte, made their appearances in Guatemala and Argentina, respectively. Rey Pascual appeared to a Mayan man in the 1650s almost 200 years before Santa Muerte’s historic arrival.¹⁷ The story of Rey Pascual

¹⁴ This includes religious elements from Afro-Caribbean religion like Santería.

¹⁵ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 31.

¹⁶ The word “prayers” in Spanish.

¹⁷ “Pascual Bailón was a Franciscan friar from Aragón who lived during the second half of the sixteenth century and was known as a mystic and contemplative. He was beatified by the Church in 1618, just a couple decades after his death, and then canonized in 1690. Although he never set foot in the Americas, his apparition in Guatemala in 1650 to a deathly ill Mayan man is credited with ending a virulent epidemic. Legend has it that the Spanish saint appeared in the form of a tall skeleton in luminescent robes at the deathbed of a prominent Kaqchikel man and presented

follows the same pattern that other folk saints have. Chesnut believes that Rey Pascual is a syncretic transformation of the Spanish Franciscan Saint Pascual Bailón. San La Muerte of Argentina, like Santa Muerte and Rey Pascal, is a skeleton who is also known to his devotees as the just judge. This saint is most known for his ability to find stolen or lost objects. Even though these figures seem similar to Santa Muerte, and in Rey Pascal's case they predate her, there still is a large differentiating feature between Santa Muerte and these other Skeleton saints. As Andrew Chesnut states that "the Argentine and Guatemalan skeleton saints are the product of a fusion of La Parca with real and imagined Spanish saints."¹⁸ This is not the case for Santa Muerte, she has no historical connections to being a human and has only a scarce amount of mythology that backs her human origin. Santa Muerte's identity is also directly connected to her status as a female saint. She is seen by her devotees as a maternal figure, these other skeleton saints do not have such familial relationships to their devotees. Thus, for Santa Muerte, even if her identity is influenced by her male skeleton counterparts these influences are found only in shared iconography as she holds the eternal power of death. Each of these origin myths about Santa Muerte showcase unique dimensions of the saint's iconography and identity. Even though her origin is unknown her identity has continued to be shaped by both her Catholic and pre-Columbian roots, which have intermingled to create her unique identity as a folk saint.

himself as Saint Pascual, even though it would be forty more years until he was canonized." Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, The Skeleton Saint*. Oxford University Press, 2012, 166-167.

¹⁸ Ibid., 61.

Folk Sainthood within the Cult of Santa Muerte

Santa Muerte is the Catholic folk saint of death. With her identity undeniably tied to folk veneration it is no surprise that there are commonalities between her and other folk saints. However, Santa Muerte brings in new components to her folk identity and veneration that are not shared by her saintly peers. These differentiating features of Santa Muerte's character affect the interactions that her devotees experience with her. Figures like Juan Diego, who inhabit similar spaces of both Catholic and folk devotion, have an easier time being accepted by the Church, as shown by Juan Diego's beatification. This beatification process began due to Juan Diego's increasing popularity amongst Catholics. Similarly, this large population of followers of Juan Diego is seen in the cult of Santa Muerte. As previously stated, she has an estimated 10 to 12 million devotees around the world, yet remains officially unrecognized by the Catholic church. Even though both Santa Muerte and Juan Diego historically never existed, Juan Diego's identity allows him to still fit into the Catholic soteriology. Santa Muerte will never have the same experience with the Catholic church as Juan Diego. Santa Muerte's identity exists outside of the traditional Catholic conceptualizations of saints due to her being the saintly embodiment of death.

Before explaining both the similarities and differentiating characteristics of Santa Muerte's status as a folk saint, it is important to understand what exactly folk saint devotion is. Firstly, this type of devotion is an expansive space that holds a variety of different characters. In the context of Santa Muerte, folk devotion is unequivocally connected to Mexican culture. As Frank Graziano writes "The world of folk saint devotion, and more broadly of folk Catholicism generally, is one in which supernatural beings (gods, saints, souls, spirits) are a prominent

presence in everyday life. They intermingle with humans and have causal influence—magical and miraculous—on even the mundane matters of one's day-to-day routine.”¹⁹ This pantheon of supernatural beings allows devotees to turn to saints for a wide variety of concerns that appear in their daily lives. This folk saint devotion is characterized by the resounding amount of “normal/everyday” people that are devotees to these saints. Devotees seek the aid of supernatural beings to help them survive their everyday troubles. This creates a strong bond between the devotee and the saint as the devotee is continuously relying on the saint for their miraculous help. In the cult of Santa Muerte, it is important to note that like other folk devotional practices “normal people” make up the majority of this tradition’s devotees. This reality however is not expressed by the media. They continuously link her to the world of criminality and perpetuate Santa Muerte’s connections to narco culture. I will explore this media portrayal in more in depth below, but it is worth mentioning that media representations of Santa Muerte affect how she is perceived as a saint and in most instances, they negatively tarnish her role as this divine figure to the general public.

Even with the harsh criticism from outsiders, devotees are continuously using her as their saint of choice. This is in part due to Santa Muerte being a specialist in many issues, she is even known as the “saint of action” by her devotees.²⁰ Her followers know that once they make a request to Saint Death she is going to follow through and grant their miracles quickly. Similar to many other saints, Santa Muerte most commonly deals with issues regarding health, love, family, and employment.²¹ Unlike her other saintly counterparts, she initially started off as a specialist in love and is considered to be a powerful love sorceress.²² Typically folk saints start by dealing

¹⁹ Frank Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

²⁰ Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, The Skeleton Saint* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 21.

²¹ Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 11.

²² Due to the scarce number of historical records about Santa Muerte before colonial contact, the first well documented sources of Santa Muerte describe her as a love sorceress. This means Santa Muerte very well could

with the common issues devotees face then and over time they develop specializations that become their calling cards. For Santa Muerte, she historically has been tied to love sorcery as her first official saintly occupation. Contemporarily her identity as a multidimensional saint holds one of the strongest appeals to her devotees. No longer do they need to call upon multiple saints to help them with their cause, now they can just ask Santa Muerte to help them with any issue they may have.

Unlike formalized veneration of canonized saints and worship of a distant god, Santa Muerte and other folk saints are deeply connected to their communities and devotees. There is an “intimate familiarity with saints who are conceived as otherworldly extensions of their communities.”²³ The identity of these folk saints is a direct reflection of the community that the saint inhabits. For figures like Santa Muerte her popularity has extended past Mexico to a wide variety of countries and communities. As the saint’s popularity continues to grow, more ritual diversity is seen within this tradition, as each community interacts with her in nuanced ways. However, a common component of her identity (no matter her location) is that she is distinctively portrayed as a Mexican female.²⁴ This is shown through ritual activities like dressing Santa Muerte effigies in traditional Mexican women’s clothing. Her identity as a Mexican is also demonstrated through the offerings that will be given to her, as her offerings are items that devotees believe that Santa Muerte would like as a Mexican.²⁵ This often includes tequila, beer, cigarettes, traditional Mexican food, and money.²⁶

have started as a generalist saint that did not have a specialty in love sorcery. The first historical record of Santa Muerte appears in inquisition records in 1797. See Chesnut, pp. 31-32 for more information on this initial historical record of Santa Muerte.

²³ Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 3.

²⁴ As Santa Muerte continues to spread outside of Mexico it will be interesting to see how her identity is transformed to the communities she inhabits.

²⁵ See Graziano, pp. 55-57 about the role of offerings in folk saint devotion and how offerings are connected to the saint’s identity.

²⁶ See Chesnut, pp. 191-192 for a closer look at the items offered to Santa Muerte and their cultural significance.

Santa Muerte's identity as a Mexican is further evoked by her general conceptualization by devotees as they pull from larger ideas of death in Latin America. "Death in [Latin American] Catholicism implies more a change of state and status than a permanent absence from the world of the living."²⁷ This means that once a loved one dies, they are truly never gone from the physical world. Special holidays like Día de los Muertos commemorate this belief as loved ones visit the tombs of the dead and believe that their deceased family can return to the world of the living for this period of time. Ritual traditions like this one, showcase the comfortability with death and dying in cultures across Latin American, especially in Mexican culture. Thus, Santa Muerte as the physical embodiment of death is not seen as macabre but as a comforting and familiar figure. Beyond just the cult of Santa Muerte, folk devotion also embraces this comfortability with death. This differs from the Catholic Church "insofar as the iconography of Christ and the saints serve more as models for meaningful suffering, for penance, and for consolation (by comparison with greater suffering) than they do as vehicles for positive, practical change."²⁸ This focus on suffering greatly differs from folk devotion and more specifically devotion to Santa Muerte, as these traditions purposefully are practiced by devotees as a means of alleviating their suffering in both life and death. As explained by Graziano that "Death is not privileged for morbid attraction or passive contemplation, but rather for deployment of its otherworldly powers to improve one's life in this world."²⁹ This is part of the power of Santa Muerte as a saint. She embodies how death can be a transformative and powerful force in individuals' lives.

As with many other folk devotional traditions this cult has no formal doctrine to dictate or limit the ritual activities associated with Santa Muerte. Thus, devotion to folk saints can take a

²⁷ Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

variety of forms as followers have freedom to express devotion how they see fit. There is, of course, an underlying structure to most devotional practices (both in the public and private sphere) but devotees are not limited or bound by these foundational structures of devotion. One common feature in this type of devotion is the use of spiritual contracts between the Saint and devotee. These contracts ensure that both parties keep up their end of the deal. If a devotee does not follow through with their promise to the saint, they believe that the saint will inflict their wrath upon the devotee. Conversely, the devotee can punish their saint for not granting their miracles. This can be done by explicitly stopping veneration to the saint or even disrespecting their effigies as is seen in some cults devoted to St. Judas Thaddeus.³⁰ In the cult of Santa Muerte it is known that if a devotee does not hold up their promise to Saint death that she will use her power to punish her disloyal follower. However, unlike other folk devotion, devotees do not punish Santa Muerte for not granting their miracle. Devotees believe that she is too powerful of a being to punish and know that she would seek revenge if she were disrespected.

In all folk devotion saints emerge out of the needs of the community.³¹ For the cult of Santa Muerte this is especially the case as her primary devotees are marginalized and disenfranchised people who cannot turn to the Catholic Church or their governmental institutions for aid in their survival. As stated by David Bromley, “her distinctive, core devotees are outsiders: marginal sexual groups (the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community, sex workers), drug cartels, criminals (drug traffickers, kidnappers, coyotes), incarcerated prisoners, and marginalized young adults.”³² As marginalized people, Santa Muerte’s devotees seek power

³⁰ Oftentimes devotees will turn their effigies around so they face walls, some will tie ropes to their statues and hang them upside down, and in extreme cases followers will bury their effigies as punishment for not granting their miracle. See Orsi, *Thank You St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Lost Causes* for more information on interactions with saint effigies.

³¹ Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 10.

³² David Bromley, “Santa Muerte as Emerging Dangerous Religion?” *Religions*, vol. 7, no. 6, 2016, pp. 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7060065>, 4.

greater than that of church and state to help them. It is no wonder “that the needs brought to the attention of folk saints are predominantly those that ineffective government does not satisfy, notable basic health care and socioeconomic security.”³³ Ultimately folk saints like Santa Muerte help their devotees deal with their status and identity as outsiders. Santa Muerte helps her devotees claim agency in spaces where they are deemed “other”. This acceptance of marginalized and disenfranchised peoples showcases one of the most unique qualities of Santa Muerte’s identity as a folk saint. Her identity as a non-judgmental saint is one of the most appealing characteristics to her devotees as many of them cannot be accepted by the Catholic church or the larger communities they live in. No matter what actions her devotees do in this life, Santa Muerte will not forsake them or turn her back on them. It is due to Santa Muerte’s status as the embodiment of death that she is able to create this judgment free space for her devotees. Death is an equalizer that everyone will have to confront, and thus Santa Muerte is indifferent to how individuals live their lives. Similarly, to her devotees Santa Muerte can be considered a marginalized saint; she is actively condemned and denounced by the Catholic Church even though most of her practitioners consider themselves Catholic. Her marginalized status is another quality that her devotees find comforting as she is a relatable figure because many of them have also been shunned by the Catholic Church. To her devotees Saint Death allows them to deal with their marginalized status and the challenges and sufferings that it entails.

Compared to other non-judgmental folk saints like Jesús Malverde, who is thought of as the patron saint of narcos and thieves, Santa Muerte holds a different power and strength than these figures.³⁴ Saint Death was never a human woman and thus her strength does not come from a tragic human life but from the eternal power of death. In most folk devotion, devotees consider

³³ Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 29.

³⁴ See Gómez et al. for more about the folk saint Jesús Malverde.

their folk saints to be extensions of their identities and feel equal to their saints, as they feel seen and can relate to the folk saint's tragic life as a human. This idea of tragic death is a feature of folk sainthood and many of the origin myths about individual folk saints describe the gruesome and unjust ways folk saints have died. By dying tragically this adds power to these myths as many of these saintly figures are given the status of martyrs. For Santa Muerte there is no tragic story of her life and death. Devotees believe that Santa Muerte is an extension of their identities as marginalized people but recognize that she is of a higher power (as literally the embodiment of death) and do not conflate their human status with her divine one.

Santa Muerte is one of (if not the most powerful) folk saints a devotee can turn to. Her power is connected to her status as the personification of death; an equalizing figure that no one can escape. To most devotees Santa Muerte is imagined as only answering to God and having the ability to grant god-like miracles. As Andrew Chesnut explains:

If the bony saint finds herself with scores of new adherents who have been disappointed by Saint Jude, Guadalupe, Jesús Malverde, and others, it is because none of them, official or folk, can rival the power and range of her miracle-working ability. In large part this derives from her position in the celestial hierarchy imagined by most devotees. Ranking higher than other saints, martyrs, and even the Virgin Mary, Santa Muerte is conceived of as an archangel (of death) who really only takes orders from God himself. Readers familiar with Catholic theology will recognize the familiar role of Archangel Michael, God's angel of death who guards and judges souls, weighing their merit with the same set of scales employed by the skeleton saint. Thus in the folk theology of death's devotees, the Powerful Lady not only replaces Saint Michael but for all intents and purposes supplants God himself with her infinite power to perform miracles.³⁵

Santa Muerte's infinite power as the saint of death allows her devotees to feel fully protected by her. As most of her devotees are surrounded by violence and death, they take comfort knowing that they have a personal relationship to this figure. In most folk devotion God tends to disappear from the ritual activities between the saints and their devotee. For instance, saints will be thanked

³⁵ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 60.

for miracles rather than God. The devotees believe it is the divinity of the saint enacting these miracles not the divinity of God enacting these miracles through the saint. As Frank Graziano explains “The request for miracles is made to the folk saints, the granted miracles are credited to the folk saints, and the thanks, including prayer and offerings, are directed to the folk saints rather than to God.”³⁶ Even though a large majority of Santa Muerte’s devotees define themselves as Catholics some of her devotees choose to remove themselves from organized religion, specifically Catholicism, altogether. For these devotees that do not ascribe to the Catholic faith, arguably do not see God in any part of their relationship to Saint Death. This puts Santa Muerte at the top of the spiritual hierarchy for these non-Catholic devotees.

As an ambiguous saint that inhabits both the space of formal Catholicism and folk devotion alike, Santa Muerte is expanding how the term saint can be understood. “One effect of this broadened usage of “saint” is a leveling and then reordering of the Catholic hierarchy.”³⁷ This subverts the power of the Catholic Church to determine who is a saint. Thus, individuals that were once previously marginalized by the Catholic church can call upon their own saintly figures like Santa Muerte to offer them the love, support, and protection they cannot receive from canonized saints and the Catholic church. The Catholic church’s recognition of saints legitimizes certain lived experiences of devotees . However, devotion to Santa Muerte validates the reality of her followers’ lives. Thus, sainthood, whether or not it is formally recognized by the Catholic church, is a complex concept that simultaneously exists within the doctrinal frameworks of the Catholic church while also being expanded and restructured to fit the needs and experiences of devotees. Santa Muerte is a resistant force to the Catholic church’s continued discrimination against people and saints that do not fit into their imaginings of Catholics and sainthood. Santa

³⁶ Graziano, *Cultures of Devotion*, 10.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

Muerte's continued popularity only further shows how this limiting system of veneration within the Catholic Church is not working and devotees are turning to the only reliable figure they know— death.

Theorizing Ritual

To help better conceptualize the ritual activities within the cult of Santa Muerte I will be pulling from Ronald Grimes' elements of ritual. To aid in this discussion I will also be using the terms performance, enactment, and practice. These terms are often used interchangeably when discussing ritual activity. However, Grimes points out that there is a nuanced distinction between each of these words. Grimes argues that "Rituals are practices insofar as they engrain persistent attitudes; performances insofar as they are either witnessed or framed as fictive; and enactments insofar as they exercise force beyond their own boundaries."³⁸ Even though these words are distinct from one another and apply to different ritual situations I think that certain rituals are an amalgamation of performance, enactment, and practice. Specifically, in relation to Santa Muerte, I think that these terms -- practices, performances, and reenactments -- can be applied to all ritual activities present in the cult. At different times and spaces, ritual activity can be any of these terms. I am arguing that certain rituals within this cult are combinations of performance, practice, and enactment. Thus, these terms are not in opposition to one another but are complementary and work together in certain time-spaces to create unique ritual experiences within the cult of Santa Muerte. By using Grimes' theory of ritual elements, I will be able to emphasize the significance

³⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014, 243.

of ritual within this tradition and highlight the effects that ritual has on devotees of Santa Muerte, as it can create and transform the moods and motivations³⁹ of practitioners.

Performance, Enactment, and Practice

In Grimes' theory of ritual action, he makes the clearest distinctions between the terms, performance, enactment, and practice. Grimes points out that the key dimension of thinking about ritual as performance is that it suggests that there is an audience. Grimes states that "Because social density is so typical of ritual, ritual actions are usually interactions, and these interactions differ in certain ways from ordinary kinds of interaction".⁴⁰ In other words, even though rituals can be an individual endeavor, many ritual activities are done within group settings. This means that all of the ritual actors will be interacting with each other and the space, even if they are not an active figure in the physical "doing" of the ritual (like the audience/ritual spectator). Thus, within performance models of ritual activity more agency is given to both the ritual insider and the audience/ritual spectator as they are all viewed as active participants of these rituals.⁴¹ In the cult of Santa Muerte performance plays a key role in ritual engagement with public shrines. One of the most famous Santa Muerte shrines is located in the barrio Tepito in Mexico city. This shrine engages with the idea of ritual performance and how the "audience" indisputably affects the ritual activities taking place at this public shrine.

Ritual performance also alludes to thinking about what "ritual actually does, rather than on what it is supposed to mean."⁴² By focusing on the "performance" of ritual activity it can keep scholars from attributing meaning to ritual where there is none, as not every aspect of a ritual

³⁹ Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system". In *The interpretation of cultures*, 87-125. Fontana Press, 1993, 90.

⁴⁰ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 243.

⁴¹ Catherine M. Bell, "Ritual, Symbols, Syntax, and Praxis." In *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 61-89. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997, 76.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73.

necessarily has deeper meaning than just the “showing” of it. This can be understood better in terms of ritualization⁴³ that denotes a gradation of ritual activity that gets rid of thinking about actions as either ritualistic or not. However, Grimes also suggests that rituals consist of more than just “showing,” for this type of ritual he uses the term enactment. For Grimes enacting ritual means that there is a certain amount of force behind the ritual, denoting that this force can bring about something that affects the participants of the ritual. Grimes states:

Similarly, enacting a ritual can set things in motion. Its gestures and postures are designed to achieve something. Their aim is not merely to entertain but rather to effect, so I usually say that people enact rituals, especially when a rite seems capable of accomplishing a deed or bringing about an effect. If I say “perform,” it is usually to call attention to the fact of being witnessed by an audience or to an as-if attitude among participants. Ritual is performed when participants act in front of spectating others or when they play roles in a subjunctive mode.⁴⁴

This focus of “doing” is helpful in thinking about the real world effects ritual activities can have on the ritual participants (ritual insiders and ritual spectators/witnesses) and the environments around them. Thus, participation in ritual activity (whether passive or active) can create “powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations” in its participants. Enactment can be viewed as an extension of performance theory that draws more on the “doing” and effect of ritual, but still notes the role of the audience/spectator within these rituals. Ritual enactment appears throughout the cult of Santa Muerte. Each time a devotee within this tradition enacts a ritual in devotion to Santa Muerte they are seeking to bring about a real-world effect. Whether it be to punish a straying spouse or praying for protection, devotees of Santa Muerte enact rituals to receive the blessings and divine help of death.

The last distinction that Grimes makes is thinking about ritual as practice. Grimes pulls heavily from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus; “how societies reproduce their values in

⁴³ See Bell, pp 73 and Grimes, pp 243 for more on the role of ritual participants.

⁴⁴ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 243.

individuals, or... how individuals come habitually to hold the views and attitudes expected of them.”⁴⁵ The relation of Bourdieu’s habitus to ritual gets at what Grimes believes is at the core of practice; “the ways cultural meanings seem obvious, natural, or taken for granted.”⁴⁶ Practice theories showcase how ritual activity helps to produce, reproduce, and maintain cultural realities that are presented as unquestionable truths. Thus, practice theory looks at the larger cultural frameworks that rituals are situated within. Catherine Bell notes the transformative element of practice theory, she states:

[...] practice theory claims to take seriously the way in which human activities, as formal as a religious ritual or as casual as a midday stroll, are creative strategies by which human beings continually reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments. Practice theory also addresses several issues that differentiate it from performance theory. For example, it is less interested in specific types of acts, such as ritual or dance and more interested in how cultural activity generally works.⁴⁷

Practice theory allows scholars to look at the larger structures at play within ritual activities. It showcases how attitudes and moods are engrained through ritual activities. For the cult of Santa Muerte practicing certain rituals showcase the larger cultural expression of Mexican identity. Through rituals that deal with gender (like love rituals), devotees are often practicing rituals that are an effect of or a means of combating the larger issues of gender identity and gender roles with Mexican culture. All of these terms (performance, enactment, and practice) illuminate the nuances within ritual action. These terms demonstrate how ritual action can vary greatly in meaning, effort, and belief but are essential parts of cultural expression.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 244.

⁴⁷ Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, 76.

Ritual Actors

When thinking about ritual action it is important to discuss the people participating in these ritual activities. Grimes calls these participants ritual actors. This term evokes the ideas of performance theory and gives agency to all participants (even the ritual spectators) as active members of ritual activities. This does not mean that every person who is a ritual actor is physically “doing” the ritual action, but they are in the same space and interact (however limited) with the ritual participants doing the ritual action or with the ritual objects by being in their presence. Grimes explains that “Because everyone, even the most passive participant, exercises some kind of agency, all participants are doers, even if they do nothing more than show up or stay away.”⁴⁸ In these ritual spaces many different types of ritual actors are interacting, such as devotees, nonbelievers, and tourists; they are all simultaneously affecting these ritual spaces. All ritual actors have an active role in the ritual, even if they are passive in relation to the ritual activity. By relating ritual participants with actors this brings into question the element of belief and the dimension of fictiveness within the performance of ritual. Ritual actors do not have to believe or even need to know the meaning of the ritual activities with which they are interacting. A common dichotomy between action and belief often presupposes that belief exists before action when this is not necessarily the case, nor is it an important question to ask as ritual actors are not questioning the legitimacy of their belief over their action. What is significant about ritual actors and the question of belief is that “Ritual actors, unlike stage actors, are not supposed to be pretending (although they may in fact be). Although they may be performing, because they are aware of being observed, they are also supposed to enact something as agents who accomplish something.”⁴⁹ These ritual actors exist in a time-space that allows them to interact with sacred

⁴⁸ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 249.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 249.

objects, people, and environments. Whether or not the ritual actor is a believer, non-believer, or complete outsider to these ritual activities, these rituals are connected to identity building. This is especially the case for those ritual actors who are spectators and exist outside of the cultural framework of these rituals as their identity would be “other” to the ritual native in these spaces. Likewise, identities can be recemented through the collective ritual agents.⁵⁰ In other words, the individual’s identity is bound to these collective ritual spaces and affirms their identity as part of the community or insider group who is physically an active participant in these rituals. In the cult of Santa Muerte, this affirmation of identity is an especially important part of the ritual activities within this cult. As the ritual actors who are actively engaging with Santa Muerte at public shrines reconfirm their status as devotees and members of their local communities. It is in these spaces that social interactions are taking place amongst devotees that are a part of either the local community or the larger Santa Muerte devotional community. Thus, creating lasting bonds through their shared devotion of Santa Muerte.

Ritual Place

In conjunction with ritual actors are ritual places. These ritual actors are interacting with ritual places through ritual activities. Grimes explains that ritual places are often seen within binary frameworks that he describes as:

Ritual space is often conceptualized on an either/or model: architectural/ natural; inside/outside; central/peripheral; static/mobile; permanent/temporary; sacred/nonsacred; high/low; near/far; public/private; paid for/free; space (abstract, empty) / place (specific, geographical); set (constructed) / setting (given, there). Actual human activity often happens between, not at the extreme ends of, such oppositional polarities.⁵¹

⁵⁰ See Ibid., 251 for more about collective ritual agents. He defines it as “a group acting in concert.”

⁵¹ Ibid., 256.

These binary conceptualizations of ritual take away its nuance and limit how interdependent these ritual elements are to the outcome of the overall ritual experience. This is not to say that this interdependence of the ritual elements relies on all rituals having actors, places, times, and objects, but it does suggest that most rituals do have a majority of these elements that plays a role in the performance, enactment, and practice of these rituals. For ritual places, there is a significance on the actions taking place in this space, as not every ritual space is necessarily sacred. Thus, Grimes understands ritual space to be “any place where a ritual occurs.”⁵² This broad conceptualization of ritual space allows for larger inclusion for places that are not always thought of as ritualistic to be considered as such. This is especially helpful for thinking about ritual activity within the cult of Santa Muerte; like many other folk devotions, her devotees seek her aid through their everyday experiences and daily spaces. Thus, ritual spaces are varied throughout the cult and can even include the most mundane of locations. Even for spaces that are not traditionally thought of as sacred can be made as such through the ritual engagement that takes place there. Thus, the sacredness of space is more about the transformative qualities it has on an individual. Meaning that the status of the individual is changed through the interaction with the sacred but returns once the interaction with the space is over. Grimes also points out that spaces can be embodied and likewise can embody action. This in some instances can mean that spaces become ritual actors and even enact ritual activities.⁵³ Grimes explains that “Rituals operate in environments that are simultaneously biological, geographical, social, political, historical, and cultural.”⁵⁴ Ritual places whether or not deemed sacred showcase the important interactions that take place between practitioners and the cultural frameworks within these ritual

⁵² Ibid., 257.

⁵³ See Grimes, pp 258-259 for more about non-humans as active agents of ritual. Grimes uses the examples of mountains and rivers (mainly focusing on places of the natural world) as being ritual agents. It would be interesting to look at how ritual spaces that are not of the natural world are active ritual agents. Especially, thinking about virtual spaces; how they are embodied and how they embody.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 259.

activities. Ritual place in the cult of Santa muerte shows this unique interaction between the sacred and profane as devotional spaces are often mundane locations like bedrooms, kitchen tables, or neighborhood streets. These locations thus become an intermingled space of sacredness and profaneness through the presence of Santa Muerte and her shrines.

Ritual Time

Often coinciding with ritual place is ritual time. Ritual time can be interpreted in a variety of ways and has many meanings. Grimes lays out definitions of what he finds to be the most prominent terms in reference to ritual time. The most relevant to my argument are his definitions of ritual duration (“how long a ritual performance lasts”), ritual endurance (“how long a ritual has survived historically”), ritual timing (“when a ritual happens”), and ritual phasing (“the temporal patterning (“rhythm”) of a ritual; a ritual’s articulation of its beginning, middle, and end (“plot”)”).⁵⁵ Rituals are both spatially and temporally connected to the individuals and groups/communities doing them. Thus, culturally significant times are often represented ritually. Ritual duration showcases the physical time that is passing while performing, enacting, or practicing a ritual activity. This amount of time can vary greatly depending on the complexity of the ritual. The ritual duration can also be representative of a culturally significant amount of time, and thus is less about the ritual action but the ritual symbolism of time. Stepping back and looking at the historical significance of ritual, ritual endurance highlights how most rituals change and transform throughout time. The rituals that remain the same for long historical periods can give larger insight into the social, political, and economic mindsets of devotees.

Grimes notes that when analyzing ritual time two common analogies are created that present “ritual-as-unchanging-structure and ritual-as-timeless ideas,” both of these connections to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 262

time “remove ritual from the ravages of time.”⁵⁶ In other words, under these models, time’s effect on ritual disappears and creates the illusion that ritual is a static concept. Plenty of rituals die out and many are transformed and are built upon to create new ones. The endurance of a ritual can be affected by the preservation of said ritual, like if the ritual is passed down through writing, orally, or mnemonically.⁵⁷ In connection to the temporal transformations of ritual, thinking about ritual timing is significant as looking at the historical changes or stagnation of when a specific ritual takes place can highlight culturally persisting or culturally discarded moods and attitudes. The element of ritual timing is significant as it can point out not only a collective understanding of time but also an individual one, like when a ritual will take place does not have to have a culturally significant meaning but could just be based on an individual’s internal clock. This is especially true for the cult of Santa Muerte as Saint death has no physical dates that are significant to her mythology (like a birthday or death day as she was never a human woman). Thus devotees pick times that are significant to their community or that are related to other holidays and events.⁵⁸ The timing of the ritual can also vary for a variety of reasons, some based on physical practicality (like needing a ritual to be held a night as less people are working at this time)⁵⁹ or cultural symbolism. Timing of ritual activities can also be connected to the ritual place, specifically thinking about if a ritual is being done in the public or private sphere. Where a ritual takes place can limit what times a ritual can be performed. The last dimension of ritual time is ritual phasing. This term encapsulates the overarching structures that certain rituals can follow. By looking at the larger timing structures within rituals it can give clarity to the type of ritual as well as the formality or informality associated with said ritual.

⁵⁶ Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 264.

⁵⁷ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 264.

⁵⁸ Día de Muertos has become an important time for Santa Muerte devotion. Devotees will pray to her along with their dead ancestors.

⁵⁹ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 265.

Ritual Objects

This same formality and informality within ritual activities can be seen in the interaction ritual actors have with ritual objects. These objects can be seen as any object within a ritual place. This means that not all ritual objects are sacred objects. As Grimes explains:

“Sacred” is about value; “ritual” is about use. “Sacred” means “ultimately valued,” but there are penultimate things as well: treasures, memorabilia, and keepsakes. Ritual objects are implements actively used in rituals, but what about things merely occupying a ritual space? What about food eaten, food offered to gods, and food left over? And what about ritual implements carried beyond the ritual precincts? Are they still ritual tools? If a ritual object away from its home is treated ritually, it remains a ritual object. If it is treated as mere disposable stuff, it is not.⁶⁰

This means that based on the interaction an individual has with a ritual object outside of the ritual space denotes its ritual significance but does not necessarily denote its sacredness. Not all rituals even need ritual objects. In the rituals that do require objects, these objects (especially the sacred ones) can take on a different status that transforms their identity beyond just objects. This status transformation of a ritual object is present in folk saint devotion as saint effigies are seen as real embodied representations of the saints.⁶¹ For ritual objects of great significance and for ones that are seen as sacred, Grimes notes that these objects often come with myths and stories attached to them. Grimes uses the example of icons as they have myths attached to them and are held as sacred objects: “icons are ritually executed representations of holy beings (God, Christ, the saints, angels).”⁶² Icons demonstrate the personification that takes place with ritual objects, as they are seen as physical representations of holy people. This is why acts violence against sacred objects (iconoclasm) have such a profound impact on devotees. These objects are not just things

⁶⁰ Ibid., 268.

⁶¹ See Hughes “Cradling the Sacred” for more about object embodiment.

⁶² Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 271.

but living beings endowed with sacred (even holy) power. Jennifer Hughes describes this as vital materialism: “The set of beliefs and actions oriented around the ontological assumption that seemingly lifeless objects, and not just human beings, possess vitality and agency.”⁶³ Vital materialism appears within the cult of Santa Muerte in regards to her effigies. These statues of Santa Muerte are believed to be physical embodiments of the saint. Thus, they should be treated with the utmost respect. Any offering given to a Santa Muerte effigy is believed to be taken in/consumed by Santa Muerte.⁶⁴ Ritual objects showcase how the boundary between people and things can be fluid and an ever-changing space.

Each of these ritual elements showcases the nuances and complexities of ritual experience. By understanding the “doing” of ritual through performance, enactment, and practice, I am highlighting the larger functions that rituals can serve within communities, for individuals, and through cultural traditions. Grimes demonstrates that ritual is not a singular decisive concept but a multitude of elements that comes together to create experiences that differ based on the places, times, people, and objects present. This is especially helpful for understanding the unique experiences that devotees are having within the cult of Santa Muerte.

Love Sorcery within the cult of Santa Muerte

Gender and Devotion

Gender roles in Mexican societies are in some instances examples of exaggerated expressions of female docility and hypermasculine expressions of sexual prowess. Males are

⁶³ Hughes, *Cradling the Sacred*, 57.

⁶⁴ Oftentimes devotees will offer Santa Muerte cigarettes or alcohol on her altar. These devotees can be seen blowing smoke or spitting alcohol onto the effigy so that Santa Muerte can consume the offering herself.

typically seen as the breadwinner and the female as the primary caretaker of the house and children. Under this gendered model women are reliant on their male partners to provide the main income. Because most of Santa Muerte's devotees are marginalized members of society this typically means that they are impoverished peoples, who are under a great deal of financial strain. It is also due to these gendered stereotyped roles that ideas of machismo⁶⁵ (hypermasculinity) comes with specific notions about relationships and what it means to be male. For the scope of this I will limit machismo as the portrayal of hypermasculinity and masculine pride by males within Mexican culture. This leads to some males seeking multiple female partners to show their prowess and virility. There "is a Mexican tradition known as la casa chica ('the small house'), in which adulterous men subsidize their paramours, paying their rent or other expenses."⁶⁶ This leaves the spouses of these men in unstable social and financial situations. Even the mistress or paramour's status to their male lovers is not a guaranteed position of security and can change, leaving them in the same social and financial ruin as the spouse. Thus, many of these women turn to love rituals to deal with the emotional, financial, and social implications of a spouse's death, infidelity, or abandonment. Love magic offers these women the ability to reclaim some sort of control and stability over their situations. Andrew Chesnut argues that:

If witchcraft is a weapon of the weak, a magical attempt on the part of the socioeconomically powerless to manipulate and control circumstances, environments, and other people that they are unable to influence through other means, then the double attraction of love magic to women, especially impoverished and marginalized ones, is easily comprehensible.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ I do not want to overgeneralize machismo culture as it is a very complex idea that is compounded by many social factors, and looks a variety of different ways in other Hispanic cultures beyond Mexican culture. For a deeper look at the concept and culture of machismo as well as the stereotypes associated with it, see Gutmann and Walters.

⁶⁶ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 127.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

The use of love magic ensures that these women are able to either seek new partners, keep their partners faithful, have their adulterous partners return to them, or even seek vengeance on their partners for leaving them. As one a *curandero*⁶⁸ states that his women clients will seek “A kind of revenge, they are hurt because their men have cheated on them, hit them or abused them.”⁶⁹ Thus they will ask this *curandero* to pray to Santa Muerte for their causes and help them overcome their challenges or abuse from their spouses.

In regard to thinking more about gender within Hispanic cultures specifically thinking about Mexican and Latin American culture, there is the strong binary of male and female. These genders come with specific stereotyped roles that can be especially hard for individuals who do not fall into these binary norms, like members of the transgender community, to fit in to society. Due to the Catholic Church’s influence (about eighty-four percent of the population identify as Catholic)⁷⁰ and harsh dogmatic stance on transgender people it is difficult for them to be accepted in Mexico and Latin America. It is no surprise that Santa Muerte has a very large transgender following as these individuals have been marginalized by both society and the Catholic Church. Due to their marginalized status many transgender people have limited economic opportunities and some turn to sex work to survive. There are large Santa Muerte devotional communities of transgender sex workers.⁷¹ These individuals have a unique connection to Santa Muerte as she represents “the most important axis of spiritual solidarity among Mexican transgender workers... [Santa Muerte] is most like the women themselves and closest to their experience.”⁷² Santa Muerte’s marginalized status helps her to further connect

⁶⁸ Traditional folk healer.

⁶⁹ *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*, directed by Lucio Apolito. Opificio Ciclope, 2011, Video.

⁷⁰ David Bromley, “Santa Muerte as Emerging Dangerous Religion?”, 5.

⁷¹ See Howe, Cymene, et al. “Devotional Crossings.” *Religion at the Corner of Bliss and Nirvana*, edited by Lois Lorentzen, Duke University Press, 2009 for a look at how transgender sex worker circulate Santa Muerte devotional practices.

⁷² *Ibid.*,6.

with her transgender devotees as they are experiencing the same ostracizing by the Catholic Church. A transgender woman who tried to attend a Catholic mass reported “The priest stopped his sermon and told us to leave the house of God. After that, I decided I wouldn’t ever go back.”⁷³ Thus, many transgender people turn to Santa Muerte for love, support, and protection they cannot seek from the institutional Catholic Church.

Love Magic

In relation to love rituals transgender people are practicing the same ritual activities that non-transgender devotees are doing. However, the unique qualities of transgender devotion are seen in how their connection to Santa Muerte helps them love and accept themselves. Clifford Geertz's definition of religion showcases this religious devotion as inculcating certain "moods and motivations" induced by interaction with a sacred symbol (in this case, Santa Muerte).⁷⁴ Due to the marginalization of transgender people by society and the Catholic Church it is not uncommon to see many of these people having a hard time accepting themselves and their gender identity. This element of self-love and acceptance that is found in transgender devotion to Santa Muerte can be further demonstrated by comparing Santa Muerte devotion to the devotion of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Like Santa Muerte the Virgin is characterized as a mother to her devotees. She is thought to be the mother of Jesus and in turn is the mother of all children of God. Within the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe there is also a strong focus on love and its power. As firstly seen by the Virgin in her interactions with Juan Diego when he sees her apparition as she offers “gentle but persistent reminders to [him] about love: a love that can be

⁷³ Woodman, Stephen. “How s Skeleton Folk Saint of Death Took Off With Mexican Transgender Women,” *USA Today*, 31 March. 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/03/31/santa-muerte-death-transgender-women-mexico/99867052/>. Accessed May 1, 2021.

⁷⁴ Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” 97.

trusted, a love that gives dignity, a love that is personal.”⁷⁵ It is this deeply personal love that is also seen in the Santa Muerte tradition, wherein both cults the devotees each have a unique and intimate relationship to these saints. This type of relationship and personal love is characterized as being unconditional in both devotional practices. Having unconditional love in any relationship presumes that nothing can change this love and that there is an openness between the individuals in the relationship to be authentically themselves. In the cult of the Virgin this unconditional love is one of the most central tenets. However, in relation to Santa Muerte this love may not be as unconditional as the cult asserts. This is directly seen in how the Virgin exists within the moral and ethical framework of the Catholic Church. Thus, what the church presumes to be wrong and blasphemous is inherently tied to the Virgin as doctrinally she enacts the Catholic moral imaginary. Thus, any experiences that are outside of catholic morality are unequivocally looked down upon by the Virgin. For transgender devotees it becomes tricky for these individuals to navigate their devotion as the Catholic Church paints them as sinners and blasphemous people, yet the Virgin is representative a mother who unconditionally loves her children. This convoluted space created by being transgender and being a devotee to the Virgin of Guadalupe is not seen in the devotion of Santa Muerte. As I previously mentioned, one of the key features of Santa Muerte’s identity is that she judges no one as death is an amoral entity that eventually comes for everyone. This means that Santa Muerte does not have the same doctrinal biases and limitations that the Virgin is susceptible to due to her identity and origins being situated in Catholic doctrinal frameworks. Thus, devotion to Santa Muerte creates a different type of space for transgender devotees as they are fully accepted and seemingly urged to be their true and authentic selves. Whereas the transgender devotees of the Virgin understand that she

⁷⁵ Carl Anderson and Eduardo Chavez, *Our Lady of Guadalupe: Mother of the Civilization of Love*. Doubleday Religion, 2009, 5.

may love them, but they may not be accepted for who they truly are due to the ethical and moral stance taken by the Catholic Church against transgender people. Where Santa Muerte is the mother who loves her children unconditionally, the Virgin is the mother who loves her children but is disappointed by their sins. This creates a unique relationship between Santa Muerte and her transgender devotees as they are not only unconditionally loved by Santa Muerte, but she also accepts and understands their identities as transgender people.

Santa Muerte pushes for her followers to accept themselves as she accepts and loves them. For her transgender devotees this is achieved through their ritual devotion to Santa Muerte as they create an intimate bond with her that in turn shifts their moods surrounding themselves to one of selflove and acceptance. This acceptance and love comes from the love and acceptance they experience with Santa Muerte. As characterized by Arely Vazquez, one of the most well-known devotees of Santa Muerte who runs a public shrine in Queens, New York:

The Bony Lady gave Arely the strength and courage to change her gender to female, which has entailed several surgeries and hormone therapy. It's one particular surgery that Arely views as one of the great gifts of her matron saint. Several years ago, I asked her what had been the most important miracle that the Pretty Girl had granted. She immediately clutched her bosom and exclaimed "these!" The breast implants had cost her thousands of dollars. Arely's transgender friends and fellow devotees appear to have asked the White Girl for the same miracle.⁷⁶

Santa Muerte gave Arely the courage to accept herself and deal with the difficulties of her transition. Arguably, Santa Muerte helps all her devotees learn to accept themselves and their situations as marginalized peoples. However, this self-love and acceptance seen by transgender people in their devotion to Santa Muerte gives them the ability to pursue their gender identity, which can involve physical and mental strains that Santa Muerte helps them overcome. These

⁷⁶ Andrew Chesnut, "Sex & Death: Santa Muerte's Strong LGBT Following." *Death and the Maiden*, 15 February, 2017, <https://deadmaidens.com/2017/02/15/sex-deathsanta-muertes-strong-lgbt-following/>. Accessed 21 February, 2020.

love rituals go beyond dealings of the heart in respect to another person but focus on internal love (love of the self). As these transgender devotees build their relationship to Santa Muerte, they are also creating a space for self-acceptance and expression.

When thinking about love rituals within the cult of Santa Muerte it is important to understand the overall framework of ritual activity within this cult. Because this tradition does not have any formal doctrine or institutional elements, ritual activities can vary greatly based on the individual's connection to Santa Muerte. However, there is an underlying structure that most of these ritual practices follow. Most of these rituals have the same underlying structure as Catholic saint veneration rituals and commonly use Catholic iconography to represent Santa Muerte (specifically using the same imagery as the Virgin of Guadalupe). Yet not all of these rituals are influenced by Catholic saint veneration. "Devotees bargain with Santa Muerte, giving gifts (candies, bread, water, money, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, flowers) in return for assured assistance with their requests. This combination smacks of magic and bribery, which clash with formal church doctrine,"⁷⁷ though this ritual behavior is not without its parallels. Santa Muerte's devotees have a different relationship to her than devotees have with Saint Jude. Unlike Santa Muerte devotees, devotees of Saint Jude can punish him for not granting their miracles. Like other folk devotion, bribery is an incentive for the saint to aid the devotee or grant their miracle, however for saints like Jude, devotees believe that he needs them as much as they need him. This is not the case for Santa Muerte as she will supersede her devotees as she is the physical embodiment of death, an eternal force. This demonstrated through the respect and reverence that is given to her effigies and offerings. These items act as the ritual objects within this cult and are often given to her on home altars or public shrines. Many of her devotees participate in ritual acts

⁷⁷ Bromley, "Santa Muerte as Emerging Dangerous Religion?" 6.

with her as she is thought of as the “saint of action.”⁷⁸ Her devotees know that once they request something from her or ask for help, that these results will happen quickly. Through the practice of rituals within this cult devotees understand they are creating a contractual relationship with Saint Death. This means that she will uphold her part of the agreement as long as the devotee also does what they promised. Typically what the devotee has asked for or desires to be done will determine if the ritual is done in public or private. Most rituals that are personal in nature or are intricate in detail are done privately.

Love rituals within this cult can be practiced in a variety of different ways. As I indicated above, the specific type of ritual the devotee will choose will be based on their personal relationship to Santa Muerte as well as the type of request. These elements and particular circumstances will determine the complexity of the ritual. The most popular form of love rituals is the burning of red votive candles and reciting the prayer on the back as it burns. In this cult materiality is heavily focused on, thus certain colors represent a dimension of Saint Death’s identity. Love rituals are associated with the color red. Oftentimes devotees will incorporate other red items to further strengthen the love ritual. The most common items that are found in love rituals that involve creating altars include using Santa Muerte effigies, votive candles, food offerings, herbs, spices, and personal effects. These ritual objects can vary greatly based on the ritual being enacted and typically, in love rituals altars are created to enact a specific love spell. These spells also vary greatly depending on the desired purpose such as wanting to bind an individual to the devotee would look far different to a spell seeking to attract love interests to the devotee. Within these spells, items and ingredients can be altered or changed for what the devotee has on hand. Many devotees during powerful love spells choose to dress up their Santa Muerte effigies in red dresses to further strengthen the connection she has with the love magic.

⁷⁸ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death*, 21.

Within this cult and like other folk saint traditions effigies of the saint are some of the most important elements to ritual devotion. Jennifer Hughes explains that within folk devotion there is the belief (whether or not it is conscious is debatable) of vital materialism. Hughes states:

“Vital materialism” refers to a set of beliefs and actions oriented around the ontological assumption that seemingly lifeless objects, and not just human beings, possess vitality and agency.⁷⁹

This is especially the case within the cult of Santa Muerte as her effigy is thought to be a physical embodiment of the saint. Thus, her effigies are treated with the utmost respect, especially in ritual spaces. Santa Muerte effigies offer a physical connection between the saint and devotee that helps to create their unique relationship. When thinking about these types of rituals within the cult of Santa Muerte, Robert Orsi’s idea of “lived religion” is showcased in these practices. Orsi argues “Religion comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic, relationship with the realities of the everyday.”⁸⁰ These rituals are created through the interaction with everyday life and are altered and changed by the individual’s circumstances. This means that devotees are incorporating Santa Muerte and the rituals associated with her into their everyday actions. Ritual devotion to Santa Muerte can take place in the most mundane of places and is often done through small daily acts like lighting a votive candle and praying. Love rituals are especially impacted by “everyday life” as many of these elements are syncretic as they have been influenced from the religious cultures of Catholicism, Voodoo, and Santeria. Each of these traditions highlights the importance of daily devotion and creates the unique ritual experiences found in Santa Muerte.

⁷⁹ Jennifer Scheper Hughes, “Cradling the Sacred: Image, Ritual, and Affect in Mexican and Mesoamerican Material Religion.” *History of Religions* 56, no. 1 (2016): 57. <https://doi.org/10.1086/686768>.

⁸⁰ Robert Orsi, “Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion,” *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, edited by David Hall, Princeton University Press, 1997, 7.

Due to the wide variety of ways that love rituals can be practiced within this cult, devotees can have many different experiences with these rituals that shape their personal narrative about them and their effectiveness. These love rituals are shared through a variety of different ways from blogs dedicated to Santa Muerte, websites selling Santa Muerte merchandise, forums about love rituals, and even videos demonstrating how to do certain love spells.⁸¹ Some of the most common love spells are found in *La Biblica de la Santa Muerte*. In Andrew Chesnut's book *Devoted to Death* he describes a ritual a woman named Lupe enacts with one of these spells. The spell she uses is for "Luck in Love" it reads:

Ingredients:

1 small, bone-colored Santa Muerte statuette [red]
1 white plate
Petals of 3 red roses
1 bottle of rose oil [patchouli]
1 bottle of cinnamon oil
1 red fabric bag [red T-shirt]
1 10 cm x 10 cm piece of personal clothing [red T-shirt]
1 piece of a binding stick [a twig found on the ground]
Matchsticks
Water
1 strainer
1 bucket

Procedure: Put your article of clothing in the middle of the plate and immediately place Santa Muerte on top of the clothing and then cover her with rose petals (lay her down if it's easier). Drizzle the rose and cinnamon oil over the petals and then put the binding stick on top. Cleanse yourself from head to toe with a red votive candle lit with the matchsticks. Pray the Santa Muerte prayer (you can use the Santa Muerte prayer that best suits you). When the candle burns out, remove Santa Muerte, and wrap her up together with your article of clothing in the red fabric. Put the wrapped plate and binding stick into the red bag. Then put the rose petals to boil. Once it has boiled, let the water cool down and then use it to rinse yourself after bathing. You should always carry this amulet [the

⁸¹ These virtual spaces can be thought of as ritual places that continue to emerge and change as social media continues to be an impactful presence in present-day life. See Beliso-de Jesus for more information on how rituals are being transformed by technology in the tradition of Santería.

bag] with you and shouldn't let strangers or acquaintances touch it. Remember that the baths are from the neck down.⁸²

In this narrative that Chesnut discusses Lupe sought the help of Santa Muerte after her husband (who she had been married to since she was 13) was deported back to Mexico (with no plan of returning back to America) leaving her and her children alone. This abandonment led Lupe to seek supernatural advice from Santa Muerte. In this narrative, Lupe and her spouse's dynamic showcases many of the gendered stereotypes of machismo that come into play within Hispanic culture. Lupe is using the spell to find a new partner, specifically "bolillo (literally, white-bread roll, but Mexican slang for gringo)."⁸³ She wants a partner that will not be domineering and controlling like she felt her Mexican husband was, hence her choice in a white male. This use of love magic to find a new spouse shows how women are using these ritual activities to regain control over their situations; in this case Lupe is trying to control who is her next partner. It seems like her marriage to her husband may have been out of her control as she was married at 13. These cultural frameworks that are seen in this narrative further demonstrate how female devotees feel Santa Muerte gives them agency over the instability in their lives. Even though Lupe at the end of this narrative is still waiting to meet her new man, she is still devoted to carrying out the ritual until her results happen. This dedication to the ritual highlights Lupe's belief in its effectiveness and willingness to follow through with her contract to Santa Muerte. It can be inferred that even if Lupe never ends up in a relationship her devotion to Santa Muerte will be unwavering as Santa Muerte has seemingly helped her in numerous other ways. This highlights an important point that when rituals do not "work" this does not mean that the individual stops their devotion to Santa Muerte but more likely will have an explanation for the lack of results (especially since Saint Death is considered the saint of action). These explanations

⁸² Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," 130-131.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 131.

could be rooted in the devotee perceiving that they did not properly execute the ritual, that other supernatural works are at play (someone casting witchcraft on them), or that their connection was not strong enough to Santa Muerte.⁸⁴ These reactions to ritual activities like love magic showcase how reality is negotiated through these rituals and through the devotee's personal relationship to Santa Muerte. On the flip side of love magic also comes the darker forms of magic and ritual within this tradition. These darker rituals are a significant part of Santa Muerte's identity as the saint of death. She is truly willing to offer aid to her devotees no matter how dark the request.

The Darker Elements of Devotion

Within this cult we see that ritual plays a significant role in creating a deeply personal relationship between devotees and Santa Muerte. Some of the most novel ritual activities associated with Santa Muerte and one that showcases the bond she has with her devotees, uses the darker elements of Santa Muerte's identity. Oftentimes people will turn to this darker dimension of Saint Death when they need her help with a request that no other saint would be willing to grant. This would include asking the saint to help you with something that is illegal or morally ambiguous. These darker rituals showcase the unique qualities Santa Muerte has as a saint as she is willing to help her devotees in any situation even if it is at the expense of another person's life. Within this cult Santa Muerte is often portrayed as being a Saint that is most commonly associated with criminality and the world of narcos. These ties to narco culture have

⁸⁴ Ibid., 128. This is similar to Catholic saint devotion as devotees can interpret their ritual "failures" in a variety of ways, often connecting it back to their connection with the saint or even blaming the saint for the miracle's failure. In instances where devotees blame their saint, this is not seen within the cult of Santa Muerte. Devotees of Santa Muerte would blame themselves before they would ever think to blame Saint Death.

shed a negative light on all devotion to Saint Death. It also does not help that the Catholic church has denounced Santa Muerte and her devotees. Most of the bad press about Santa Muerte evokes her connections to narcos and creates the narrative that only criminals are devoting themselves to this saint. This is not to say that there is not a strong narco presence within devotees of Santa Muerte and many of her devotees would be classified as criminals. As one devotee states “Most of the reasons given by people who worship Santa Muerte are that she is an image or an entity that we live with day by day, day by day. If you want it for evil, evil will be if you want it for good, good will be.”⁸⁵ This population within Santa Muerte’s congregation reflects the unique characteristics of Santa Muerte as she draws individuals to her that normally would not be accepted anywhere else.

Santa Muerte’s Darker Identity: Saint of Narcos

When evoking the darker side of Santa Muerte, her devotees turn to black prayer votive candles. These candles are thought to induce Santa Muerte’s powers of protection and vengeance. The ritual activities that call upon the darker elements of Santa Muerte’s identity can be used in a variety of other ritual instances, like in the previously mentioned love sorcery section. Santa Muerte’s vengeance can be used in love magic to punish a cheating spouse or hurt the spouses’ mistress. Thus, the darker side of Santa Muerte is not limited to the media representation of narcos and bad drug deals. However, a good portion of this darker side is used for individuals who need help with tasks that are morally ambiguous or even morally wrong.⁸⁶ Numerous times since Santa Muerte’s first official public appearance in the Mexico City Shrine

⁸⁵ *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*, directed by Lucio Apolito.

⁸⁶ By “morally wrong” I mean to say that the term covers a wide range of actions or situations that would fall outside of the Catholic imaginings of morality.

in 2001, she has been found in the raided homes of numerous cartel members. As Andrew Chesnut writes:

Over the past decade, arrests and killings of low-level drug dealers found with evidence of devotion to the Bony Lady have become routine. What is more extraordinary are the higher-ranking cartel bosses and hit men who have been detained sporting tattoos, pendants, engraved pistols, and other images of Saint Death. First to make the headlines among cartel bosses was Gilberto García Mena of the Gulf Cartel. In April 2001, the Mexican army stormed his mansion in a small town in Tamaulipas and found García Mena hiding in an underground bunker, and Santa Muerte residing in a garden.⁸⁷

These numerous sightings of Santa Muerte in the homes of narcos have been sensationalized by the media. Santa Muerte is seen through the eyes of most lay persons as a narco saint. This obviously does not reflect the complexities of her identity nor does it do justice to the wide array of devotees Saint Death has. This representation of Santa Muerte also over-simplifies her connections and role in narco culture. “The Mexican media would have us believe...She is the patron saint of narcos, [she] plays both defense and offense for the cartel members that venerate her.”⁸⁸ This is not the full story of Saint Death as her narco devotees are juxtaposed by the large devotional population of state employees like police officers, lawyers, and judges. “Her devotion among the police, soldiers, and prison guards, those on the front lines of the Mexican government’s war against the cartels, seems as widespread as it is among the traffickers they are fighting.”⁸⁹ As Padre Romo, who is a priest and devotee of Santa Muerte, states, “here in the downtown shrine [Tepito Shrine] is where sometimes policemen come. Yes, they come when they are on duty near the church, they come in to entrust themselves to her before work or to ask Santa Muerte for a favor.”⁹⁰ This hints at the duality found within Santa Muerte’s darker side, as she is simultaneously a protector and vengeance seeker for her devotees on both sides of the law.

⁸⁷ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 103.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹⁰ *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*, directed by Lucio Apolito.

Santa Muerte: Saint of Protection

As the embodiment of death, it is easy to see why narcos and officers alike turn to Saint Death. She is able to help her devotees deal with the reality of (in some cases even overcome) death. Death in the lives of narcos is often a premature one, with violence and pain being at the center front. Santa Muerte offers her devotees comfort in knowing that there is a possibility she can prevent their deaths or just offer them a “good” death. As one female devotee explains how death and subsequently Santa Muerte appears everywhere,

Death appears in the streets, in the houses, she demands devotion... When death calls for devotion, the skeleton shows itself anywhere in the world. And the skeleton? Who is the only one that can protect you against death?—Your own death.⁹¹

As the saint of death, Santa Muerte also gives her devotees unconditional love. As stated above, Santa Muerte’s unconditional love is different to other saintly figures like the Virgin of Guadalupe. Saint Death is not limited by Catholic doctrinal frameworks that offer conditions to both the devotees and saints’ conduct. This amorality that death embodies is a key feature for the significance and uniqueness of Santa Muerte. As Frank Graziano explains “Some devotees prefer folk saints because they grant certain types of miracles that canonized saints would never even consider. Success in crime and sending curses to enemies are the outstanding examples. Folk saints, many of whom were themselves criminals, understand these special needs and are not restricted by traditional moral standards.”⁹² As Graziano points out, other folk saints also aid their devotees in morally ambiguous situations. Her actions support her devotees, even in death, this is why Santa Muerte is such a popular figure amongst narcos. Her growing popularity is even beginning to surpass other saints that are specifically patron saints of narcos. Andrew Chesnut states “As the illicit drug industry has become a multibillion-dollar business in Mexico

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Graziano, 42.

and one of the main sources of revenue in the country, the Skinny Lady has rapidly supplanted Jesús Malverde, except in his home state of Sinaloa, as the matron saint of both narcos and agents of the Mexican law charged with disrupting the trade.”⁹³ Santa Muerte’s popularity in narco culture showcases her divine power as the saint of death. She channels her power for the sake of her devotees, lending them aid in any situation.

Rituals of Vengeance

For these darker rituals within this cult, Santa Muerte’s power as the embodiment of death is evoked to act as a Grim Reapress for her devotees. This would include devotees asking Santa Muerte for her help in getting revenge. On the site santamuerte.org,⁹⁴ features a prayer written by Ron O. (a Santa Muerte devotee) that calls upon Santa Muerte’s powers of revenge. It reads:

Prayer for Revenge

Santa Muerte,
I Summon You,
Santa Muerte,
I Invoke You,
to Give Me Justice,
Justice Against My Enemies,
Justice Against Those That Hurt and Harm Me,
Santa Muerte,
Hear My Cries,
Punish My Enemies,
As Only You Can Punish Them,
Santa Muerte,
You Know I Am Not an Evil Person,
This Is a Problem Only You Can Fix,
Use Your Sickle to Cut Down My Enemies,
As They Had Me Pushed Down to the Ground,

⁹³ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 98

⁹⁴ This site features a variety of community created prayers and rituals that devotees can use for their Santa Muerte devotion.

and You Gave Me a Hand to Stand Back up,
Cut Them to the Ground,
Santa Muerte,
Thank You for Your Protection,
Thank You for Your Help,
Thank You for Hearing My Cry.

Amen⁹⁵

It is common within the cult of Santa Muerte for the ritual actors to use prayers as a key feature of their ritual activity. Especially for complex rituals that require preparation, time, and energy, prayers are one of the key features in most ritual activities for Santa Muerte. For most prayers devoted to Santa Muerte, especially this one, the devotee would be asking Saint Death to help them with a specific cause. In this case, the devotee would be asking for Santa Muerte to use her divine power to punish and maybe even hurt the enemies of the devotee, who have wronged them. For rituals that use the darker elements of Santa Muerte's identity, these rituals typically consist of more complex ritual activities. That would include a variety of ritual objects that would typically be interacted by the devotee within the ritual space for multiple days. It is common for these complex rituals to typically last nine days with prayer being recited each of these days.⁹⁶ As previously mentioned black candles are often used for these darker rituals. The more complex and time consuming a ritual often equates to the effectiveness and powerfulness of the ritual. In these instances, ritual space becomes an important part of the ritual activity, as most Santa Muerte devotees will turn to private spaces to practice these darker and more complex rituals. In the public sphere, these rituals would be inappropriate to enact at a public shrine. Devotees do not want other people to know that they are doing these darker rituals

⁹⁵ Ron O. "Prayer for Revenge." La Santa Muerte, July 31, 2012.

<http://www.santamuerte.org/english/3577-prayer-for-revenge.html>. Accessed March 10, 2021.

⁹⁶ Desirée Martin, *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*. Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States. Rutgers University Press, 2014.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy006.nclive.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat04042a&AN=app.b9485638&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

(especially if the ritual is intended for someone within that person's community) and secondly most of these rituals involve personal matters that would be unsuitable to perform in a public space.

Rituals of Protection

Even though Santa Muerte can evoke her dark powers for revenge, she is also a strong protector for her devotees. It seems that her power of protection is more often evoked than her power of vengeance. As Andrew Chesnut states:

Whereas the white devotional candle ranks among the top sellers and abounds at public shrines, the black one is among the slowest selling and rarely appears at devotional sites on Mexican roadsides and sidewalks. Of course, because of its association among the general public with "black magic" and witchcraft, many devotees who regularly or even occasionally use a black candle probably prefer to light it in the privacy of their own homes, concealed from critical eyes. Nonetheless, in the many private altars I have personally visited and those I have viewed in photos, including crime scenes, this, the darkest of candles, is among the least popular.⁹⁷

There is the common assertion by the media that only these darker rituals that involve the black candle are being practiced by devotees. Rarely is there a representation of Santa Muerte by the media that showcases her other identity characteristics. The media's portrayal of Santa Muerte is one dimensional and only highlights her connections to criminality. This is in part because her image continuously appears on the altars of narcos across Mexico and the United States.⁹⁸ As Piotr Michalik states that "the cult of Santa Muerte was associated almost exclusively with the world of crime: drug dealers, kidnappers and prostitutes."⁹⁹ These negative representations of Santa Muerte are furthered by local media that push this distorted image of the cult in local Mexico City newspapers like *La Crónica* and *Reforma*.¹⁰⁰ The larger media outlets (like news

⁹⁷ Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 21-22

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁹ Michalik, "Death with a Bonus Package," 159.

¹⁰⁰ Michalik, "Death with a Bonus Package," 159.

networks) appropriation of Santa Muerte showcases the misinformation that is being perpetuated by these sources. By leaving out her other characteristics such as her powers of protection and healing, the media paints Santa Muerte out to be an evil entity that uses black magic to harm others. The media's portrayal of Santa Muerte devotion as a cult of crime, has even spread to popular American movies and TV shows.

[She] has made cameo appearances in the Oliver Stone film *Savages* (2012) as well as a number of TV shows including *Breaking Bad*, *True Blood*, *Dexter*, *True Detective*, and *Ash vs. Evil Dead*.” Aside from the final example, all of the above films and TV shows portray Santa Muerte stereotypically as a patroness of organized crime and black magic.¹⁰¹

This misrepresentation of the saint is harmful to not only her image but to her devotees as well. Before Santa Muerte grew to the level of popularity she has today, many of her devotees had to keep their worship and ritual activity with her private. The negative connotations associated with Santa Muerte meant that if the devotees were open about their worship, they would have been labeled as Satanists or witches by the Catholic church and their communities. With the continued negative representation of Santa Muerte by the media, these assumptions continue to follow the cult's devotees. It is only due to the rise of the cult's popularity that has allowed for different narratives to be expressed beyond its connection to narcos.

Tepito shrine in Mexico City

One of the biggest counter narratives being produced by Santa Muerte devotees is at the famous Mexico City shrine on Alfarería Street. This is thought to be the first official public Santa Muerte shrine run by Enriqueta Romero “(affectionately known as Doña Queta).”¹⁰² This shrine is located in the Mexico city barrio, Tepito. Here devotees attend a monthly rosary service

¹⁰¹ Manon Hedenborg-White, and Fredrik Gregorius, “The Scythe and the Pentagram: Santa Muerte from Folk Catholicism to Occultism.” *Religions* 8, no. 1 (2016): 10. doi:10.3390/rel8010001.

¹⁰² Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte*, 8.

in honor of Santa Muerte. This shrine showcases how performance of ritual activities can act as a way of shifting the public narratives of figures like Santa Muerte. Firstly, the main ritual event is the praying of the rosary, which is undeniably a Catholic ritual activity. This situates Saint Death's devotees within the Catholic imaginary (at least ritually). Most of Santa Muerte's devotees affirm that they are Catholics and that their devotion to Saint Death does not affect their Catholicism but is supplementary to it. However, many express a dissatisfaction with the church and its limiting structure. One Santa Muerte devotee explains:

Nowadays there are many rules [within the Catholic Church]. The last thing people need is to feel oppressed and the more oppressed are the ones that you mention to me, the weak, the offenders, the poor... There is no church, there isn't [he is referencing the cult of Santa Muerte]. Up to this moment, people who are responsible or in charge of these altars are letting themselves go into the power of the Death one more time. People are being drawn by death.¹⁰³

The Tepito shrine is one of the world's most well-known shrines for Santa Muerte; it is often crowded and full of various kinds of people. This would include devotees, tourists, non-devotee community members, media outlets, and passersby. All of these individuals add to the unique ritual space of the Tepito shrine. The effect that each of these ritual actors has on this ritual space is that all of them are ritual actors. As Ronald Grimes explains that "everyone, even the most passive participant, exercises some kind of agency, all participants are doers, even if they do nothing more than show up or stay away."¹⁰⁴ With this large ensemble at the Santa Muerte shrine, the owner Doña Queta is purposeful in her portrayal of Santa Muerte. As Laura Roush writes:

The positive gestures and prayers included in the Alfarería Street services must be understood as performances given in contradistinction to the representations and personal uses of Santa Muerte that Enriqueta has chosen to exclude...the Tepito rosary, aware of

¹⁰³ *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*, directed by Lucio Apolito.

¹⁰⁴ Grimes, *Craft of Ritual Studies*, 249.

its own visibility, inserts personal devotion into a chain of public speech acts that started before the congregation even existed.¹⁰⁵

This shrine and the ritual activities associated with this cult can be understood as a form of ritual performance as there is a focus on the audience and the audience's perceptions of the space. The Tepito rosary service acts as a counter narrative to the negative and misappropriated uses of Santa Muerte and her image. Devotees are actively showing both the "good" aspects of Santa Muerte as well as the "good" devotees of this saint. Roush explains that "Enriqueta's [Doña Queta] altar has been recognized or labeled (depending upon one's sympathies) as the geographic and moral center of the correct and well-meaning side of Santa Muerte."¹⁰⁶ Doña Queta uses her popularity and celebrity status within the cult to change the ideas and beliefs surrounding Santa Muerte. By showcasing the "ordinary" devotees of Saint Death, this shrine dismantles the common narratives that only narcos and criminals are devoting themselves to this saint. In the documentary *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*, Doña Queta states:

When we go to the church, we get heavily scolded. First of all, the priest addresses us with serious sermons. He scolds us telling us what to do and what we are. Here, nobody scolds us; they just come here alone with a very sad heart, downhearted with many problems. The first thing they do is to stand in front of her and tell her 'help me mommy, what can I do?' ... All these people find their solutions, do you understand? But they come directly. You don't have to wait until mass begins, you don't have to hear when the priest starts his scolding, that is a big change. It's another world. Here you go start to the point.¹⁰⁷

Doña Queta explains the discontentment that Santa Muerte's devotees have with the Catholic Church and how Saint Death helps these devotees with the everyday and mundane challenges and experiences they have in life. It is important to understand that this shrine does not show the full array of ritual activities or the wide variety of devotees within this cult. However, it does

¹⁰⁵ Laura Roush, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo: A View from a Mexico City Altar." *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. (2014): 137. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2014.0064>.

¹⁰⁶ Roush, "Santa Muerte, Protection, and Desamparo," 141.

¹⁰⁷ *Nuestra Santísima Muerte*, directed by Lucio Apolito.

demonstrate that Santa Muerte is a saint that is actively helping her devotees in their everyday lives. She is not just a saint to narcos but everyday people who are just trying to survive and live to see another day. Her devotees are intimately aware of the precarious status of their lives and deaths as marginalized and disenfranchised people. By seeking the aid of a supernatural being like Santa Muerte, devotees are able to reclaim agency over their lives and create a pillar of support for themselves through their devotion to Santa Muerte.

Conclusion

Throughout my research on the cult of Santa Muerte I have demonstrated the unique and enigmatic identity of this saint. Relying on previous scholarship I have noted some of the possible historical precursors to Santa Muerte's symbolism and imagery as seen in both pre-Columbian and European roots while also showing the syncretic elements that have shaped her identity as a multifaceted figure. Her first historical occupation as a love sorceress showcases her distinct development throughout history that is different to many other folk and canonized saints. These differentiating elements of folk devotion that are integral to Santa Muerte's identity, offer her devotees the ability to seek the aid of the supernatural being while also not having to conform to typical catholic conceptualization of sainthood or devotion. This is demonstrated through the ritual activities within this cult as devotees create lasting bonds and relationships to Santa Muerte that in turn helps them reaffirm or build their worldly identities. Through rituals like love magic or ritual for vengeance, devotees of Santa Muerte are devoting their lives to this saint and are gaining the protection, vengeance, and wisdom that only death can offer.

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