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Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings (Part 1 of 3)

By Robert J. Bunker, Ph.D.



Photo provided by Pamela L. Bunker

*Bloodbaptized—in a shroud of human skin;
 Raise your wings—as we celebrate the dead;
 Sacrifice—in the honour of your wealth;
 Reward us now—in triumph we behead.*¹

The narcotics wars in Mexico have increased in scope and intensity beginning with President Felipe Calderón's December 2006 de facto declaration of war against the cartels and gangs. The deployment of Mexican military forces in counterorganized crime and stability and support roles directly responded to the loss of the country's control within many regions—identified as areas of impunity—of the country. Since this conflict began, over 45,000 people have died in the fighting, and the areas of impunity have grown to include wide swaths of territory constituting hundreds of locales now under control of the cartels. The criminal insurgencies waged by the cartels and gangs, centered on a strategy of securing nongovernmental interference with their illicit narcotics and other criminal economic activities, have received much attention and debate. Far less has focused on some of the darker spiritualistic parts of the drug wars.

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This variant of the cult promotes greater levels of criminality than the more mainstream and older forms of Santa Muerte worship.

One component entails the rise of the cartel and gang narcocultura (drug culture) variant of the Cult of Santa Muerte (literally translated as “Holy Death”).² This variant of the cult promotes greater levels of criminality than the more mainstream and older forms of Santa Muerte worship. Sometimes it can be so extreme that it condones morally corrupt behaviors—what many people would consider as resulting from an evil value system that rewards personal gain above all else, promoting the intentional pain and suffering of others, and, even, viewing killing as a pleasurable activity.

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While addressing the rise of such dark spirituality requires a balanced perspective (e.g., avoiding a repeat of the Satanism scare of the 1980s), enough ritualistic behaviors, including killings, have occurred in Mexico to leave open the possibility that a

spiritual insurgency component of the narcotics wars now exists. Not all of the narcotics leaders, their foot soldiers, and assassins have remained religious or, alternatively, embraced secularism. But, evidence suggests that the numbers of defections to the cults that worship a perverted Christian god (e.g., La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios) and the various unsanctioned saints (e.g., Jesús Malverde, Juan Soldado, and Santa Muerte) have grown for years.

This rise in deviant spirituality has not come as a surprise. Mexico still contains a significant population of persons living in poverty and feeling disenfranchised by a government system perceived as being based on patron-client relationships and the influence of wealthy ruling families. This underclass produces a disproportionate amount of unsanctioned (folk) saint worshipers—though only a small percentage of them end up as killers for gangs and cartels. Still, many of these men and women who brutalize, torture, and kill others need a way to rationalize their activities. If not offered solace via mainstream Catholicism, they will seek comfort elsewhere.³ While the adherents of a more benign drug saint, such as Jesús Malverde, can engage in nonreligious killing, others who worship Santa Muerte increasingly appear unable to separate their criminality from their spiritual beliefs.

For U.S. law enforcement agencies, the rise of a criminalized and dark variant of Santa Muerte worship holds many negative implications. Of greatest concern, the inspired and ritualistic killings associated with this cult could cross the border and take place in the United States.

Dark Spirituality

Santa Muerte ideology has developed in Mexico for approximately a half century and has spread into the United States and Central America. The cult's popularity has increased with its ties to illicit narcotics trafficking in Mexico in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As a "saint of last resort," Santa Muerte always has had a following among those who live in extreme circumstances. As one expert explains, "The Santa Muerte cult could best be described as [following] a set of ritual practices offered on behalf of a supernatural personification of death...she is comparable in theology to supernatural beings or archangels."⁴



Photo provided by U.S. Law Enforcement

The cult appears to have more European than Aztec origins, with some individuals describing Santa Muerte as a new age Grim Reaper-type goddess, a bad-girl counterpart to the Virgin of Guadalupe.⁵ Her imagery includes that of a robed skeleton carrying a scythe and globe or scales. Part of her popularity results from her characterization as nonjudgmental (amoral) and a source of supernatural intervention for her followers who engage in the correct rituals and provide the proper offerings and sacrifices. Over half of the prayers directed at her include petitions to harm other people via curses and death magic.⁶ Still, many Santa Muerte followers appear benign—typically poor, uneducated, and superstitious individuals who practice a form of unsanctioned saint worship mixed with varying elements of folk Catholicism.

However, a sizeable minority of worshipers follow the fully criminalized variant of Santa Muerte worship steeped in narcocultura. The harsher version has gained popularity in Mexico as the criminal insurgencies taking place in the country have spread and intensified. For most of the cartels' foot soldiers and their gang associates, brutal deaths prove almost certain. Such a form of imminent mortality facing adherents makes the worship of Santa Muerte spiritually dark. The death of someone's enemies,

Inspiration vs. Ritualization

When facing the evidence of a potential ritual, investigators must remember the difference between *inspiration* and *ritualization*. Actions and their associated material evidence may draw inspiration from other actions and have a strictly utilitarian motive (e.g., the production of a terror reaction in a targeted audience). However, ritualized actions are driven primarily by the beliefs, perceptions, or neuroses of individuals. Ritualized actions also may fall into individual (e.g., signature) and group (e.g., the operation of a belief/symbol system) ritualization. It also is important to note that persons may move from inspired actions to either individual signatures or group ritualization.

Inspired actions tend to have several characteristics.

- They draw on other actions in the same culture/community.
- They are carried out in the belief that they are the best way of achieving an effect.
- They are *not* part of a coherent symbol/ritual system.
- Individual ritual actions often are characterized by specific signs.
- They draw on personal neuroses.
- They reflect the belief that they are necessary to reach a particular goal.
- There always are common elements across scenes (e.g., a signature).

Group ritualized actions usually have several characteristics.

- They draw on a cultural/community symbol system.
- They may be required by that symbol system.
- They are part of a larger system of coherent, interlinked rituals that have desired results.

Source: Marc Tyrrell, a symbolic anthropologist and senior research fellow with the Canadian Centre of Intelligence and Security Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada.

protection from harm (or, at least, hope for a quick and glorious death), cultivation of a dangerous reputation, and ability to enjoy the benefits of fabulous riches—including the company of beautiful women—become paramount. With the stakes so high, the sacrifices and offerings to Santa Muerte have become primeval and barbaric. Rather than plates of food, beer, and tobacco, in some instances, the heads of victims (and presumably their souls) have served as offerings to invoke powerful petitions for divine intervention.

While not a fully developed religion, Santa Muerte has self-proclaimed priests, temples and shrines, and many ritualized elements. Mexican authorities arrested one high priest, Romo Guillén, on kidnapping charges in December 2010. Individuals in his gang posed as members of the Los Zetas Cartel.⁷ In 2009 he called for holy war against the Catholic Church. During that same year, the Mexican army destroyed numerous Santa Muerte shrines. Members of the Catholic Church and the army see the growth of this cult as a dangerous development.⁸

Santa Muerte rituals vary, and worshipers disagree about some of the symbolism and the proper procedures to gain the spiritual and physical results petitioned. However, adherents generally consider Santa Muerte a jealous and vengeful deity who demands that her followers conduct the rituals and sacrifices properly to avoid her divine wrath. Candle magic, herbs, oils, amulets, spiritual energy, and various mystical items play an important role (table 1). Often, the colors and mixtures of items employed determine ceremonial intent and arrangement of the altar. Components of the rituals also hold importance. Candles help to focus worshiper concentration and act as a conduit so that Santa Muerte receives the prayers. Smoke blown, alcoholic drink spit out, and narcotics smeared on statues are thought to help activate them. The bases of candles and statues also may have items or artifacts embedded in them and may be anointed with oils and herbs to enhance their power. More extreme forms of worship involve bowls of blood—animal and human—at the altars and smeared on the religious icons and on the devotee as part of a blood pact.⁹

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Table 1. Santa Muerte Color Significance

Color	Symbolism
Red	Love and passion
Black	Power against enemies
White	Personal protection
Green	Response to injustice/legal issues
Gold	Attempt to attain wealth
Bone	Peace and harmony in life
Blue	Spiritual harmony and concentration
Copper	Removal of negative energies
Purple	Transformation of negative events to positive opportunities
Silver	Luck and success
Seven colors	Properties of the colors gold, silver, copper, black, purple, red, and green

This table serves only as an example. Applicable groups may be syncretic, drawing on multiple belief systems and having different meanings for the same characteristics.

Source: Tony Kail, *Santa Muerte: Mexico's Mysterious Saint of Death (La Vergne, TN: Fringe Research Press, 2010): 128.*

Endnotes

¹ “La Santísima Muerte,” performed by Necrophobic, from the album *Death to All*, Regain Records, 2009. The influence of Santa Muerte is expanding into some English-speaking musical genres. An additional concern is the promotion of alleged rituals, such as “blood baptism,” derived from wearing bloody human skins taken from sacrificial victims.

² Initial disclaimer: The opinions expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the FBI, DOJ, the Futures Working Group, Police Futures International, or any other institution or organization. Additional disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

³ Catholic priests in Mexico also are under siege. Since 2006, 12 have died, 1,000 have been extorted, and 162 have been threatened with death. See Joseph Kolb, “Mexican Priests Face Death, Extortion from Drug Cartels,” *Catholic Register*, October 6, 2011, <http://www.catholicregister.org/news/international/item/13102-mexican-priests-face-death-extortion-from-drug-cartels> (accessed August 27, 2012).

⁴ Kevin Freese, *The Death Cult of the Drug Lords: Mexico's Patron Saint of Crime, Criminals, and the*

Dispossessed, <http://fmso.leavenworth.army.mil/documents/Santa-Muerte/santa-muerte.htm> (accessed August 27, 2012).

⁵ E. Bryant Holman, *The Santisima Muerte: A Mexican Folk Saint* (Edward Holman: 2007).

⁶ Alfredo Ortega-Trillo, "The Cult of Santa Muerte in Tijuana," *San Diego News Notes*, June 2006.

⁷ "Mexican Holy Death Sect Leader Arrested," *Fox News Latino*, January 5, 2011, <http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/news/2011/01/05/mexican-holy-death-sect-leader-arrested/> (accessed August 28, 2012).

⁸ "Holy War Against the Catholic Church," *California Catholic Daily*, April 9, 2009.

⁹ Tony Kail, *Santa Muerte: Mexico's Mysterious Saint of Death* (La Vergne, TN: Fringe Research Press, 2010): 128.

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