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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.

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.

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”). 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.
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. While the adherents of a more benign rationalize their activities. If not offered solace via brutalize, torture, and kill others need a way to rationalize their activities. If not offered solace via mainstream Catholicism, they will seek comfort elsewhere. While the adherents of a more benign

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.

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.""
Santa Muerte ideology has developed in Mexico for approximately a half century and has spread into the United States and Central America.

Table 1. Santa Muerte Color Significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Symbolism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Love and passion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Power against enemies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>Personal protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Response to injustice/legal issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gold</td>
<td>Attempt to attain wealth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone</td>
<td>Peace and harmony in life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Spiritual harmony and concentration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copper</td>
<td>Removal of negative energies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Transformation of negative events to positive opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver</td>
<td>Luck and success</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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.


Endnotes

1 “La Santisima 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
8 "Holy War Against the Catholic Church," California Catholic Daily, April 9, 2009.