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Introduction

A recent visitor to Mexico is very likely to encounter the striking image of Santa Muerte (Saint Death), a symbol of the cult that has risen to prominence across the country. Hooded, scythe-carrying skeleton bares its teeth at street market stalls, on magazine covers and t-shirts. The new informal saint gains popularity not only in Mexico but also in Salvador, Guatemala and the United States. At the turn of the 21st century, the cult of Santa Muerte was associated almost exclusively with the world of crime: drug dealers, kidnappers and prostitutes. Responsibility for this distorted image of the cult laid mostly with biased articles in everyday newspapers such as *La Crónica* and *Reforma*. This situation has been slowly changing thanks to trustworthy and accurate articles on Santa Muerte that started to appear around 2004 primarily in *La Jornada*.

Santa Muerte is above all an eclectic figure. The ritual and iconography of this peculiar saint merge elements deriving from most diverse sources. Santa Muerte's imagery prevails particularly in esoteric shops, commonly known as the "herbal shops" (*yerberías*, or *botánicas*). Popular publishing companies, such as Editores Mexicanos Unidos S.A., release books that deal with the details of practicing the cult of Santa Muerte and are available in most bookshops. Followers of the cult may also choose from a wide selection of glossy magazines like *Devoción a la Santa Muerte* or *La Santísima*, as well as internet websites, forums for worshipers and virtual shrines.

The first acknowledged stationary street altar of Santa Muerte, a glass case enclosing a large skeleton figure dressed in a bridal gown, was exhibited in 2001 by doña Enriqueta Romero Romero at Alfarería Street in Tepito (Mexico City). Only in Mexico City, dozens of similar altars have appeared ever since. Despite ongoing attempts to unite, most of the devotees remain dispersed, or grouped only in small, local communities scattered all over the Mexico.

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Virtually everything in regard to Santa Muerte remains a blank space on the map of scholarly research. There is no reliable statistic data concerning geographical distribution and social background of the cult, nor does exist a complete list of the Mexican shrines. The matter of the cult's origins is still waiting for a solid historical investigation. To date, only a few scholarly texts regarding Santa Muerte have been written, with several dissertations and theses waiting to be published. [1] Therefore, I am bound to rely for the greater part on my own fieldwork, [2] with additional references to unpublished dissertations and theses, press articles, or devotees' resources.

In the following article, I would like to address some of the fundamental questions concerning the extraordinary phenomenon of Santa Muerte. How did this cult emerge from the Catholic tradition in colonial Mexico? Is there any particular difference between Santa Muerte and other Mexican folk saints? What are the main factors driving her eclectic inclinations? What are the formal and symbolic conditions of Santa Muerte's virtually unlimited capacity of intermingling with other aesthetic and spiritual patterns? And finally, should the Santa Muerte cult be considered as a New Age phenomenon?

To start our little excursion into the realm of sanctified death, I am going to introduce briefly the historical roots of Santa Muerte iconography and worship, and also add a few remarks on Mexican folk Catholicism. Due to lack of space for broader discussion, I shall limit my presentation to selective analysis of chosen examples that illustrate the eclectic forms taken by the Santa Muerte figure. I am going to focus on four representative cases: the glossy magazines for the devotees, the Conchero-Aztec dancers, and two instances of urban curing practice. These exemplary cases demonstrate different factors that push forward Santa Muerte's interreligious blends. These factors might be considered as crucial in categorizing a given form taken by this cult as genuinely or merely seemingly pertaining to the New Age religiosity.

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1. Among the first and most important scholarly texts concerning Santa Muerte, there are articles by Malvido (2005) and Flores Martos (2007; 2008), along with a book by Perdigó Castaneda (2008). Amidst unpublished dissertations and theses, particularly interesting and noteworthy is a monograph by Fragoso Lugo (2007). Santa Muerte is also mentioned in several books, for instance Arriola (2003), and Lamas (2002).

2. The data used in the following presentation was obtained throgh fieldwork, primarily in the town of San Cristóbal de las Casas (Mexico) and neighbouring indigenous communities. Additional material was gathered in Guatemala, Mexico City, and Xalapa (Veracruz). The fieldwork took place between October 2007 and April 2008. The research was part of a project in collaboration with CIESAS-Golfo, supported by Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores. I would like to thank both of these institutions for the help I received.

How old is the Death?

In her study of the historical origins of Santa Muerte, Malvido reaches for European Christian iconography. In correspondence with fear and grief caused by the plagues that periodically shook medieval Europe, the motif of death gained growing popularity in Christian iconography from 13th century on. It appeared not only in literature and plastic arts, but also in music, dances and performances. Iconographically, the concept of death was depicted in various ways—in the form of skull, cross bones, skeleton or human remains in different stages of decomposition. Death image represented a range of diverse concepts such as immortality of the soul, the elusiveness of man's life, abandonment of earthly desires and reflection on the eternal life (Malvido, 2005: 20; Infantes, 1997).

One of the most widespread motifs in late medieval art was the famous *danse macabre*—a depiction of decomposed human remains playing music and dancing with representatives of all social classes of the time. Other popular motifs involving the death figure were the Triumphs of Death, the Vanities, and the Prodigious Life of Death. The abstract concept of death became personified as the "Empress", and the "Mistress of Human Nature" (Malvido, 2005: 24).

Preparation to a dignified death became one of the primal concerns for people who since medieval times gathered in confraternities (*cofradías*). Members of a confraternity gathered regularly and were involved in various activities: they funded hospitals, collected contribution, organized funerals and prayed for the deceased confraters (Maldonado, 1979: 95-97). During major feasts, the Spanish confraternities organized costume dramas. A confraternity usually had its specified patron saint. However, some of them operated under the patronage of an abstract symbol or concept such as the Holy Cross or Good Death.

The institution of a confraternity was well established in Viceroyalty of New Spain and Captaincy General of Guatemala, as well as in other colonial Latin American states. The costume dramas organized by confraternities in Spain have found favorable conditions in the New World. Costume drama was also frequently used by evangelizers, who struggled with language barriers and illiteracy of the indigenous people. One of the most spectacular dramas was the representation of The Triumph of the Holy Cross Over Death motif during the celebrations of the Holy Week (Malvido, 2005: 24). The residues of those colonial dramas are still present in Latin American indigenous and metis festive processions and dances, often featuring skeletal figures.

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. Descriptions of instances of idolatrous practices associated with skeletal figures appear in the 17th and 18th century reports of Inquisition. Some of them include names of idols, such as Justo Juez and Presagiadora (Malvido, 2005: 21). The best documented and still popular cult in Guatemala and South Mexico is the cult of San Pascual el Rey. Nominally San Pascual el Rey is often identified with Saint Paschal Baylon, canonized in 1690. However, in Guatemalan and Mexican context he is depicted as a crowned skeleton in accordance with the iconographical standards of the Triumphs of Death. In most cases San Pascual becomes the patron saint for urban and indigenous curers (Navarrete, 1982; Pieper, 2002; Arriola, 2003).

The earliest appearance of a venerated skeletal figure named Santa Muerte that has been discovered to date is documented in an Inquisition report from 1797. The report describes in detail the idolatrous practices of indigenous inhabitants of San Luis de la Paz (Perdigón Castaneda, 2008: 33).

The 19th century wave of secularization rendered the skeletal figures representing Triumphs of Death in costume dramas more or less useless. Some of these figures were then preserved and venerated in private houses of the former confraters. Apart from crowned wooden skeletons of San Pascual el Rey, the most famous are "Nuestra Señora, La Muerte" from Yanhuitlán in Oaxaca State, and "San Bernardo" from San Augustín in Hidalgo State. Both figures are often perceived by Santa Muerte devotees as the representations of their patron saint.

Death as a saint

The cult of Santa Muerte in its most common, basic form does not significantly differ from the typical practices of saint worship that form part of Mexican folk Catholicism. Thus, it consists of a set of highly syncretic beliefs and practices labeled as Catholic, but shaped by influences of local indigenous culture or eclectic spiritual currents from colonial (*i.e.* Afro-Christian religions) and postcolonial times (*i.e.* Spiritualism). In comparison to orthodox Catholic customs, the folk Catholic rituals and prayers are more often performed to express a demand or a wish and frequently gravitate toward magical practices.

One of the characteristic features of Mexican folk Catholicism is a phenomenon that can be described as the "trend towards a saint". Saints who are locally famous for their miracle work, meaning they are particularly efficient in granting wishes, quickly gain widespread popularity. The saints in vogue start to appear on road shrines and home altars nationwide, and become patron saints of urban and indigenous curers. The reputation may last a couple of decades until another miraculous saint, whose popularity is currently on the rise, takes place of the predecessor. A recent example of such "fashionable saint" is the Virgin of Juquila.

From the Mexican folk Catholic perspective, many saints grant their devotees' wishes regardless of their intentions. Thus, for example, the Virgin of Guadalupe might bestow her help not only in health or family matters, but also bring bad luck to an enemy or protect a drug dealer from police intervention.

The world of Mexican folk Catholicism is inhabited by a considerable number of folk saints, who could be divided into two groups: the informal and the semi-formal saints. The informal saints are figures declared by their believers as saints, although they have never been canonized. A perfect example here is the legendary robber Jesús Malverde, a Mexican analogue of Robin Hood, who became a popular patron saint among drug traders. An exemplary semi-formal saint is the abovementioned San Pascual el Rey, whose cult incorporates numerous heterodox practices in spite of his apparent association with Saint Paschal Baylon.

As Weaver points out, Mexican cult of folk saints [3] is closely related with folk healing practices. According to him, one of the inalienable features of Mexican folk healing practices is the presence of elements descending from 19th century Spiritist and Spiritualist traditions (1994: 28-29).

The contemporary Santa Muerte cult undoubtedly shares many characteristics with other forms of Mexican folk Catholicism. The central part of the cult is the adoration of the image of Santa Muerte in the form of a statuette or a picture. The altar plays an essential role. The devotees place their offerings beside or on the altar: apples, candies, cigars, tequila, candles and flowers are the usual gifts. Santa Muerte is also frequently referred to as the "Saint of Saints" (*Santísima*), the "White Girl" (*Niña Blanca*), the "Sister of Light" (*Hermana de Luz*). Design of the altar and its particular elements is a matter of individual taste and preference. Catholic saints and figures from different currents of popular religiosity might also appear. The devotees usually initiate their practices by crossing themselves before the statuette or altar. A great part of prayers to the White Girl fits the characteristics of Catholic phraseology and patterns. There are rosaries, novena prayers, as well as Mexican Birthday Songs (*mañanitas*) dedicated to Santa Muerte. The believers go on pilgrimages, occasional masses are performed. Nevertheless, esoteric and occult undertones in the ritual practice are also significant. They are manifested, for instance, in the intention to obtain a specific result through the ritual, in the use of prayers that bear language pattern of a spell, and in the adjustment of the elements of ritual to its specific purpose. [4] Some of these patterns are directly associated with indigenous magical

3. Weaver (1994: 29) limits use of the term "folk saints" as corresponding to "persons from recent past, who had ability to cure and were widely consulted with during their lifetime". He mentions Niño Fidencio and Pedrito Jaramillo as examples. Both of these folk saints were legendary Mexican healers.

4. The symbolic chromatic assignement of the statuettes may serve as a comprehensible example. For instance, the red figures are used in rituals concerning emotional matters, the golden ones to solve economic problems, and the green ones usually appear with relation to health issues.

healing practices (methods of taking away a spell, herbal medicine), others fit in with the contemporary, commercialized esoteric.

The worship of the White Girl spreads predominantly in the major urban centers, with Mexico City being the most popular one. Two main categories of ritual specialists among the devotees can be distinguished: cult leaders and curers (*curanderos*). Cult leaders are charismatic individuals who arrange, administer or cooperate in public ritual practices such as rosaries or feasts. The majority of the street altar owners perform this particular role. The curers are dedicated to magical healing practices and usually have a patron saint, Santa Muerte among others. It is not uncommon that functions of the cult leader and the curer are joined.

Most of the devotees describe themselves simply as Catholics. Doña Enriqueta Romero, one of the most renowned cult leaders said:

> "It turns out that we pray in the same manner as in the Catholic Church, which means that we recite Pater Noster, Apostles' Creed and Mea Culpa. We also say a rosary dedicated to Her". [5]

However, it has to be emphasized that the zealous devotees of Santa Muerte, as compared to other folk saints followers, particularly often express their reluctance toward institutionalized Christianity (see Perdigón Castañeda, 2008; Fragoso Lugo, 2007).

Additionally, as an informal saint Santa Muerte is much more frequently related to other folk saints. As Perdigón Castañeda points out: "(...) it is not uncommon that Santa Muerte is presented as Jesús Malverde's wife, as well as Niño Fidencio's [6] helper" (INAH, 2008).

Apart from the believers describing themselves as Catholics, many of the followers belong to other currents of popular religion: Spiritualism, Santeria, and the peculiar movement of the Aztec-Conchero dancers, whose scope covers Neopaganism as well as Christianity. [7] One of the most widespread and researched forms of Mexican Spiritualism is the Marian Trinitarian Spiritualism (*espiritualismo trinitario mariano*) which originated in the 19th-century Mexico City, in an urban circle of marginalized railway workers. Its religious system combines elements of Catholic liturgy with elements of Allan Kardec's Spiritism which involves possessive trances, mediumism, clairvoyance, automatic writing, and curing with magnetic passes. Elements from indigenous religious practices are also present. [8] Beside the Great Jehovah, Prophet Elias and the Virgin Mary, one of the more significant figures in the eclectic theology of Marian Trinitarian Spiritualists is the "White Sister" (*Hermana Blanca*) identified with the angel of

5. Interview, 4 April 2008, Mexico City.

6. See footnote 3.

7. For a description of the Aztec-Conchero dancers see Gonzalez (2005), Torre (2007; 2008).

8. The Trinitarian spiritualists use ritual cleansing (*limpia*) in the curing practices, and call upon pre-Hispanic ancestral spirits called los Macehuas. See Ortiz Echaniz (1990).

destruction from Exodus and the Santa Muerte herself (Ortiz Echaniz, 1990; Lagarriga Attias, 1975). Some followers of Cuban Santeria, on the other hand, identify Saint Death with one of the *orishas*—either Yemayá (Flores Martos, 2007), or Oyá (Perdigón Castañeda, 2008: 104).

Thus, what seems to be the most important characteristic distinguishing Santa Muerte from other folk saints is her extraordinarily developed "semiotic voracity", amazing efficiency in absorbing meanings and imagery from most diverse contexts. Although, as it has been said, a high level of syncretism in iconography, ritual practices and religious concepts is characteristic of Mexican folk Catholicism in general, the case of Saint Death is unprecedented. Still, is this characteristic a fair reason to label the Santa Muerte cult as a New Age phenomenon?

New Age not so new after all

From the immense volumes of interpretations and definitions of a multilayered and elusive cultural phenomenon called New Age, I am going to evoke predominantly the classic study on the subject by Hanegraaff that covers the most ground. Hanegraaff (1996; 2001) discusses the New Age religiosity primarily in the context of secular thought of Western culture.

According to Hanegraaff the New Age Movement as a phenomenon of Western culture emerging in a historical process can be understood in a strict and in a general sense. The New Age religion originates from Western secularized esotericism and might be understood as its recent development. It derives from the combined 18th and 19th century traditions, among others Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Transcendentalism and Spiritualism. The latter gave rise to occultist movements, such as Theosophical Society, or Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which in turn created foundations for Neopaganism and the New Age metaphysics in the process of progressive secularization (Melton, 1988; Faivre, 1994; Faivre, Hanegraaf, 1995; Hanegraaff, 1996).

Amidst the above mentioned historical currents constituting the Western esotericism, the Spiritualism deserves particular attention on account of its close, multilevel relations with the cult of Santa Muerte. Spiritualism emerged as a result of the quest for an alternative, esoteric science, merging elements of the previous claims about new science of spirit, such as Mesmerism, magnetism, clairvoyance and others (Faivre, Hanegraaf, 1995: 275). As Hanegraaff puts it: "Spiritualism (...) was a religion perfectly suited to modern, secular democracies: not only did it promise 'scientific' proof of the supernatural, but its science was non-elitist as well. (...) Spiritualism was characterized by a pronounced scientific attitude combined with an intrinsic opposition to institutionalized Christianity" (Hanegraaff, 1996: 439). Those features later became characteristics of the New Age religion.

For Hanegraaff, the New Age Movement in the strict sense begins with millenarian interpretations of the UFO sightings in the 1950s. Utopian countercultural currents and the emergence of a net of spiritual illumination centers in the 1960s and 1970s constitute the clearest definition of the New Age Movement in the strict sense. The characteristic feature of this stage is the activist attitude, expressing dissatisfaction with the mainstream Western culture, combined with strong millenarian accents. The term Age of Aquarius becomes a synonym for the vision announcing the arrival of a better, peaceful world and spiritual enlightenment of humanity.

New Age in the strict sense becomes but one of the currents within the next stage of the Movement. This stage—the New Age Movement in the general sense—originates in the late 1970s and continues till the present day. The central features of New Age Movement in the general sense are: prevailing loss of countercultural attitudes, broadening and simplification of the previous ideas, turning to an individual progress instead of a social development, as well as increasing commercialization corresponding with the development of the postmodern, global consumer society. The last mentioned feature is related to the individual and informal religious syntheses created by the New Agers. Making individual religious syntheses, suitable for personal needs, from ready-made elements, is similar to buying merchandise at a shopping center. Hence the term "spiritual shopping mall", frequently used to describe the New Age religion (Hanegraaff, 1996). To describe the superficial, commercial pursuits penetrating many aspects of the present stage of the New Age Movement Hanegraaff applies a Spangler's term: the "New Age glamour" (*ibid.*: 105).

Death advertising campaign

The glossy magazines for Santa Muerte devotees constitute one of the clearest examples of how the commercial and "glamorous" insertions penetrating the contemporary New Age religiosity influence on the shape of the cult. The most widespread magazine is *Devoción a la Santa Muerte*. On the cover there is always a figure of Santa Muerte in one of its infinite iconographical variations. One cannot miss bold headlines: "EXTRA", "NEW", "GRATIS!!!", "Giant free poster!" screaming like a cover of some popular teen magazine. Bonus offers in every issue include calendars, carton figures, posters with Novenaries, with Santa Muerte's name stamped all over. Photos of altars, exemplary prayers to Santa Muerte, devotees' accounts of miracles, questions from readers and explanations of the symbolic meaning of particular iconographical details are permanent features of the magazine. A precise ritual instruction is another indispensable fixture. The included photos display magic ingredients available in mail-order as well as directly in one of the editor's shop in Mexico City.

An inclination towards wish-granting magic rituals constitute a characteristic feature of folk saints cult in general. In the commercialized form of Santa Muerte cult this feature pops-up to foreground. The magazine contains advertisements by urban curers, offering energetic cleansings (*limpias energéticas*), Tarot readings, protection against negative influences or help in matters of health, love, money and other personal problems, with Santa Muerte usually serving as the patron saint. At times, the advertisement is a part of ritual advice set joined with a photo report on the curer. Don Macario, an urban curer occasionally present on the magazine's pages, refers to Christian mythology and symbolic as well as to commercial esoteric, at the same time wearing an intriguing, eclectic version of a traditional indigenous garb with visible elements of Huichol peyote motifs.

The penetration of the "glamorous" New Age elements into rituals and mythology of Santa Muerte is also perceivable on the lexical level of the magazine. Two weasel words predominantly appearing in the texts are "energy" (*energía*), and "spiritual" (*espritual*). Hence the reader is encouraged to undergo "spiritual cleansing", or "energetic baths with the power of Santa Muerte", to "increase the spiritual energy", "turn away the negative energy", et cetera.

Advertisements appearing in the magazine display a notion of spiritual context of the commercialized version of the cult of Santa Muerte. Frequently appearing in the magazine are advertisements of horoscope hotlines, fortune-telling chat rooms offering Tarot, Viking runes, and numerology readings as well as Feng Shui accessories and tutorials. The undisputed queen of this typical spiritual shopping mall is of course the White Girl. Among the available products there is a special variety of Tarot cards, suited for the Santa Muerte devotees, not to mention the infinite range of typical accessories such as statuettes, pendants, necklaces, t-shirts and so on. Buying a DVD with ritual instructions enables you to receive a bonus pack with Santa Muerte candles and a book on the magical power of minerals.

In the case of the glossy magazines for the Santa Muerte devotees the syncretic intermingling of diverse spiritual traditions remains predominantly a respond to market's needs, a means of gaining access to the widest possible range of consumers. Here the adequate context creating favorable circumstances for syncretic processes is not local, characteristic specifically for Mexico or Latin America. Rather, the inclination to transform the Santa Muerte figure into a commercial product suitable for combining with other similar spiritual goods forms an inseparable part of the global tendency toward commercialization of the spiritual domain.

Reviving the old Death

Although not constituting a central feature, several elements of the New Age in its strict sense, such as millenarism and activist, utopian, countercultural attitude, are to be found among the wide variety of shapes taken by the cult of

Santa Muerte. They are present predominantly in the syncretic worldview of some of the Conchero-Aztec dancers. The dynamic performances of the Conchero-Aztec dancers, enacted to the sound of drums and conches in the main square of Mexico City, are one of the chief tourist attractions. Distinct currents developing within this subculture range from strict Neopagan to Neopagan-Catholic hybrids. Dressed in costumes inspired by pre-Hispanic warrior clothing, the dancers often conduct their rituals (strongly influenced by archeological and anthropological literature) at pre-Hispanic ruins and colonial Christian temples. They give homage to pre-Hispanic deities as well as to Catholic saints, the latter frequently double-named in Nahuatl and Spanish, for instance Tonantzín-Guadalupe [9]. The millenarian aspects of the Conchero-Aztec dancers' worldview appear, among others, in the myth of the return of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor. The restoration of an old Aztec order, [10] and living in accordance to the laws of nature are the aims of many active Conchero-Aztec efforts. The problem of basic differences in the dancers' worldviews as well as their close relation to the New Age spirituality is described in detail by Torre (Torre, 2008). My purpose here is merely to draw attention to Conchero-Aztec dancers' performances during the *fiestas* at the street altar in Tepito, and the presence of Santa Muerte in their individual theologies. Here Santa Muerte is generally identified with Aztec dual personification of Death, god Mictlantecuhtli and goddess Mictlantecihuatl (Fragoso Lugo, 2007; Perdigón Castañeda, 2008; Flores Martos, 2008). In the case of Conchero-Aztec dancers the groundwork for syncretic processes is the assumption of concordance of traditions, remaining one of the characteristic features of New Age religiosity, and Western esotericism in general (Faivre, Hanegraaf, 1995).

Epiphanies and Internet

As it has already been mentioned, one of the two kinds of ritual specialists having Santa Muerte as the patron saint is the curer. In the urban context, where physical ailments are normally treated by doctors, the curers specialize mainly in the "spiritual matters". They cure ailments allegedly caused by a curse, intervention of supernatural beings, "contamination of aura" and the like. However, they frequently do have some medical knowledge and prescribe herbal mixtures or medicaments to their patients. Besides the "curing" practices, an urban curer offers to improve the client's situation in various ways, generally proposed is

9. Tonantzín, meaning "Our Venerable Mother", is a denomination used by nahatl speaking natives to address Virgin of Guadalupe. In pre-Hispanic times it was used in reference to a goddess, generally the Coatlicue. See Granziera (2004); Gruzinski (1995); León-Portilla (2002).

10. Aztec empire is generally depicted by the Conchero-Aztec dancers as a domain of peace and harmony. They often reject the concept of pre-Hispanic human sacrifice as fabricated by conquistadors: Torre (2008).

the enhancement of economic, emotional or social condition, with the use of adequate rituals. Additionally the curer might also provide services in future prediction or finding lost persons and objects. An infamous but still valued service is casting evil spells. All of the above mentioned services have been provided in urban centers since colonial times (Aguirre, 1980; Quezada, 1989). The curing practices are usually denominated as "curing" (*curación*), whereas the wish granting procedure—a "job" (*trabajo*).

In most cases, urban curers declare themselves as Catholics or belong to one of the main currents of Mexican popular religiosity. The followers of Santa Muerte are no exception. They usually start their practice on the basis of supernatural vocation: a miraculous intervention, a dream or vision frequently combined with initiation illness, or as a result of previous practice in one of the Spiritual Centers (*centros espirituales*). An average Catholic urban curer has one patron saint but often turns for help to other saints, usually the local patrons or saints traditionally venerated in his or her family. Generally urban curers receive clients in a separated room adapted to the ritual practice, where the main altar of patron saint is placed. In some cases there is also an altar in the waiting room. Information about the cult practices and curing methods is obtained through personal visions, intuition, other practitioners' advice and printed or electronic resources, the last one being something of a taboo.

The impact of the "glamorous", or commercial New Age spirituality on ritual and worldview of urban curers becomes clearly visible in the biggest urban centers, notably in Mexico City. Don Valdéz and don Macario, who advertise in *Devoción a la Santa Muerte* magazine might serve as an excellent example. Meanwhile a typical urban curer applies a personal combination of methods which include traditional rituals of indigenous origin (most of all *limpia*, [11] use of tobacco and herbal medicine), practices characteristic for Mexican folk Catholic healing (prayers, use of statuettes and pictures of saints, candles, blessed oils) along with esoteric techniques like Tarot and astrology.

Elements of Spiritualism have penetrated urban curers practices to such an extent, that some scholars are inclined towards recognizing them as an inseparable component of Mexican folk healing (Weaver, 1994). Among these elements is the communication with elevated beings, clairvoyance (as one of the diagnostic methods), as well as treatment with application of magnetic passes. Some of the urban curers show tendency towards giving their spiritual practice a "scientific flavor", a trend particularly traceable on the lexical level.

11. *Limpia* is a ritual cleansing employed in urban and indigenous curing practice generally consisting of sweeping over the patient with a bundle of herbs, and sprinkling him or her with alcohol.

From medicine to esoteric

Don Ramón, in his late 20s, runs his curing practice in the outskirts of San Cristóbal de las Casas. He is quite popular: there is always a queue of people waiting for a consultation. His clients range from youths to elderly people. Over five years ago, before practicing as a curer, don Ramón started as a paramedic and wanted to become a physician. He is single. Ramón joins obligations of curer with those of a local cult leader, and arranges yearly *fiesta* dedicated to the Saint Death.

Don Ramón declares that his vocation to cure and help people was bestowed upon him by Santa Muerte in a series of visionary dreams:

> "... I've had meetings with her for about ten years. How do I do it? Actually, by dreaming about Her. (...) So, one time She just said: I want you to follow me". [12]

Ramón admits that in the beginning he drew many information about the cult of Santa Muerte from popular resources:

> "So... well, I started to, let's say, investigate by reading some books about Her, I used internet as well". [13]

Altar in the waiting room is considerably bigger than the one situated in the room for ritual practices. The first one is covered with Santa Muerte statuettes, two of them being quite sizable. Among the typical devotees' offerings there are crosses as well. On the wall behind the altar hangs a huge poster of Santa Muerte. Remaining walls are decorated with pictures of Saint Juda Taddeus and Esquipulas, the Black Christ. Just before the altar, there is a large statue of a ferocious red dragon resembling a creature from a fantasy book cover. The altar in the small room where the rituals take place displays more Catholic elements. Apart from a few much smaller statuettes of Santa Muerte, a number of rosary-hung crosses appear along with a picture of Allan Kardec (founder of Spiritism), Saint George, and a Baby Jesus (*Niño Dios*) doll. On the right side is a large image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Hung right behind the altar are depictions of Our Lady of Fatima, Saint Juda Taddeus, a Niño Doctor doll and a sizable picture of the Black Christ.

Besides a variation on the standard pattern of the *limpia* ritual, which involves passing an egg over patient's body, Ramón employs a wide range of divination techniques in order to set a diagnosis for his client. A fundamental method of diagnosing is based on examining forms created by an egg broken into a glass of water. This method is also applied by rural, indigenous curers. Other methods of divination employed by Ramón include reading from shapes taken by a smoking cigar or tobacco smoke, and from the Tarot cards. He customarily uses Tarot of Santa Muerte as well as the Raider Tarot. Occasionally

12. Interview, 9 October 2007, San Cristóbal de las Casas.
13. *Idem.*

Ramon applies quartz and minerals. At times, he makes use of his medical knowledge, although only to a limited extent:

> "... It could be cholesterol, white blood cell balance or other problems. If it turned out it's cholesterol or uric acid related I would employ herbal methods. If it's glucose, I would pretty much stop. If something exceeds my limits I prefer to recommend medical treatment. Otherwise, I could cause a person's death or a stroke or, I don't know, a diabetic coma". [14]

Don Ramón's characteristic use of language, a combination of medical jargon ("respiratory tract", "circulatory system") with esoteric terminology ("absorb energy", "magnetic field of a person", "spiritual entities") is most peculiar. The curer's personal theology is well-considered. Its core clearly remains Catholic, but with a clearly traceable impact of the Marian Trinitarian Spiritualist world-view:

> "I have believed in all the saints, the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Lord Esquipulas, since childhood. (...) I am very religious and I hadn't been Her [Santa Muerte] follower until She threw some light on the matter that had bothered me at the time. The question was: If I follow Her, is it for or against God? She replied: You call me in the name of God. Do you think you let your God down then? I worship Her as the essence of death itself, with no color, no sex (...) I perceive her as a Being of Light. (...) Isn't She the one who punishes in the name of God in the Bible? Yes, She is. She is the most important of all saints. Who had taken all the martyrs' lives so that they became saints? She did. (...) A common basis of all the religions is the concept, that we are constituted of a body, a soul, and a spirit. In all of the religions concept of death is the central feature. There has to be someone who's responsible for recovering the souls and bring them to the place of destiny". [15]

In the case of don Ramón the eclectic character of Santa Muerte figure becomes comprehensive by dint of a well-considered, strictly hierarchical world-view imbued with a conviction of concordance of spiritual traditions. Elevated beings, such as the Death are perceived as rather abstract and incorporeal. Ramón describes Santa Muerte as Light, in accordance with the Marian Trinitarian Spiritualist nomenclature. Don Ramón's language, full of borrowings from medical and "scientific" jargon might be considered as an expression of the longing for "scientification" of the spiritual—a factor that shaped the development of Western esotericism from its very origins and remains present in its latest incarnations.

Buddha, Shiva, and Virgin of Guadalupe

Over 40-year old doña Inés [16] lives near the city center of San Cristóbal. She is a widow raising two sons and a daughter on her own. Before practising as a curer she used to work as a servant and a chef assistant among others. The

14. Interview, 9 October 2007, San Cristóbal de las Casas.
15. *Idem.*
16. In conformity with the respondents requests only their first names are used.

impulse to start curing practice was, as she declares, a personal meeting with Santa Muerte at the neighboring temple of Virgin of Guadalupe:

> "She appeared in the shape of a pretty Lady. (...) At first, I thought she was just another woman coming to pray. But I was mistaken, she touched me right here, on the shoulder (...) I sensed she was emitting some sort of vibration, she had healing powers". [17]

A small altar is situated in the living room which serves as a waiting room for Inés' clients. The altar's central figure is the Virgin of Guadalupe, accompanied by depictions of Jesus Christ, Saint Anthony and the Virgin of Juquila. The house walls are decorated with mediocre landscapes, pictures of unicorns and Santa Muerte posters. The biggest poster is a fairy black and white image of Saint Death attended by a naked young woman. On the left side of the entrance, a wooden statuette of a semi-formal folk saint San Simón is located. The main altar lies in the ritual room. It contains an impressive number of Santa Muerte statuettes, interspersed with small print pictures and prayers to Santa Muerte available on sale. Behind the altar two large paintings of Jesus Christ are situated. Coming across a statue of golden Buddha and a Shiva (as Mahayogin) figure was something of a surprise in these surroundings.

> "Thanks to Shiva I get myself together, she [18] delivers me from all kinds of *bad air* (*mal aire*). That is why I use Shiva. As for Buddha, he is here to help me in getting a job, perhaps. Or just because I like him, he looks nice. I prefer him because he has got the little Saint [Santa Muerte] in his belly". [19]

> "Mochito [San Simón/Maximón] is like a friend, my brother. He helps me. But I don't work with him. (...) When something happens I say to him: look Mochito, this and that happened, let's see if you can help me out or not. He is so cute. Very miraculous". [20]

The ritual cleansing (*limpia*) with *pox*, [21] and herbs such as rue, basil and rosemary, as applied by doña Inés, is not significantly different from a typical ceremonial scheme of urban and rural indigenous curers all over the Mexico and Guatemala. After concluding *limpia*, the curer foretells the problem that brought the client to her:

> "... I sense their ailments and tell them what's wrong (...) and they decide themselves if they want to get cured or not...". [22]

Depending on the type of problem, doña Inés administers an adequate folk medicine method, for instance herbal baths. She claims that she has become acquainted with the ritual techniques exclusively by means of intuition and supernatural inspiration:

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17. Interview, 4 October 2007, San Cristóbal de las Casas.
18. Doña Inés has a strong conviction that the Shiva is actually a female figure.
19. Interview, 4 October 2007, San Cristóbal de las Casas.
20. Interview, 10 February 2008, San Cristóbal de las Casas.
21. Pox is a local variety of moonshine (aguardiente).
22. Interview, 4 October 2007, San Cristóbal de las Casas.

"... no one taught me, no one said: listen, you are going to work, you are going to set an altar. I started it all by myself, just using my head". [23]

Besides a practice typical for a curer, doña Inés arranges a feast dedicated to Saint Death every year at the 2nd of November. The *fiesta* takes place in the curer's house. There are dozens of participants, usually whole families of devotees with children, parents and older people. The Saint Death *fiesta* at doña Inés' house also fits the pattern of Mexican folk Catholicism. It starts with the Mexican Birthday Song (*mañanitas*) dedicated to Santa Muerte and continues with "... dancing, *mariachis*, well, *tamales*, snacks, beer... and all of that". [24] The peculiar distinguishing feature of the *fiesta* is a visible presence of North American Halloween elements: decoration of carved pumpkins hanging from the ceiling, scattered on the central altar, and children in horror costumes and make-up. An exceptional quality of doña Inés' private theology is a syncretic identification of Santa Muerte with the Virgin of Guadalupe.

In the case of doña Inés the basis for incorporating figures and practices originating from diverse traditions is not a coherent worldview assuming a concordance of traditions, but rather a certain expedience. The main factor favoring the absorption of new practices and beliefs is simply their effectiveness. Despite her extremely exotic borrowings doña Inés remains on the ground of Mexican folk Catholicism. A similar view, entirely focused on Santa Muerte's efficiency as a miracle worker is also expressed by some of the indigenous inhabitants of San Cristobal's surroundings.

Skirmishes of folk saints: an indigenous point of view

Although the skeletal San Pascual remains very popular among the Natives from Chiapas and Guatemala, official cases of practising the cult of Santa Muerte are still rare. An indigenous curer I had a chance to discover, who openly admitted to have Santa Muerte as the patron saint, was doña Rosa from San Lorenzo Zinacanán, a community near San Cristóbal. Doña Rosa is a married 20-year-old woman involved with one of the Spiritual Centers. Thus, in her healing practice she combines elements of urban and indigenous curing techniques. A second patron saint of doña Rosa is San Simón. Although her curing abilities gain recognition among the Zinacantán inhabitants, she is also ascribed with casting evil spells.

Doña Maruch, an indigenous inhabitant of Zinacantán, maintains that sometimes a skirmish between curers who revere different saints takes place:

23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*

> "There is a girl who also works [cures] that way. So, this girl also works in a Spiritual Center. As they say, she is a Santo Remedio follower and has chosen him as the patron saint of her practice. (...) So one day she had a fight with the a follower of Santa Muerte [doña Rosa]. So, the girl who lives here, down the road, has less power, Santa Muerte has more power. And because Santa Muerte is very evil, the girl got sick". [25]

Conclusions

What distinguishes Santa Muerte from other Mexican folk saints is for the most part her astonishing effortlessness in absorbing countless elements of diverse visual codes, ritual patterns and belief systems. Nevertheless, as it has been illustrated by the examples above, there are many different factors influencing Santa Muerte's intermingling with practices and imagery pertaining to diverse religious traditions. Some of them indicate her affinity with the widely understood New Age spirituality. Others resemble it solely in a superficial manner.

Popularity of glossy magazines dedicated to the cult of Santa Muerte is one of the clearest examples of the cult's strong inclinations towards commercialization, typical for the "glamorous" New Age spirituality. The magazine format requires attention drawing elements such as headlines, advertisements or a clear division of the content into units. Noble philosophical or spiritual traditions of oriental and indigenous origins are debased into ready-made, user-friendly and easy-to-understand modules put on sale like any other product. Such uniformization offers only an illusionary choice. What is essentially sold is the same limited set of products with shifting packages. This tendency is manifested on one hand by a stunning (and constantly increasing) number of Santa Muerte figure designs, and on the other by eclectic hybrids—the new packaging of the same old product—such as the Tarot of Santa Muerte.

In this case the multileveled interconnections between Santa Muerte's imagery and other spiritual traditions result from market's needs, and are motivated by the sellers' aspiration to gain access to the widest possible range of consumers. Thus, this aspect of the cult remains but one of the manifestations of the "spiritual shopping mall", that emerged within the global consumer society.

However, there is also a place for Santa Muerte in a worldview belonging to the New Age in the strict sense, as presented by some of the Native Pan-American, millenarist movements of Aztec-Conchero dancers. Furthermore numerous aspects of the Santa Muerte cult, as performed by urban curers, due to their Spiritualist ties, hold close affinity with the New Age religiosity understood as a recent development of the Western esotericism. These aspects are

25. Interview, 27 February 2008, San Lorenzo Zinacantán.

present, among others, in urban curers and Marian Trinitarian Spiritualists healing practice, which includes clairvoyance, magnetic passes, as well as communication with elevated beings, or spirits of the departed. The latter, according to Faivre, remains in close correspondence with some of the practices characteristic for the New Age spirituality, *i.e.* the "channeling"/"branching" (Faivre, 1994: 104). In the context of urban folk healing with strong Spiritualist flavour the groundwork for incorporating elements pertaining to other belief systems is often an implicit assumption of concordance of diverse spiritual traditions. As it already has been said, the tendency to ornament one's language with medical and "scientific" borrowings, displayed by urban curers such as don Ramón, might be considered as a manifestation of the need of conjunction of the scientific with the spiritual, an underlying characteristic of modern Western secularized spirituality. Also, the non-elitist character of the Santa Muerte cult, along with the reluctance towards institutionalized Christianity frequently expressed by her followers remain close to the spirit of the New Age religiosity (Hanegraaff, 1996: 439). However, the contemporary forms taken by the Spiritualism manifested in rituals and worldview of the Marian Trinitarian Spiritualists and many of the urban curers' practices cannot be regarded as New Age religiosity as such. Rather, they pertain to a sister tradition, that along with New Age spirituality descends from common ancestry, but grew on a different soil.

Some of the phenomena appearing in the cases discussed above might prove misleading. In many cases the syncretic character of practices and imagery associated with Santa Muerte is not based on an assumption of concordance of spiritual traditions, nor is it driven by a desire to widen the circle of consumers. Likewise, individualization of urban curers' practice frequently has nothing in common with the high esteem for subjective experience and individuality characteristic for the New Agers. Nor is it an expression of the so-called "shopping mall self" of the consumer society members (Aldred, 2000). Both the inclination to absorb elements from other religious traditions and the individualization of spiritual practices might essentially remain manifestations of Mexican folk Catholicism, as in the case of doña Inés.

Unlike a New Ager, whose incorporation of successive "spiritual entities" into an individual pantheon is usually justified on basis of a more or less defined worldview, a Mexican folk Catholic believer incorporates new beings using the basic criterion of their alleged power and efficiency. For instance, San Simón will appear on an altar because "people say that he helps in business".[26] The immense popularity of the Virgin of Juquila or the informal saint Santa Muerte is usually summed up with a comment like: "That's because she's likely to grant your wishes. She's miraculous".

26. Interview, 27 February 2008, San Lorenzo Zinacantán.

Likewise individualism in New Age spirituality is easy to confuse with epiphanic individualism constituting the traditional element of folk curing practice. The epiphanic individualism involves a personal experience of epiphany as a basis of curer's practice. One of the essential differences between these two concepts is the fact, that in spite of a highly individualized source of inspiration for establishing the curing practice, the worldview and rituals of a folk curer eventually match the main core of classical paradigm of Mexican folk Catholicism. Santa Muerte is generally located within the Catholic worldview as a saint, an angel or a similar being. At times, Santa Muerte is directly identified with one of the canonized saints, or even the Virgin of Guadalupe, as in the case of doña Inés.

Thus, in many cases the heterogeneous traditions shaping the cult of Santa Muerte compose a mosaic which, in resemblance to the survived pre-Hispanic rural beliefs described by Ingham, paradoxically tends to "confirm rather than contradict the Catholic worldview" (Ingham, 1986:1).

The most popular explanation of the unusual popularity gained by Santa Muerte during the last couple of decades is based on a literal comprehension of this figure as a representation of the death. Both journalists and scholars tend to perceive the cult as a form of death worship, resulting from the escalation of violence in Mexico and the economic fragility of numerous Mexican Saint Death's devotees (Perdigón Castañeda, 2008). Thus, according to this explanation, the contemporary worship of Santa Muerte would constitute a kind of recapitulation of the phenomenon that emerged in Medieval Europe, when plagues and wars drew the imagery of death nearer to the people.

In my opinion these explanations are not entirely accurate. Perceiving Santa Muerte primarily as a personification of death is not consistent with the point of view expressed by the devotees themselves. Rather, the main source of Santa Muerte's exceptional popularity seems to be the particular efficiency in granting devotees' wishes, along with her effortlessness in absorbing elements of and intermingling with diverse spiritual traditions. The latter is a result of many factors. As in the case of other folk saints, it is influenced by the religious panorama of Mexico, which from the colonial times on has been shaped by the interaction of distinct belief systems and religious practices of various origins: indigenous, Christian, Afro-Christian and Spritualist. The informal practices associated with Mexican folk Catholicism and the individual character of curers' healing performance result in a somewhat latitudinal approach towards interpretations of Santa Muerte's and other folk saints' images. What is more, despite ongoing attempts to unite the devotees of Saint Death, there is no single acclaimed institution gathering the cult members. As a result, there is no formal canon of laws or a precise liturgical scheme that would limit the variety of cult practices.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that in the particular case of Santa Muerte there are some additional, formal factors driving her exceptional eclectic potential. The image of a human skeleton is loaded with various meanings in different cultural contexts, but at the same time its diverse representations hold notable resemblance and it is so, because they are modeled after a universal anatomic phenomenon. Thus, this striking and easily recognizable image stimulates the creation of links between distinct systems of meaning. This feature becomes particularly significant in the era of information. The avalanche of images and concepts engenders a desperate need of establishing focusing points—figures or ideas that enable creating links between diverse systems of meanings. Such figures or ideas make possible to canalize the chaotic flow of diversified information, to force this information into a fixed, yet highly receptive form, thus facilitating orientation.

An omnipresent paradox—one of the most striking features of Santa Muerte—is another important formal property that seems to influence her exceptional popularity. It is expressed in the saint's very denomination consisting of "Saint" and "Death". The paradox pervading Santa Muerte figure is for the most part based on a contradiction between the reception of her image by the devoted followers and the laymen. In private theologies her role is that of an angel or a particularly powerful saint. The devotees often describe her as motherly, benevolent, beautiful, sweet, sometimes even joyful. The attitude of a believer towards the White Girl and a figure that represents her is altogether very personal. The devotees tend to focus on her folk saint features such as the alleged power of granting wishes, working miracles or protecting the followers. The existential-metaphysical questions associated with her function as the death often remain aside. If these questions are addressed at all, Santa Muerte is generally seen as a messenger of God, a distinguished being with a mission to guide the followers to the other side. The omnipresent paradox is particularly striking on the lexical level in phrases spoken by the devotees, such as: "Then I said to this man: in the name of Saint Death—do not kill me!", "Saint Death has saved my life", or "Saint Death makes your life less bitter".

In the particular case of religious phenomena reversal coding and a change in the connotation system expressed by paradox are parts of the initiation procedure, a tool that enables distinguishing the initiated form the uninitiated, the esoteric from exoteric. The unconventional reading of a symbolic text strengthens the sense of elitism among the devotees and unites them in opposition to the laymen.

In time, even the most powerful metaphor as well as its close relative, the paradox, is likely to become conventional and be turned into an idiomatic expression. The Santa Muerte devotees accustom themselves to the initially striking image of their patron saint. They start to see through its somewhat repulsive

surface. The scythe-carrying skeleton becomes a protecting, motherly saint, associated with family holidays and festivals and a great number of positive life experiences. Getting through to the cryptic meaning, the reversal decoding, becomes conventional. On the lexical plane, the process of accustoming is often expressed by conferring nicknames. Santa Muerte devotees are using a lot of diminutives when referring to their patron, such as the Skinny One (*Flaquita*), the Little Saint (*Santita*), or the Cute Little Girl (*Niña Bonita*).

Nonetheless, the above mentioned process is dynamic and runs in cycles. The social reaction to the image of Saint Death makes it virtually impossible to completely forget about the common reception of it. As a result, its paradoxical character is recalled again, which means that the process of accustoming with the image has to be repeated.

It also seems that in the case of Santa Muerte, the multidimensional paradoxicality of the saint's image enables its smooth adjustment to a personal and divergent world view and lifestyle of any of her followers. [27]

Many issues presented in this paper as merely a draft ask for further, rigorous investigations and a comprehensive study. The matters of specific character and range of the Latin American New Age variety along with a detailed history of Spiritualism in Mexico remain open for discussion. The scientifically overlooked cult of Santa Muerte requires a precise quantitative analysis. Crucial questions regarding the range of the cult, social and gender distribution of the devotees, or the number and exact types of shrines are waiting for an honest elaboration.

Piotr Grzegorz MICHALIK
Jagiellonian University Cracow
piotr_grzegorz_michalik@yahoo.com.mx

27. Some of the above mentioned considerations associated with paradoxical nature of the Santa Muerte figure have been presented in the form of a paper during the 10th World Congress of Semiotics at La Coruña in 2009.

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Abstract

This paper discusses a popular but hardly investigated cult of an informal saint Santa Muerte (Saint Death). Santa Muerte enjoys growing popularity in Mexico and neighboring countries. One of the reasons for it is the cult's extensive presence in mass media. It remains exposed to influence of other popular religious traditions, including Spiritualism and elements of the New Age spirituality.

Key words: Santa Muerte, popular cult, new age, Mexico, mass media.

Résumé

Cet article analyse le culte populaire mais peu étudié de la Santa Muerte (Sainte Mort) et qui jouit actuellement d'une popularité croissante au Mexique et dans les pays voisins. Une des raisons de ce phénomène est la présence massive du culte dans les mass media. Il est exposé à l'influence d'autres traditions religieuses, y compris le spiritualisme et certains éléments de la spiritualité new age.

Mots-clés : Santa Muerte, culte populaire, new age, Mexique, media.

Resumen

Este artículo trata de la Santa Muerte, un santo informal muy popular, pero poco estudiado. La Santa Muerte tiene una popularidad creciente en México y los países vecinos. Una de las razones de esto es la extensa presencia del culto en medios de comunicación de masas. El culto queda expuesto a influencias de otras tradiciones religiosas populares, incluso el espiritualismo y la espiritualidad de New Age.

Palabras clave: Santa Muerte, culto popular, new age, Mexico, media.