

# Syncretic Santa Muerte: Holy Death and Religious Bricolage

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**Abstract:** In this article, we trace the syncretic origins and development of the new religious movement centered on the Mexican folk saint of death, Santa Muerte. We explore how she was born of the syncretic association of the Spanish Catholic Grim Reaper and Pre-Columbian Indigenous thanatologies in the colonial era. Through further religious bricolage in the post-colony, we describe how as the new religious movement rapidly expanded it integrated elements of other religious traditions, namely Afro-Cuban Santería and Palo Mayombe, New Age beliefs and practices, and even Wicca. In contrast to much of the Eurocentric scholarship on Santa Muerte, we posit that both the Skeleton Saint's origins and contemporary devotional framework cannot be comprehended without considering the significant influence of Indigenous death deities who formed part of holistic ontologies that starkly contrasted with the dualistic absolutism of European Catholicism in which life and death were viewed as stark polarities. We also demonstrate how across time the liminal power of death as a supernatural female figure has proved especially appealing to marginalized socioeconomic groups.

**Keywords:** Santa Muerte; death; liminality; religion; syncretic; Mexico; Santería; Palo Mayombe; Latinx



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## 1. Introduction

In this article, we consider the syncretic origins of Mexican folk saint, Santa Muerte, the female folk saint of death, in the colony of New Spain and detail her ongoing syncretic development in the post-colony of Mexico. As a team of two, an anthropologist and a historian who have cumulatively conducted 15 years of research on Santa Muerte across the Americas, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach.

Firstly, taking an ethno-archaeological,<sup>1</sup> anthropological and historical viewpoint, we argue that Santa Muerte accreted from the meeting of two distinct conceptions of death during the colonial era, when Spanish colonizers brought Christianity to Latin America to convert Indigenous people, and with it the figure of the Grim Reaper which represented death. We reveal how Indigenous people in Mexico did not simply apostatize from their own spiritual traditions and “upload” Christianity as enforced by the Spanish clergy during their proselytization efforts. Instead, Indigenous people remapped Catholicism through their own spiritual ontologies, and often integrated their own spiritual praxis covertly due to the violence visited upon them by colonizers when they did not follow the Catholic creed (Tavárez 2011, p. 163). We describe how through the meeting of Christian and Indigenous thanatologies in the colonial space—which soon became a space of omnipresent death, due to mass genocide of local peoples—early iterations of Santa Muerte originated which involved tapping into the power of death and liminality for miracles of healing and restored life.

<sup>1</sup> Ethnoarchaeology is a subdiscipline of anthropology which uses archaeological data for the ethnographic study of peoples of the past. We use such an approach, in part, taking from ethnoarchaeological work such as that of Michael Lind (2015) to draw conclusions because as Fewster details (Fewster 2006), in ethnoarchaeology analogical inference can allow us to interpret human behavior in the past, as well as “to establish the principles of connection or relevance between the past and the present” (Fewster 2006, p. 63).

Secondly, we look at how the folk saint of death in the 21st century continues to revolve around the power of death in the post-colony and to agglomerate new syncretic aspects absorbing influences from Santeria, Palo Mayombe, and New Age spirituality. As we explain, Santa Muerte, although morphed significantly since its inception in the colony, is now at the center of a thriving new religious movement. Nevertheless, the religion retains its appeal as a faith appealed to by those in marginal, liminal spaces who in situations of vulnerability, exclusion and proximity to death seek to tap into its power to obtain relief, empowerment and resist their marginalization.

As we explain throughout this article, ideas about death as a puissant force are long-standing in Mexico and endure as an important part of Santa Muerte's powers in the modern world. Yet the folk saint would not have come into existence without the introduction of Christianity and its syncretism with Indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, in order to understand the unique powers of Santa Muerte, a historical analysis of the Skeleton Saint is requisite. In this article, we provide such an analysis. But before it can be proffered, it is vital to give a brief synopsis of what some authors assert is one of the fastest growing new religious movements in the Americas (Chesnut 2017; Bromley 2016). We will start with an explanation of what a folk saint is, after which we extend a brief introduction to the Mexican death saint. This will be followed by an analysis of her inception as a syncretic saint emerging as a formative version of who she is today in the colony and developing later in the post-colonial era wherein the new religious movement further expanded, coalescing influences from manifold African diaspora spiritual traditions. We suggest that as a loosely organized faith, with no official clergy nor rules (Argyriadis 2016, p. 34), Santa Muerte lends itself to syncretism and that this accounts, in part, for the appeal and success of the new religious movement.

## 2. Saint of the Folk

Santa Muerte is currently one of the most popular folk saints not only in Mexico but also across the Americas, the great majority of her followers only since 2001 when devotion to death went public. She is a folk saint, literally a "saint of the folk" that is to say, of the people, particularly the working classes. As Graziano (2006), has pointed out unlike Catholic saints, who were holy people that have been officially canonized by the Church, folk saints are either real persons or mythical figures who have not been recognized by the Vatican but who the general populace has deemed as holy and imbued with supernatural powers. Because "folk saints, unlike Catholic ones, lived out their lives on Latin American soil" they are "familiar faces among the often less relatable pantheon of official saints. Due to a mythology that is built upon cultural propinquity, they are far easier to turn to and propitiate as their realities seem intertwined with those of their devotees" (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, p. 28).

In Latin America, the faithful often prefer "lo nuestro ("what is ours," meaning saints belonging to a given community and its culture); a desire for freedom of devotion, without the mediation, restrictions, and costs of clergy" (Graziano 2006, p. 30). Furthermore, they hold the "belief that folk saints are more miraculous than canonized saints" (ibid.). Moreover, aside from cultural affinity, the folk saint's place outside of the moral strictures of Roman Catholicism, within more loosely organized amoral frameworks, allows devotees to feel more at ease supplicating them. "They know that their petitions will not be dismissed as insignificant, that their transgressions (perceived as consequences of their social condition) will be pardoned, and that their humble offerings will be accepted and respected" (Graziano 2006, p. 32).

In general, folk saints died a tragic death by unjust violence, abuse by authorities, extreme poverty or in other related shocking circumstances. Folk saints are "seen as different from ordinary mortals and as kinds of martyrs, closer to God" (Vanderwood 2004, p. 204). Furthermore, their cultural ties to local people entail that they are willing to go "beyond the norm" of canonized Catholic saints "in their willingness or capacity to intercede on behalf of their communities" (Graziano 2006, p. 11). In his research on Santa

Muerte, anthropologist Flores Matos (2014, 2019) prefers the term “miraculous dead” to folk saints and links them explicitly to the Mexican Skeleton Saint. He states that “death has a role and relevant agency” (Matos 2014, p. 117). Flores Matos makes the astute observation that devotion to Santa Muerte flourishes due to her reputation for solving quotidian afflictions quicker and more efficaciously than other miraculous dead, such as Sarita Colonia from Peru (Matos 2019, p. 92).

Returning to Mexico, one example of another Latin American folk saint is Juan Soldado. Known as Juan Castillo Morales during his lifetime, Juan was a soldier in Tijuana. In 1938, at twenty-four-year-old, he was brutally executed by a firing squad. He had been judged guilty of the rape and murder of an eight-year-old girl. Following his death, many began to proclaim his innocence and declare that Juan had been the victim of malfeasance in the upper echelons of the army. They stated he had been framed, with no actual evidence, for crimes committed by a high-ranking officer. People began visiting his graveside. His ghostly voice is said to have cried out, proclaiming his innocence (Vanderwood 2004, pp. xi–xiv). At his tombstone, locals asked for miracles which Juan Soldado purportedly answered, entailing he became a popular folk saint within months of his death.

The folk saint is unrecognized by the Catholic Church, nevertheless thousands venerate Juan Soldado. Devotees are concentrated in Tijuana but also found further afield. Many make a pilgrimage to his grave to ask for Juan Soldado’s help with problems such as legal issues, crossing the US border illegally and other matters. Most other folk saints have emerged from similar situations, dying untimely, often tragic, deaths. Albeit where Santa Muerte differs from the others is that she is not perceived as the spirit of a deceased person but rather as the personification of death itself (Yllescas Illescas 2016, p. 69). One has to trace her syncretic origins as hailing from the nexus of two distinct religious traditions and understandings of death to fully understand the power of death personified.

### 3. Santa Muerte, the Female Folk Saint of Death

Whether in the form of a silver pendant hanging from a devotee’s neck, on a votive candle, or as a three-dimensional statue Santa Muerte is typically represented as a female Grim Reaper (Figure 1). She is a skeletal figure, often garbed in a mantle and a long gown (Perdigón Castañeda 2008). In her left hand she generally wields a scythe and in her right, a globe or the scales of justice. She is typically accompanied by an owl. In English she is called Saint Death or Holy Death. The name “Santa Muerte” explicates her identity. In Spanish “muerte” means death. “Santa” translates both as holy and as saint (Chesnut 2017, p. 4). But Santa, it should be also noted, is the female word for saint in Spanish. And the saint is perceived by her followers as of the female gender. She is a “liminal, fierce feminine” persona and is seen as an “all powerful and protecting ‘Mother’ who can solve all problems and who has the power to give and take away” (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2015, p. 63).

The folk saint is turned to for miracles of all kinds, from health, wealth, love to good fortune. And like most folk saints, Santa Muerte is amoral, therefore she may also be supplicated not only for good deeds but also bad, such as to bring death and bad luck to enemies. For this reason, Santa Muerte has often been mislabeled by the press, media and US law enforcement authorities as a narco-saint, that is to say a saint venerated solely by narco-traffickers (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a). In previous articles and a book, we demonstrated how the portrayal of Santa Muerte as narco-saint is erroneous and revealed the folk saint’s many other roles, whether as matron saint of the drug war being supplicated by both sides of the law (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a), as protector of women in a state where gendered violence is widespread (Kingsbury 2020, Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020c), or as a holy healer turned to for favors of health, especially in the current context of coronavirus (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b).

Santa Muerte is informally structured as a folk faith. Unlike the Catholic Church, there is no single, guiding Santa Muerte church.<sup>2</sup> Although chapels have been founded by a variety of independent religious entrepreneurs, such as Enriqueta Romero in Tepito, there is no formal clergy overseeing the folk faith nor who write rules or enforce regulations. This has allowed the new religious movement to accrue many influences from other spiritualities. The pope and Catholic clergy across Mexico and in the US have lambasted Santa Muerte as a macabre and dangerous symbol of narco-culture. Ironically, “although those outside the folk faith often etically define Santa Muertistas as non-Catholic, emically . . . devotees . . . considered themselves and the saint Catholic” (Kingsbury 2020, p. 6).



**Figure 1.** Statue of Santa Muerte photographed in Oaxaca by the anthropologist. Note the prayer written on a piece of paper and placed in her outstretched hand. There is also an offering of marijuana on it. A gift of fruit has been placed by a devotee above the globe she carries.

Devotees visit chapels to pay their respects to the folk saint, and also independently practice the faith within the privacy of their own homes, at altars that they have erected. The non-regulated aspect of Santa Muerte allows anyone to practice their faith freely, as they wish, and without outside intermediaries (such as priests), within their own homes. This explains, in part, why the folk saint of death is so popular, as there are no moral strictures nor outside pressures.

Notwithstanding Santa Muerte being informal and characterized by heteropraxy, there are specific ritualistic keystones. Altars and chapels are fundamental to the faith. Most devotees will visit their local chapel at least once a month to leave offerings and say prayers. Many have an altar in their home. This may be opulent, if the owner can afford it. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in Mexico where 42% of the population live in poverty—and this impecuniousness has only worsened since COVID lockdowns and regulations put many out of work—this altar often consists merely of a small statue of Santa Muerte, or even just a votive candle with gifts to Santa Muerte comprising some of

<sup>2</sup> Although several churches have been opened by people such as David Romo and Enriqueta Vargas who have attempted to create national and even transnational networks of believers, these are exceptions to the rule.

the following: alcohol (often beer, or tequila), foods such as chocolate and candy, flowers, cigarettes, and glasses or bottles of water as the Skeleton Saint is said to be perpetually parched.

Santa Muerte is well-known as the folk saint of the marginalized, appealing to the disenfranchised and closest to meeting death (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2015, p. 5; Pansters 2019, p. 35; Perdigón Castañeda 2008, p. 65). As Oleszkiewicz-Peralba points out, she is especially popular “among liminal sectors of population that deal with transitions and transgressions, such as people working on the streets (e.g., street vendors, criminals, and prostitutes), migrants, inmates, policemen, troops, prison guards, social workers, and lawyers” (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2015, p. 9). Nevertheless, she is appealed to by a motley crew (Gaytán Alcalá 2008) from housewives to fishermen who feel abandoned by the Church due to the tenuous “relationship between priests and poor communities” which “has been one of shifting proximity and distance” (Hughes 2012, p. 24). And death is not reserved in Mexico for those living among liminal sectors.

Awareness of death is omnipresent in Mexico, not just to those at the margins of society. The threat of demise is ubiquitous due to the drug war which impacts “the everyday lives and choices of those who cannot escape its contours” (Kingsbury 2020, p. 7). “Living in the Mexican state is extremely unsafe . . . many . . . .quotidianly face danger and death, experiencing life through a metaphysics of disorder” (Kingsbury 2019, p. 93). The drug industry has “turned Mexico into what some call a narco-state and one of the most violent places on earth” (Chesnut 2017, p. 104). In 2019, the homicide rate escalated to 35,000 confirmed murders. Furthermore, because of the drug war, 82,000 people have gone missing since 2006. And it is not only police, army and narcos whose lives are on the line daily but also those who get unwillingly caught in the crossfire.

Moreover, Mexico has been named one of the most dangerous countries for women. Government figures record that an average of 11 women are murdered daily. As Speed details, in Mexico “Thousands and thousands of women and girls have been murdered in recent years, their bodies tossed out like so much waste in garbage heaps, ravines, and empty lots” (Speed 2016, p. 285). The Mexican state has become characterized by necropolitics<sup>3</sup>. The government has failed to protect its citizens from the violence caused by the drug industry, and indeed some authors have spoken of “narco-politics”, a “narco-democracy” and endemic “narco-corruption” exploring the inextricable links between “drugs and politics” (Patenostro 1995, p. 42; see also Andreas 1998; Wright 2011) which mean that drug-related murders frequently occur with impunity.

This entails that people continually “live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death” (Mbembe 2019, pp. 36–38). However, instead of standing up to death, many in Mexico have instead entered into a religious relationship with death wherein she is imagined as possessing the supernatural puissance to protect them from perishing. For women fearing femicide, Santa Muerte has taken on the role of protectress, she is also imagined as providing supernatural aegis to their children (Kingsbury 2020, p. 10). For those involved, *velis nolis*, in the drug industry which has overtaken much of the country, they imagine that the saint can both shield them from death and allow them to access its power to neutralize enemies (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b). As we will see, tapping into the perceived power of death is not a new idea in Mexico. At the heart of this religious movement is what Lomnitz termed the “interdependence . . . of death and power” (Lomnitz 2005, p. 166).

<sup>3</sup> The term was initially coined by Achille Mbembe who defines necropolitics to be politics as a “work of death” (2019, p. 12) The concept is utilized to examine how life is subjugated to the power of death, importantly in the context of Mexico, necropolitics underlines the asymmetrical state-dictated conditions of who gets to live and who will die. As Estevez points out narcopolitics and necropolitics go hand in hand, arbitrary murders caused by the drug wars, executions, torture, forced disappearances and displacement are a form of “necropolitics in its Mexican version. The perpetrator is neither criminal nor law-enforcement. It is both, it is a hybrid” (Estévez 2013, p. 2).

#### 4. The Power of Death

Santa Muerte's powers derive from her liminal persona as death itself. For most Europeans and Americans death as a powerful supernatural force is a foreign idea. Death is largely perceived as being about finality. Hertz's studies of death, originally published in 1909, are renowned with good reason, yet they depict a European understanding of death which does not allow us to understand the puissance of the female folk saint of death, her origins and syncretic makeup. For Hertz, death was ultimately a form of "sacrilege, one involving a violence, energy or negative social force", something that worked contra society, menacing the very survival of the social order (Hertz 2013, p. 98). But such attitudes towards death are certainly not universal and do not apply across Mexico (Norget 2006). Indeed, numerous studies have detailed societies wherein death is treated as a mighty force. For example, Seremetakis' study of Greek mourning practices on the island of Mani has proved that death may be an instrument of power (Seremetakis and Seremetakis 1991). Victor Turner has also pointed to the power of death, in his study of the ritual process and his work among the Ndembu (Turner 1967, 1969, 1974).

Turner's work on ritual is based upon that of Arnold van Gennep's (1908), a Belgian folklorist, who in 1908 published a book on rites of passage. His analysis of patterns endemic to rituals that accompany a change of social status, whether weddings or funerals, suggested that all consist of three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation (Turner 1967). For van Gennep, the funeral was the most liminal of all rites given its association with that most mysterious, and final moment at the end of all human lives.

Turner, encountering the English translation of van Gennep's work in 1960, would further develop the concept of liminality inherent to the ritual phase of transition. Turner elaborated upon the links between death and liminality pointing out that "imagery of death abounds in Ndembu liminality" (Turner 1967, p. 100). While he examined the connection between liminality and marginality, he also focused on the power of liminality. He argued that it was at once dangerous but also potent. And for this reason, in ritual, he argued, during the transitional liminal stage "the work of rites of passage takes place . . . transformations occur" (Schechner 2002, p. 58).

In his study of the ritual process among the Ndembu, Turner spoke of a vital triad consisting of a dialectic that passes "from life through death to renewed life" wherein death is also associated with witchcraft and contains the power to produce such life renewed (Turner 1969, pp. 38–24). Death, being the ultimate liminal stage, and imbued with the power to renew life is not a notion particular to the Ndembu and is commonplace in African and African diaspora religions, as we will touch upon. In Indigenous traditions of Mesoamerica and South America, as will be reviewed in the following section, Indigenous peoples in pre-Hispanic times worshiped death deities to access the liminal power they were perceived to possess. And still today, as Oleskiewicz-Peralba describes, Santa Muerte embodies "liminality"—and despite being associated with marginality as the folk saint of the disprivileged and dispossessed—she is also seen as "attractive" as she incorporates "wisdom, magical powers, and the truth of human condition" (Oleskiewicz-Peralba 2015, p. 5). The truth, in this case, is the certainty of death for us all.

Devotees live, as we all do, with the knowledge that they will die. Moreover, in Mexico, where death looms large due to the drug wars, poverty, and now coronavirus (see Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b) this truth is all the more apparent, and liminality may be a permanent state of being for many who live on the knife-edge of death. A devotee of Santa Muerte named Zaniyah, when asked why she worshiped the folk saint replied, as many other followers of the folk saint tend to, "*porque lo unico seguro que hay es la muerte*" (because the only thing that is certain is death) (Kingsbury 2020, p. 14). Followers of the folk saint seek to tap into the power of death as the ultimate truth in a country that due to its narco-politics and necropolitics is a spatium mortis.

The idea of death as potent, and bringer of life, is not novel. It speaks to the Mesoamerican metaphysics of the monism of life and death which was prevalent in pre-Hispanic times. Moreover, with the genocide of millions of Indigenous peoples revealing "the in-

commensurable vastness of death and violence” (Lomnitz 2005) at the hands of colonial powers, this idea was not only heightened but also transformed.

### 5. Death in Pre-Hispanic Mexico

In much of Mesoamerica and in particular Mexico, death, although unwelcomed, was not understood to be the “antonym of” nor final “extinction of life” as Hertz posited (Hertz 2013, p. 97). Instead, it was often associated with regeneration, as in the famous Mayan ball game which was a metaphor in action for “death and rebirth” (Schele and Friedel 1990, p. 76). This is why Indigenous death symbology incorporates notions of regeneration, fecundity and sexuality (McCafferty and Carrasco 2001, pp. 30–50). All of this is important for our understanding of Santa Muerte. Many Americans and Europeans view Santa Muerte with fear, due to death being conceived of as a negative force associated with finality, but Indigenous understandings of this same concept inhered life-imbuing properties, and most importantly, the power of death. This influences the way the folk saint of death is seen by devotees to this day.

Across much of pre-conquest Mexico, death deities—which rather than being understood as gods or goddesses, were conceptualized as representing, or embodying the vital force of death—were revered for their powers. “Although also symbolizing the realms of the underworld or acting as psychopomps” the death deities “were propitiated or appeased to delay death and... bring sanation” as well as life (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b, p. 195; see also Miller and Taube 1997). Death deities such as the thanatic Aztec couple, Mictlantecuhli and Mictecacihuatl, were approached for their powers in pre-Hispanic times, much as Santa Muerte still is today. In art related to them, their powers of regeneration are exemplified in scenes that depict birth, fecundity and sex, such as “penetration, pregnancy, the cutting of the umbilical cord, and lactation” (McCafferty and Carrasco 2001, p. 32). It is assumed by McCafferty and Carrasco that this is related to the “regenerative power of bones as seeds, which is evident in the journey of Quetzalcoatl into the world of the dead to steal the bones from which human beings would be created” (ibid., p. 34).

Before the Spanish conquest, Mictecacihuatl presided over roughly a month of commemorations, corresponding with a good part of August, of deceased family members and loved ones. As part of the overarching suppression of Indigenous religion, the Catholic Church exorcised Mictecacihuatl and moved the date to coincide with All Saints’ Day (1 November), which is also known in Mexico as Day of the Innocents for its association with Masses focusing on deceased infants and children, and All Souls Day (2 November), where the focus is on departed adults. Today the first two days of November are known as Days of the Dead and the second day is fast becoming the “feast day” for Santa Muerte to the point that the Church on both sides of the border now issues annual admonitions to parishioners to keep the folk saint out of their commemorations of departed loved ones (Contreras 2019).

It is not only among the Aztec that we find such regenerative and positive associations between life and death but in a wide range of peoples from the Mixtec to the Maya. The Mixtec death deity, Lady Nine Grass, in the Tonindeye codices which date back thousands of years, portray her with a face featuring skull-like hinged jaws, much like Santa Muerte. Yet her sartorial attributes, such as her “blouse-like quechquemitl” are “representative of the lifegiving female deities in Postclassic Mexican iconography” reflecting the “Pre-Columbian view of life and death as cyclical”, and her powers over transitional states as a liminal deity of death (Pohl 1994, p. 78). Despite her original Spanish iconography inherited from the Iberian Grim Reapress (known as “*la Parca*”), Santa Muerte as a dynamic new religious movement offers Mexican devotees a form of death worship that is in sync with Indigenous thanatologies and the liminal power of death.

### 6. Contested Origins

There is no consensus as to the historical origins of Santa Muerte nor where the idea of death as a powerful saint hails from. At this point, there is only scholarly con-

jecture on her inception. Notwithstanding, archival evidence documents early mentions of Santa Muerte in the colonial records, which provide many clues when combined with ethno-archaeological scholarship (see [Perdigón Castañeda 2008](#)). Scholars of the folk saint have sought to locate her inception. There are two schools of thought. The first, Eurocentric school, assumes that the saint hails primarily from Spain. [Lomnitz \(2005\)](#); [Fragoso Lugo \(2007\)](#); and [Malvido \(2005\)](#) belong to this school. The second approach as adhered to by [Chesnut \(2017\)](#); [Garma and García \(2015\)](#); [Kingsbury \(2020\)](#); [Perdigón Castañeda \(2008\)](#); and [Ruiz \(2011\)](#), inter alia, takes into account Indigenous spiritual elements in Santa Muerte. This approach avoids reifying the “epistemicide,” catalyzed by colonialism that is to say, “the extermination of knowledge and ways of knowing” which do not derive from Eurocentric epistemologies ([Grosfoguel 2013](#), p. 74). This school asserts that pre-Hispanic thanatologies are not to be overlooked as part of the saint’s syncretic identity which arose from a process of cultural concrescence with Catholicism in the colonial era, then later developed and flourished in the context of the post-colony.

Lomnitz assumes that Santa Muerte has European ancestry believing that the folk saint comes from the cult of San Pascual Bailon in Guatemala and Chiapas in the 1650s. A sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan Friar, San Pascual was promoted in Guatemala by missionary co-religionists ([Lomnitz 2005](#), p. 343). Lomnitz deduces that Santa Muerte came from this figure, but how he underwent a sex change and became a multifaceted miracle worker he does not explain. We will proffer another interpretation of this.

Malvido’s account focuses on the importation of the Spanish Catholic concept of una “santa muerte,” una “buena muerte” or “Holy” or “Good Death” which the missionaries brought with them when they came to proselytize in the New World ([Malvido 2005](#)). While this later will become one aspect of devotion to death in the post-colony, in the colony, as the colonial records we later allude to attest, this was not vital in veneration to early iterations of the folk saint. Pansters describes the “overwhelming colonial as opposed to pre-colonial roots of Santa Muerte” ([Pansters 2019](#), p. 10). Kristensen presupposes that the folk saint “emerged from the material transformation of two distinct representations of death, known as La Catrina and La Santísima Muerte “a two-dimensional image of the Skeleton Saint” ([Kristensen 2016](#), p. 405). The lacuna in his argument is that the saint’s powers and persona are unexplored as he ignores the fact that La Catrina has no spiritual dimensions and originated as a political symbol of discontent. She derives from a satirical cartoon of the dictator Porfirio Díaz’s wife etched in the early 1900s by José Posada as a critique of the Porfirian regime ([Gómez 2019](#)). More importantly, none of these analyses explores the perceived power of death by devotees and the monism of life and death inherent to Santa Muerte worship.

As detailed, across pre-Hispanic Mexico, Indigenous peoples from the Aztec to the Mixtec venerated death deities ([Jansen and Jiménez 2017](#); [Lind 2015](#); [Rivard 2012](#)). In pre-conquest iconography these myriad deities, as Santa Muerte is today, were depicted as skeletons and had the power to gift and “foment life” ([McCafferty and Carrasco 2001](#), p. 319). Many death goddesses, such as the Aztec thanatic deity Mictecacihuatl, were depicted in late pregnancy signifying the fecundity of death as a “source of life” ([Bloch and Parry 1982](#), pp. 6–7).

In Christian eschatology, death was conceptualized in a dissimilar manner. For most European Catholics in general, and of course for the Spanish, death entailed finality for all. Only Jesus was exempt. His death salvifically allowed for redemption for all Christian believers ([Brondos 2001](#)). For Christians, the figure of the Grim Reaper was a way to represent death. As a symbol of this, the reaper was never venerated and only symbolized death as finality.

## 7. The Reaper

The Grim Reaper originated in Europe during a plague, not entirely different from that of COVID-19. Albeit, with today’s advanced medical knowledge we are better equipped to deal with the latest epidemic and the numbers of deceased have been minute compared

to during medieval times. The Black Death, also known as the bubonic plague and the Pestilence, attacked the lymphatic system causing buboes, swollen lymph nodes and eventually death (Cohn 2003). It devastated Europe and Asia in the mid-1300s claiming more than 20 million lives.

During this time, death became iconographically represented in Europe as the Grim Reaper (Guthke 1999, p. 48). Tales abounded in Europe of terrifying figures with scythes prowling around peoples' doors who then fell ill and died. These tales together with the imagination of artists coalesced to create the skeletal figure of death.

The robe worn by the reaper represents the vestments donned by clergy when conducting last rites. The scythe symbolizes the final moment of death as the imaginary thread of life is cut short. In the fourteenth century, European farmers used scythes to cull their crops. Death was imagined as lopping the living, cutting their existence short, much like peasants thwapped the heads off their barley and wheat plants during harvest.

The practice began during this time of adorning churches and graveyards with the skeletal figure. It is also during this time that the "*danza macabra*" originated. Catholic clerics had actors perform a dance of death, often in cemeteries. One of the actors would dress as death. As the other thespians gyrated their bodies one last time, the Grim Reaper approached them, and swung its scythe, thus ending their life (Knoll and Oosterwijk 2011). The Grim Reaper, as well as skull motifs, featured in a panoply of Christian material culture. The goal was to impart religious lessons, such as learning how Jesus triumphed over death, the value of prayer, and living a righteous life free of sin to get to heaven, as well as other catechism key to Christian eschatology.

Soon after the end of the plague, Spaniards colonized the so-called New World. Upon their arrival in what they called New Spain, which was to become Mexico, Spanish clergy continued to wield material culture for pedagogic purposes. Missionaries, blinded by their own racist prejudices, saw Indigenous religions as barbarous and even satanic, seeking to convert locals to Catholicism and thus "save their souls". They employed the female figure of the Grim Reaper, *la Parca*, as well as figures of Jesus, Mary and various saints. If Indigenous people refused to convert to Christianity this was often compelled through a variety of heinous methods ranging from public shaming to *auto da fe* (Tavárez 2011, p. 18).

## 8. Indigenous Understandings of the Reaper

Firstly, it should be noted that many Indigenous peoples interpreted Christianity through their own cultural lens. They did not simply become "Christians in anything like the sense implied by conventional understandings of conversion," rather "they understood Christian teachings in their own terms and adapted them to their own ends, which varied from place to place" (Poole 2017, p. 363). They drew on their own traditions to understand Christian ideas (Cisneros 2009). Since many turned to death deities for their earthly needs some Indigenous groups, as archives prove, took the Grim Reaper for a saint, since the Grim Reaper was often referred to in connection to una "*santa muerte*" (a holy death). The figure of death was understood to be miraculous much like the other saints that the Catholic Church had brought over to New Spain, such as Santa Marta. Believing death was a saint in its own right, some began worshipping it (Chesnut 2017, p. 48). This is the case for the highland Maya in the state of Chiapas and Guatemala, and the Guarani in Argentina and Paraguay.

Both the Guarani and Maya associated the Grim Reaper with their own death deities and Catholic saints in their creation of Latin America's two other skeletal folk saints, Rey Pascual of Guatemala and Chiapas, and San la Muerte of Argentina and Paraguay. In contrast to Mexican Santa Muerte who preserved the female identity of *la Parca*, Rey Pascual and San la Muerte are Skeleton Saints who most likely became male due to their syncretism with Catholic holy men. Spanish saint, Pascual Bailon in the case of Rey Pascual and Jesus, the Just Judge, for San la Muerte (see also Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b).

It is also likely that Indigenous peoples sought to venerate the old gods under the guise of the new, much as has been documented in the case of African slaves snatched and

forcibly shipped to Haiti (Bellegarde-Smith and Michel 2006; Desmangles 2000; Kingsbury and Chesnut 2019). Across the Caribbean and the Americas it has been recorded that after being coerced into practicing Christianity in the colonies, those abducted from Africa did not abandon their goddesses and gods, rather they syncretized African deities with Catholic saints to supplicate them in secret. This created Vodou, Santería, Candomblé and other syncretic faiths.

In Mexico, Indigenous peoples did not just apostatize. Colonial records confirm that they continued after colonization to infuse Indian praxis, usually covertly, into their understanding of Christianity. There are myriad examples of the “merging of ancient and Christian devotions” (Tavárez 2011, p. 245). One such example documents that in 1560, the Spanish Vicar of Yanhuitlan, Oaxaca, complained that Zapotec men, prior to a hunt, would visit the church, placing candles before the image of Christ for a successful hunt, but they saw him not as Jesus but as their god Nosana, a deity associated with creation, deer and fish (Lind 2015, Suppl. 88).

In the New World, Indigenous people saw *La Parca* through the lens of their own thanatological traditions. They did not see Jesus as triumphant over death but rather viewed death as omnipotent. Sometimes they even fused Christ with death seeing both as one mystical personage, as in the case of San La Muerte. It is hardly surprising that death was viewed as prepotent, not only given that ethno-archaeological evidence proves that death was previously worshiped by pre-Hispanic peoples but moreover in the context of massive loss of life, given the genocide of Indigenous peoples brought upon by the Spanish, many saw death as the most important force.

In some regions, up to 90% of Indians were killed, by, to paraphrase Diamond, “guns, germs and steel” (Diamond 1997), to add to which the brutality of “excessive labor requirements, excessive tributes, mistreatment . . . starvation, flood, drought, disease” (Gibson 1964, p. 136). Given this overwhelming ubiquity of death many continued to seek to harness death’s power but instead of venerating the death deities of old, venerated the skeletal figure of the Grim Reaper brought by the Spanish.

In 1650 in Guatemala, it is documented that the folk saint Rey (King) Pascual emerged. He hailed from the syncretic amalgamation of seventeenth-century “Spanish Franciscan saint Pascual Bailón with Mayan religion as well as a popular image of death known as “King Death” that had travelled from Spain to the New World in which death was depicted as a monarch garbed with a crown” (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b, p. 15). During a plague caused by the colonizers in Guatemala, legend states that an Indigenous person had a hagiophany of the Spanish saint. He appeared as a skeletal figure who granted miracles of life to the sick and supposedly ended the pandemic. In the case of Rey Pascual, we see the vestiges of Indigenous thanatology wherein death gives life, as well as the impetus during colonial times to deal with excess death by accessing its power. Thereafter, despite the Church’s demands that devotees apostatize, they began to petition the crowned figure of male death for miracles, especially those of healing and they continue to do so till this day.

Specific references to Santa Muerte first appear in the Spanish colonial record in the 1790s, almost a century and half later than those to Rey Pascual. In 1797, within the archives of the Inquisition we find a document entitled “Concerning the Superstitions of Various Indians from the Town of San Luis de la Paz” (Perdigón Castañeda 2008, p. 21). It mentions Santa Muerte for the first time. The record documents the activities of the Chichimec people who resided in what is presently Guanajuato. The archives state that the Chichimec “at night gather in their chapel to 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” (ibid.).

In response to such activities, the clergy razed the chapel where the effigy of the saint of death was kept and punished those petitioning the figure. Clearly, instead of seeing the Grim Reaper as representing death, or asking it for a “buena muerte” (which Malvido claims

is Santa Muerte's origins (Malvido 2005)), the Chichimec sought a miracle from the figure. The records suggest that this was to influence political matters in the region and ensure local Indigenous dignitaries retained their power.

In earlier records, in 1754, we also hear of curanderos being accused of heresy and castigated by clergy for turning to painted images of the reaper which they used in rituals to restore life to the ailing (Perdigón Castañeda 2008, p. 31). Inquisition records from the same era cite another such case. In 1793, in the present-day state of Querétaro, a report was filed of Indigenous people who, during mass, placed upon the church altar and began to worship "the figure of a complete human skeleton standing on top of a red surface, wearing a crown and holding a bow and arrow" (Perdigón Castañeda 2008, p. 33).

Despite the Church's insistence that the Grim Reaper symbolized the death of Jesus and more importantly his triumph over death when he was resurrected, some Indigenous people sought to supplicate this figure. Evidence from archives demonstrates that depictions of death were being venerated for miracles of healing and to obtain power, much as in the pre-conquest era when death deities were seen as powerful and "involved in the daily routine of life, birth and death" (Harrington 1988, p. 32). Such figures were precursors, or formative figures of Santa Muerte.

Veneration of Indigenous-stylized deities, such as these deathly figures, often led to severe punishment from whipping to death by burning (Tavárez 2011, p. 18). In response to such censure and castigation many devotees of death took their devotion underground. Notwithstanding, as far north as New Mexico and southern Colorado practices persisted. In the 1860s, in this region, among a group of mestizos, we find the syncretic worship of death once again. This emerged from the use of death carts by a Catholic brotherhood known as los Penitentes (the penitents). The order originated in Spain but it transformed into devotion to death upon its adoption on the northern frontier of what had been New Spain.

For the Penitentes, the death cart was an important feature in their rituals. The contraption was loaded with rocks and upon it the figure of death, in the form of the reaper, was mounted. The cart was then pulled by one of the members of the brotherhood in an act of penance. In Spain, the death cart was part of a re-enactment of the Passion of Christ. But, in the New World, the skeletal figure astride the cart morphed into a syncretic synthesis of Saint Sebastian and a death deity. It thus became Doña Sebastiana, a female supernatural personification of death (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b, p. 201). This figure was seen as a psychopomp but also supplicated for favors. She was referred to as Santa Muerte as well as Comadre (co-godmother) Sebastiana, as records attest (Steele 2005, p. 298).

After this time, Mexicans freed themselves from their colonial oppressors, declared independence, and lost their northern territory in a war against the USA, as well as fighting in the twentieth century's first great revolution. No doubt devotion to death remained in the shadows. However, this was not recorded until the 1940s when two American anthropologists and one Mexican described in their monographs that Santa Muerte was being worshiped by women (Aguirre-Beltrán 1958; Lewis 1961; Toor 1947). They note she was prayed to by these women who asked her to use her scythe to return errant husbands to the homestead. Also, what is interesting is that in one of the prayers for the novena (nine-day prayer) the saint is supplicated for healing, attesting to the survival of the notion of death procuring life and one such prayer refers to death as "*poderosa*" powerful. The saint is asked not only to expunge illnesses but to lift curses that might be impeding life.

It is evident from these scholars' books, that cover a wide variety of regions in Mexico, that devotion to Santa Muerte was not something new during this time period, given the variety and number of prayers enumerated. What is also notable is the range of states the saint is recorded as being worshiped in, from Oaxaca to Puebla to Guerrero to Mexico City. Such widespread devotion to death and numerous prayers evince that supplication of Santa Muerte had a long history in Mexico.

## 9. Death in the 21st Century

For roughly the four decades when she was first located by anthropologists in the 1940s to the late 1980s, the Mexican death saint is reported by researchers to be petitioned largely for affairs of the heart. Still today the top-selling colored Santa Muerte votive candle is the red one of love and lust, according to the owners of over twenty botanicas and naturalistas that we spoke to in Mexico (see also [Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020c](#), p. 383). Syncretism involving Spanish love magic resulted in Santa Muerte becoming the love doctor on call for both mending and breaking Mexican hearts, especially female ones, as documented in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s ([Aguirre-Beltran 1958](#); [Lewis 1961](#); [Toor 1947](#)). However, in the late 1980s the skeletal love doctor expanded her repertoire to include aid with business, scholastic endeavors, legal support as well as with organized crime in Mexico including increasingly violent supernatural favors of protection and vengeance for narcos and kidnappers ([Chesnut 2017](#)). The case of Adolfo Constanzo is of interest as it reveals how the faith of Santa Muerte, which originated from a synthesis of Catholicism and Indigenous spirituality, remains syncretic in the 21st century, always absorbing and adopting praxis and beliefs from other spiritual traditions, especially those of a liminal nature, which appeal to the marginalized living in spaces of death, danger and distress.

Cuban-American drug trafficker Adolfo Constanzo commanded a group of narcos on the border town of Matamoros. On his ranch outside of town, law enforcement discovered the remains of fourteen murder victims who had been ritually sacrificed as part of an aberrant melange of Afro-Cuban Palo Mayombe, Mexican witchcraft, and possibly Santa Muerte as a statue of her was found among the cauldrons, daggers and other accoutrements of ritual human sacrifice ([Chesnut 2017](#), p. 88). While it is unclear as to how veneration of the Skeleton Saint figured in the syncretic assemblage of Constanzo's narco-cult, it marks the first time Santa Muerte is reported present at an Afro-Cuban ritual venue, but it would not be the last.

There has always been significant Cuban cultural influence in Mexico, notably in the Gulf Coast state of Veracruz. To this day, Veracruz along with Mexico City, has a large Cuban presence, especially since the Cuban Revolution when thousands emigrated to the capital city. Moreover, many flocked to the US, where like Mexicans and other Latin Americans they have come in search of work and new opportunities. Interacting with each other, these communities have influenced each other on multiple levels, including spiritually, fostering religious osmosis and bricolage. And in botanicas that cater to these groups one may find candles to Orishas alongside votives to Santa Muerte.

Cuban influence has resulted in the integration of elements of both Palo Mayombe and Santeria into the beliefs and practices of a sizable number of Santa Muerte devotees, particularly in Mexico City, Veracruz, and American cities such as Miami, New York, Houston and Los Angeles. Some of these influences have been so far-reaching that they have affected praxis among all followers of Santa Muerte, such as in the case of the seven-colored, Santa Muerte candle.

This votive originated from the Seven African Powers of Santeria, also known as Regla de Ocha. In the Afro-Cuban faith the seven powers are the seven most powerful Orishas: Eshu Elegbara, Ogun, Obatala, Yemaya, Oshun, Shango and Oya ([Murphy 1993](#)). This idea transmuted in Santa Muerte to refer to the folk saint of death's seven powers, being reputed to help practitioners on seven different fronts: love, money, health, delivering peace and cleansing, justice, wisdom and success, as well as protection against and for attacks of black magic. The rainbow-colored statue or votive candle has now become the advocacy of choice for devotees seeking miracles on multiple fronts and is a popular candle across Mexico and the Americas (see [Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020c](#), p. 383).

There are other far-reaching influences on Santa Muerte from Santeria, such as the recent trend for practitioners of the former to wear different colored beaded necklaces with skulls, or figures of Santa Muerte on them. These are similar to but more ornate than the "collar de muerto" (death necklace) worn by followers of Santeria. We have noted that these are particularly popular among curanderos of Santa Muerte who don them as part of their

ritual apparel, such as the self-dubbed, Dr. Muerte (Figure 2). He is a “*brujo*” (witch) from Tabasco. Dr. Muerte travels across the country offering his magical services and selling Santa Muerte votive candles. This line of work often brought him as far south as Oaxaca where the anthropologist, in our team of two, met him. He explained to her that in Santa Muerte such necklaces absorb negative energy, protecting the wearer from others with ill intentions. He stated that should bad energy be excessive, the thread of the necklace will break sending the beads in myriad directions. This, Dr. Muerte assured the anthropologist, would ensure the jewelry took the brunt of ill intentions rather than the wearer.



**Figure 2.** Dr. Muerte standing in front of a Santa Muerte altar wearing the Santeria-influenced Santa Muerte necklace that is said to ward off evil energy.

In botanicas across the US, Santeria, Santa Muerte and Palo Mayombe items commingle on the shelves. As Oleszkiewicz-Peralba points out “different kinds of products and services are offered in the same place, which may lead to syncretic mixtures” (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2015, p. 116). Both Santeria and Santa Muerte share commonalities within devotional practices that make for easy cross-fertilization. For example, among the pantheon of Santeria Orishas is Oya, guardian goddess of cemeteries or “Queen of the Dead” who as a female thanatic deity resembles the Mexican Skeleton Saint in some aspects, albeit she is not dead, instead she mediates between the living and the dead (Gleason 2000; Lefever 1996). Moreover, there are parallels between the African thanatology that underscores African diaspora spiritualities and the Indigenous thanatology that is integral to Santa

Muerte conceptions of death. In Santeria, “Death is not understood as the final end of man...Life in Africa is cyclic: birth, death and rebirth” (Kanu 2013, p. 549), much as in Indigenous traditions, as we have detailed.

Such is the influence of Santeria that the Godmother of Santa Muerte devotion, Enriqueta Romero, keeps an entire room in her home filled with Orishas that have been gifted to her over the years, whom she works with alongside the Mexican folk saint of death. Affectionately known as Doña Queta, the former quesadilla vendor, became known as “*la madrina*”, the godmother, of the new religious movement. This epithet was given to her after she unintentionally launched the dynamic new religious movement by placing her life size effigy of the “*Nina Blanca*” (White Girl, a common moniker) outside on the sidewalk in front of her home (Chesnut 2017).

In our 12 years of visiting her landmark shrine in the notorious Mexico City barrio of Tepito, we have observed a steady increase of statuettes of Orishas at the famous site where devotion to death first went public in 2001. And it is not just Enriqueta Romero who has been syncretically admixing Santeria and Santa Muerte. The son of the other great Santa Muerte pioneer—Enriqueta Vargas, who started the first transnational system of Santa Muerte churches across the Americas—Jonathan Legaria Vargas known as “Commandante Pantera” was famously initiated into both Palo and Santeria as well as Santa Muerte, incorporating these into his praxis before his death in 2008. This influence has spread as far south as to Oaxaca, where a prayer book of petitions to Santa Muerte gifted to the anthropologist also contained a prayer to “*Las Siete Potencias Africanas*” (the Seven African Powers).

Much of the reporting of the integration of elements of Palo Mayombe continues to be crime-related in which narco safehouses are raided and shrines containing a melange of ritual items of the Afro-Cuban faith are found alongside images of Santa Muerte. However, these reports are often sensationalistic, inaccurate and “have little to do with actual practice by most devotees” (Kingsbury 2020, p. 7). They present these faiths in a manner “aimed to evoke terror . . . without openly entering into racist discourse” disseminating and reinforcing centuries-old racist tropes “of the barbaric Other” (McGee 2012, p. 232).

There are several associations between Palo and Santa Muerte. The most important is working with death. In Santa Muerte, practitioners work with death personified as a folk saint so as to obtain miracles, favors and work magic. In Palo, people known as “*muerteros*” work with spirits of the dead to transform the fates of the living (Ochoa 2004, p. 10; see also Ochoa 2010). Both necromantic practices furthermore include the centrality of sacred bones. The Bone Mother, as Santa Muerte is sometimes referred to, is a collection of holy bones in the form of a human skeleton imbued with the singular power of death. While human bones in Palo Mayombe are believed to be imbued with the supernatural power of the deceased thus making them the sine qua non ingredient for ritual works prepared in large cauldrons known as Nganga.

Santeria and Palo Mayombe, like Santa Muerte, and other African diaspora religions emerged in the horrendous conditions of the colony. Such spiritualities were created and practised by “the most marginalized . . . the descendants of slaves” (De La Torre 2004, p. 201) in a space of death where “egregious working conditions, paltry nutrition, poor shelter, interminable work hours, corporal and capital punishment entailed that life expectancy was shockingly short” (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2019, p. 5). Death was commonplace and thus tapping into its power, or asking the dead for favors was imagined to be a way to bargain for a longer and better life.

Today still, in the context of the US, Santeria, Palo Mayombe and Santa Muerte—all non-mainstream religions—are primarily practised by marginalized Latinx. These populations often feel socially alienated and are economically disenfranchised within a “dominant Euro-American culture” (De La Torre 2004, pp. 199–200). They routinely experience outsiderhood, structural inferiority and other experiences that place them in liminal spaces (Oleszkiewicz-Peralba 2015, p. 1). They “are acutely aware of the ways

in which they are marginalized and thus seek alternative communities and...spiritual practices" (Howe et al. 2009, p. 4).

Santería has been called a "religion of popular resistance" (De La Torre 2004). We believe that Palo Mayombe and Santa Muerte are too, in that they seek to counter hegemonic discourse by creating a cosmology and practice that actively seeks out the liminality of death to create strategic ways to cope with racialized, gendered and other forms of marginalization through their faith practices. If syncretism has occurred so seamlessly between these three faiths it is because they all seek to access the liminality of death. This is understood as establishing "conditions of 'pure possibility'" which "generate novel configurations'", within marginal spaces (Apter 1991, p. 216). The impression of channeling the liminal power of death may even imbue practitioners with fearlessness given structural conditions that expose them to great vulnerability (Howe et al. 2009, p. 25).

In addition to syncretic incorporation of elements of Afro-Cuban religions, devotion to Santa Muerte, since going public two decades ago, has also integrated substantial beliefs and practices from the New Age. For those unfamiliar with the Mexican religious landscape, the popularity of New Age beliefs and practices might be surprising. However, they are now a permanent fixture of Latin American spiritual economies to the extent that a surprisingly high number of Mexican Catholics believe in reincarnation and references to positive and negative vibes are part of common parlance. When asked why devotees blow cigar smoke on effigies of Santa Muerte devotional pioneer Doña Queta stated that it removes the "bad vibes."

For the past decade or so, Santa Muerte paraphernalia with New Age symbols, such as Chakras and quartz crystals, have been readily available both at online shops and brick and mortar stores. On the symbolic front, New Age has probably had the greatest influence on devotion to death with the adoption of colored votive candles and images of the death saint based on the seven Chakra colors, which it adopted from Hinduism and Buddhism. Black, white, and red were the colors of the cult prior to it going public. Twenty years later, each of the primary colors symbolizes an important part of the saint's miracle-working mission. For example, purple votives and statuettes of the folk saint are employed for healing and health, and as we have documented, especially today in these times of coronavirus.

Gold is another recent color imported from New Age symbology and is a key hue for devotees seeking prosperity and abundance during one of the most severe economic downturns, due to Covid-19, since the Great Depression. Elements from Wicca have also found their way into the faith, and given the centrality of magic to both Euro-American paganism and Santa Muerte, this is not surprising. When the anthropologist in our team of two visited Yuri Mendez, a self-styled "*bruja*" (witch), "*chamana*" (shaman) and "*curandera*" (healer) of Santa Muerte in Cancun she discovered her using the pentagram during rituals, and the Witches Knot to protect against negativity (Figure 3).

Although New Age practices would seem an odd choice given that they generally do not address death like Santa Muerte, they promote the idea of "liminality as a space for personal growth" (Lewis 2008) and often incorporate magic, whether in spells or as "a set of techniques for altering consciousness and bringing about personal transformation" (Magliocco 2015, p. 635).



**Figure 3.** Yuri Mendez, founder of the largest shrine to Santa Muerte in Cancun using the Witches Knot to protect against negativity during a ritual to the folk saint of death. Note the offerings of money to Santa Muerte in her outstretched hand, and Yuri's tattoo of Holy Death on her arm.

### 10. Conclusion: A Syncretic Future

Thus, from her inception during the Mexican colonial era, Santa Muerte was birthed by the syncretic confluence of Medieval Spanish Catholicism and Pre-Columbian Indigenous thanatologies. In contrast to most of the literature on the origins of the folk saint of death, we have demonstrated that despite her largely Spanish iconography, devotion to the death saint incorporates significant Indigenous ontologies, particularly the ways in which death is conceived of monistically with life, as part of an endless cycle of birth, demise, decay, and regeneration. When Santa Muerte resurfaces in the 1940s after a century and a half of having gone off the historical grid, she is observed in a novel syncretic practice that weds Iberian love magic with the power of Indigenous death deities. In Spain and the rest of the Catholic Mediterranean certain saints, but never death itself, were petitioned for affairs of the heart.

But it is not until some four decades later, in the late 1980s, that for the first time we observe Santa Muerte venerated in a context beyond her Catholic and Indigenous roots. Cuban-American narco Adolfo Constanza revealed how in the shadows devotees were integrating Holy Death with Afro-Cuban Palo Mayombe and Mexican *brujeria*. This set the stage for increasing syncretic associations with both Palo and Santería after devotion to death went public in 2001 at Enriqueta Romero's landmark Tepito shrine.

While the most prominent Afro-Cuban religious influence tends to be concentrated in Veracruz, Mexico City, and certain major American cities, New Age beliefs and practices have influenced Santa Muerte symbolism and rituals on a wide scale. As the dynamic new religious movement continues to expand in Mexico and across the West, it will undoubtedly integrate elements of additional religious traditions, even of those that at first glance might

seem incongruous, such as Evangelicalism. And indeed, it is precisely the loosely organized, and receptive nature of the Santa Muerte faith—which allots its practitioners the ability to be super syncretic in their devotion as they absorb and repurpose elements of other spiritualities—that make devotion to death such a dynamic and ever-expanding faith.

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