“On the Concept of *Paro: La Santa Muerte* and Her Interventions in Human Affairs”

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RELIGIOUS INNOVATION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE IN THE 21st CENTURY
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Bibliography
Also referred to as Santísima Muerte, and as la Flaca/la Flaquita (the Skinny/the Little Skinny One), la Hermana Blanca (the White Sister), la Niña Blanca (the White Girl), and la Santita (the Little Saint).

Statues of varying dimensions and of various materials; in jewellery; in paintings (especially *murales*); tattoos.

Basically, she appears as a skeleton draped in a tunic or a cape whose aspect and nature can vary.

Colours: black (death), blue (success in studies), coffee (communication with the dead), golden (business and money), green (legal problems), purple (health), red or pink (love and friendship), [bone] white (bodily purification); seven colours, incorporating all the respective powers, exists as well.
An altar’s development in Cuajimalpa (Mexico City)

April 2014

March 2015

May 2015

Offers: Alcoholic drinks, balloons, candles, cigarettes and cigars, cigars’ smoke, cocaine stripes, food, heroin, incense, jewellery, joints, money, necklaces, rosary beads, seeds, toys.
The ORIGIN is still debated.

A few recent events are known.

TEPITO (Mexico City)
October 31, 2001 Enriqueta Romero (b. 1945), a life-long devotee, exposes out of her house in calle Alfareria 12 a life-sized statue of la Santa. This marks the beginning of notable public manifestations of devotion.

COLONIA MORELOS (Mexico City)
“Archbishop” David Romo (b. 1959) tries to institutionalise the devotion in 2003 by infusing the belief in la Santa into the Iglesia Católica Tradicional México-Estados Unidos, Misioneros del Sagrado Corazón y San Felipe de Jesús. In 2012 he is judged guilty of robbery, kidnapping, and extortion and sentenced to a 66-year imprisonment.

TULTITLÁN (State of Mexico)
January 2008. Foundation of the Templo de la Santa Muerte Internacional in Tultitlán (State of Mexico) by the controversial Jonathan Legaria Vargas (1982-2008), also known as Comandante Pantera. He is assassinated in July.
Scholarly interpretations

The origin is debated (pre-Columbian? Catholic?)

Plenty of ethnographic studies in Spanish.

Three monographs:


ALL converge on one observation: she is *la Santa de los Olvidados*. Devotees need protection and express their disaffection both with governmental and Catholic institutions.
A “New Deal”: 

1 – Mexican scholarship should be acknowledged and credited.
2 - ...and Mexican press taken *cum grano salis*.
3 – Fieldwork (temples and altars should be explored rather than used as venues for the presentation of books)-
4 – Fine-tuned reconstruction of the history in Mexico City (“Spiritual District” – F. Lorusso)
5 – Merchandising: designed by whom, from where?
6 – Theology – it should be taken seriously.
7 – How do Catholic priests and nuns deal with the devotion?
8 – How many devotees?

(Chesnut: millions. Information based on Romo’s statements. At least 300 altars in Mexico, Reyes Ruiz 2011)

Some fragments of my investigation...
Theology (her paros)

- Death as “pure justice.”
- She can avoid death, because/but she is death
- Death as the most powerful (“She even took Christ”).
- She saves you all the time – except the last one (Win-win narrative).
- Paros: down-to-earth favours. Parar = to stop. Finding a job, quitting an addiction, getting a lover back, finding a just judge...
- Described as “one of us” (cabrona, stubborn, tough) but she has no hagiography.
- There is no original/main miracle.
Tultitlán (1)

- Legaria’s mother has taken over as madrina.
- She has produced a sophisticated narrative that contrasts her son’s image in the press.
- BUT: Examining her son’s books one discovers that he actually emphasized the criminals/narcos connection.
- Her personal narrative (suffering from her son’s death, conversion, fighting for religious freedom) compensates the missing hagiography.
Tultitlán (2)

- *El Comandante* has become an intercessor. *(Performs paros).*

- “New Trinity”: *Santa Muerte – Comandante – Madrina.*

- A ritual that turns Catholic mass and prayers upside down: “In the name of the Father, the Son, and of Pantera’s Spirit” – “Our Mother, who are on earth”...
ISCAT

It has survived Romo’s imprisonment

It still offers a Sunday service officiated by a padre

It conserves Romo’s Angel of Death alongside usual representations of la Santa

Plenty of visual references to Catholic saints and figures
Scant references to la Santa during the mass
Catholic official position: Norberto Cardinal Rivera Carrera, archbishop of Mexico City, appointed exorcists to contrast it, clearly considering it as satanic. The Vatican expressed itself officially; in May 2013 Gianfranco Cardinal Ravasi president of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture, speaking in Mexico City defined it as a “degeneration of religion.”

Devotees criticize the clergy but often describe themselves as Catholic!

Questionnaire:

1) ¿Cuántos años de sacerdocio lleva usted, en qué orden y en qué zona de México?
2) ¿Cuándo se dio cuenta usted de la existencia de la devoción hacia la así llamada Santa Muerte?
3) ¿Cómo se dio cuenta usted de la existencia de la devoción hacia la así llamada Santa Muerte?
4) ¿A su juicio, qué tan difundida está la devoción?
5) ¿A su juicio, cuál es el origen histórico de la devoción?
6) ¿A su juicio, cuáles son las causas/factores sociales de la devoción y de su difusión?
7) ¿Conoce usted la postura oficial de la Iglesia Católica al respecto?
8) Al tener un contacto directo con ellos, ¿cómo se relaciona usted con los devotos y sus historias personales (por ejemplo sobre acontecimientos milagrosos de la “Santa”)?
Interview with Hermana V. (She directs a hospital next to Tepito.)

She realized the existence of the devotion approx. 11 years ago (echographies).

She is aware of the Catholic official position.

She recognizes that narratives about paros are difficult to contrast.

The devotion is not structured enough to become an alternative religion but it is gaining momentum and it tells us something about the lack of evangelization/contact with society.

A theology based on understanding (vs. satanizing) although not on justifying.
¡Gracias! Questions?

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Bibliography


Photographic books


Pictures

SLIDE 1 – Tultitlán, by David Byström
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