

The Argentinian *San La Muerte* and the Investigations of Walter Alberto Calzato

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Walter Alberto Calzato

Experts in Latin America and its folk religiosity are most likely familiar with the devotion for *San La Muerte* and its diffusion in Argentina as well as in Uruguay. This non-canonic saint is alternatively represented as a skeleton with a scythe or as a sitting skeletal figure. Over the past decade an interesting work has been conducted by an Argentinian scholar, Walter Alberto Calzato (b. 1958), who so far has explained the results of his investigations in numerous articles (sometimes written in collaboration with other scholars such as the Mexican ethnographer Gabriela Sánchez Hernández) as well as in unpublished monographs, all of them in Spanish, which have not enjoyed the visibility and circulation they deserve.¹

Calzato is a knowledgeable and eclectic scholar. He graduated in anthropology at the University of Buenos Aires and mainly works as a primary school teacher in the Argentinian capital. Besides, he is currently a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the National University of La Plata and a Master's student of Cognitive Psychology at the University of Buenos Aires. Since July 2015 he runs the blog *Entheos* that deals with themes of popular religiosity. Calzato's texts, with their conceptual frames and frequent, learned quotations reveal deep familiarity with ethnography and a vast theoretical, literary, and philosophical knowledge.

In describing himself in his blog the Argentinian scholar emphasises how his past experiences include militancy within “paraprotestant religions” as well as a year-long familiarity with exotericism (alchemy, theosophy) all of which has taught him how “the Sacred, plastic by nature, raises, declines, follows and adapts to each and every social situation, enriches memories, and can tolerate silence.” In his vision, religion “far from being a balsam, is a question-maker, that promises no peace, not even that of the graveyards.”² This brief note is dedicated to an overview of Calzato's work³ on, and interpretation of, *San La Muerte*.⁴

1 Frank Graziano dedicates one chapter of his monograph *Cultures of Devotion to San La Muerte* (Graziano 2007).

2 <http://wcalzato.blogspot.com.ar/> (last accessed September 25, 2015).

3 Calzato's main books, which I could study in draft form, absorb and systematize partial conclusions already contained in published peer-reviewed articles. I here refer to such books with abbreviations.

The fieldwork

Calzato began his fieldwork as early as 2001 (Calzato & Sánchez Hernández 2011, p. 30 n. 7). He investigated shrines and altars in different towns and villages of Argentina in the province of Corrientes (Empedrado, Saladas) as well as in Buenos Aires and its districts: Avellaneda, General Sarmiento, Morón, General Rodríguez, Moreno, Grand Bourg, Claypole, and Laferrere.⁵ Corrientes is identified by Calzato as the “devotional epicentre” of *San La Muerte* (Calzato & Sánchez Hernández 2011, p. 13); the Argentinian scholar emphasises that this area is not only influenced by Catholicism but also by the Brazilian devotions *Umbanda* and *Kimbanda* and the autochthone *guaraní* thought (DE p. 17); another important observation concerning Corrientes is that it suffered most bitterly under the financial crisis that hit Argentina in 2002, the *litoral* having always been an area of financial distress (DE p. 19).

The investigations carried out in Calzato’s fieldwork included interviews with altar keepers as well as simple devotees that he reports in detail and most of which are available in recordings. Such interviews were not always easy to obtain because of a certain secrecy that surrounds the devotion for *San La Muerte*. This is principally rooted in a feeling of fear for the Saint’s power (and willingness to harm) in case secrecy itself is broken (DE p. 18). However information about some altars could be located online as well (DE p. 30).⁶

Forms and Narratives of San La Muerte

Calzato does not deal in depth with the historical origins of this folk saint, however he reports that the devotion gained momentum and visibility over the crisis years (he himself has no tender words for the politicians he holds responsible for the Argentinian maladministration and political postures that in his own phrasing has generated “monsters” - ESV p. 11).

San La Muerte, different from the Mexican *Santa Muerte*, with which he should not be confused,⁷ has a sketchy hagiography that is repeated with changes from devotee to devotee. He is believed to have been a religious man (possibly a Jesuit), known for his healing powers, who was incarcerated and starved by his adversaries and subsequently found in skeletal form (ESV p. 32).

For the abbreviations as well as for the whole corpus of Calzato’s published and unpublished work my reader is directed to the bibliography.

4 I heartily thank Walter Calzato for patiently helping me to produce this overview as well as for his warm welcome in Buenos Aires where, with his mediation, I could briefly visit at least one shrine (the one in Tigre whose picture integrate this article). Any imprecisions in the present reconstruction are of course my responsibility.

5 The devotion, besides the capital and its districts mentioned while reconstructing Calzato’s fieldwork, is found in Argentina in the provinces of Chaco, Formosa, Entre Ríos, Misiones, Santa Fe (ESV p. 17 and DE p. 15).

6 <http://www.sanlamuerte.net/> (last accessed September 24, 2015).

7 For an account of the Mexican *Santa Muerte* see Lorusso 2013 and Chesnut 2012.

San La Muerte is mainly represented as a caped skeleton with a scythe (he is also called in this case *San Esqueleto* and *Señor de la Buena Muerte* - DE p. 15), or as a seated, crowned, skeletal figure holding the head between his hands (he is also called in this case *San Justo*, *San Bernardo* or *San Paciencia* - DE p. 15). The former representation is most common in the area of Buenos Aires (DE p. 15). He is perceived as absolute justice because of a powerful if elementary association: nobody can escape death.⁸ *San La Muerte* is usually celebrated between August 15 and August 20 and the different forms of celebration depend on each specific shrine but they usually include singing (*chamamé* music), dancing, processions, rosary, and the preparation and consumption of grilled meat (*asado* – DE p. 15).

San La Muerte's powers and his capacity to empathise with the devotees' suffering are attributed to his religiosity, to the experience of the unjust persecution, to the atrocious death. The fact that he was supposedly found seated although being dead can be perceived as a sign of supernatural qualities and hence of sanctity. The visual overlap with the classical figure of death further strengthens the aura of righteousness.

The altars are scattered in all of Argentina and they are not centrally coordinated. Occasional attempts at having the devotion officially registered by the state as a religion failed (ESV p. 39 and DE p. 6). Calzato observes that some altar keepers became aware of each other's existence thanks to the very same anthropologists' work (DE, 6). Although some priests are reported to be (or have been) tolerant or even friendly towards *San La Muerte* (DE p. 20), the Catholic Church as an institution rejects the devotion which is based on a theologically unacceptable personification of a state, namely death (Calzato & Sánchez Hernández 2011, p. 31 n. 8).

However devotees do not perceive or describe themselves as belonging to another religion, despite the fact that they occasionally use the term "conversion" in referring to their experience. The devotion, besides being practiced alongside Catholic faith, can incorporate or be associated with other folk ones, some non-canonic, such as the devotion for *el Gauchito Gil* or *Difunta Correa* and others belonging to the Catholic Church, most notably in the Marian Devotion (*Virgen Desatanudos*, *Virgen de la Medalla Milagrosa*, *Virgen de Luján*) but not exclusively: San Cayetano, San Roque, San Antonio, Santa Rita, and Santa Bárbara (Calzato and Sánchez Hernández 2011, p. 15). Such incorporation can be visual and material (when effigies of the saints are placed side by side in the same altar) as well as narrative and theological (when tales of *San La Muerte* are related to the gospels or to narratives regarding other saints). The form of the devotion is strongly dependent on the specific "guardian" (*dueño* or *dueña*) that takes care of it (ESV p. 17).

Calzato distinguishes three forms of devotion that are in fact strictly intertwined and that can be found at each shrine or temple. The first is related to the prayers to obtain health, money, and love; this is the most frequent and common, and devotees who turn to *San La Muerte* for these kind of favours visit the shrines all year long (ESV p. 17). The second form of devotion is aimed at harming other people with the intercession of *curanderas* who visit the shrines once a year (ESV p. 18). Calzato also observes that this kind of devotion seems to be absent in the area of Buenos Aires (DE p. 16). The third form of devotion is typical of inmates who usually introduce a little effigy of the Saint under their skin in order to obtain a "good death" as well as protection from assaults and similar violent actions; the little effigy

⁸ This is the same "basic theology" behind the appreciation of the Mexican *Santa Muerte*.

in such case is carved in “a baptised Christian’s bone” (ESV p. 18, DE p. 16). Calzato remarks that the same belief is held in Buenos Aires but in this area tattoos rather than bone images are used (DE p. 16). Devotees usually belong to the most marginalized fringes of Argentinian society, those living in the suburbs known as *villas miserias* (ESV p. 18), but middle-class devotees are known as well (Calzato and Sánchez Hernández 2011, p. 14). Some shrine keepers are rather vigilant and avoid that the first kind of devotion is blended with the second (for instance by pilgrims who discretely ask the Saint to harm someone or who carry signs and items of other devotions); other guardians simply tolerate the practice (Calzato and Sánchez Hernández 2011, pp. 14-15).

From Calzato’s interviews with various informants we learn that *San La Muerte* is credited with miracles and prodigies ranging from apparitions in dreams, premonitions, healings, and protection or favours (e.g. finding a job, improving one’s financial situation, retrieving property, or finding a lost item). Public altars’ wardens can perform healings as well. The Saint is reported to be rather jealous and even vengeful in case one does not show enough gratefulness for a received favour, as in the case of one politician who was helped by him to win the elections, did not show any thankfulness afterwards, and was eventually punished with the death of his daughter in an accident (ESV p. 38; for other examples involving politicians cf. DE p. 48).

Another interesting characteristic noted by Calzato is how theological narratives related to *San La Muerte* are parasitic of Gospel ones: some devotees namely believe that the “kingdom of death” over Earth begun while Jesus was dead, and hence absent, and that such situation could not be solved even by Jesus’ resurrection itself (ESV p. 5 and DE p. 23).

“*Lo cerca y lo lejos*”

The first conceptual dualism through which Calzato tries to interpret the devotion for *San La Muerte* is the opposition between what is “near” (*lo cerca*) and what is “far” (*lo lejos*). “Far” is used with a multifaceted meaning. It refers to what is far geographically (such as the centers of power in Buenos Aires from the rest of the Republic and especially from Corrientes), but also far when it comes to feelings of solidarity (the cynicism of the politicians) and empathy or understanding (that would be the case of the Catholic Church towards folk devotions). *San La Muerte* would be precisely a reaction to such geographical, moral, political, and theological distance that created the Argentinian crisis. Such reaction thus is characterized by closeness. It is also multifaceted. It is not only carried by *domestic* altars (i.e. situated in the place which is closest to the devotee), but also by down-to-earth, every-day miracles or favours attributed to the bony saint and, most representatively, by the incorporation in the very devotees’ bodies of his minuscule effigies that, as we have observed, are made of human material, the one that is perceived as innermost: bone (ESV p. 18). *San la Muerte* is not a goal – he is a beginning; he is not the skeleton who takes your life or only comes at the end of your life – it’s the friend who takes you, arm in arm, along the path of life (DE p. 57).

San La Muerte’s proximity, according to Calzato’s interpretation, is also proximity in time; since there is no original, major historical event that marks the first coming of the Saint (such as the apparition of the Virgin on a specific day in a specific place) and since he is not institutionalized, devotees can well report some vague version of his life (we have already mentioned the narrative of the starved Jesuit), but they constantly have some personal, biographical story to tell concerning him and his workings in their own lives; Calzato observes that Marian devotion, although analogously nourished by miracles

individually conceded to devotees, is first and foremost legitimated by them by referring to its remote, historical narrative and institutional legitimization rather than to those very episodes occurred to them (DE p. 60).

A non-eschatological devotion

But closeness, remarks Calzato, takes a further form that leads us to the second concept through which he interprets the devotion. The devotees' narratives are especially focused on their own past, usually when they report how their suffering or problems were alleviated by *San La Muerte*, or they narrate about the present. Such present is perceived and presented as pervaded by the Saint's presence and the future is auspicated or imagined to be similar to it. In other words, although religions are usually believed to be the vehicle of eschatological visions, i.e. of conceptions of the afterlife, devotees of *San La Muerte* display a surprising lack of beliefs of/interest in what happens after death (cf. DE p. 49 and 50). Some of them even deny the relevance of the hereafter in a very explicit way (DE p. 65). As we have beforehand remarked, it is an act of "received justice" that is usually conducive to the devotion. If injustice is still extant (i.e. if a devotee still perceives their biographical circumstances as strained and problematic) justice from the Saint is, however, expected and asked for in this life. This leads Calzato to describe the devotion for *San la Muerte* as a non-eschatological one (DE pp. 67-70).

Violence

Calzato also interprets this folk devotion through the concept of violence. Such violence is first of all, and *lato sensu*, a political one: the impoverishment that hit the country like "a hurricane" over the last years while "a fictive and fantastic liberal hope" was nourished "that ended up in a failure" (DE p. 7). However, violence seems also to be the dominant trait of the situations in which *San La Muerte* is encountered for the first time, actually in the role of saviour from violence itself, such as the case in which a woman who was hit and heavily wounded by a car and whose life was prolonged or restored by him, appearing to her in a dream or vision while she was lying in a coma (Calzato and Sánchez Hernández 2011, pp. 17-18). Violent acts (not small pranks, nor merely symbolic actions) are also the Saint's instrument to take revenge when someone does not manifest thankfulness and appreciation, such as in the above-mentioned case of the politician's daughter. In sum, *San La Muerte* operates violently and amidst violence. However, between the two forms of violence, the random one of unreliable politics and the constant although utterly severe one of a Saint *que hay que cumplirle* (you have do what you have promised to him), devotees invariably choose the latter (DE pp. 64-65).

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Pictures from the temple of *San La Muerte* in Tigre (Buenos Aires) by Stefano Bigliardi, July 22 2014.



