



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

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CHANGE IN THE 21st CENTURY



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# Phenomenology

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.



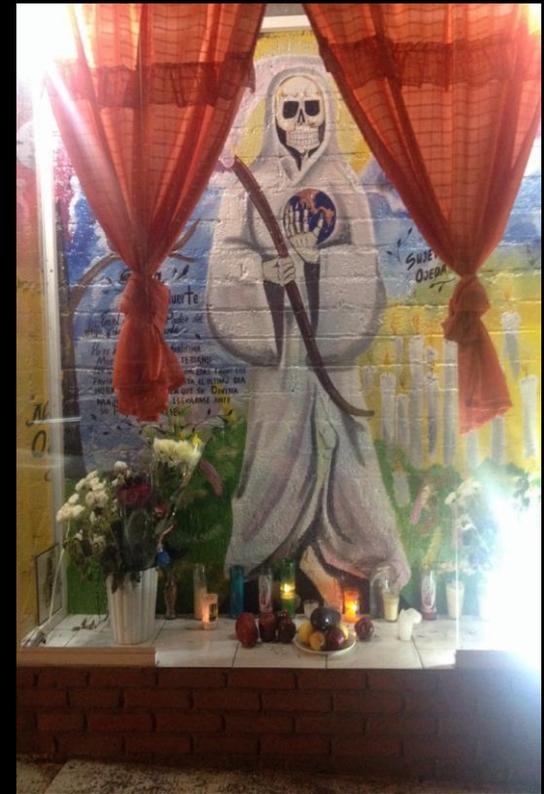
# An altar's development in Cuajimalpa (Mexico City)



April 2014



March 2015



May 2015

**Offers: Alcoholic drinks, balloons, candles, cigarettes and cigars, cigars' smoke, cocaine stripes, food, heroin, incense, jewelry, 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:

J. K. Perdigón Castañeda. 2008. *La Santa Muerte protectora de los hombres*. INAH: Mexico City.

Chesnut, R. Andrew. 2012. *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

F. Lorusso. 2013. *Santa Muerte. Patrona dell'umanità*. Stampa Alternativa, Viterbo.

**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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## Pictures

SLIDE 1 – Tultitlán, by David Byström

SLIDE 2 – Tultitlán, by David Byström

SLIDE 3 – Internet

SLIDE 4 – Cuajimalpa, by Stefano Bigliardi

SLIDE 5 – Tepito, by Stefano Bigliardi

SLIDE 6 – Tultitlán, by David Byström

SLIDE 7 – Tultitlán, by David Byström

SLIDE 8 – Tultitlán, by David Byström

SLIDE 9 – Tultitlán, by David Byström

SLIDE 10 – Tultitlán, by Stefano Bigliardi and David Byström

SLIDE 11 – Tepito, by Fabrizio Lorusso

SLIDE 12 – Tepito by Fabrizio Lorusso

SLIDE 13 – Col. Morelos by Fabrizio Lorusso and David Byström