



A BRIEF INTRODUCTION
PART 1

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La Santa Muerte: A Brief Introduction

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Introduction

This book is about La Santa Muerte, also known alternatively as simply Santa Muerte ("Saint Death"), "The White Girl," "The Bony Lady," "la Flaquita," "The Pretty Lady," "The Skinny Lady," "Our Godmother," and even "Mother Death." If you're reading this introduction, you've probably heard some anecdotes from friends or relatives or the rumors and media reports that have become increasingly commonplace concerning Santa Muerte that intrigued you enough to learn more. That's important because as this book explains, countless reports of inexplicable and miraculous occurrences of all types have been made by the followers of Santa Muerte in recent years, and ardent believers maintain that Santa Muerte not only answers their prayers, but does so in a nonjudgmental way. Not surprisingly, these reports, many of which have been verified by independent observers, have attracted attention from others who are also in need, and her legions of followers continue to grow in numbers.

On a personal note, I started praying to Santa Muerte a few years back during my time in graduate school. The events and my life leading up to it resulted in a fusion of Santa Muerte into my Islamic practice and my life from the beginning to now I intend to share in my upcoming book *The Agnostic Devotee*. Since I am not Christian, I follow a very different path compared to Catholic devotees because of a different cultural background and religious beliefs.

This book is a part one of two. This book introduces readers

to the history, rituals, backgrounds and current affairs with Santa Muerte and part two of the book will discuss in details the prayers, rituals, magic spells and the offerings a devotee offers and can offer to Santa Muerte. In addition, part two will also describe how the author, as an agnostic Muslim, uses a combination of Islamic offerings and a fusion of cultural rituals when praying to Santa Muerte which are introduced and briefly described in the chapter on Santa Muerte rituals and practices in this book. In sum, this book's aim is to serve as a brief introduction to devotees and non-devotees based on my own experiences, my own learnings through books, articles, videos and other resources as well as my empirical observations from learning and practicing living with several devotees from Mexico during my time in prison.

Preface

For many people, a secular saint who gives them power over death, intimately understands their lifestyles, is nonjudgmental about their lifestyles, and showers them with material goods and earthly rewards in return for their unwavering devotion and reverence is enormously attractive, especially when growing numbers of adherents confirm these positive experiences. It is not all that surprising, then, that La Santa Muerte, known alternatively as the “Bony Lady,” “White Girl,” “Holy Death,” and, literally, “Saint Death” or “La Santísima Muerte” (“Most Holy Saint of Death”) has attracted a growing numbers of followers in Latin America, and most especially in the northern Mexico region bordering the United States.



Figure 1. Representative Santa Muerte icon

Although the White Girl may be gruesome in visage, skull and skeleton imagery and iconography do not hold the same fearful connotations that they do for many North Americans and these images are integral part of Santa Muerte's devotees religious observations and celebrations as shown in Figure 2 below.

*Figure 2. Representative Day of the Dead and La Santa Muerte
votive candle offerings*

Indeed, even north of the border, followers of Santa Muerte are rapidly growing in numbers and some mainstream celebrities are crediting their success to her miraculous interventions. Against this backdrop, developing a better understanding of the increasing importance and influence of this female deity in Latin American and U.S. culture has assumed new importance and

relevance today. Some salient examples of Santa Muerte's growing popularity and influence include a New Orleans devotee who built sturdy, glass-enclosed public shrines in her honor outside her home and defended them against neighbors complaints that they were unsettling to passersby as well as a popular Albuquerque-based actor who credits her success in securing a role on the hit television series, "Breaking Bad" to Santa Muerte (Contreras, 2013).

According to Grossman (2015), devotees of Santa Muerte in the U.S. are also increasing in number, even in some northern states. For example, Maryland-based Sonia Doi organizes meetings of like-minded spirits, the majority of whom are women, and leads discussions concerning folk religions such as Santa Muerte. Indeed, Grossman (2015) found that folk religions are proliferating globally, but most especially in Mexico and other regions of Latin America, and this growth is being fueled in large part by women. The results of a recent Pew Research Center survey identified more than 405 million people (approximately 6% of the global population) were adherent to some type of traditional or folk religion that lacks sacred texts, formal creed or organization structures all of which are characteristic of Santa Muerte.

Moreover, in sharp contrast to mainstream religions such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity which have all been headed by male religious leaders and Eastern religions such as Buddhism are likewise led by male monks and scholars, folk religions are

mainly the religious turf of women. Indeed, Andrew Chesnut, author of the first book published in the U.S. about Santa Muerte, claims that with more than 10 to 12 million devotees already, Santa Muerte is "the fastest-growing new religious movement in the Americas". The disproportionate number of women leading Santa Muerte rituals is consistent with the trends in other folk religions where women enjoy the opportunity to assume leadership positions compared to other religions. The growing population of Santa Muerte devotees can also be discerned from the fact that in addition to its rapid proliferation in Latin and North American which accounts for about 90% of followers, the practices are spreading to European countries as well.

Despite this growing popularity, Santa Muerte still suffers from a poor reputation due in part to the faith's association with so-called "narcoculture" (see chapter four below) as well as well-known depictions of the White Lady in an especially violent and high-profile episode on television's series, "Breaking Bad". In addition, the widespread view in the mainstream media that Santa Muerte is the patroness of drug dealers rather than the protectress of victims of narco-related-violence has further tarnished her image and reputation.

Nevertheless, other media sources cast Santa Muerte in a gentler and far more compassionate light, including an article appearing in the *Los Angeles Times* concerning a Santa Muerte temple in Los Angeles which is described as "like the Virgin for people on the edge" who may be marginalized by poverty, shattered

families, undocumented immigration status, or sexual orientation. Other devotees seek Santa Muerte's benefactions for their romantic relationships or retribution for wrongdoings against them simply because these types of saints are not available in Latin America's dominant Catholic culture.

A critical juncture in the recent rise in popularity of Santa Muerte can be traced to Mexico when in 2001 Enriqueta Romero aka Dona Queta, a quesadilla vendor placed a life-sized statue of Santa Muerte in her front yard. Neighbors and others quickly took notice and began making offerings such as candles, tequila and flowers (see more in Chapter Three concerning Santa Muerte rituals) in hopes of securing her blessings for their health and protection (Grossman, 2015). Not long thereafter, another Mexican devotee Jonathan Legaria Vargas, founded the Santa Muerte temple in Tultitlan and erected the tallest statue of Santa Muerte in the world. The attention garnered by these events has galvanized the followers of Santa Muerte in ways that make it clear that she appeals to an increasingly broad-based demographic element. As a result, Santa Muerte has assumed the lofty status of the "multitasking miracle worker of Mexico" whose devotees blend practices and prayers from the Catholic Church (including a rosary variation), underscoring the ability of people of all religions and faiths to seek her assistance. As Grossman concludes, *"You can be both a Christian and a follower of a folk religion"* (emphasis added).

Notwithstanding the growing popularity of La Santa Muerte,

these trends have not been without their setbacks that have unfortunately reinforced already negative perceptions about the protectress. For instance, in June 2016 Ray Romero, the husband of Dona Queta, and a well-known devotee of Santa Muerte, was gunned down by sicarios on a motorcycle close to the shrine they had erected in her honor, due in large part to the enormous number of followers it attracted (Chesnut, 2017). In reality, the current wave of enthusiasm for Santa Muerte worship may be attributable in large part to a series of serendipitous and otherwise seemingly inexplicable events that resulted in this life-sized statue of the Bony Lady being erected in the first place. In the past, Dona Queta has been reluctant to discuss how her life-sized statue came to be set in her front yard which created all of the hoopla in the first place. The statute was presented to Dona Queta as a gift from her son following his release from a Mexico City jail in September 2001. Her son who pled guilty to a lesser charge to which he readily admitted guilt, was originally charged with a much more serious offense that would have carried a lengthy prison sentence and both Dona Queta and her son were seriously concerned about this eventuality.

Based on Dona Queta's encouragement her son prayed to Santa Muerte for protection while he was incarcerated. Not only was he protected from harm in jail, he was even released shortly thereafter when his case was reduced in severity (Kristensen, 2016). It is noteworthy that Dona Queta and her family were delighted – but not surprised – at this outcome since they had an

unwavering faith in Santa Muerte all along. As a result of this liberating experience and a direct answer to their prayers, Dona Queta's son visited the Sonora market (one of the largest in Latin America for religious and magical artifacts) in search of an appropriate statue of Santa Muerte. Despite the enormity of the market, there were relatively few life-sized statues of the Bony Lady for sale.

After an exhaustive search, though, Dona Queta's son found just what he was looking for and purchased it on the spot. It is also noteworthy that this life-sized statue had been for sale for many years at the Sonora market, but no one had the courage to actually buy it and take it home with them. In many ways, the events that followed suggest that Santa Muerte's time had truly come at this juncture in history, but the initial reaction to his purchase by others at the market makes it clear that his purchase was still regarded as anomalous at the time. As her son explained later, "She [Santa Muerte] was the only one that tall. She had been there for a while but nobody had had the guts to buy it. The day I bought it, people started to shout 'fucking nuts'. One of my friends told me I was crazy. I do respect her, but she looks macabre. Before that, they had only sold a few figures a meter high, but she was as tall as a human" (Kristensen, 2016). Not only was Dona Queta's son vindicated for his seemingly erratic purchase of a life-sized statue of Santa Muerte, this purchase set in motion a series of events that are still having reverberations throughout Latin and North America today.

Following his arrival back home with his newly purchased life-sized statue of the Bony Lady, Dona Queta's son found that there was a major problem with displaying the statue: there was simply no room for the large figure in his own home so he presented it to his mother as a gift in return for her devotion and guidance concerning Santa Muerte that helped free him from jail. Although Dona Queta was elated at receiving the life-sized statue of Santa Muerte, she shared the same types of logistical constraint as her son in terms of having sufficient space in her small ground-floor house to display it properly. In this regard, Kristensen (2016) reports that, "The life-sized skeleton was also too large for the cramped room where Dona Queta and her partner spent most of their time. Since space was understandably scarce, they were forced to open the door that faced onto the street to make a little more room".

Because the life-sized statue of Santa Muerte was only partially visible from the street when displayed in this fashion, Dona Queta was startled when more and more people started slowly walking by her home, stealing furtive glances at the statue and some leaving token offerings of flowers and votive candles. As a result of these incessant offerings, Dona Queta soon found herself with even less room in her home than before she set up her statue. In response to these crowded conditions, the decision was made to move the life-sized statue of Santa Muerte outside in the front of her home (Kristensen, 2016). This seemingly innocuous move, however, also had serious implications because

four local men were murdered on a nearby street shortly thereafter, and many residents believed they were killed as a blood sacrifice to honor Santa Muerte. In fact, a Protestant church group a few blocks away demonstrated against the statue and the Roman Catholic Church formally condemned the statue as a form of idol worship (Kristensen, 2016).

Notwithstanding these high-profile violent events, the numbers of congregants at the life-sized statue of Santa Muerte continued to swell, so Dona Queta commenced conducting rosaries on the first day of each month that were inspired by the Catholic version and attendance increased still further. Over the course of the next decade or so, there have been hundreds if not thousands of other street shrines erected in honor of Santa Muerte and tens of thousands of her followers turn out each month for the public rosaries that are held in her honor each month in Mexico City today.

These seminal events and trends beg the question as to why Dona Queta and her family were compelled to worship Saint Death rather than less controversial, formally canonized saint from the Catholic Church such as Saint Jude. As one authority emphasizes, "It is, after all, hotly debated among popular Catholics as to whether La Santa Muerte is a saint or a devil". If you ask Dona Queta and her son, they will say, 'she is the one that works' (*la que funciona*) and that only 'she knows why' (*so'lo ella sabe por qu'e*). These types of empirical responses from people who are in a position to know typically quell any

further inquiries into their motivation, but they do not communicate the full range of powerful emotions and beliefs that underlie these events. It is intriguing that Dona Queta's son looked so determinedly for a statue of death at the Sonora witchcraft market. Could he not just have offered La Santa Muerte his profound gratitude by praying to her in private? And why a life-sized figure when there was no room for it?

The answers to these questions seem to relate to the fundamental power exerted by Santa Muerte in guiding her followers, but these answers also involve something more down to earth. By erecting the life-sized statue of Santa Muerte as a street shrine, Dona Queta's son essentially humanized Saint Death in ways that her other, earlier iconography could not. Indeed, Kristensen argues that rather than dating to antiquity, the true origins of the modern Santa Muerte incarnation can be traced to this signal event. According to Kristensen:

Santa Muerte emerged from the material transformation of two distinct representations of death, known as La Catrina and La Santisima Muerte. La Santisima Muerte was transformed in the 1980s and 1990s from two-dimensional images into three-dimensional sculptures. This transformation facilitated the coalescing of the two into the public figure we know today as La Santa Muerte, who, on the one hand, is the transformed popular death figure of La Catrina now endowed with a forceful 'spirit' and, on the other, a transformed holy version of a biblical-dark-angel-of-death now 'downgraded' to a saint.

(2016, p. 405).

Besides the murders of four men near the original life-sized statue of the White Girl, there have been other reports concerning the backlash against Santa Muerte followers that have even included interventions by both the Mexican government and the Mexican military. Nevertheless, despite such setbacks, the faith continues to grow, including the establishment of chapters in the United States by Santa Muerte International in Atlanta, Dallas, Houston and New York with plans underway for many more (Chesnut, 2017). The Santa Muerte International Web site (<https://www.internationalsantamuerte.com/about/>) emphasizes that, "Despite having a 'frightful' appearance, Santa Muerte is a very peaceful, loving, and caring Saint that truly has your best interest at heart".

These vastly different characterizations underscore the dichotomous nature of Santa Muerte, blending both the profane and sacred in ways that defy simple explanations. As Chesnut concludes, "There are never any easy answers when it comes to death, and the folk saint that has stepped into the role of representing the ultimate end is no exception". As shown in Figure 3 below, Santa Muerte does not resemble the conventional appearance of saints. Described by Flanigan (2014) as "A strange hybrid of the Virgin Mary and the grim reaper - statues and other pieces of contemporary folk art show her decked out in flowers or a bridal gown, brandishing a scythe- she might be at home on a Santana album cover, or on the wall of a tattoo parlor".



Figure 3. Santa Muerte with a scythe

It is readily understandable how some non-initiates might view the creepy figure above as less-than-saintly, but it is important to note, though, that Santa Muerte (or literally "Saint Death") represents far more to her faithful devotees than merely a gruesome image. Indeed, while Santa Muerte has never been formally canonized and remains a secular saint, she is the most visible figure in what has been described by numerous authorities as the fastest-growing religious movement in North America today. In truth, this is a remarkable trend given the devoutness of many traditional Catholics and Protestants and their unswerving adherence to their respective religious dogmas, but it does highlight the fact that despite her offsetting appearance to many

uninitiated, followers of Santa Muerte must be reaping some types of benefits otherwise the religious movement would not be enjoying these rapid levels of growth.

Because the White Girl appeals to many members of marginalized social groups, including criminal elements, it is little wonder that the growth in the Santa Muerte movement has also been fueled by economic turbulence in Latin American countries, including Mexico, as well as the ongoing war against the powerful cartels that essentially control the U.S.-Mexico border's drug trade that has cost more than 40,000 lives already, with victims and perpetrators alike seeking her assistance. More significantly, though, the growing numbers of Santa Muerte followers also come from all walks of life despite the large percentage of marginalized individuals who earn their livings on the fringes of society, largely by their wits and frequently through criminal enterprises, and Santa Muerte draws all of them because of the nonjudgmental and powerful interventions she has consistently manifested time and again over the years.

As noted earlier in the preface, the purpose of this book is to introduce readers to the fascinating background, history and rituals that are typically used by devotees of Santa Muerte to help dispel the several misunderstanding concerning these practices and how they operate. This book is not only intended for devotees wanting to learn more about Santa Muerte but also for people who simply want to learn about this phenomena and the mysteries that are associated with Santa Muerte. The information

that follows is intended to address these needs and the directions for future research that concludes the book will serve as food for additional thought for those interested in the Death Saint today.

Chapter One

Background and History of Santa Muerte and Other Secular Saints

Background and Overview

To her millions of followers around the world, Santa Muerte goes by many names, some of them flattering (i.e., “Grandmother” or “White Girl”) and some which are more reflective of her various skeletal appearances (i.e., “Bony Lady” or “Saint Death”). Regardless of the name by which she is known, though, Santa Muerte has increasingly been considered as a life-changing answer to her devotees’ prayers (Ugarte, 2017). For instance, one Tepito, Mexico devotee, Juan Carlos Avila Mercado, a former Catholic priest, reports that attendance at his Sunday services has grown steadily in recent months, and some attendees are even arriving at his services crawling on their knees in humble supplication to this secular saint.



Figure 4. Santa Muerte devotee arriving for a service on her knees

It is important to note that Tepito is a Mexico City neighborhood that is known for its notorious black market, general criminality rates and overall low income levels, so it is perhaps not surprising that the marginalized residents of this community have turned to Santa Muerte when nothing else seems to work to improve the quality of their lives. Indeed, devotees firmly believe that Santa Muerte is always with them, needing only to be acknowledged and worshiped in an appropriate but highly individualized fashion. For instance, according to Mercado, “[Santa Muerte] chooses them and has always been with us. We are born and we die with death” (Ugarte, 2017).

Prior to 2001, Santa Muerte devotees primarily worshiped in

private by building small personal shrines in their homes but the construction of a public shrine in 2001 in Tepito served as the catalyst to fuel public adulation of the White Girl throughout Mexico and beyond. The Tepito-based Santa Muerte devotee who built the first life-sized public altar, Enriqueta Romero aka Dona Queta in front of her home together with Enriqueta Vargas, head of the Templo Santa Muerte Internacional have become the de facto religious leaders of the rapidly growing Santa Muerte movement (Arreola, 2016). However, no account of the meteoric growth of Santa Muerte cult would be complete without mentioning the pivotal role of self-styled archbishop David Romo played in attempting to institutionalize devotion to the Angel of Death.

In the year 2002, David Romo, a veteran of the Mexican Air Force, founded a temple for Santa Muerte worshippers in the Tepito neighborhood. The church was registered with the Mexican government the following year. David Romo, who acted as an “archbishop” introduced a fusion of Roman Catholic and Santa Muerte prayers, as a way to differentiate his services from his main rival, Dona Queta, who is regarded as the as the god-mother of the movement. These services featured a syncretizing blend of Roman Catholic and Santa Muerte prayers (Walker 2004). The masses were held at midnight and differed from a conventional Roman Catholic mass as devotees invoked “the spirit of the Santa Muerte” and uttered phrases, “glorious death, powerful death” and prayed their enemies be vanquished. Romo

also presided over thematic masses that reflected his worshippers personal concerns. These included masses for parishioners who were ill and were experiencing demonic possession or relatives of prisoners who wanted to hold a special “mass for prisoners” (Chestnut 2012). Prayers during the services were for protection: “Oh, Most Santa Muerte, I call upon you so that, through your image, you may free me from all dangers, whether these dangers are physical or from witchcraft, and that through this sacred flame you might purify my body from all charms and curses and that you also bring love, peace, and abundance. So be it” (Freese n. dabun).



Figure 5. David Romo

Romo's assertion of leadership of Santa Muerte led to a more

general criticism of Romo within the Santa Muerte community that “he was trying to be the leader of a devotion that could really have no leader but Santa Muerte herself” (Wayward Monk n.d.). In 2009 Romo called on Santa Muerte devotees to engage in a “holy war” against the Roman Catholic hierarchy for its increasing frequent condemnations of the devotion. Romo’s combative and controversial advocacy for Santa Muerte essentially came to end in January of 2011 when he was arrested, along with seven other followers, and charged with running a kidnapping ring and laundering the ransom money through his personal bank accounts. His supporters rallied to his defense, claiming that the Mexican government and Roman Catholic Church were conspiring to suppress their faith. In September of 2011, Romo was sentenced to 12 years in prison. Interestingly, he has yet to be tried on the kidnapping and ransom laundering charges, but was convicted instead for using a voting credential that bore his photograph, but under a different name, with which he was then said to have opened bank accounts in which he could receive ransom payments.

As discussed further in the chapters that follow, the origins of Santa Muerte purportedly date to pre-Hispanic times; however, authorities such as Chesnut maintain that her actual origins can be traced back to the Spanish Conquistadors who brought her over as a means of evangelizing the indigenous populations of Latin America as the female personification of death. In this regard, Agren (2014) reports that: “Certain indigenous groups

made her a holy figure, which she never was in the European context. The devotion went underground for centuries, until anthropologists discovered women practicing love magic with Santa Muerte, pleading for help with their wayward spouses”.

Although the exact numbers of these early followers remains unknown, the research that follows suggests that it was already widespread by the time the worship of Santa Muerte entered the public sphere during the latter half of the 20th century. In September 2001, though, all of this changed when Enriqueta Romero, a formerly obscure quesadilla vendor in Mexico City’s notorious Tepito neighborhood, placed a Santa Muerte statue in front of her home. Slowly at first but in increasing waves, followers of Santa Muerte emerged from the shadows and gathered together publicly to celebrate their firm faith in the Death Saint for all to see. As Agren puts it, “She literally took the skeleton out of the closet”.

The rapid increase in Santa Muerte’s followership has not escaped the notice of Roman Catholic Church leaders, either. For instance, Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, president of the Pontifical Council for Culture, cautioned in 2013 that, “Everyone is needed to put the brakes on this phenomenon, including families, churches and society [because] the Santa Muerte is the celebration of devastation and of hell”. What has actually taken place in the interim, however, is that “everyone” appears to be jumping on the Santa Muerte bandwagon because she “doesn’t ask for more money” referring to the complaints from the working

classes concerning having to pay for Catholic sacraments (Agren, 2014). Other authorities cite the Death Saint's abundantly forgiving nature and nonjudgmental attitude towards prayers. For instance, one devotee proclaims that, "The Catholic Church reprimands, but Santa Muerte never does. She accepts everyone, with faults and without" (Cambell, 2010).

Although the Catholic Church considers the Santa Muerte belief system as heretical and the purview of the criminal element in society, her millions of faithful followers counter that the saint is generally misunderstood and that their devotion to this secular saint does not detract from the legitimacy of their other religious practices. For instance, Contreras (2013) emphasizes that, "Shrines to Santa Muerte have cropped up all along the U.S. - Mexico border in cartel safe houses as well as on the dashboards of vehicles that are used by Mexican narco-traffickers to smuggle drugs into the United States". Indeed, following the destruction of a number of these roadside shrines to Santa Muerte in northern Mexico, hundreds of Santa Muerte followers staged a march on Mexico City's main square, chanting that, "We are believers; we are not criminals".

The celebrations and devotions directed to Santa Muerte follow a general scheme, although these can be different depending on the individual worshippers and the focus of their prayers. It is important to note, though, that the masses that are celebrated in her honor are attended by young and old, men and women, of all walks of life, including artists, gay activists, small business

owners as well as numerous non-Latino people who simply feel they have not received their fair share of life and who are not otherwise actively involved in organized religions. More to the point, Santa Muerte's followers are uniformly serious about their beliefs in her extraordinary powers. As Campbell (2010) describes one Santa Muerte mass, "There is earnest devotion, tears, and a sense that here at last is someone who listens. If anything threatens the national security of Mexico, it is not the religious beliefs of the poor, but the political and economic despair that draws them here".

The inextricable association between Santa Muerte and various criminal elements in Latin American and South American society has been reinforced by several high-profile media accounts, but this connection fails to paint a full picture of Santa Muerte and other secular saints (Contreras, 2013). Secular saints such as La Santa Muerte occupy an interesting niche in the Latin American pantheon as well as many other religions that warrant closer analysis. For instance, in my country of origin, Pakistan, quite a few people wholeheartedly believe in the miraculous powers of Hazrat Data Buksh Ali Hujwari who is venerated as the patron saint of Lahore, Pakistan. He is, moreover, one of the most widely venerated saints in the entire Indian subcontinent, and his tomb-shrine in Lahore, popularly known as Data Darbar, is one of the most frequented shrines in South Asia. At present, it is Pakistan's largest shrine in numbers of annual visitors and in the size of the shrine complex. He is known as the master to bestow

treasures and as a result a huge number of devotees visit his shrine annually to pray to the saint. The majority of participants are rural peasants, factory workers, housewives and middle-class devotees. The shrine fulfill devotional needs and provide outlets from the chores of daily life. Devotees go there for prayer and meditation, *barakat* (blessings), for cure, protection and also to make a *mannat* (a vow). When that vow is fulfilled, they go to the shrine to make an offering- usually food, charity, or an animal sacrifice.

Another saint in my hometown city of Karachi, Pakistan is Abdullah Shah Ghazi, the Sufi “savior saint” whose shrine is depicted in Figure 6 below.



Figure 6. Shrine to Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, Pakistan
For a long time, the saint's many admirers have believed that

the reason cyclones usually miss hitting Karachi is due to “the mystical power and presence of Shah Ghazi’s spirit that resides within the shrine” (Abdullah shah ghazi- the savior saint, 2014). According to Hanif (2016) “If you have an urgent problem that the living can’t help with, you walk up the stairs of the shrine. You offer a prayer and maybe a handful of rose petals. Your problem may not be solved immediately, but you come out feeling better”. Consequently, this saint’s followers firmly believe that his shrine contains his ethereal spirit which is a legitimate focus of their devotion and offerings. In return, Shah Ghazi answers their prayers.

This “steady stream of devotees” to popular saints resembles the growing multitudes seeking the assistance of Santa Muerte and other secular saints around the world. These beliefs in the efficacy of these saints clearly resemble the manner in which Santa Muerte is revered and worshiped in the Americas and beyond. On one hand, popular secular saints such as La Santa Muerte are not widely regarded by followers of mainstream religions as being on precisely the same par with canonical saints with respect to conventional spiritual or religious practices. On the other hand, though, Martin (2014) emphasizes that, “Nevertheless, they are apprehended in ways similar to saints, for their images or words are frequently circulated or interpreted in a way that approximates the divine or even becomes it”. This distinction between secular and canonical saints further underscores the fundamental differences between humanity and divinity that

has universal relevance. In this regard, Sanchez (2012) points out that altars to Frida Kahlo and Che Guevara are commonplace during El Día de los Muertos celebrations and these secular saints are likewise remembered and venerated for their contributions while in their mere mortal form.

While there is no formally accepted definition of secular sanctity, the term “secular saint” is typically used to describe religious figures that are venerated due to their contributions to worthy causes or their otherwise extraordinary abilities but who are not officially recognized as canonical saints by an organized religion. As shown in Figure 7 below, attired in a black nun's robe and holding a scythe in one hand, the secular Santa Muerte offers faithful followers the opportunity to secure better employment, ward off evil, improve marital relationships and, more rarely, to exact vengeance for wrongdoings.



Figure 7. Santa Muerte clad in black nun's robe

It is this aspect of Santa Muerte's secularity that has made her especially appealing to those who live on the fringe or actually outside of the law. For instance, according to Andrew Chesnut, author of *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* and the Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University, "Others seek her protection for their drug shipments and to ward off law enforcement. Her growth in the United States has been extraordinary. *Because you can ask her for anything, she has mass appeal and is now gaining a diverse group of followers throughout the country. She's the ultimate multi-tasker*" (emphasis added) (Martin, 2014).

These issues and others related to secular saints are

addressed head-on in Chesnut's book, *Devoted to Death*, wherein the author provides one of the first factual accounts of Santa Muerte and her increased followership in Latin and North America (Dees, 2014). Based on numerous years of empirical ethnographic observations of the worship of Santa Muerte in Latin America and the United States, Chesnut provides a timely analysis of the history of this secular saint together with an overview of religious practices and rituals.

Despite his exhaustive field work, Chesnut still remains outside the circle of actual worshipers so he is essentially an outsider looking in, making the first-hand accounts reported in his book especially valuable today. The limitation with Chesnut's book is perhaps unavoidable given that his purpose in writing was fundamentally different from mine. For example, according to Dees (2014), "In mainstream media, devotion to Santa Muerte has been linked to participation in the narcotics trade and other illegal activities. However, one of Chesnut's key goals is to complicate the image of Santa Muerte as a demonic anti-saint by highlighting the many reasons a broad swath of devotees, from Mexico to the United States, seek out her guidance and protection". While it is impossible to determine with any precision the percentage of Santa Muerte followers who are outright criminals, the growing body of scholarship concerning this secular saint indicates that this element only represents a small part of the White Girl's followership today.

Based on his analysis of the data he accumulated during his

field research, Chesnut concludes that the dramatic growth in Santa Muerte's popularity in Latin and North America in recent years can be attributed in large part to historical developments that have brought the marginalized populations of these countries into the limelight. In other words, by raising public awareness concerning their fragile existence, Chesnut makes it clear that secular saints such as Santa Muerte are filling a chasm-sized void in the lives of many people who have nowhere else to turn. Beyond this basic human need, Chesnut also ascribes the growing popularity of Santa Muerte to the ongoing drug war in Mexico and stresses the need to address exaggerated reports that the protectress is simply the patron saint of narco-traffickers and no one else. In fact, as discussed in chapter four below, nothing could be further from the truth and reality concerning Santa Muerte.

The true picture of Santa Muerte is complex but not unfathomable, mysterious but knowable, and arcane but wonderful when all of the facts are known. What else could account for growing numbers of her followers seeking and receiving benefactions from Santa Muerte that are simply unexplainable otherwise? Women continue to seek her help in dealing with wayward lovers. Adherents who have fallen on hard times pray to her for help in finding a job. Shop owners seek her support for the continuing success of their businesses. In other words, Santa Muerte is an accessible, nonjudgmental and compassionate secular saint whose interest in the welfare of humanity has become

the stuff of legend.

Moreover, just as many individuals that have become involved with the criminal justice system, including incarceration, seek Santa Muerte's assistance with their legal problems, so too do law enforcement authorities and those in the helping professions actively seek her interventions for protection. Because most people are realists – at least to some degree – it is apparent that there must be something real and substantive to all of this fuss about Santa Muerte that explains her rapidly growing popularity. In sum, Dees (2014) concludes that, “Her devotees are pragmatic [and] Santa Muerte is so popular precisely because she is thought to be familiar with the lifestyles of her adherents and to quickly respond to her devotees' requests”.

Indeed, the popularity of Santa Muerte rivals that of canonical saints such as Saint Jude and the Virgin of Guadalupe for miracle requests and her images and iconography are becoming virtually ubiquitous throughout Latin and - increasingly - North America. While few outright criminal desperadoes have been willing to come forward and share their experiences and practices with respect to Santa Muerte in the mainstream spotlight, it is possible to discern some of these issues by examining the empirical observations provided by law enforcement authorities tasked with better understanding this growing phenomenon. According to one such authority, “Criminals pray to La Santa Muerte to protect them from law enforcement. But there are good people who pray to her who aren't involved in any criminal activity so we

have to be careful" (Martin, 2014).

Notwithstanding this cautionary analysis, there have been a sufficient number of high-profile incidents involving Santa Muerte followers in recent years that makes it especially challenging to counter some of these claims. For example, the conviction of the self-appointed leader of the Santa Muerte movement in Mexico City, David Romo, for operating a kidnapping ring and laundering the proceeds through his personal bank account despite his claims of innocence. The claims of innocence on the part of Romo may or may not be true, but what is known for certain is that the Santa Muerte church he established was able to register as a legally recognized organization that was approved by the Mexican government until the Vatican intervened and his legal status was revoked. This outcome may be attributable, at least in part, to the fact that Romo altered the image of Santa Muerte to depict her as an Angel of Death with feathered wings resembling canonized Catholic saints which may have been especially objectionable to church leaders. Some other high profile incidents which fuels the public perception of Santa Muerte as a "satanic cult" as highlighted by the media include:

- The arrest and prosecution of a powerful criminal figure in Tepito, Mexico City in 2004 responsible for killing virgins and babies and offering them as sacrifices to Santa Muerte to gain her favor and magical protection.
- The public execution of Sinaloa Cartel members by members of Gulf Cartel at a public shrine in Nuevo Laredo in

2008.

- The killings of several individuals in December 2009 and January 2010 in Ciudad Juárez, where perpetrators murdered individuals in an apparent Santa Muerte ritual killings. Regarding one incident, authorities found at the crime scene the remnants of an apparent altar and the words “Santa Muerte” and “cuídanos flakita” (take care of us, skinny) spray painted on one of the victims. In the second crime, gang members burned a victim behind a house containing an altar and a small Santa Muerte statue. Interviewed neighbors said that the killers, part of the Hillside 13 Gang, asked for “something big”; as a result, the perpetrators performed multiple human sacrifices.

- The conviction of eight people in August 2015 arrested for killing two 10 year old boys and a 55 year-old woman in a ritual sacrifice in which the victims veins were sliced open and their blood was poured around an altar to the saint.

Notwithstanding the inextricable connection between criminality and Santa Muerte (as discussed further in chapter four below), there is a growing body of evidence that prayers to the White Girl are truly answered. While canonical saints have been elevated to their status due to the rigorous canonization process used by the Catholic Church (which even includes the so-called “Devil’s Advocate” whose only responsibility it is to point out any foibles in a proposed saint’s life that would preclude the canonization), secular saints such as La Santa Muerte are

venerated based on mere human qualities, including the darker side of the human condition.

This difference also accounts in large part for the growing popularity of La Santa Muerte in Latin and North America today. In this regard, Martin (2014) emphasizes that, "It is because they are accessible as fallible humans that secular saints are revered as divine mediators or as sacred figures in their own right. Although the union between secular and sacred is common to all saints, secular saints particularly foreground the simultaneity as well as the contradiction of human and divine". While everyone's needs, wants and desires are unique, most devotees to secular saints tend to seek their assistance to help them during times of personal crisis or to assist with other personal matters that they believe require supernatural interventions. There are distinct rituals and prayers that are used for different secular saints depending on whether the assistance involves personal relationships, employments, health or other needs.

It is important to note, though, that the interactions between secular saints and their human followers transcend individual or local desires to include an expanded conceptualization of identity, memory, temporality and space. For example, according to Martin (2014), "Spiritual beliefs and practices in the borderlands transcend both personal and ecclesiastical rituals to disrupt and destabilize the conventions of national borders and citizenship, regional space, and temporalities both secular and sacred".

Moreover, these religious rituals and practices are also

transforming the societies in which they are practiced in fundamental ways that are characteristic of mainstream religions. For instance, Martin adds that, "The [secular] saints are border crossers themselves, accompanying people from all walks of life on their travels and especially migrants, who draw upon secular sanctity for help in deciphering their place as subjects who exceed traditional conceptions of citizenship. Yet the saints are not merely symbols of migration. Their devotees also construct national identities around them, and they also serve as markers of regional or local space". For e.g. saints such as Sai Baba of Shir-di in the Indian Sub-continent continue to unite people belonging to different ethnic and religious communities bringing together devotees and pilgrims disregarding the barriers including those of the state. Sai Baba of Shirdi also known as Shridi Sai Baba, holy/saintly father, in India, is honored as a saint by both his Hindu and Muslim devotees. It is however unclear if he was a Muslim or a Hindu as he lived in a mosque and gave it a Hindu name, his teachings were mainly a mixture of both the religions. The Hindus believe he was a clear appearance of Lord Shiva and regard him as a supreme God while the Muslims regard him as an *Awliya* (a saint or a friend of God). From one devotee in the 19th century to 25000 pilgrims a day reaching to more than a 100,000 visiting his temple during religious festivals, he is loved unquestioningly and uncritically by not only the Hindus and the Muslims but also revered as the most popular non-Zoroastrian religious figure. His devotees claim that he had

the powers to cure any incurable disease, lit the lamp with water, detach any of his limb and then attach it back, and helped his devotees by guiding them in their dreams. Indeed, people from all religions pray to him from celebrities to the Prime Minister of India.

Similarly, other saints such as the 19th century outlaw Jesus Malverde commonly known as the “angel of the poor”, Pancho Villa, Santa Teresa de Cabora, and César Chávez, can all be said to generate novel types of regional, national and even transnational identity for their followers regardless of their geographic locations in North and Latin America today. While these and other secular saints are differentiated by the types of rituals and prayers that are used by supplicants, they share some commonalities just like their formally canonized counterparts. In the first place, the foregoing secular saints are all characterized by being marginal figures during the existence on the human plane in some fashion. In the second place, these secular saints have been enormously influential in shaping the societal margins that exist between Latin and North America as well as the divine and corporeal. In this regard, Martin (2014) concludes that, “As figures that assume a sacred aura, in part because of their secular roles as political, revolutionary, or cultural icons, these saints perform and embody the contradiction of human and divine reflected in secular sanctity”.

It is this aspect of secular sainthood in general and with respect to Santa Muerte, perhaps, that is regarded as being the

most threatening to the political status quo, thereby further reinforcing any preexisting negative stereotypes and misperceptions concerning this secular saint. This is unfortunate because the reality of Santa Muerte is far different. Nevertheless, because she attracts many people on the fringe of society, overcoming these negative misperceptions among the general population has assumed new importance and relevance in recent years. Indeed, Santa Muerte embodies both contradiction and ambivalence. Yet, unlike the others, the death saint has no physical manifestation within material history. This indicates the abstraction of the hopes and desires of the subaltern but also transcends the power of the state or church to rein her in and, by extension, to tame her unruly devotees.

All of the foregoing underscores the significance of the swelling ranks of Santa Muerte followers at this juncture in history. Not only are the countries of North and Latin America experiencing some especially acrimonious political relationships, the debate concerning illegal immigration in the United States has become particularly ugly. It is little wonder, then, that any religious movement in Latin America that appears threatening in any way will be regarded with suspicion north of the border, especially when that same religious movement is gaining a foothold in various parts of the country as well. Even more troubling is what the crisis has revealed about the content of the beliefs of many ordinary people—perhaps several millions in all who unhesitatingly describe themselves as Christian and Catholic but

who in fact follow a twisted caricature of orthodox faith, in which religion is wholly separated from morality.

While this assertion is generally negative in tone, it is accurate with respect to the religious worship of Santa Muerte being separate from traditional morality in that supplicants can ask for virtually anything from this accessible and nonjudgmental protectress. For example, according to Chesnut, Mexican botánicas (esoterica shops) currently sell more Santa Muerte figurines than they do icons of Mexico's patron saint the Virgin of Guadalupe. Chesnut claims that Santa Muerte "has a reputation for being an incredibly speedy and efficacious miracle worker," characterizing her as both a healer and savior for those with legal problems. Moreover, Chesnut adds that, "Unlike most canonized saints, at the end of the day, she isn't Catholic, so you can ask her for anything -- to bless a shipment of crystal meth, for example" (Flanagan, 2014).

Indeed, reports from the field confirm that many followers of Santa Muerte do in fact ask her for just that – protection from criminal competitors or protection for their illicit drug shipments and the people who operate these networks, but it is vitally important to keep in mind that this is just a miniscule part of the overall nature of the protectress when it comes to her concerns for all of humankind without regard to the conventional moral aspects of individual needs and wants. Furthermore, it would be misguided to single out Santa Muerte as the sole secular saint that appeals to the marginalized elements of modern society.

According to some authorities, Santa Muerte is just one among a pantheon of other Latin American secular saints that have become part of the prevailing ethos today, making the need to gain a better understanding of what is actually involved in these rituals and practices all the more important today. In sum, the supplications and offerings that are made by devotees to Santa Muerte serve as a type of supernatural touchstone that brings mere humans into contact with the supernatural in ways that could not otherwise be achieved. The followers of Santa Muerte enjoy what can only be described as an up-close and personal relationship with her that simply cannot be achieved with the formal and distant canonized saints of the Catholic Church. The offerings and prayers given to Santa Muerte by her legions of followers all have different motivations, but they share the common feature of being directed at a secular saint by those who have traditionally relied upon canonized saints for answers to their prayers, signaling an important fundamental shift in religious thinking among millions of people today.

According to Jenkins (2011), "While such beliefs demonstrate a profound faith in spiritual realities, they also show the yawning gulf that separates popular practice from any traditional concept of Christian faith". Indeed, the worship of Santa Muerte is reshaping the traditional concept of Christianity by incorporating many of the rituals and sacraments that are used in mainstream liturgical practices. This outcome is more readily understandable when the origins of Santa Muerte are taken into account and

these issues are discussed further below.

Origins of Santa Muerte

Although the precise origins of La Santa Muerte remain unclear and even controversial, some authorities, including Chestnut, suggest she originated from the iconic Grim Reaper from the European Middle Ages or the Aztec death goddess, Mictecacihuatl, the “Lady of the Dead” (see Figure 8 below) (Call, 2012).



Figure 8. Mictecacihuatl, the ancient Aztec goddess of Death

The connections between the Aztec's Lady of the Dead and the modern incarnation of Santa Muerte are readily apparent, including the fact that the Aztecs also made ritualistic offerings to her and prayed to her for abundant harvests. Indeed, the Lady of

the Dead remains a powerful figure in the annual celebrations of the Day of the Dead throughout Mexico and many parts of Latin America today (Flanigan, 2014).

Likewise, Tucker (2017) also recently noted that despite the reputation as being some type of esoteric death cult that appeals only to drug traffickers and other criminal elements, Santa Muerte has grown in popularity to the extent that the practice has become increasingly prominent but controversial part in celebrations of the Day of the Dead on November 1 and 2 of each year. Like the worship of secular saints such as Santa Muerte, the Day of the Dead celebrations are likewise a mix of Catholic and indigenous religious rituals that are specifically intended to honor people's ancestors in both dignified and mirthful ways.

Known alternatively as "El Día de los Muertos" or "The Day of the Dead" in Mexico and the United States, All Saints' Day is formally known in Spanish as "El Día de Todos los Santos" and All Souls' Day is called "El Día de las Ánimas"; however, both days have been conflated into a single celebration throughout all of Latin America (Marchi, 2009). An important point made by Marchi, though, is that, "Whether one is speaking in English or Spanish, the term 'Day of the Dead' (or El Día de los Muertos) is the only expression used to refer to the artistic and cultural celebrations of the holiday in the United States".

One Santa Muerte practitioner, Santana, who has officiated at Santa Muerte temples throughout Mexico for the past decade or so for Day of the Dead and other celebrations attributes this

perception of power and increased popularity of Santa Muerte to the fact that she actually “delivers the goods” irrespective of any moral issues that may be involved to the contrary. For example, according to Santana, “The followers of Santa Muerte say her appeal lies in her non-judgmental nature and her supposed ability to grant wishes in return for pledges or offerings. It's a widely misunderstood faith. It's not a satanic Mass. She gives people what they want and when they finish their cycle of life here on earth she comes for their souls. *She's just fulfilling God's orders*” (emphasis added) (Tucker, 2017).

In fact, Santa Muerte has long been worshipped in Latin America countries, but her popularity declined with corresponding increases in Catholicism until fairly recently, perhaps around the mid-20th century. This assertion is supported by research conducted by Nabhan-Warren (2013) that found, “Worship of Santa Muerte began to emerge again more consistently in Mexico in the 1950's and 60's where statues of the saint can be found in front of homes and businesses alike. The poor, working class people began growing disillusioned by the Catholic Church and the saints linked to Catholicism. They found comfort in the simplicity and humility of Santa Muerte and looked to her for protection from evil and a calm passage from life to death”.

By the mid-1990s, Santa Muerte had attracted sufficient attention to become an issue for public debate and much of the coverage from the mainstream press has been negative due to misperceptions concerning the purpose of the rituals and practices

that are used in Santa Muerte worship. This confluence of rising popularity of a death-related figure with declines in participation in mainstream religious observances in Latin American countries has therefore been accompanied by misunderstandings about what the protectress is really all about. As Ugarte (2017) points out, "While the cult has existed for some time and there are also death saints in South America the worship of Santa Muerte has seen especially rapid growth in recent years after a devotee unveiled the public shrine to Santa Muerte in Tepito".

Likewise, Chesnut also concurs that the origins of La Santa Muerte are unclear but leans towards the explanation that she is the incarnation of the Aztec goddess of death but others maintain her origins can be traced to medieval Spain through the image of La Parca, a female Grim Reaper (see Figure 9 below).



Figure 9. La Parca, Spanish female grim reaper character

As can be seen from the eerie representation in Figure 9 above, La Parca bears a striking resemblance to many of the modern conceptualizations of Santa Muerte, providing support for this thesis concerning her actual origins.

While many adherents in Mexico fail to see the connection between La Parca and Santa Muerte, there is some additional evidence in support of this origin for the protectress. In this regard, Tucker (2017) argues that, "After conquering Mexico in the 16th Century, the Spanish encouraged locals to honor the deceased on All Soul's Day, leading to the emergence of the Day of the Dead as a fusion of Catholic and indigenous beliefs. Devotees have begun to recognize Santa Muerte as the reincarnation of

Mictecacihuatl and reclaim the Day of the Dead as her unofficial feast day, provoking a 'huge panic' within the Catholic Church". This "huge panic" among mainstream Catholicism has been further exacerbated by some of the more arcane and esoteric rituals and practices that are used in Santa Muerte worship as discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Santa Muerte Rituals and Practices

While the scholarship concerning the rituals and practices used in Christian and non-Christian religions typically rely on clear-cut and readily discernible differences, the rituals and practices used in praying to Santa Muerte tend to blur these distinctions. For example, according to Gonzalez (2014), "Roman Catholicism influences many of the rituals and imagery surrounding Santa Muerte, despite the church's claims that devotion to her is Satanic. Santa Muerte votive candles, for example, resemble official Roman Catholic votive candles to Mary and the saints".

Moreover, it is becoming increasingly clear that this fusion of folk and mainstream religions practices, rituals and observances in general and with respect to Roman Catholic and Santa Muerte practices and rituals in particular that something essentially novel is taking place that resembles but does not precisely mimic the veneration given to other secular saints around the world. For example, Gonzalez adds that: "Although scholars too often draw clear lines between Christian and non-Christian religions, some religious rituals also blur them. Devotion to folk saints is a clear example of this phenomenon; such devotion contains a mixture of official and folk Catholicism that occur along with devotion to canonized saints".

It is important to note that millions of new Santa Muerte adherents who have traditionally been devout Catholics all their

lives have flocked to her fold in recent years so this trend must be based on some meaningful, real-world returns on their investment in spiritual time and energy.

As shown in Figure 10 below, devotees at Dona Queta's Mexico City shrine to Santa Muerte take part in modified rosary services each month together with masses said in the White Girl's honor.



Figure 10. Devotees raise their Santa Muerte (Saint Death) statues during a rosary service

Although there are no “official” rituals and practices used in Santa Muerte worship, there are some commonalities that can offer some valuable insights concerning what is actually involved. In some cases, mainstream Catholics would readily relate to the inclusion of canonized saints into Santa Muerte rituals and practices, but they would be less likely to understand or

appreciate the incorporation of various indigenous practices as well.

It is also noteworthy that the rituals and practices used by Santa Muerte devotees in the United States represent the single instance of such practices being directed at this unique female folk death saint. In this regard, Gonzalez (2014) advises that, “One example of a growing devotion to a folk saint is the adulation of Santa Muerte in Mexico and the United States (particularly, though not exclusively, among Mexican Americans), Santa Muerte is the only female personification of death in the Americas, unlike other folk saints of death like San La Muerte (Argentina) [see Figure 11 below] and Rey Pascual [see Figure 12 below] (Guatemala)”.



Figure 11. Altar to San La Muerte in Argentina



Figure 12. Figure of Rey Pascual from Guatemala

The unmistakable resemblance between Santa Muerte and Argentina's San La Muerte and Guatemala's Rey Pascual as shown above is apparent, with the only readily discernible distinction being the fact that the White Girl is female. This tangible attribute likely accounts in large part for the inordinately large percentages of women who are Santa Muerte devotees, but there are other salient factors involved including the types of rituals and practices as discussed further in chapter four below that are used in her worship that are far different from mainstream religions.

Some indication of the festive rather than grim or somber nature of the rituals and practices that are used in Day of the Dead

celebrations throughout Latin America can be discerned from those in Latin and South American countries which currently incorporate Santa Muerte into their traditional observations. For instance, Kurash (2013) cites the case of Peru where the Day of the Dead celebrations appear to be anything but “dead”. Kurash reports that, “With the magical sound of wooden flutes, the scent of incense, and the warm Andean sun making shadow patterns across the rolling hills, this event has all the hallmarks of a happy, festive occasion. Families spread out picnics; strolling musicians and vendors sell cotton candy, toys, flowers and food. But this celebration is taking place in a cemetery, el Cementerio de Nueva Esperanza [see Figure 13 below], one of the largest cemeteries in the world”.



Figure 13. Day of the Dead celebration at el Cementerio de Nueva Esperanza

As can be seen from Figure 13 above, the Day of the Dead celebration at the el Cementerio de Nueva Esperanza is a colorful

and festive affair, replete with all of the trappings of a traditional Latin American carnival held anywhere else. This 2-day celebration takes place in a huge cemetery, the congregants are not subdued or intimidated by the tens of thousands of graves surrounding them and some families even camp out overnight in the middle of the cemetery from one day to the next. Significantly, just as in neighboring Bolivia, these Day of the Dead celebrations also include indigenous rituals and practices that pre-date Catholicism and incorporate death imagery and worship. Kurash points out that, "The Incas honored their ancestors by displaying their mummies in a prominent place and sharing a meal and liquor with them. A shaman would be called upon to communicate with them and bring blessings from the relatives back to the living".

It is not surprising, then, that these Day of the Dead celebrations have also incorporated processions in honor of Santa Muerte. Described by Kurash as "a grim reaper-like skeletal figure dressed in a long robe, she is associated with healing, protection and the afterlife, and represents the mummies once honored by native people".

In the Peruvian example cited above congregants build an altar to Santa Muerte as shown in Figure 13 and make offerings of incense, candles and flowers and the altar is then borne through the cemetery followed by her multitudinous admiring worshipers. As Kurash reports, "The statue is carried though the graveyard's snaking dirt paths and up steep terrain, led by the

shaman and flanked by musicians. Nearby, puppeteers and jugglers perform. It has the feel of Mardi Gras or a New Orleans jazz funeral. After sunset, the Santa Muerte altar is disassembled and stored away for the next year's festivities" (Kurash, 2013).

There are other reflections of mainstream religious practices evinced during these Day of the Dead celebrations involving Santa Muerte as well that suggest her followers are reshaping modern conceptualizations of religious practices. For example, a ceremony known as a "despacho" is performed by a shaman officiating at el Cementerio de Nueva Esperanza who makes form offerings and confers blessing on the assembled crowd as well as condor-like calls that invite the spirits of the dead to take part in the celebration with their living counterparts. Santa Muerte is asked to protect both the dead and the living in this life and life hereafter (Kurash, 2013).

These religious practices tend to support the thesis that Santa Muerte's origins can be traced to the Aztecs. In fact, one of the Peruvian Day of the Day celebration's organizers, John Alvarado Palomino, suggests that their version of these events represents a combination of religious traditions that hark back to Andean people. According to Palomino, "Mexico marks the holiday as a way of honoring the dead. But in Peru, we also call upon the ancient customs from the Andean people and the magic of Amazonians" (Kurash, 2013).

This interesting and timely example is only the tip of the Santa Muerte iceberg, though, and there are signs that her acceptance

is increasing everywhere. Indeed, Cigarroa (2016) emphasizes that, "You can now find candles with the image of Santa Muerte in corner grocery stores, next to candles dedicated to St. Jude, the patron saint of miracles". Local lore has it that Santa Muerte's cursed envelopes can be found outside the federal courthouse in downtown El Paso. Even the threat of a curse can be especially intimidating for superstitious people, but when it comes to Santa Muerte, superstitions are not relevant because her power is authentic. Indeed, empirical observations and growing numbers of individuals testimonials with respect to her effectiveness as a protectress who can perform miracles contributed greatly to the rapid growth of devotion to her.

Here again, the image of Santa Muerte among people who do not know more about her is far too often adversely affected by popular negative stereotypes concerning her adherents. As Gonzalez (2014) emphasizes, "Her devotees are often caricatured as drug dealers and criminals, and Catholic and Protestant churches condemn her devotion. In actuality, her devotees span the diversity of the Mexican and Mexican American population". As noted above, although there is no "official" dogma or rituals or practices used by Santa Muerte devotees, some of the more common offerings used include money, incense, candles that resemble the votive candles used in the worship of Saint Mary and other canonized Catholic saints and other items of relative value (after all, who can put a price tag on a miracle?). Newcomers to the faith can also benefit from the comprehensive

guidance provided by the International Santa Muerte organization's Web site concerning how to construct your first altar which is available at https://www.internationalsanta_muerte.com/.

The International Santa Muerte also provides some preliminary guidelines for building a simple altar and making your first offerings and prayers to Santa Muerte. According to this guidance:

Your altar can be as simple as a picture of Santa Muerte and a glass of water, or it can be an entire temple complete with multiple statues and the whole nine yards. It is recommended to choose a quiet, clean, and calm location when working with Santa Muerte. You may start with a desk (wiped clean and clear of clutter), a small table, a shelf, or even the floor of your closet. While eventually you will want to create a permanent place for Santa Muerte, for now you can create a temporary location.

Pour yourself and the Holy Lady a glass (an actual glass, no plastic, please!) of water, and set the picture (or statue or any other image of Santa Muerte) down. Understandably, you may be having some doubts or uncertainties about the entire process. Take a few minutes to look – and really look – Santa Muerte in the face. Process your feelings of fear, your feelings of doubt, and your feelings of uncertainty. Perhaps you may even laugh at the fact that you are communicating with a female skeleton. Congratulations! You have now successfully

communicated with Santa Muerte (Comprehensive guide to working with Santa Muerte, 2017).

After constructing a permanent altar to Santa Muerte, devotees can begin to add other types of offerings depending on their individual preferences, the general guidelines set forth herein and the purpose of their prayer.

Perhaps the most significant misperception concerning the religious practices and rituals used by Santa Muerte devotees involves their use of black candles as a type of black magic to seek retribution for perceived wrongdoings by others. The different colored candles that are used in Santa Muerte rituals, though, represent far more than just the vengeance-evoking black candle which can also represent protection as set forth in Table 1 below.

Santa Muerte offering color meanings

(Candle color / Meaning)

White

The removal of negative energy, cleansing, purification, removing obstacles, balancing the emotions, mental clarity, healing grudges, overcoming arguments, solving hurt feelings, envy, jealousy, anguish, disputes, healing, motivation, courage, overcome fears, peace, happiness, good luck, spiritual blessings, counseling and guidance, the white is an "all purpose" color and like the black image it can represent protection.

Red

Love, passion, heat, lust, sexuality, fidelity, excitement, commitment, marriage, relationships, calm for a rocky relationship,

overcome relationship problems, and anything to do with feelings of the heart. It also represents blood.

Black

All forms of protection, overcoming problems and worries, obstacles, blockages, ridding someone from your life or vicinity, combat negativity, healing spiritual illness, reverse and return spellwork, spiritual or psychic attacks, enemy spellwork, revenge, and both cursing and unhexing.

Bone

Spirit contact, necromancy, ancestors, peace, success, harmony, and is an "all purpose" color much like white.

Green

Justice, fairness, legal matters, court hearings, legal disputes, law enforcement, winning the favor of a jury or judge, good luck, money, asking someone for a favor, increase business sales, improving financial situations, selling a home or a piece of property, gambling luck, pay raises, and job promotions

Gold

Money, prosperity, success, spiritual blessings, asking for special favors, reaching goals and deadlines, abundance, riches, material gain, overcoming bad habits, self-improvement, motivation, courage, strengthen a particular talent, gain new insight of a matter, overcoming fear, gaining new and fresh ideas, landing a new job or blessing the opening of a new business,

Purple

Mental health, physical health, emotional health, spiritual health,

psychic abilities, divination,

Blue

Wisdom, education, study, learning, luck in taking exams, retaining information learned, strengthening the memory, overcome fear of public speaking, help a person get their point across to another, understanding, and knowledge.

Rainbow (aka “The Seven Powers”)

1. The gold is used for abundance, wealth, and family matters
2. The purple is used for change for the better, health, and letting go
3. The silver is used for good luck, stability, and blessings
4. The red is used for passion, love, romance
5. The copper is used for removing negative energies, cleansing, and protection
6. The blue is used for spirituality, study, and prosperity
7. The green is used for money, justice, and success

Source: Adapted from Santa Muerte history (2017)

In a Mexican context, the rituals that are used for Santa Muerte typically include the same types of rosary services each month they would perform in a mainstream Catholic church, only modified to accommodate the protectress' unique devotional requirements which I discuss in part two of this book. While rates of Catholicism continue to decline throughout Latin America, the percentage of Santa Muerte devotees continues to swell. Nevertheless, Santa Muerte is not a jealous saint and tolerates other types of mainstream devotional practices such as

Catholicism (Arreola, 2016). In sum, Arreola believes that, "Like death, La Santa Muerte does not discriminate; everyone - rich, poor, or somewhere in between - will die, and La Santa Muerte will listen to the prayers of them all as well".

It is also important to note that novices are able to easily participate in Santa Muerte rituals such as the monthly rosary because they resemble the practices that are used by mainstream Catholicism; however, the essential differences that exist tend to make Santa Muerte gatherings transgressive and defiant, especially from the general public's point of view (Roush, 2015). Despite investigative reporting from authorities such as Chesnut, it remains unclear why Santa Muerte has been singled out from the secular saint pantheon for modern worship except that her popularity must be due in large part to the fact that she is in fact a miracle-work- who deserves the adulation and offerings she receives in return.

Some devotees have in fact used their relationship with Santa Muerte in an effort to invoke vengeance or other retributions for past wrongdoings, and these high-profile but usually rare instances have contributed to the negative image of the protectress. Nevertheless, empirical reports from the field indicate that the most commonly sought after prayers involve an enhanced protection from a legal system that is broken and protection from other social institutions and violent individuals (Roush, 2015).

These basic concepts of protection (e.g., "amparo") and the

loss of protection (e.g., “desamparo”) which form the main issues in Santa Muerte liturgical practices have religious and judicial origins that contribute to the perception of these religious practices as being relevant and appropriate in a modern context. As Roush points out, “There is a vocabulary of protection that crosses easily from the clientelistic politics of survival to other worldly concerns and back again. It places questions about worldly political intermediaries and questions about supernatural forces in the same discursive frame”.

The discursive frame in which Santa Muerte is depicted is also operative with respect to what types of prayers people want to be answered. In some cases, Santa Muerte is depicted as a skeletal figure that is adorned in a flowing cloak as shown in Figure 14 below. The color of the gown that Santa Muerte is adorned with in depictions of her also have meaning, with white (the most popular color) representing the spiritual cleansing of negative energy and purification, red representing strengthened personal relationships, black representing protections from evil spells cast by others and green gowns representing her willingness to assist those who are experiencing problems with the criminal justice system.

Typically, the protectress is depicted holding a scythe in one hand representing the negative energy that she is believed to be capable of dispelling and a globe in the other to indicate the worldwide power she wields and her willingness to assist anyone regardless of where they live in the world or any other religious

beliefs they may have.



Figure 14. Santisima Muerte draped in flowing cloak

Other symbols that are used in the depiction of Santa Muerte also play a role in ritualistic practices. For instance, Santa Muerte is also frequently shown accompanied by figures of an owl (which has keen eyesight to see through the darkest of nights), an hourglass (to remind devotees that their time among the living is limited and should be regarded as precious) and a scale (reflecting the balance between justice and injustice and her willingness to intervene on behalf of petitioners).

Although supplications can be made to the White Girl at any time, some authorities suggest that prayers said during the nighttime hours are the most effective. In addition, prayers

delivered on Tuesday and Thursday nights are even more powerful, especially if there is a full moon (Understanding Santisima Muerte, 2015). Regardless of the actual circumstances, though, one prayer that is commonly used by the devotees of Santa Muerte devotees after they have made their offerings on their specially designed altar to her includes the following: "Most Holy Death, I ask that through this image you will cover me with the cloak of your protection, that you always take care of me and guide me through all snares and dangers. Give me your blessing so that I never lack the things I need. Give me strength, health, prosperity and protection" (Understanding Santisima Muerte, 2015).

In many ways, followers of La Santa Muerte use many of the same religious practices and observances that are used for canonical saints – and for good reason. For example, Martin (2014) reports that, "The ritual relationships of exchange and identification between saint and devotee highlight the intersection between human and divine. This intersection, which might seem to be a contradiction in terms, in fact embodies secular sanctity". This intersection also serves to explain why some Santa Muerte devotees use illicit drugs as offerings. Just as there is no "official" or single right way to worship the protectress, illicit drugs such as marijuana though do form a core set of offering types that are reflective of the types of practices that are most commonly used by devotees.

According to Prower (2015), marijuana is frequently regarded

as the “official” plant of Santa Muerte but this is only true to some extent. For instance, Prower (2015) advises that, “One on hand, Santa Muerte has no ‘official’ plant sacred to her, but on the other hand, many of the people involved in her worship are members of drug cartels as well as independent drug dealers and users. Because marijuana is precious to them and provides their livelihood, it is common for such devotees to give marijuana to Santa Muerte as an offering, symbolically giving her a ‘cut’ of the profit for protecting their business”. This type of quid pro quo arrangement is certainly not unique with respect to offerings to both secular and/or canonized saints, of course, but these types of practices do underscore the fundamental need to provide some of type of substantive offering in return for the miracle workings of Santa Muerte.

Moreover, marijuana has been used as religious offerings in countries around the world since antiquity - in fact back to the Bronze Age - but the illicit qualities of the plant make it especially appropriate for Santa Muerte offerings. Energetically, every magical tradition grants marijuana varying properties ranging from calming to divinatory, but in the Santa Muerte tradition, it has the “necessary evil” properties. It is used in spellwork mainly for protection and money magic, especially where the practitioner will knowingly commit a crime and in seeking a profitable outcome as well as protection from both the law and harm.

While some devotees pray to Santa Muerte by building altars and offering votive candles (see Figure 15 below), fruits, tequila,

cigarettes and even illicit drugs such as cocaine in exchange for having their prayers answered, other devotees make offerings that are specifically intended to provide assistance in love, wisdom, healing or with monetary problems (Gonzalez, 2014).



Figure 15. Representative La Santa Muerte votive candles

Following the presentation of offerings to Santa Muerte in Latin and North America, they are typically shared among the assembled devotees. In this regard, Ugarte (2017) recently reported that, “After asking for a favor, offerings are shared among the followers. Tacos, pastries, apples, sodas and amulets are passed from hand to hand. Alcohol is sprayed and cigarette smoke blown over the Death Saint repeatedly. The faces of her followers display faith and solidarity”. A good example of this

type of religious practice is illustrated in Figure 16 below.



Figure 16. Santa Muerte devotee blowing smoke in the face of the protectress

Some indication of the diversity of offering types can be seen from the impromptu public Santa Muerte altar constructed in Mexico City as shown in Figure 17 below.



Figure 17. Typical impromptu Santa Muerte altar in Mexico City

The faith and solidarity that are routinely displayed by Santa Muerte devotees are based on their personal experiences with the protectress and growing numbers of confirmation of prayers answered as discussed further in chapter four below.

Besides marijuana and other illicit drugs, Table 2 below provides a list of the most common offerings seen at a Santa Muerte altar, as well as explanations on their uses.

Common types of Santa Muerte offerings and their meanings

(Offering type / Meaning)

Green candle

A green Santa Muerte candle deals with liberty, fairness, equality, and justice. You may use this candle to ensure you are fairly represented if you are being prosecuted for a crime, receive a fair

judgement in a legal proceeding, released from a wrongful imprisonment, released from incarceration early, or any other matters in which you wish for Santa Muerte to judge.

Red candle

The red candle of Santa Muerte is used for instances where she can help you with love or passion.

Gold candle

A gold candle reflects the prosperous and fortunate side of Santa Muerte. This is used to improve one's lot in life, bring prosperity or success to one's business ventures, or for overall good luck and fortune.

Black candle

A black candle offering is associated with Santa Muerte's darker side and attributes. May be used to call upon la Nina Negra for help with problems such as dispelling evil spirits, eliminating curses or hexes placed upon you, revenge or retribution upon enemies, or other invocations not covered by the other colors.

Blue Candle

A blue candle offering is associated with friendship, camaraderie, and social relations. It can also be used to increase insight, intuition, or empathy. This can be used for things such as mending broken friendships, stopping fights within a household, making new contacts, networking, or other social activities.

White candle

A white candle embodies Santa Muerte's powers of healing, wellness, blessing, cleansing, and just about any other general

purpose. If you purchase a candle, this is the one to buy.

Bread

Bread, a human food for millennia, is a traditional offering symbolizing health, abundance, fertility, and life. This should be kept fresh. Especially used when asking for material favors from Santa Muerte, or as an offering of thanks.

Tequila

One of the most popular offerings, Tequila is placed as an offering to the Bony Lady in order to allow her to partake in the world's most popular intoxicant. Tequila can be used for almost any purpose, although for instances dealing with health or wellness other offerings might be more appropriate. Place in a shot glass, or offer an entire bottle. Devotees also light votive candles and leave gifts, such as marshmallows, money and apples to ward off bad vibes, at shrines. Interestingly, "Bottles of bargain-brand tequila [are] what the saint likes best" (Agren, 2014, p. 4).

Rum

Distilled from sugar cane, an important commodity of Mexico, Rum is used much like tequila as an offering to the Bony Lady.

Tobacco

Tobacco can be given to Santa Muerte in the form of a cigarette, cigar, or blown in her face. Used for general purposes and offerings.

Bones

A literal bone offering to the Bony Lady may be used in situations where you seek health or healing of a physical body. It can also

be used for darker, more sinister purposes.

Cinnamon

Used as a general cleansing offering upon the altar of Santa Muerte. Cinnamon is an extremely important cooking spice in Mexico. It can be offered as entire sticks, or powder sprinkled around the altar for its potent smell and cleansing properties.

Coffee

Coffee's energy providing effects are well known. Coffee can be used to increased expediency of Santa Muerte, or increase the overall power of her spells.

Coins/Paper Currency

Coins, currency, and paper money are frequently given as an offering to Santa Muerte. This is required when asking for material success, or material favors. This is one of the most common and popular offerings, especially if you are visiting a public shrine or an altar. Support your local shrine or altar! In doing so, you are giving thanks to Santa Muerte and ensuring that those who devote a huge portion of their life to serving her are able to continue doing so in the future. Santa Muerte is a very needing woman, and does ask for quite a bit; however, these offerings are ALWAYS repaid above and beyond.

Corn

Corn can be placed on the altar as a fresh ear. Corn is an ancient food of the Americas and has been around since the time of the Aztecs. Use corn to keep Santa Muerte healthy, satiated, and strong.

Grapes

Grapes are a traditional fruit offering. They signify prosperity, abundance, fertility, and health. Green grapes may be used with other green offerings for prayers relating to justice, or purple grapes may be used.

Flowers

Used as a traditional cleansing, health, and wellness item. Has deep biblical roots and tradition (also known as olibanum). May be used as incense or to cleanse and purify your altar.

Beer

A popular intoxicant and well loved by Santa Muerte. Darker beers are more common. Beer is less common, however, than liquors such as tequila, rum or whiskey.

Apples

A traditional offering of fruit can be used as a color coordinated offering (red apple for love or passion, green apples for abundance, prosperity, or justice), however, this is not completely necessary. There are biblical associations with this fruit (although some argue that the Bible references an apricot or orange rather than apples as we know them today).

Honey

A honey offering can be used when improving health or prosperity. Honey should be fresh, locally-sourced or organic. Avoid imitation honey made from high fructose corn syrup.

Oranges

Oranges can be placed as a food offering to Santa Muerte for

general purposes.

Scales of justice

Santa Muerte has always been a representative for those who have been underserved or underrepresented in the legal system. You can place these on her altar to ensure a positive outcome in a legal proceeding, or for fairness throughout your life.

Scythe

The tool of Holy Death. The scythe represents reaping of souls, which helps to pass them to the next stage of life. This is the job of Santa Muerte. The scythe also represents harvesting of crops, which leads to abundance, health, and prosperity.

Sugar

Santa Muerte is known for her sweet tooth, and is known to love sugar. This offering can be used as a sign of thanks and to satisfy Santa Muerte's appetite.

Other sweets

Sweets can take the form of baked goods, candies, or any other sugary substance. Santa Muerte enjoys sweets as much as the next person. These offerings are typically replenished on a regular basis.

Wine

While not as popular as beer and certainly a far distance from Tequila, a glass of wine is perfectly appropriate as an offering. Other especially effective offerings to Santa Muerte include jewelry (e.g., amulets, necklaces, and bracelets fashioned in Santísima Muerte's image). These are potent talismans that should

be worn in order to secure prosperity, help in legal matters, protect you from harm and succeed in business affairs (Understanding Santisima Muerte, 2015).

Source: Adapted from the comprehensive guide to working with Santa Muerte (2017)

An important element of the ritualistic offerings and prayers to Santa Muerte is an appropriate type of altar. Just as there is no “official” offering or rituals for the White Girl, there are no “official” types of altars for her worship. There are some useful guidelines available for constructing one’s first altar, however, as well as some specialty types of altars that may be needed from time to time which are set forth in Table 3 below.

Guidelines for constructing different types of Santa Muerte altars (Altar Type / Guidelines / Comments)

First (temporary) altar

An altar can be as simple as a picture of Santa Muerte and a glass of water, or it can be an entire temple complete with multiple statues and other appropriate offerings and decorations. Regardless of the altar’s form, it is recommended that devotees select a clean, quiet, and calm location when working with Santa Muerte. New devotees may want to start with a desk (wiped clean and clear of clutter), a small table, a shelf, or even the floor of a closet. While devotees will eventually want to create a permanent place for Santa Muerte as described below, the first altar can be in a temporary location. Simply pour the Holy Lady a glass (an actual glass, no plastic) of water and set the picture (or

statue or any other image of Santa Muerte) down. Understandably, new devotees may experience some doubts or uncertainties about the entire process. Take a few minutes to look – and really look – Santa Muerte in the face. Process any feelings of fear, feelings of doubt, and feelings of uncertainty. Perhaps even laugh at the fact that the process involves communicating with a female skeleton.

This is the first step to successfully communicating with Santa Muerte.

First (permanent) altar

After identifying a suitable permanent location for an altar to Santa Muerte, new devotees can start adding other images of Santa Muerte (in the form of statues or pictures). In addition, incense, aromatic herbs, flowers, and votive candles are highly recommended as well as offerings of fresh bread or fruits.

A clean tablecloth can be used as a replaceable covering for a permanent altar.

Traveling altar Specialty altar

A portable, or traveling altar, can be as simple as a prayer card with Santa Muerte's image on it together with a glass of water. If a more elaborate design is desired, the following ideas will serve this purpose well:

- A small briefcase decorated with statues, ornaments, images, and any other desired iconography;
- A cardboard shoebox; or,
- A cigar humidor or box made out of cedar.

There are no “right” or “wrong” traveling altars, but it is important to remember to keep the basic guidelines in mind (i.e. clean and fresh).

Business or workplace altar

Because of the power exerted by Santa Muerte in the day-to-day live of her devotees, many have elected to construct an altar in their workplace as well. If this is something you believe you would like to do, a workplace altar can be garnished with less gruesome imagery and icons of the Bony Lady which are aligned with the type of occupational practices that are involved. For example, devotees working in financial services may want to place green candles on their workplace altars together with salient tools of their trade (i.e., calculators, pens, currency). Likewise, auto repair mechanics may place various (clean) tools on their Santa Muerte workplace altars while educators may elect to place a globe, erasers, pencils and rulers on their workplace altars.

Discretion is recommended in placing altars in the workplace due to lingering misperceptions and negative stereotypes.

Roadway/ natural altars

Public roadway altars are an excellent way to give thanks to Santa Muerte while at the same time spreading her word and power throughout the community. These types of altars should be constructed with durable materials. Ensure that all trash and debris is disposed of properly. These types of altars should also be placed far away from the roadway to preclude easy visitation in

order to provide a truly rewarding experience for those hardy enough to make the effort. Santa Muerte appreciates and enjoys beautiful natural locations such as caves, hollowed trees by the lakeside, or prominent large rocks on mountains.

Food offerings should not be placed at roadway/natural altars because the decayed remains may adversely affect the surrounding environment. Rather, a durable statue and perhaps a couple of candles should be used. Ensure that if this altar is no longer going to be visited that it is disassembled, otherwise the White Girl will feel abandoned.

Source: Adapted from the comprehensive guide to working with Santa Muerte (2017)

It is important to note, though, that the rituals and practices that are used by Santa Muerte devotees for these and other purposes also vary - sometimes significantly - around the world. In my home country Pakistan, for example, although majority of the population is Muslim and its citizens study and follow Islam which does not support the belief in secular saints, there are some examples defying norms that prevail in Pakistani communities as a result of cultural traditions (Farooq & Kayani, 2012).

While not exactly Islamic, some of the following practices are occult and/or considered black magic practices that are most commonly used in Pakistan today. It is important to note though just as the rituals for Santa Muerte incorporate indigenous cultural and religious practices, so too do the rituals used for this purpose in Pakistan. For example, the Taweez (Talisma) culture

is very popular amongst people of the Indian sub-continent as it is believed to be a powerful tool to overpower black magic, evil-eye, protection from harm, as a guard against evil spirits, healing, to bring good luck and as a source of strength. The amulet is a black piece of string with a small pouch containing prayer typically worn around the neck. It is mostly written on a piece of white paper with some prayers, statements, some letters placed inside the square, some numbers, some symbols, using the ink of saffron or with holy water and wrapped in plastic to prevent moisture from entering, tied up with strings, further sealed in a leather cover to prevent water from entering and then worn. Some other styles include tying around the arm. Belief in evil-eye or *nazar* (jealous look) is widespread amongst the people of the Sub-continent and is one of the oldest beliefs that are still prevalent. Sorcerers to caste evil spell write their taweez in blood, which could be a woman's menstrual blood, from an animal sacrifice, or in red ink.

Coming from a culture where these things are wide spread, in order to protect myself from evil-eye, jealousy, magic and for my success I wrote an amulet with saffron water in the name of Santa Muerte and kept it at my house. Both the Santa Muerte candle vigil and talisman together helped eradicate the negativity I felt around me. As they say back home, "*Sadqa* (act of charity done out of compassion, love, friendship or generosity) eats the demon" so I told my compatriot in Pakistan to release 6 doves as an offering to Santa Muerte for bringing blessings in my life.

While not part of the traditional Islamic dogma, there are a number of factors related to Islamic beliefs that are conducive to the acceptance of black magic as an adjunct. Supernatural beliefs and occult practices constitute an important socio-cultural reality in Pakistani society. Beliefs surrounding magic and evil eye are pervasive in our society. Such beliefs are thought to directly influence the lives of people and shape their life experiences and worldview. The sphere of supernatural exists as an effective belief system in both urban and rural contexts of Pakistan (Siddiq, 2016).

As can be seen from the graph in Figure 18 below, a significant percentage of modern Pakistani hold strong beliefs concerning the rationality as well as the efficacy of black magic and the evil eye in society.

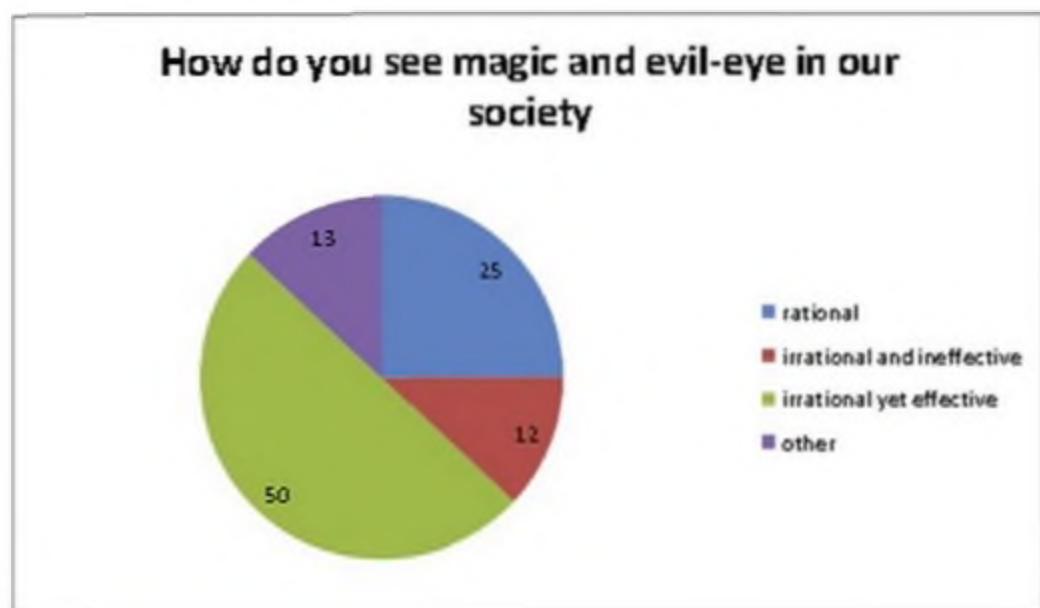


Figure 18. Pakistani perceptions concerning magic and the evil eye with respect to rationality and efficacy

Although the beliefs in black magic and the evil eye date to pre-scientific antiquity and the practices that are used today resemble those used in the distant past, the primary focus of such practices today is far different. For instance, Drury (2011) reports that, "The [modern] magic occultism has an altogether different thrust. Here the concept of magical consciousness relates much more to the concept of will or intent—to the idea that one can bring about specific effects or changes within one's sphere of consciousness".

Besides the taweez culture there is also a chilla (retreat) concept in the subcontinent. Chilla is a Persian word which means "forty". In Hindu, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh traditions it is referred to as "Sadhana". Chilla requires the seeker to disconnect himself from people and to disengage himself from all material interactions for a set period of time. His heart must be engaged in God's Remembrance, and his mind relaxed from daily concerns (Seclusion, Shaykh Hisham). Chilla-yi or chilla-e-makoos (inverted chilla) is a mystical practice that involves hanging upside down for forty days while reciting prayers. Hazrat Fariduddin Ganjshakar is supported to have been one of the first saints to have performed Chilla-e-Makoos by suspending himself in a well during this ritual. It is seldom practiced in modern times because of its extremity. Chilla is more common in today's time. One spends 40 days in an isolated and dark space, also known as a Chilla-khana. This practice began among Sufis in eastern Iran and then made its way to India and Pakistan (Islamic

Mysticism, Tawni Miller).

In my case, I have offered a chilla in the name of Santa Muerte asking her help to destroy my enemies. Some background is needed to explain the rationale in support of this prayer vigil. This chilla was performed because I suffered significant losses after serving 3 weeks in prison and when I got out I did chilla for 40 days praying to Santa Muerte to punish whoever set me up or wishes me harm. After the completion of my chilla, I found out that one of my competitors was shot in the leg and was hurt severely. In return, I offered two black goats as a sacrifice in thanks to my protectress Santa Muerte using the conventional salting ritual used by devotees when performing a blood sacrifice. The salting ritual which I discuss in part two of this textual series is one of the most aggressive rituals I have come across and is often used to cause diverse tragedies and in some cases even death on the intended victim.

An important part of performing chilla includes the faith and personal discipline the practice requires, and rather than being a solitary prayer said over the course of 40 days, the chilla is rather a prayer ritual that leads to the self-enlightenment that is needed to commune with the divine. As one practitioner proclaims, "Chilla is a voluntary practice that has benefited thousands of individuals by helping them become better Muslims, and by extension better people" (Gafur, 2017). While the chilla is not ubiquitous throughout Pakistan, it is more commonly practiced in rural regions where the belief in supernatural interventions is

especially pronounced. In fact, the belief in the power of black magic to produce beneficial outcomes was underscored in a rural Pakistan village 140 miles north of Karachi when a practitioner sacrificed his six children by strangling them to death in expectations of monetary assistance he desperately needed (Pakistani father sacrifices five children 'to gain magic powers', 2015).

In Latin and North America, there have been other, equally gruesome reports in the media as well as rumors from informed sources that suggest other crimes involving human sacrifices are also attributable to the upsurge in Santa Muerte worship among the more violent segments of society. The fact that many of the shrines that have been erected alongside highways in northern Mexico and the southern United States are at the scenes of violent clashes between law enforcement authorities and narco-traffickers or between cartels adds further evidence to this connection.

Although the practice of the chilla may be more commonplace in rural regions of Pakistan, the belief in the power of black magic rituals and practices is widespread throughout Pakistani society. For example, Symington (2014) reports that, "As in other parts of South Asia and many Middle Eastern countries, the penchant for faith healers and black magic is deeply embedded in Pakistani society, despite Islam's injunction against magic. From rich landlords to the menial workers who eke out a living in the backstreets of the country's cities, Pakistanis routinely turn to spiritual healers to cure ailments from cancer to epilepsy, to seek

guidance on marriage, or even to deal with overly talkative daughters-in-law”.

Likewise, a report by Ali (2012) points out that while black magic is formally forbidden by Islam, “owing to traditional inheritance of beliefs from Indian culture, both the educated and uneducated believe in evil spirits or at least agree that black magic exists”. It is also noteworthy that the types of black magic invoked by practitioners in Pakistan closely resemble the types of prayers that are used throughout Latin and South America for Santa Muerte worship. For example, Ali (2012) notes that while practitioners of black magic in Pakistan routinely cast spells seeking vengeance against wrongdoers, they are also called upon to intervene in matters of love, protection, employment, and financial success.

Another tradition from my culture which I adopted in my offerings to Santa Muerte is the concept of buying meat, particularly a pair of lungs, circumambulating it around your head and throwing it to kites and crows. The surrounding birds flock to eat the meat. The buyers call it *Sadqa* asking God to keep troubles away from them, and grant them blessings (The sacrificial meat business, 2011). On numerous occasions I have executed this offering with the help of my compatriot in Pakistan as a token of appreciation to Santa Muerte for blessing and protecting my life every day.

In other important instances and as noted above, I have offered other blood offerings in the name of Santa Muerte which I

will discuss in details in part two of this book. The general public associate blood rituals involving animals with Satanism, not realizing that they were all invented and are still practiced by mainstream religions and that Satanism does not involve animal sacrifice. This fusion of religious and cultural traditions is indicative of the fluidity of Santa Muerte worship and the fact that there is no single "right" or "official" rituals or practices, but there are some common practices and rituals that are used that can help guide newcomers to their own unique worship of Santa Muerte in order to realize the miracles she routinely bestows upon her faithful devotees.

A good example of this type of guidance includes the use of other Santa Muerte practitioners or people involved in occult practices to assist in making individual offerings, especially in cases where personal performance may be difficult due to local laws in some jurisdictions that prohibit blood sacrifices. For example, it is illegal to purchase an owl in the United States as they are federally protected animals. In order to maximize the effects of one of my offerings to Santa Muerte, I carefully coordinated the purchase and sacrifice of an owl with my compatriot in my hometown which he purchased at the Empress Market, the oldest market in Karachi, Pakistan. My compatriot sacrificed the owl in a graveyard in the middle of the night in the name of Santa Muerte while I prayed to her simultaneously in the United States. The 12-hour time differential between these two locales was not important to Santa Muerte since her influence and powers span

the globe, and the efficacy of this approach was clearly demonstrated by the rapid answer to my heartfelt prayers. Likewise, similar to the Santa Muerte practices used in Latin and South America, I have also used animal bones as offerings to the protectress by writing the names of people who have done me harm, wrapping them in a burial shroud and burying them in a fresh grave.

Given her appeal to marginalized segments of society, it is little wonder that Santa Muerte is popular among prisoners. On another personal note, during my incarceration, I witnessed inmates offering soups, candies and milk to makeshift altars of Santa Muerte made out of posters and drawings on cardboards. In prison, so-called "commissary" items such as these are the equivalent to offering money in the outside world. In fact, most of the Santa Muerte devotees I spent time with shared the same belief that it was because of Santa Muerte they received less time on their criminal sentences. In addition, I have heard stories about an inmate who said he was shot at point blank and it was Santa Muerte who jammed the shooter's gun three times, giving enough time to him to strike back and save his life.

An important point that emerges from this brief review of religious practices and rituals used by Santa Muerte devotees is their fundamental but unequal quid pro quo nature. In other words, devotees must make some type of symbolic but still substantive and meaningful offering to the White Girl but the rewards they receive in return far outweigh any value associated with such offerings.

From a strictly pragmatic perspective, then, devotion to Santa Muerte therefore just makes good sense given her proven efficacy as a compassionate and nonjudgmental miracle worker. These points are also made by Martin (2015) who reports, "All of these devotional practices involve some sort of transfer (as in the offering of gifts to the saint in return for good health or a job), but the exchange between saint and devotee is necessarily unequal. The gift of a healthy childbirth or a son released from prison before his sentence is completed, for example, is not directly equivalent to an offering of lit candles or homemade tamales, or even to an act of sacrifice like walking to a saint's temple on one's knees".

The devotees of Santa Muerte recognize this inherent disparity but accept it because of their unwavering belief that secular saints are different due to their divine status despite having been humans at one point themselves. The highly personal nature of Santa Muerte worship and the practices and rituals used may therefore help account for her rapidly growing popularity, especially among marginalized segments of society, throughout the Americas and beyond as discussed further in chapter three below.

Chapter Three

Santa Muerte's Inextricable Relationship with Narco-Culture

This book would be remiss if the issue of Santa Muerte's connection with narcoculture was not addressed. Indeed, as described in the preceding chapter, some of the sacraments used in San Muerte rituals involve illicit drugs, but as the other foregoing chapters also made clear, this is just a small part of a much bigger picture. Although Santa Muerte has become well known over the past half century as a secular saint who is eager to help her followers with the problems that they face in life, the protectress has become inextricably associated with narcotraffickers and the Mexican cartels.

This unfortunate but understandable association can be attributed in large part to the geographic proximity of many of the more violent encounters between law enforcement authorities in Mexico and the United States with cartel members and the increasing public nature of their worship of Santa Muerte in these areas. For example, Martin (2015) notes that, "The northern Mexican border region is one of the centers of the drug wars that have shaken the foundations of state and civil society in Mexico and are rapidly encroaching upon the U.S. side of the border. The border town of Nuevo Laredo is one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico, while the entire area that includes Monterrey and Nuevo Laredo is the locus of a violent dispute between the Gulf and Sinaloa cartels for control of drug-smuggling routes

into the United States”.

Likewise, even though no groups have come forward to claim responsibility for building the public shrines to Santa Muerte along border highways since 2007, a number of the sites of these shrines have been the scenes of violent encounters between narco-traffickers and the police as well as executions and gun battles between cartel members. As a result, even though the association of Santa Muerte and her followers with the drug trade and organized crime is just one of her numerous attributes, this is the main issue that has been spotlighted in the mainstream press.

The association between Santa Muerte and drug cartels together with condemnations by the Catholic Church have resulted in the destruction of some public shrines in recent years by law enforcement authorities as well as nonbelievers. As Martin (2015) emphasizes, though, “The vast majority of devotees, however, aren’t crooks. Kiko Torres, owner of the Masks y Mas art store in Albuquerque, says sales of La Santa Muerte statues, incense, and oils have skyrocketed in recent months. Most people who buy the stuff are regular people who just recently found out about her. Some probably have no idea about her connection to that other world”.

As also noted throughout the foregoing chapters, Santa Muerte is not the only secular saint that is worshipped by marginalized people - including drug dealers - but because she is the only female secular saint worshipped and her followership

has grown so large so quickly, she has been the focus of an inordinate amount of negative publicity despite the reports of the enormous amount of positivity she has sent humanity's way over the years. For example, Flanigan (2014) points out that, "Los santos de los narcos, or 'narco-saints,' are informal patrons of Mexico's chief illicit trades: money laundering, smuggling, and of course, drug trafficking but it is Santa Muerte that is most highlighted in mainstream media". Although it is true that Santa Muerte has become the "unofficial" patron secular saint of criminals - including drug dealers - she is also the unofficial patron secular saint of the poor and typically outsiders who straddle the line between good and evil or sacred and secular.

Despite becoming inextricably associated with drug trafficking, it is important to emphasize that Santa Muerte is an "all-purpose deity" who actually wants to help all who are in need. Perhaps the overarching reason for this association with the criminal elements in society is because these individuals are in the public eye far more than the poor and disenfranchised devotees who flock to her altars. After all, it only takes one or two high-profile cases of narcotraffickers being implicated with Santa Muerte worship to brand the entire practice as the domain of criminals only, but this would ignore the millions of devotees who are simply trying to live better lives despite the odds stacked against them (Beezley, 2011). In reality, though, narco-traffickers have their own popular secular saints besides Santa Muerte, including most especially Jesús Malverde. Even here, though,

devotees counter claims by authorities that these secular saints are the sole domain of criminals by stressing the fact that millions of people who are not criminals routinely seek their assistance for the infinite array of problems that characterize the human condition.

As also noted throughout this book, while Santa Muerte devotees come from all walks of life, she has assumed special significance for individuals who live on the fringe or even outside the bounds of society, including undocumented migrants, taxi drivers, truck drivers, prostitutes, drug addicts, and criminals in Mexico, the United States, and beyond. Although critics are quick to point out that the very origins of the Santa Muerte public cult are tied to crime because Doña Queta's life-size effigy of the saint, which is the object of devotion to tens of thousands of *chilangos* (a slang term for residents of Mexico City) was a gift to her from her son to thank the Powerful Lady for his speedy release from prison, however the connection between Santa Muerte and narco-traffickers that have been made in the mainstream press and by law enforcement authorities does not paint an accurate picture of her real-world devotees.

The connection between narco-traffickers and Santa Muerte was given significant additional impetus when she was included in an episode of the highly popular television series "Breaking Bad", in which two hitmen for the Juarez Cartel known simply as "the Cousins" made offerings at a Santa Muerte altar in an effort to seek vengeance against the show's protagonist (Call, 2012) as

depicted in Figure 19 below.



Figure 19. The two cousins from “Breaking Bad” praying to Santa Muerte for righteous vengeance

La Santísima Muerte, the death saint patron of the marginalized and dispossessed in Mexico, the United States, and beyond, is especially favored by devotees who identify with her duality between dark and light, and good and evil. Most of Santa Muerte's devotees understand that good and evil coexist in her, and they often simultaneously appeal to both. At the same time, illegality and marginalization, which are generally associated with the saint's "dark" or "evil" sides, take on multiple, diverse forms, encompassing criminalized activity such as narcotrafficking, religious transgressions that reflect unorthodox spiritual practices such as witchcraft, and most contentiously of all, the very

conditions of poverty and racialization in Mexico. Nevertheless, cultural representations of Santa Muerte often resist such diversity and persist in opposing her dark and light sides.

Films such as Eva Aridjis's *La Santa Muerte* and Pável Valenzuela Arámburo's *La Santísima Muerte* aim to represent all Santa Muerte in all of her multiplicity and to correct stereotypical representations of the death saint in general. But perhaps inadvertently, Aridjis's film reinforces the contrast, rather than the intersections, between "light" and "dark". However, in *La Santísima Muerte*, Valenzuela Arámburo deliberately embraces the saint's contradictory duality to provide a different perspective on illegality and criminality, simultaneously accepting such illegality as a dark menace in the vein of Santa Muerte's typical detractors, and rearticulating it as a necessary aspect of the saint's holy works (Martin, 2017). Valenzuela Arámburo's film not only emphasizes that the very same devotees invoke Santa Muerte for her powers of "good" as well as for those of "evil", it demonstrates that these devotees incorporate the saint's dark side as they see fit not as a consequence of their marginalized status, but as a means to resist it. Thus, while both films underscore that marginalized populations are just as nuanced and contradictory as their patroness of death is, Valenzuela Arámburo's film grounds itself in Santa Muerte's duality in order to demonstrate how her seemingly contradictory aspects construct and shape each other (Martin, 2017). As such, the film combats the representation of marginalization and criminality in Mexico and

beyond, highlighting the extent to which her devotees appeal to both her dark and light sides precisely because they are simultaneously victims of marginalization and agents of resistance.

All of this is not to say, of course, that many criminals are not followers of Santa Muerte, but it is to say that this connection does not represent the full scope of her devotees, many of whom claim personal experiences in having their prayers to the White Girl answered as discussed in chapter four below.

Chapter Four
***Testimonials and Empirical
Evidence from the Field***

One of the more compelling factors that has driven the increased popularity of Santa Muerte in recent years is the growing body of empirical evidence that confirms the White Girl's efficacy as a miracle worker who answers the prayers of all regardless of any moral considerations to the contrary. Indeed, followers of Santa Muerte report that she helped them find love, find better jobs and launch careers. Gregory Beasley Jr., 35, believes he landed acting roles on "Breaking Bad" and the 2008 movie "Linewatch" after a traditional Mexican-American healer introduced him to La Santa Muerte. "All my success ... I owe to her. She cleansed me and showed me the way" (Martin, 2014).

Another devotee, Steven Bragg, 36, reports being introduced to La Santa Muerte in 2009 and first started praying to her for a number of different reasons, including his search for a personal relationship. Following his construction of a public altar to the White Girl (the New Orleans Chapel of the Santísima Muerte) and the conduct of weekly rosary services that have attracted growing numbers of followers, Bragg reported that, "It's something I decided to do after all that La Santa Muerte has provided. She has never failed me and continues to bless me" (Contreras, 2013).

Likewise, a Santa Muerte devotee named Manuel Zavala credits the White Girl with saving his life after being assaulted and

left for dead - despite his criminal track record: "I encountered the saint, my girl, at a time when I was near death. Honestly, I've been very bad. I did things I shouldn't have, but God gave me a second chance and thanks to God, I discovered Santa Muerte" (Ugarte, 2017). Other Santa Muerte devotees have similar remarkable and otherwise inexplicable miraculous accounts to share. For instance, a resident of Mexico City's barrio Tepito, Haydé Solís Cárdenas, claims that: "Santa Muerte heads prayers from dark places. She was sent to rescue the lost, society's rejects. She understands us, because she is a cabrona like us.... We are hard people and we live hard lives. But she accepts us all, when we do good and bad" (Martin, 2015).

One devotee who has been regularly interviewed by the mainstream press concerning her Santa Muerte beliefs, Enriqueta Romero the feisty religious crusader, emphasizes that "She is fair and listens to everyone's prayers. She performs miracles for everyone, she sees your faith and not your face" (Martin, 2015).

Similarly, a street vendor from Mexico City, Solís Cárdenas, states that he "feels an affinity with Santa Muerte not as a righteous, holy inspiration but as a tarnished outsider much like herself" (Martin, 2014). Yet other devotees credit the Bony Lady with turning them away from a life of crime to become contributing members of society. In this regard, one northern Mexico resident who gives his name simply as "Zavala" stated that, "I go to a church and like the priest says: 'Life is death and death is life.' Thanks to a person I love a lot, my White Girl, my life has

changed and now I'm not the second-rate guy I was before" (Ugarte, 2017).

A number of empirical reports concerning the efficacy of Santa Muerte's miracle-working have come from the United States as well. For example, Arely Vazquez, a New York City transgender conducts services in honor of the Bony Lady every Saturday and sponsors a large fiesta each August. Vazquez states that she believes she shares an important characteristic with other followers of Santa Muerte, viewing herself as a "disenfranchised Catholic" (Grossman, 2015). According to her personal account of her experiences with Santa Muerte, Vazquez unequivocally claims that she worships the White Girl because "she accepts people no matter what they are, who they are. I believe she intervened in my life. And I like that our saint is a woman, one who is second only to God. When I say a Santa Muerte rosary and light candles at my home altar, I believe something responds to the energy put out there" (Grossman, 2015).

There is also an underlying redemptive quality to the religious practices and rituals that are used by Santa Muerte followers that are in sharp contrast to those used in mainstream religions. Rather than instilling a sense of unearned guilt as the Catholic Church does according to many former believers, the rituals and practices used by the followers of Santa Muerte represent a source of strength and power that can have immediate worldly benefits rather than the nebulous heavenly rewards promised by the Catholic Church. In this regard, one prominent self-styled

Santa Muerte leader, Pastor Enriqueta Vargas (known by The International Temple of Santa Muerte simply as "Madrina,"), counseled an abandoned wife whose boyfriend had abused her and whose child was taken by an ex-husband to, "Be strong. Believe in yourself. She lacks self-esteem. Other religions instill this in you" (Agren, 2014).

This type of guidance appears to have struck a responsive chord with many people whose lives have been challenged by a lack of social mobility or employment opportunities, and the legions of former Catholics who are diverting their tithes to this secular saint are causing some authorities to attribute the trend to strictly criminal elements in Latin and North America. As Agren and other analysts stress, however, while there are known criminals involved in the Santa Muerte movement, these only represent a miniscule percentage. Nevertheless, this connection between the White Girl and cartels has been ingrained in the public's mind and this negative connotation must be addressed in order for her true nature to be revealed. As Agren concludes, "The Catholic Church has condemned Santa Muerte as satanic and compared worshipping her to witchcraft. But it's a movement quickly going mainstream and being embraced by everyone from cartel criminals and kidnappers to cops and common people". Likewise, Vargas adds that, "It doesn't matter if you're good or bad. Santa Muerte accepts people as they are". In fact, it was Vargas son, Jonathan Legaria (aka "Padrino" or "Godfather") who originally founded the Templo Santa Muerte Internacional

(International Temple of Santa Muerte) in 2007. Legaria was not only a charismatically outspoken leader in the growing public devotional tradition surrounding Santa Muerte but was also attempting to raise the public acceptance of Santa Muerte's devotions through radio programs and open public displays such as the 75 ft statue he erected in Santa Muerte's honor, only to be gunned down in his SUV by more than 150 bullets in 2008 by assailants who still remain at large. Since his death, "Padrino" has become closely associated with Santa Muerte and has even gained some cult status of his own in the process as shown in Figure 20 below.



Figure 20. Santa Muerte altar featuring votive candles devoted to Jonathan Legaria (aka "Padrino" or "Godfather")

It was after Legaria's death Enriqueta Vargas, the once devout Catholic, who had up to this point been uncomfortable with her son's fervor, pledged she would devote herself to tending Santa Muerte's tradition if Nina Blanca would bring justice to the murderers that took her son's life. Events over the coming months transpired such that Vargas felt Nina Blanca had fulfilled her end of the bargain, and since then Vargas has tended to the Tultitlan shrine with vigor, becoming a popular source for information on Santa Muerte, while continuing to build the community through regular worship services at the shrine and digital outreach on Facebook.



Figure 21. Enriqueta Vargas standing next to the 75 feet statue of Santa Muerte that towers over The International Temple of Santa

Muerte

Significantly, the essential quid pro quo aspects of worshipping Santa Muerte are also made clear by other devotees including Yahel Martinez who petitioned the White Girl to make her cheating husband return to her and change his ways: "She's very jealous. If you promise something, you have to come through" (Agren, 2014).

An especially poignant testimonial to Santa Muerte's efficacy is provided on Chesnut's website (<https://skeletonsaint.com/>) from a devotee in Texas who shares some compelling and interesting empirical observations about how the faith operates in day-to-day practice. The testimonial presents a detailed description of the devotee's experiences with la Santa Muerte during a visit to Ecatepec, Mexico. The anecdotal account involved one American Santa Muerte follower who found himself at the mercy of an unreliable transportation network which stranded him in rural Mexico while on his way to visit friends. After saying a prayer to Santa Muerte, a passing car stopped to offer assistance and the American threw caution to the wind and accepted, despite reports of violence in the area in recent months. After some brief informal chit-chat, the American revealed that he was a follower of Santa Muerte at which point the driver paused, seemingly rocked by this revelation, and responded that he too was a devout follower of the White Girl.

More revealing, the driver also stated that just prior to seeing the American by the side of the road, Santa Muerte spoke to him

and told him to stop for this person: "He looks at me with this stone cold stare and says: 'Something came upon my heart when I saw you there and I understand now, mi Flakita [roughly "The Bony Lady"] was telling me to stop!' His English was as broken as my Spanish, but we were able to communicate sufficiently" (as cited in Chestnut, 2017)

As noted above, Santa Muerte has an estimated 10 to 12 million followers in Latin and North America, and while these new adherents stem from all religious backgrounds, the majority of these new followers have been drawn away from Roman Catholic congregations over the past 15 to 20 years (Agren, 2014). It is therefore readily understandable why the Vatican has become increasingly alarmed over these losses to a secular saint who has purported ties to the earthly underworld. Although the results of a Pew Research Center survey in 2010 found that nearly three-quarters (72%) of Latin Americans regarded themselves as Catholic, many of these people have turned to Santa Muerte out of frustration with their traditional religious practices that appeared to have no material or spiritual return on their investments. As Agren (2014) points out, "So many Mexicans see her as part of their folk-Catholic identity. They don't care if the Church has condemned her".

Santa Muerte is commonly associated with drug cartels and crimes such as kidnapping. The Mexican government has torn down dozens of shrines - presumably, built by drug traffickers - dotting roads running to the U.S. border, and the hit TV series

Breaking Bad showed hitmen praying at a Santa Muerte shrine. Vargas, Romero and other leaders insists that the majority of members in their congregations are ordinary people; members describe their day jobs as mundane: maid, nurse, auto painter, criminologist - to name a few (Agren, 2014).

Finally, some first-hand accounts from other Santa Muerte devotees collected by the author specifically for this book include those set forth below.

- "Santa Muerte got me out of prison" (male, aged 37 years);
- "All I have to do I ask for her guidance and she provides me with what I need" (female, aged 56 years);
- "The White Girl saved my marriage" (female, aged 29 years);
- "She helped me out of a legal jam" (male, aged 30 years);
- "Santa Muerte saved me from drug addiction" (female, aged 21 years);
- "She always listens and she always answers my prayers no matter what they are for" (female, aged 49 years); and,
- "Our Godmother protected me from a dangerous gang" (male, aged 25 years).

Taken together, these and countless other reports concerning the efficacy of Santa Muerte's miracle workings make it clear that here is a secular saint that cares about everyone regardless of their past or present condition and truly wants to help us improve our lives. She accepts all, regardless of what religion you follow, your sexual orientation, race, age, marital status, and even opinions on the afterlife. While we may not know exactly what

happens in the afterlife, but we do know we all die eventually. Death comes to fringe members of the society such as gays, drug dealers, and the mentally unstable just as much as it does to celebrities, politicians, mothers, and doctors. With this perspective, it makes sense to pay homage to the gatekeeper waiting for us all.

***Conclusion and Directions
for Future Research***

Conclusion

The research shows that although the precise origins of Santa Muerte have been lost in the mists of time, this and other secular saints have long been the focus of supplications by devotees seeking their assistance which might not be available through mainstream religions due to various dogmatic restrictions. The research also shows that many of these rituals and practices blend indigenous elements with mainstream religions in ways that are reshaping the religious landscapes of many societies today. Most importantly, I hope this review of the history of the White Girl and recent trends with respect to her rapidly growing followership in Latin and North America has answered some of your questions and helped you develop an informed opinion that is not marred by the negative reports from the mainstream press and law enforcement authorities concerning her typical devotees.

Because she appeals to many marginalized people, it is not surprising that Santa Muerte's devotees include members of various criminal enterprises, including most especially drug cartels, but this aspect has overshadowed the millions of other followers who come from all walks of life seeking essentially the same things as the vast majority of people everywhere: protection from harm, help with personal relationships, and better employment opportunities. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that because

the worship of Santa Muerte does not preclude devotees from practicing other religions, her popularity will continue to increase well into the foreseeable future making books such as this an important contribution to the existing body of knowledge concerning this important religious trend. This book also serves as a useful framework in which to pursue additional research in the future as discussed further below.

Directions for Future Research

As noted in the preface, part two of this textual series will describe in greater detail how the author, as an agnostic devotee to Santa Muerte, uses a combination of rituals and offerings adapted from his former religion (Islam) when praying and making offerings to Santa Muerte. In support of this effort, additional research is needed concerning the rituals and practices used by other cultures in worshiping secular saints and the relative efficacy of these saints in working the same types of miracles that have been attributed to the White Girl as celebrated in the colorful Latin American procession shown in Figure 22 below.



Figure 22. Santa Muerte in a colorful procession

In addition, future research concerning the antecedents for the vastly varied views of death in different societies is needed to help identify opportunities to help people who are suffering from an unwarranted fear of death overcome their anxieties in order to enjoy the precious time they do have available on the earthly plane to its fullest. Over the last decade, Santa Muerte (St Death) has attracted a remarkable number of followers in Mexico and the USA. Whereas the social context of her devotees, who tend to live on the fringes of society, has attracted ample attention from scholars and journalists, one of the principal puzzles is still how a skeleton image of death has come to be seen as a saint by large numbers of Catholics. How is it possible for this figure to

embrace such antagonistic qualities as death and sainthood in a Christian context? In this semiotic-material exploration of the image's genealogy, I suggest that La Santa Muerte should be seen as a coalescing of two radically distinct images of death: the popular-sec-ular Catrina and the occult-biblical Santísima Muerte. The St Death venerated today encompasses the ambiguities of the two and creates an exceptionally vibrant and popular Catholic image (Kristensen, 2016).

A major contributing factor to the unreasoned fear of death is the religious dogma that is hammered into people from birth. In many cultures, young people simply follow the religious beliefs of their parents without questioning and fail to perform their own due diligence concerning their religion. Unfortunately, this holds true of virtually all mainstream religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam. In other words, many people are simply born into it and never question their faith. A point comes in some people's lives, however, when they begin to question their faith and what it means for their eternal souls. While mainstream religions subscribe to an afterlife that may involve eternal damnation or, less likely, eternal bliss, some other religions are essentially silent with respect to what happens after we die.

This search for a better understanding concerning everyone's eventual fate dates to time immemorial, of course, but the advent of modern telecommunications has made it possible for greater numbers of people to learn about alternatives to their mainstream religious practices, accounting in part for the growing

interest in secular saints such as Santa Muerte. In fact, many of the inmates who were novice devotees of Santa Muerte whom I met in prison did not know anything about her origins or background and they too just blindly followed the religious practices and rituals. In response to this lack of understanding, I started a small group of Santa Muerte devotees in prison to explain the rituals and practices used in her worship. This group met once a week to share our personal experiences and views about the White Girl and offer prayers and offerings to the makeshift altar of Santa Muerte I had setup in my prison cell.



Figure 23. My personal altar to Santa Muerte in prison

The primary theme that emerges from my experiences is the fact that Santa Muerte followers do not fear death but rather

embrace it as a natural part of the life cycle. Devotees strongly believe that she gives people what they want and when they finish their cycle of life here on earth she comes for their souls. These views are clearly exemplified in the various Día de Muertos celebrations throughout Latin and South America as well as in other religions such as the worship of the Hindu death goddess, Kali. The followers of these deities do not fear death and are therefore liberated to experience life to its fullest. Indeed, thanatophobia, or the severe fear of death, is one of the most powerful phobias facing humankind today, but in many ways, an unreasoned fear of death is analogous to fearing a tree or a rock. Like the latter examples, death is natural, and is the inevitable outcome of existence on the corporeal plane. What drives this unreasoned fear of death in some cultures while celebrating it in others? From a strictly mental health perspective, it would seem reasonable to suggest that people who go through life fearing their natural end are failing to realize their full potential while they have the chance, while those who embrace their inevitable outcomes are able to better enjoy life to the fullest while they have the fleeting opportunity to do so. Indeed, mainstream religions such as various Christian faiths are fixated on the death experience because it directly relates to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ which is a central tenet of their faith but which is unavailable to all but the most pious and devout. No wonder that many people go through life fearing what is inevitable while they should be appreciating what they have today.

The rituals and practices that are used by Santa Muerte congregants are all directed at a death saint who, although not unique in the global pantheon, does appear to represent a significant shift in religious thinking on the part of ordinary people, many of whom hold fairly conventional religious beliefs, including the unreasonable fear of death and the inhibitions instilled by their religious practices. In the final analysis, it is also therefore reasonable to conclude that the Santa Muerte movement is in the vanguard of the worship of various secular saints around the world who have been identified by the followers as benevolent and approachable and worthy of their offerings, adoration and worship. Given the recent increases in her followership and the fact that Santa Muerte is regarded as the fastest-growing religious movement in Latin and North America today, it is also reasonable to conclude that images of the Death Saint will become ubiquitous throughout the Americas and beyond by the turn of the 22nd century when there may be tens of millions or even billions of faithful devotees celebrating the White Girl's miraculous powers.

Coming Soon



THE AGNOSTIC DEVOTEE

BABAR JAVED

Ignorance may be bliss to some, but it doesn't change the fact that it's still ignorance. Most modern, educated people wouldn't argue that fact. So why is it that many of these same people choose to remain ignorant in the face of overwhelming evidence when it applies to one of the most aspects of their lives – their faith?

This is the question that lies at the heart of author Babar Javed's new book – *The Agnostic Devotee*. The very word faith implies 'acceptance' without either evidence or proof, often in the very face of science and education. "How can this be?" the

author asks, "How in the 21st century, can billions of people still cling to the belief that the fate of mankind was decided when a naked woman, formed from the rib of a sleeping man, was deceived by a talking snake. Or that a Prophet literally flew up to heaven on a winged horse?"

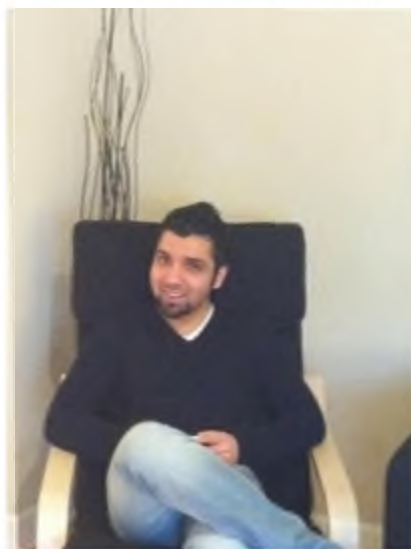
These, among many others, were the questions Javed who was raised by orthodox Muslim parents in Karachi, Pakistan, began asking at an early age. This skepticism continued throughout his youth and by the time he was a graduate student in the US he had given up on Islam altogether.

After looking into the other Abrahamic religions he was introduced to (the cult of) Santa Muerte. Finding solace in a Mexican icon that resembled a female grim reaper was a world away from his Islamic upbringing but the author was in a strange new world, that only got stranger when he was approached by the F.B.I and pressured to become an informer in an International money laundering operation. After refusing, he became the target of death threats and Government blackmail, resulting in his arrest and eventual incarceration on false accusations of being a money launderer for the notorious underworld Don *Dawood Ibrahim*. While in prison Javed was re-introduced to La Santa Muerte and became a convert. But even the skeletal saint of drug dealers, pimps and cartel king pins couldn't stop the questions and fill the spiritual void he still felt inside. Eventually, over time, and after a great deal of painful soul searching the author came to realize that the path to enlightenment lay not in the words of

Prophets, Gods and Saints, but somewhere much more down to earth and a lot closer to home.

Funny, sad, and sometimes downright scary, 'The Agnostic Devotee' is a story of one man's search for peace in a time of turbulence and misinformation. Few books force you to think for yourself. This one does.

About the author



The author, who is currently incarcerated, holds an undergraduate degree in Accounting, an MBA in Finance and a Master's of Science in Management Information Systems. With his release date approaching fast he is willing to auction off his diplomas along with any unnecessary body parts in order to pay-off his debts.

In the meantime he can be found designing and selling his own brand of sacrilegious skull motif bongos, rosaries and other Santa Muerte paraphernalia among the two thousand Hispanic inmates somewhere in the putrid bowel of Oklahoma.

Feel free to contact the author at your own risk and considerable expense!

Author@Theagnosticdevotee.com

Selah.

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