

Doctor Death and Coronavirus Supplicating Santa Muerte for Holy Healing

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Giving Shape to COVID-19
Donner forme à la COVID-19

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Article abstract

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Doctor Death and Coronavirus

Supplicating Santa Muerte for Holy Healing

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Abstract: Human beings have long turned to religion and faith healing to overcome illness and seek to delay death. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I consider how in Mexico, devotees of Santa Muerte are turning to the folk saint of death to ward off and recover from the virus. I argue that supplication of Santa Muerte during times of coronavirus offers a social critique on the current context in Mexico. The government has introduced budget cuts, reducing spending during this pandemic, and failed to provide adequate measures to protect already vulnerable citizens living in poverty and within the grips of the drug war, from COVID-19. Frontline workers are labouring in unsafe conditions with inadequate protective equipment and protocols. As a result, the death toll has risen rapidly. Mexico is currently listed as having the fourth highest death rate. I describe how fearing death, many have turned to the saint of death for recovery from coronavirus and to prolong life. My argument also counters the popular portrayal of Santa Muerte as a narcosaint, that is to say a saint solely venerated by narcotraffickers. Instead, I reveal that she is a saint of healing.

Keywords: Santa Muerte; coronavirus; Mexico; COVID-19; death; faith healing; religion; curanderismo; frontline workers

Resumé: Depuis longtemps, les êtres humains recourent à la religion et à la guérison par la foi pour surmonter la maladie et tenter de retarder la mort. J'examine comment, dans le contexte de la pandémie de COVID-19 au Mexique, les fidèles de Santa Muerte implorent cette sainte populaire associée à la mort pour conjurer le virus et guérir de la maladie. Je soutiens qu'en période de coronavirus, les prières à Santa Muerte offrent une critique sociale du contexte actuel au Mexique. Le gouvernement a introduit des coupes budgétaires, réduisant les dépenses pendant la pandémie, et il n'a pas mis en œuvre les mesures nécessaires pour protéger de la COVID-19 les citoyens déjà vulnérables, vivant dans la pauvreté et pris dans la guerre contre la drogue. Les travailleurs de première ligne travaillent dans des conditions dangereuses

avec des équipements et des protocoles de protection inadéquats. Par conséquent, le nombre de décès a rapidement augmenté dans le pays. Le Mexique est actuellement classé au quatrième rang dans le monde en termes de mortalité. Je décris comment, par peur de la mort, beaucoup se sont tournés vers la sainte de la mort pour guérir du coronavirus et prolonger leur vie. Mon argument s'oppose également à la représentation commune de Santa Muerte comme une narco-sainte – une sainte qui serait uniquement vénérée par les narcotrafiquants – et révèle au contraire qu'elle est une sainte de la guérison.

Mots-cles : Santa Muerte; coronavirus; Mexique; COVID-19; mort; guérison par la foi; religion; curanderismo; travailleurs de première ligne

Praying was, is, and will continue to be the most powerful vaccine to cure you of Coronavirus. Do you have faith in Santa Muerte? If so, pray to her and say Amen.

–*Prayer card to Santa Muerte*

All beings are mortal. Disease and death are inevitable. Nevertheless, since the earliest times human beings have seldom accepted their mortality nor that of loved ones and have turned to religion desirous to delay death and heal disease. Deities of diverse descriptions have long been appealed to by humankind in their quest for life. Faith healing has played a crucial role across the ages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, humans are once again appealing to the supernatural to ward off disease. Santa Muerte, the Mexican folk saint of death, is being propitiated for healing in times of coronavirus. Santa Muerte has 7.5 million followers across Mexico (Chesnut 2017, 22). She is appealed to by individuals and is channelled by *curanderos* (folk healers) for supernatural favours, paramount amongst which is healing. In a country where the government cannot cope with a scourge of narco-violence, let alone the COVID-19 pandemic, many of those who are sick or fear contracting coronavirus have turned to death for life. Since March 2020 Santa Muerte prayer cards and candles with petitions of protection against COVID-19 have been circulating across Mexico.

Religion and healing have long functioned in tandem. Some anthropologists purport that shamanism was the earliest form of religion, positing that shamans not only served as spiritual guides but as healers (Sidky 2010; Winkleman 2010). Through curing ceremonies, often appealing to supernatural forces, the social and physical well-being of the group was achieved. Scholars assert that such rites allowed for human relaxation, ensuring a survival advantage. One of Jesus's

main roles was as a shaman, states Craffert, who expounds that Jesus's miracles of faith healing were central to his popularity (2010).

Ortiz and Davis in their studies of Latina/o folk saints and Marian devotion, have emphasised the role of positive psychology linked to prayer, *curanderismo* (folk healing), and religious rituals among the Hispanic population in the US (2008). They note that the perceived assistance of a supernatural force, like a folk saint, brings equanimity, hope, and the strength necessary to overcome difficulties. This helps to psychologically fight disease. It also enables individuals to cope with death. As this article will demonstrate, the folk saint Santa Muerte is playing a vital role in the faith healing of COVID-19. She also allows for acceptance of death. As a sign above the Santa Muerte shrine belonging to Doña Queta, the pioneering female leader of the new religious movement, states: "Fear not wherever you go, for you shall die where you must."

In this article, I explore the role of the folk saint of death as doctor. I argue that supplicating Santa Muerte to protect from and heal coronavirus offers a social critique on the current context in Mexico. The government has failed to provide the requisite measures to protect citizens from COVID-19 and as a result the death toll has risen rapidly, with Mexico currently listed, as of the date of this article, as the country with the fourth highest deathrate from coronavirus.¹ Furthermore, given the failure of the Mexican government to provide the necessary protective equipment, it currently has the highest number of frontline worker deaths. In the already parlous conditions of the drug war, with many living in poverty, COVID has created worsened conditions of precarity for numerous Mexicans, especially in the context of state austerity. Faced with yet another threat to life, many have begun turning to death herself for their own healing or that of loved ones.

I begin by outlining the attributes of Santa Muerte and her origins during a time of plague in medieval Europe. I will show how media depictions of Santa Muerte as a narco-traffickers' saint are incorrect. While the folk saint's role as holy healer has been largely overlooked in academia, I present ethnographic evidence of the folk saint's crucial role in faith healing, which has become very apparent during the COVID-19 crisis. Santa Muerte as a saint of healing during the pandemic attests to the malleability of the new religious movement in adapting to the *zeitgeist*. Through the stories of devotees, as well as a shaman, *bruja* (witch), and *curandera* (female healer), I describe Santa Muerte's faith healing role in times of coronavirus. Finally, I will detail how veneration of the Saint of Death allows some devotees to be ever ready for her bony embrace

when their time comes. As a follower explained to me last year at a shrine in rural Oaxaca, Mexico: “*la vida solo es un paso a la muerte*” (life is just a path to death). Another devotee who had recently recovered from COVID stated that belief in Santa Muerte “ensures that my faith in death is greater than my fear of death.”²

My Methodology

I have been doing fieldwork in Mexico on Santa Muerte and her followers since 2017. I have made lasting local connections in rural Oaxaca at two shrines in the region. The region caught my attention as an anthropologist of religion interested in thanatology, due to the presence of rich religious and cultural traditions related to death (Brandes 2009; Haley and Fukuda 2004; Norget 2006). In 2017, I met the charismatic Zapotec owner of an elaborately decorated Santa Muerte shrine. I immediately formed a connection with Doña Elena, despite differences of origins, based not only on our shared gender, but above all her advocacy of a grassroots religious feminism which spoke to my scholarly and personal interest. She also revealed to me the importance of Santa Muerte in faith healing.

I also began visiting Cancun in winter 2020 due to the presence of one of the largest Santa Muerte shrines in Southern Mexico and had hoped to return in spring, but such fieldwork was curtailed by COVID-19 and I had to adjust my field methods. Nevertheless, upon my visit in February I established a strong bond with the owner of the shrine, Yuri Mendez. Her enthusiasm in sharing her beliefs, and her desire to destigmatise Santa Muerte as a narcosaint, aligned with my own scholarly arguments prior to meeting her. Our relationship has expanded thanks to online communication and her willingness to explain her faith, in particular its role in healing. Yuri is a renowned curandera and Santa Muerte priestess. Her presence extends beyond Quintana Roo through social media groups, where she has over 15,000 followers in one group alone. Posts on the Facebook page for her shrine regularly receive over 400 likes, attesting to her reach not only locally but across the country and even into migrant communities, such as those in the US. Many of these followers, aware of my work on Santa Muerte thanks to Yuri, have reached out to me in messages since to speak of their own devotion to death.

Although unable to return to the field due to current coronavirus non-essential travel restrictions, I am in contact with the leaders of these shrines and many Santa Muerte devotees I met whilst doing fieldwork. I encountered most followers of the folk saint at these chapels, although I met some while going to

local market stalls and religious paraphernalia shops. I conducted participant observation at public shrines, stores, and people's homes, where I was often invited to visit. I have weekly contact with twenty devotees, and I am in touch with twenty others on a less frequent basis on social media sites where we continue to have informal conversations. I have asked my respondents how serious COVID has been and how they have been dealing with the pandemic, giving me much rich ethnographic material.

I also continue to conduct digital ethnography interacting with Santa Muertistas on Facebook, which has thousands of pages dedicated to the saint of death. People post prayers and stories of healing daily. Perusing posts daily and messaging devotees has proved invaluable during lockdown when it is impossible to travel to the field and interact in person with respondents. I joined at least thirty-five groups that contain thousands of devotees wherein I conduct participant observation. I have kept an eye out for COVID-related prayers, stories of faith healing and photos of offerings to Santa Muerte to ward off coronavirus. I have reached out to members whose stories and/or photos caught my attention.

Context: Mexico in Times of Coronavirus

As of May 2020, countries across the globe called for a lockdown to prevent the spread of coronavirus. As of November 2020, Mexico had the fourth highest mortality rate from COVID-19 and the ninth highest number of new infections. The government responded with measures that have been deemed ineffectual by the local populace. Memes circulating on social media illustrate the discontentment. On Twitter, one meme depicts chief epidemiologist Hugo Lopez-Gatell surrounded by a cheering throng (illustrated by characters from *The Simpsons*) with the caption "The peak of the pandemic will be next week! (It does not matter when you read this tweet)." Nevertheless, some Oaxacans I spoke to told me that many locals saw COVID-19 as a conspiracy theory being wielded by the government to control people. Stories circulated of families being paid off to report non-related deaths as caused by coronavirus to inflate numbers so that hospitals could get the extra funding they have long needed. I was also informed that the local news media downplayed coronavirus on the airwaves, stating that if locals can survive dengue fever, COVID-19 is "nothing."³ Conversely, I was informed that some Oaxacans were paranoid that hospitals were causing coronavirus deaths, with the result that those who were sick or thought they might have the virus opted for selfcare and did not report it to their local doctors

or go to hospital for fear they would be killed. Such rumours are not without basis. Given inadequate government funding for hospitals, staff and patients have not had access to the personal protective equipment necessary to safeguard them from contagion, such as medical masks and face shields. This has led, according to an Amnesty International report, to Mexico's record of having the highest death rate among frontline workers.

Despite such a high death toll, the response by the government has been to invest a bare minimum and minimize the perils of the virus. Moreover, with little testing available across much of the country due to the government's austerity program, officials have been accused of flying blind. Indeed, a Santa Muerte devotee I met during fieldwork in Mexico told me of an outbreak of something suspicious that appeared to be coronavirus at a jail in Acapulco where her spouse is incarcerated. Inmates complained of fevers, nausea, and muscle aches. Despite a whole prison ward falling sick, including my respondent's husband, no tests were conducted, and the outbreak was dismissed as dengue fever without proper evaluation nor confinement of the ailing.

There appears to be no uniform government response to the virus regionally. Moreover, official regulations and recommendations change weekly, making it confusing for people. A Santa Muertista told me that it had been hard to visit her local shrine outside of Puerto Angel where she lives, as roadblocks were erected for a month in June 2020 to prevent access to the town. Yet the following month these roadblocks were removed.

Locals also circumvented rules. A key respondent told me that bars had been shut down and alcohol was no longer for sale in much of Oaxaca from June to August 2020 to prevent socializing and the spread of the virus. Distilleries were encouraged to make hand sanitizer instead. Nevertheless, she explained, this had not stopped locals from obtaining alcohol. They took to making moonshine—in the region this takes the form of *destilado de agave*, alcohol distilled from the agave plant—and selling it to individuals or at private gatherings.

Due to the government's desire for cost savings, regions have taken different measures, depending on their economy. In Quintana Roo the beaches and hotels are open for business, whilst in Oaxaca, many beaches and businesses are closed. Moreover, in some states police enforcement of mask-wearing has become militaristic, to the point where a young man was gunned down in Jalisco for not donning his mask.

President Lopez Obrador is pinning his hopes on herd immunity until a vaccine becomes available. Given the inadequate response by the government, some Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, such as the Zapotec, have imposed their own measures by “drawing on local Indigenous traditions of cooperation, self-reliance, and isolation” (Cohen 2020). Other communities, angry and fearful, have taken to making their own placards, some featuring expletives, such as one sign documented by one of my respondents in Tuxtepec that featured a picture of a mask and the words “*Usalo HDTPM*,” (use it, son of a bitch).

Lopez Obrador’s slashing of state spending during the pandemic has earned him the epithet “Scrooge” in the Mexican media, an allusion to Dickens’ miserly protagonist. The government is relying less on medical measures and more on memes and mottos to encourage healthy practices. The cartoon figure “Susana Distancia”—a play on words in Spanish which means “Your-healthy Distance”—was promoted on social media and government billboards to exhort social distancing, but has been mocked by many, since the Mexican president himself has not followed the instructions, often appearing unmasked in public and while in close proximity to other politicians.

Furthermore, measures such as staying at home are not realistic, particularly in states such as Oaxaca where 62 percent of the population live below the poverty line, and half of that populace resides in extreme poverty with inadequate nourishment, reduced access to running water or electricity.⁴ The motto “*quédate en casa*” (stay at home), some Mexicans told me, is for the rich. With mouths to feed, bills to pay, I was made aware by some of my respondents that despite knowing the risks of COVID-19, they could not afford to stay at home and had to go to their workplaces. Furthermore, with the government fully reopening several regions and locations such as Quintana Roo, the State of Mexico, Baja California Sur, and Guerrero for business to avoid the freefall of the economy, social distancing is unrealistic. Such re-openings also directly contradict the government’s stay at home policy.

Some Oaxacans in rural areas told me that frequent handwashing and cleaning of surfaces was problematic as water, which should be a basic human right, is a luxury. Many, in particular in Indigenous areas, do not have access to running water, and indeed neither did I during my time doing fieldwork in 2019. Instead of running water, residents who are not on the waterline have a reservoir on their property which must be regularly filled by “*la pipa*,” a truck that delivers water on demand. For those who are affluent, calling *la pipa* regularly is not an issue and I was cognisant during fieldwork that I was fortunate enough to have

water when I needed. However, this is not the case for many locals. Given that most Oaxacans live in poverty, la pipa is an expensive service, especially given that in the last year prices have risen by 18.2 percent. Meanwhile many earn around five Canadian dollars a day and salaries have not increased in line with inflationary water prices.

Furthermore, in areas of Salina Cruz, the water system is superannuated. In November 2020, it finally broke, causing water shortages during a time when it is most needed to maintain hygiene. The government was accused of apathy by locals who for weeks have now had to pay for la pipa. Due to this shortage, they sometimes had to buy water of dubious and potentially unclean origins. Limited water in these regions, whether due to shortages or exorbitant prices, has entailed limited hand washing and surface cleansing during a time when these practices are a requisite for safety and well-being. With few means to protect themselves, many Mexicans seek supernatural measures to protect themselves from coronavirus. One of these is appealing to the folk saint of death for life.

La Santa Muerte, the Folk Saint of Death

Whether in the form of an image on a prayer card or a votive candle, or as a statue, the folk saint Santa Muerte is typically represented as a female Grim Reaper. Her face is a skull. She wields a scythe in her left hand, is garbed in a mantle and a long gown, with bony toes sticking out from underneath. She is often accompanied by an owl and holds a globe. The name “Santa Muerte” alludes to her identity. In Spanish “*muerte*” means death and “*Santa*” translates both as holy and as saint. In English she is called Saint Death or Holy Death.

As “saints of the folk,” folks saints are persons or mythical figures who have not been canonized by the Church but whom the general populace has created and whom they believe to be endowed with supernatural powers.

Folk saints, unlike Catholic ones, lived out their lives on Latin American soil making them familiar faces among the often less relatable pantheon of official saints. Due to a mythology that is built upon cultural propinquity, they are far more easy to turn to and propitiate as their realities seem intertwined with those of their devotees. (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, 28)

Devotees tend to prefer “*lo nuestro*” (“what is ours,” meaning saints belonging to a given community and its culture). They also prefer the freedom of devotion to folk saints as it does not include the mediation, restrictions, and costs of Catholic clergy. Furthermore, they hold the “belief that folk saints are more

miraculous than canonized saints” (Graziano 2006, 30). Moreover, because of cultural affinity and a folk saint’s place outside of the moral strictures of Catholicism, devotees feel more at ease supplicating them as “they know that their petitions will not be dismissed as insignificant, that their transgressions (perceived as consequences of their social condition) will be pardoned, and that their humble offerings will be accepted and respected” (Graziano 2006, 32).

Folk saints generally died a tragic death by unjust violence, abuse by authorities, extreme poverty or other related shocking circumstances (Graziano 2006, 6). They are seen as “very special dead people” whose cultural ties to their people means that they go “beyond the norm” of Catholic saints “in their willingness or capacity to intercede on behalf of their communities” (Graziano 2006, 11).

As Hughes details, “Roman Catholicism” remains, as does folk Catholicism, “a vital location for religious innovation and experimentation as well as options and alternatives” with saints and folk saints being adapted to suit manifold circumstances and needs (2012, 7). In her exploration of the role of “el Niño Jesús Doctor,” a healing advocacy of the Christ Child, Hughes points out how the proliferation of such saints may be due to the tenuous “relationship between priests and poor communities” which “has been one of shifting proximity and distance” (2012, 24). Likewise, not only Church alienation, but also government failures such as the current inability of the Mexican state to handle the coronavirus crisis have impelled their creation. Santa Muerte differs from most saints and folk saints, however, in that she is not seen as embodying the spirit of a deceased person. Devotees often depict her as a modern version of pre-Hispanic death deities, such as the Aztec goddess of death Mictecacihuatl, or the Mayan death deity Ah Puch (see Jansen and Jiménez 2004; Moctezuma 2014).

Santa Muerte has been misconstrued as a “narcosaint:” a saint venerated solely by narco-traffickers. In 2009, the Mexican army obliterated scores of Santa Muerte shrines. “This futile act that failed to extirpate drug-related crimes, evinces yet again how the Mexican government has repeatedly lashed out at the folk saint associating her with the drug cartels” (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020a, 25). Also overlooked was how many law enforcement agents venerate the folk saint. Items such as packets of Santísima Muerte powder are “often purchased by policemen who hang them in their cars” (Norget 1996, 144). The Catholic Church has also lambasted Saint Death, accusing her worshippers of following a satanic and macabre symbol of narco-culture (Argyriadis 2014).

Such portrayals are also found in television programs such as *Breaking Bad* and *True Detective* and video games like *Ghost Recon*. The fallacious depiction of Santa Muerte as a narcosaint who is only venerated by narco-traffickers obscures her role as matron saint of the Mexican drug war, as she is supplicated by both sides of the law for protection against violence. Furthermore, followers turn to Holy Death for favours of love and money, and importantly, faith healing. This has earned Saint Death the epithet “*la Santa Sanadora*” (the salubrious saint).

Ironically, whilst “those outside the folk faith often etically define Santa Muertistas as non-Catholic,” emically most devotees, “consider themselves and the saint Catholic” (Kingsbury 2020, 5). As Howe, Zaraysky and Lorentzen point out, Santa Muerte allows devotees “not to disavow the Catholic traditions they may have learned as children, but to reshape their faith and the meaning they bring to devotion,” allowing them to feel empowered and “fearless in the face of death” given structural conditions that expose them to great vulnerability (2009, 25). The folk saint is currently being supplicated by devotees, in response to the vulnerability that coronavirus conditions and the government’s ineffectual response have created. Such supplication points to governmental failures to protect its people and a “necropolitics” that means people continually “live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death” (Mbembe 2016, 36–38). Instead of standing up to death, many in Mexico have instead entered into a religious relationship with death wherein Saint Death is imagined as possessing the power to pull them back from perils and protect them from perishing.

Doctor Death and Coronavirus

“There is no single, unifying Santa Muerte Church equivalent to the Catholic Church... Despite the large number of shrines which have been opened, no official clergy exists, only *laissez-faire* leaders who are mostly female” (Kingsbury 2020, 8).⁵ The faith allows devotees to take devotion into their own hands. They visit shrines to receive blessings from the folk saint. But rites largely take place at home altars. This non-regulated spirituality, which anyone can practice from the comfort of their home without outside intermediaries, makes it appealing to those seeking spiritual autonomy.

The faith does not have a foundational scripture like the Bible, although prayer books and spell tomes circulate freely. The most famous of these is “*la Biblia de la Santa Muerte*” (the Bible of Santa Muerte), which features prayers for health and healing. Despite heteropraxy, there are some specific practices.

Altars and shrines are essential. Most devotees have an altar. These often become “spaces of healing” (Kingsbury 2020, 15). Altars may be lavish, consisting of a table decorated with devotional objects such as statuary, skulls, candles and innumerable offerings, or they may be small, consisting of a one-inch statue of Santa Muerte or a votive candle with offerings of alcohol, flowers, foods, or water, as Holy Death is said to be extremely dehydrated.

A devotee I spoke to on Facebook from an impoverished family in the Mexico City, Marisela⁶, could not afford a large altar. Marisela had created a tiny shrine on a shelf in her kitchen around which she stored household items. She had placed a small, printed image of Santa Muerte in a white gown alongside a prayer card and offerings of incense, an apple, and an unlit cigarette, which she used in ceremonies. She prayed daily before this image. She told me, “I have asked her [Santa Muerte] to take away the virus, I have faith in her. Many people are dying and my husband has been fired. We have three babies, but I have faith in her, as she always listens to me.”⁷ Thus far, although she knew of over 40 people who had died from the virus, no one in her family had succumbed to it and Marisela attributed their good health to Santa Muerte.

Colour symbolism is central to Santa Muerte praxis. Statues and votive candles are said to have specific uses according to their hue. The three main colours associated with Holy Death are red, white, and black. Red is employed for petitions of love (Kingsbury and Chesnut 2020b:323). The black votive, although associated in the media with black magic and vengeance—especially by narcos—is often employed for protection, and during the pandemic to ward off coronavirus. White candles are used for blessing and cleansing. Many Santa Muertistas seeking health light white votives instead of the newer and less popular mauve ones (Chesnut 2016). Devotees also use yellow candles, though these are generally for recovery from substance abuse and addiction. That three different hues of votive are employed in healing evinces the importance of Saint Death as divine doctor and counters the rhetoric that she is solely a narcosaint.

Scholars often describe Saint Death as the “saint of the desperate,” as it is above all the poor and needy who turn to her (Torres-Ramos 2015, 139). Poor people are now at most risk of contracting coronavirus, and the state’s ineffectual measures to protect them have done nothing to ameliorate their precarity in a country ravaged by the drug war. Many impoverished Mexicans have been unable to social distance or stay at home. Their jobs demand they interact with the public. Numerous have turned to Holy Death for supernatural aegis. Some

Santa Muertistas work on the frontline, such as nurses caring for COVID-19 patients. They gift Santa Muerte offerings to ensure she does not reap their soul too soon. Given the government’s failure to invest in the necessary protective equipment, they remain at risk of contracting coronavirus from their patients.

The folk saint’s adaptability to the current COVID-19 crisis as doctor death is evident in the paraphernalia currently sold in Mexico. A coronavirus candle with Holy Death’s image on it features the wording “*protección contra coronavirus*” (protection from coronavirus) and an invocation to the folk saint. Verónica Lezama is the owner of a store called *Productos Esotéricos San Gabriel* that offers esoteric products in Villahermosa, Tabasco. She reported that the Holy Death coronavirus candle has been a top seller lately (Figure 1). There are two options, Verónica detailed. Either one can buy the candle on its own or as part of a coronavirus kit that includes balm and a lotion. The candle wax, she detailed, should be inscribed with the name of the person requiring protection or suffering from COVID-19. The ailing person should then rub the candle all over their body before lighting it. The balm is to be applied to the skin. The lotion is to be dispersed at entrances to safeguard the inside of a home or a business from coronavirus.



Figure 1: Coronavirus votive candle for healing and protection, alongside statue of Santa Muerte. Photo by author.

In southern Mexico in the state of Oaxaca, the COVID-19 lotion is not available. Nevertheless, an all-purpose Santa Muerte lotion is on sale, which is believed by Santa Muertistas to have shielding abilities. During fieldwork in 2019 I met Margarita at a Santa Muerte shrine near Pochutla. She invited me to visit her shop, where she sells women's clothing. She told me that news announcers on the airways are constantly extolling the COVID-19 prevention motto "quedat e in casa" but she has been unable to do so. Her husband's boss fired him because his business had been impacted by COVID-19. Margarita has neither shut down her shop nor stayed at home, as she is now the family's sole breadwinner. Nevertheless, concerned about clients bringing coronavirus into the shop, she has turned to supernatural measures. Margarita told me that before opening her boutique, every day she sprinkles Santa Muerte lotion on the threshold to prevent coronavirus from entering. Thus far, she believes, it has worked. She related to me, "death is more powerful than God," and the only way to avoid death's embrace is to "pray daily, give Santa Muerte offerings and purify your home and business."

Like Marisela, Margarita has a simple home altar. It features a glass of water, gemstones, some flowers, and a small Santa Muerte statue that is blue, the colour of mental focus and business success. For Margarita, the hue is not important. What counts is that she may speak to Holy Death daily through the effigy. Next to the statue at the centre of the altar is a picture of her husband, whose health is poor. Margarita is concerned he may contract the virus. She prayed for him daily and when particularly worried lit a white candle to ensure he was cleansed should he come into contact with the virus. Furthermore, by placing his photo on her shrine, she explained, "Santa Muerte will protect him."

Santa Muerte and COVID-19 Curanderismo

Although the *Biblia de la Santa Muerte* is widely used by devotees, new prayers are incessantly circulating, especially during times of coronavirus when there are new needs. This reveals how the new religious movement malleably adapts to shifting circumstances. Yuri Mendez is a self-identified bruja, curandera, and shaman of Santa Muerte (Figure 2). I visited her shrine in Cancun in 2020. Yuri prays weekly to Santa Muerte and gives her offerings to protect herself and her family from COVID-19. She also petitions the folk saint for world healing.



Figure 2: Yuri Mendez, founder of the largest chapel to Santa Muerte in Cancun. Yuri is a self-identified bruja (witch), shaman and curandera (healer). Photo by author.

Yuri was saddened to see how people have been suffering in Quintana Roo. The state is largely dependent upon tourism. Due to coronavirus, hotels and beaches were initially closed and innumerable people furloughed. The press estimated that over 80,000 people lost their jobs (Vasquez 2020). Moreover, those figures do not count those working in the informal economy. Due to this dire situation, as 8 June 2020 the state was reopened to tourism. However, since that time, cases of COVID-19 have increased significantly, and although many Mexicans are glad to be back at work, they are also afraid.

Yuri has garbed her effigies of Holy Death in gowns and shrouds of white, mauve, and lemon, the colours of healing, as well as gifting the folk saint flowers and foods in these hues, such as yellow gourds and eggplants. After lighting white, purple, and yellow candles and suffusing the shrine with burning bunches of sage and rosemary, which she says are cleansing, she recited the following prayer, which I have translated. She invited her many Facebook and local followers to join her in their homes, posting pictures of the ritual and suggesting this prayer as one to be recited daily for protection and healing from

coronavirus (Figure 3). As she prayed, she turned to her central effigy of Santa Muerte whom she named “Yurixtzia,” a combination of her own name and that of the Mayan Goddess associated with the moon and deathly disease, Ixchel (see Thompson 1958). She visualized the death saint employing her scythe to clear the earth of COVID-19, in particular on days when the moon was waning, such as on 14 May.



Figure 3: Yuri Mendez’s prayer and ritual to Santa Muerte for world healing of coronavirus done in front of her beloved statue of Santa Muerte, named Yurixtzia. Photo by author.

Santa Muerte, Lady of the Light
Before God and before you I kneel so that
You Intercede for me and for the entire world
To eliminate all evil, virus or bacteria
Cleanse with your purifying mantle.
Lady listen to my pleas.
Help and give bread and shelter to those who need it
And seek in you strength
Lady of the End Times protect us so that we are not infected

And do not infect those we love
Sweep COVID-19 away from our path
And grant us shelter, food and support
I ask you to never fail me
Amen.

Many have turned to Yuri to ask how to propitiate Santa Muerte for protection against COVID-19. She recommends they put an eggplant on their altar, as purple is associated with Saint Death's healing powers. Much as ancient Greeks gave garlic to the goddess Hekate, who was associated with magic, witchcraft, and necromancy, Yuri also advised devotees to offer Holy Death the sulfurous bulb in a quid pro quo with death for life.

Yuri had witnessed several miracles of Santa Muerte coronavirus healing, she told me. The young daughter of a family residing close-by was afflicted with the virus. Camila, the mother, messaged Yuri for aid. Camila requested Yuri light votives for her, Diego, her spouse, and their daughter, Ana Fernanda. Yuri was unable to obtain the Santa Muerte coronavirus candle in Cancun but managed to purchase a COVID-19 votive, featuring archangels. Yuri lit two candles, one for the young girl with an offering of cookies, and one for Camila and Diego with oblations of flowers and sweet breads. She prayed for the family. Yuri practices curanderismo, and recommended a herbal tea of bougainvillea, lemon, oregano, garlic, and cloves to be consumed thrice daily by the family. After the family recovered, they thanked the folk saint by gifting her with sumptuous bouquets of white blooms and white candles and hiring a mariachi band to sing to the salubrious saint. Yuri also thanked Santa Muerte with prayers and further offerings.

I heard of other such miracles from numerous other devotees. Consuela is a devotee of death residing in Chihuahua. Both she and her husband contracted coronavirus in early June. Her husband was the first to be afflicted. She had to rush him to hospital, where he was placed on a respirator. Consuela told me that for the first two days she was crying incessantly, convinced her husband would die. But she regained her composure when Santa Muerte came to her in a dream. The folk saint advised her to pray three consecutive nights at three a.m. She followed Santa Muerte's advice and placed a photo of her husband at her altar. Concentrating on it, she recited a prayer entitled "Santa Muerte prayer for difficult cases." She used a black Santa Muerte statue to protect her husband from COVID-19 and placed offerings upon the altar of water, tequila, and white carnations. She lit a white candle, promising the folk saint further oblations if

he were healed. When her husband recovered and came home, she lit a red candle of love to thank the folk saint for saving him.

Shortly afterwards she became ill and was rushed to the hospital, but as she stated, “I (knew I) would not die because la Santa had proved to me that she cared for me.” She was too delirious from the fever to pray regularly but she stated, “(I) had moments of lucidity and then I would pray to la Santa and I felt her mantle covering me and healing me.” Although the virus reached her lungs, she healed rapidly and surprised the doctors with her speedy recovery and lack of damage to her lungs. She told them that Santa Muerte had performed yet another miracle of healing.

Death as Defender of Frontline Workers

As I explain above, the government has implemented insufficient measures to protect frontline workers. The Health Department admitted that at least 12.3 percent of front-line medical personnel treating patients with coronavirus got infected, as compared to an infection rate of roughly 0.5 percent for the total population. Frontline workers staged protests demanding better personal protective equipment.

Vivian is a nurse from Veracruz who works on the frontline with COVID-19 patients in the ICU. We met in April 2020 through an online forum dedicated to Santa Muerte where she had posted photos of her altar with captions that featured thanks to the folk saint for protecting her from coronavirus. Much like Yuri, she wants to see the reputation of Santa Muerte as a narcosaint dispelled from popular culture, given that she has faced stigma due to her beliefs and has had to stay silent about her spirituality. Vivian’s exposure to the virus is high given that she works as an advanced practice nurse in a large hospital with staff and equipment shortages. Working under such perilous conditions, Vivian has been fearful of being infected with the virus, and of infecting members of her family.

To protect herself during her work hours, she wears a pendant of Holy Death hidden beneath her scrubs. She also prays at her home altar with three effigies, a white Santa Muerte, a gold Santa Muerte (used for abundance), as well as a black Santa Muerte statue. At the centre of the altar she diffuses sage, rose, and copal incense, and burns candles. Around these are oblations which she refreshes every two weeks. Vivian explained, “Santa Muerte likes fresh flowers, especially pink flowers. She also asks for fresh tequila and wants her apples with cinnamon. She loves roses.” Vivian’s Black Santa Muerte statue is

the most important to her in times of coronavirus. Although associated with narcos and their nefarious activities by the press, the colour black is said to proffer protection that the nurse believes she was blessed with. Initially, Vivian was fearful of the formidable powers attributed to the ebony-coloured effigy, known as *la Niña Negra*, and afraid to bring such a statue into her house. Vivian believes that she had to pass a series of difficult trials that *la Niña Negra* set her to prove her devotion. Having passed such trials, she has developed a relationship with *la Niña Negra* and states that she is the most powerful of all the different coloured statues, especially in the realm of protection.

Unlike Yuri, Vivian offers no specific oblations for fighting coronavirus, nor recites any ad hoc COVID-19 prayers. She just requests that the folk saint protect her. Nevertheless, she has devised her own rites. Vivian, aware that she is at risk of contagion from COVID-19, stated, “when I feel something weird in my throat I drink a shot of tequila at the altar with her.” This cleanses her body, annihilating the virus, she believes. Sometimes she sings songs to the saint of death as an offering and performs rites. She lights black and white candles to the saint, and offers her “*puros*” (cigars), wafting the smoke over her effigies, or gives her black statue a cigarette to “smoke,” placing it in the effigy’s hand. Nevertheless, Vivian tells me, she is sometimes so tired after a 12-hour shift at work that she has no energy to perform rituals. She said, “I tell her, I am sorry Santa, you know, of course you, most of all, know how tired I am now and I just cannot do a full prayer and ritual for you, only light a candle.”

These rituals, whether elaborate or a simple, wherein Vivian imagines the folk saint to understand the stresses and strains she faces at the hospital, help her relax and unwind from work. As pointed out, psychological well-being may be acquired through religious rituals that positively impact physical health, especially through the belief that a supernatural figure is a supporting one (Ortiz and Davis 2008, 44). Given the context of high contagion and limited protective equipment, as well as inadequate health safety protocols, many frontline workers suffer increased feelings of stress, worry and anxiety that can severely affect their quality of life, yet no support in Mexico is available for the mental well-being of health professionals working in times of coronavirus. For Vivian, Santa Muerte provided mental support, especially in the context of dealing with death directly. Many had died in her presence. She was not perturbed. Vivian stated, “the way I see it, Santa Muerte is just taking people because it is their

time to go.” In Mexico, the belief that we all have an appointed hour of death is captured by the popular maxim, “*cuando te toca te toca*” (when it is your time to go, it is your time to go).

Vivian did not see death the way Hertz has detailed that many in the Western world see it: as a threat to the social order (Hertz 1909). She viewed death as entering into a permanent union with Santa Muerte. In Mexico, a rich death culture replete with traditions such as Day of the Dead exists (see Brandes 1998, Brandes 2009, Lomnitz 2005, Nutini 2014). Nutini asserts that Day of the Dead is a syncretic celebration that admixes Catholicism and pre-Hispanic thanatological traditions (1988). Despite Brandes’ cautions against arguing about a morbid, timeless preoccupation with death in Mexican culture (2009) some scholars of the folk saint see Santa Muerte as a syncretic saint, who like Day of the Dead, attests to the perduring cultural interest in death (see Chesnut 2017, Perdigón Castañeda 2008).

Many in Mexico fear death and are not, as some narratives would have it, inured by traditions like Day of the Dead. Nevertheless, some Santa Muertistas informed me that belief in Santa Muerte prepared them should their time come. Xiadani, a devotee I met in Oaxaca during fieldwork, stated, “I fear disease, suffering, pain but I do not fear death as I know *la Dama Inmortal* is waiting to embrace me.”⁸ Her statement reminded me of Doña Elena’s daughter’s explanation of why she worshipped death. Abby told me that when you worship death, you are “no longer afraid of anything or anyone that might take you away from this earth.”

Conclusion

Santa Muerte is currently being worshipped for protection and healing in Mexico in these times of coronavirus. Such supplication of death for life is a social commentary on the conditions of increased vulnerability that Mexicans are facing. The pandemic—in the context of the ongoing drug war, plus government austerity entailing meagre measures to combat and curtail the reach of the virus—has only increased the danger of death for most working-class Mexicans. The government has ignored the dangers of the virus, and what Mbembe called “necropolitics” are visible at work. The re-opening of the economy is ostensibly justified by the argument that business must return to normal even if it means that some must die to ensure productivity (see Bercito and Mbembe 2020). With death ever at the door, some Mexicans are entering into religious

relationships with the skeletal figure of Holy Death, beseeching her for favours of healing and protection from coronavirus, especially those with high-risk jobs and few safeguards to prevent contagion, such as frontline workers toiling in poorly equipped medical facilities.

If devotees are making “miraculous recoveries” we might consider that since time immemorial humans have reaped psychological benefits from religion. Anthropologists have long recorded these, beginning with Malinowski, who studied magic and religion as a response to stress (1979), to more recent studies of the role of folk saints in healing (Funes 2009). In their study of Latina/o devotees of the Virgin Mary and folk saints in the US, Ortiz and Davis point out that psychological well-being may be achieved through religious rituals thereby impacting physical health (2008). Prayer allows for “positive psychology” and brings about a “locus of control” through the belief that a supernatural figure is there to care for you, allowing for “healing promoting effects in devotees” (Ortiz and Davis 2008, 44). This is certainly at play in stories of Santa Muertistas rapidly recovering from coronavirus.

The mass media, with few exceptions, has consistently neglected Santa Muerte’s role in faith healing, which is becoming ever more apparent during the COVID crisis. TV shows and tabloids fallaciously depict Santa Muerte as solely a narcosaint who spiritually supports and vindicates violence. Nevertheless, the evidence provided in this paper demonstrates that Santa Muerte has a vital role as “doctor death.” Whether in her yellow, white, purple, or even her black form—assumed to be exclusively associated with black magic by the uninformed—as we saw in the cases of Vivian and Consuela, devotees imagine that Holy Death protects against and cures coronavirus. For devotees, belief in Santa Muerte’s supernatural aegis during times of coronavirus has allowed them to cope with precarious conditions, when they are faced with increased vulnerability. I was told “death opens its arms to us,” not to erase, but rather, to extend life.⁹

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Notes

- ¹ See “Covid: Mexico passes 100,000 coronavirus deaths” 2 November 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-55011840>.
- ² In Spanish I was told: “*Asegura que mi fé en la muerte es mas grande que mi miedo.*”
- ³ A mosquito-borne tropical disease caused by the dengue virus with symptoms like that of coronavirus as they include fevers and joint pains.
- ⁴ See the Worldbank website <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2013/09/04/oaxaca-inclusive-growth>.
- ⁵ Several churches were opened by people such as David Romo and Enriqueta Vargas, who created national and even transnational networks of believers; however, these are exceptions to the rule.
- ⁶ I have used pseudonyms for everyone except Yuri and Elena who asked me not to.
- ⁷ “*Yo le he pedido que el Coronavirus se vaya, yo tengo fe en ella. Esta muriendo mucha gente y a mi esposo lo despidieron. Tenemos tres bebés pero yo tengo fe en ella porque siempre me escucha.*”
- ⁸ The Immortal Lady, one of Santa Muerte’s many monikers.
- ⁹ See Octavio Paz 1950.

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